

Worship *in the* Early Church



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Acts 1:1–11, 2:14–41, 17:15–34, 18:1–16, 1 Corinthians 13.*

Memory Text: “If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal” (*1 Corinthians 13:1, NIV*).

Soon after Christ returned to heaven, the early church began to expand and grow. At first, it almost was exclusively Jews who were accepting Jesus as the Messiah and coming into the ranks of believers. Indeed, at first, many of the believers thought that the gospel was only for the Jews, which showed how much they still had to learn.

At Pentecost, after Peter's preaching and altar call before a multitude of Jews (*Acts 2*), “Then they that gladly received his word were baptized: and the same day there were added unto them about three thousand souls” (*Acts 2:41*). This text alone shows the fallacy of the idea that all the Jews rejected Jesus.

Yet, we would be mistaken to look back on the early church as some sort of idyllic time of worship and praise. Though in a radically different context, the early church struggled with some of the same issues with which we struggle today, issues that could and would impact everything about their faith, including worship.

This week we will take a look at a few instances from the early days of Christianity and some of the challenges the church faced as it grew, and we'll seek to learn from the good things and, also, from the bad.

**Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, September 17.*

Many “Proofs”

From a human perspective, Jesus’ earthly ministry did not look so successful. Though He had attracted a fairly popular following while alive, it did not catch on en masse. Many leaders rejected Him, and, of course, the Romans crucified Him, causing His closest disciples to scatter and flee.

Things looked pretty bad until His resurrection and then Pentecost, when suddenly His followers found a new boldness to proclaim their crucified Master as the Messiah of Israel. It was only after the resurrection of Jesus, in fact, that the early church started to take off.

Read Acts 1:1–11. What important truths do we find here about the Second Coming, baptism, the Holy Spirit, and mission?

Look especially at verses 3 and 6. What do they tell us about how much more truth the disciples had to learn?

One of the most interesting parts of this section is verse 3, in which Luke states that Jesus presented them with many “proofs.” Some versions use the phrase “infallible proofs,” which is somewhat overstating the case. Another translation calls them “convincing proofs,” which is the less problematic translation. The point here is that the believers in Jesus were given powerful evidence, “proof” of Jesus as the Messiah. Considering the daunting task to which He had called them and all the opposition that they would face, they needed all the proof they could get. The good news is that the Lord will give us all the reasons we need for faith, all the reasons we need to believe in things that we do not fully understand. As we see in these texts, the disciples still did not fully understand the Lord’s intentions regarding the nation of Israel, even after all this time with Jesus. We need to learn to worship, praise, and obey the Lord, despite all that we do not understand.

Think about the powerful evidence we have for our beliefs and all the good reasons for the logic of our faith. Notice, too, the use of the word *faith*. What does faith imply? That is, what good reasons do you have for having faith, a belief in something that you do not fully understand?

The Lesson in Brief

▶ **Key Text:** *1 Corinthians 13:1*

▶ **The Student Will:**

Know: Recognize the importance of preaching the Word of God in worship and its effect on the growth of the early church.

Feel: Cultivate a loving attitude toward others as outlined in 1 Corinthians 13.

Do: Rest his or her faith and worship on God, our Creator and Redeemer, as a safeguard against falsehood.

▶ **Learning Outline:**

I. Know: Preach the Word

A Why is preaching and heeding the Word of God such a critical part of worship?

B What role does hearing the Word have in developing faith in believers, as well as unbelievers?

II. Feel: Love

A Why is love the most important of all gifts to the church?

B How can the misuse of some gifts create conflict?

C How can love be a safeguard against such abuses?

III. Do: Facing Challenges

A Both the early church and our church today face problems. How can faith in the centrality of our belief in Christ as Creator and Redeemer keep our feet from stumbling over problems in the church?

B How would you counsel someone who is struggling with belief in evolution versus Creation? How does our belief in our Creator qualify and inform our belief in our Redeemer?

▶ **Summary:** God's Word regarding His law, our history with Him as a people through time, His redeeming acts, and the future He is preparing for us are the foundations of our worship and safeguards for our faith.

The Preaching of the Word

A great part of the Protestant worship tradition has been the preaching of the Word. A sacred responsibility falls upon the one given the task to feed the sheep, to teach and to preach and to exhort and to encourage. Music, liturgy, prayer, the Lord's Supper, and foot washing all have their place, but, perhaps, nothing's more important than what is preached from the pulpit during the worship hour.

Read Peter's sermon on the Day of Pentecost (*Acts 2:14–41*). **How are the important topics of Scripture, doctrine, prophecy, Christ, gospel, and salvation expressed by Peter, and why are these so essential in preaching?**

What an experience it must have been, hearing the fisherman Peter preach with such power and authority. His words did not show any kind of waffling, any kind of doubt, but rather revealed the Spirit working through Him. All throughout his homily, Peter never wavers, but using the Scriptures (then, only the Old Testament) he preaches with power the gospel of Jesus Christ, the crucified and risen Messiah, who is now “exalted to the right hand of God” (*Acts 2:33*). It is amazing how, in such a small number of sentences, he covers such an incredible amount of information, everything from the outpouring of the Holy Spirit to repentance to the Second Coming.

What were the results of the preaching at this worship service? *See Acts 2:41*. **What can we take away from this for ourselves and our Sabbath services?**

Certainly, this must have been a very special worship service. Yet, at the same time, we have the same promises that they had. We have the same Bible (and now the New Testament, as well) that they had, and we have the same Lord who offers us the same Spirit. Why, then, shouldn't we have worship services with the kind of power we see here? What is holding us back?

Learning Cycle

► **STEP 1—Motivate**

Key Concept for Spiritual Growth: As demonstrated in the early church, worship is vital to the communal life of the church, and preaching is an important component of that, as well as an effective method of evangelism.

Just for Teachers: Preaching is an important component of worship in the church, and many Christians can recall moments in their spiritual lives that centered on meaningful sermons and worship experiences. Some preachers have important ministries through their ongoing teaching and their encouragement of people who listen to them regularly. It is important to recognize and support these Christian leaders. On the other hand, we need to be careful of preachers who become “celebrities,” a situation that can create risks for both the preachers themselves and their “fans.” In discussing favorite preachers, the emphasis should be on qualities of faithful preaching, rather than on the personalities of “celebrity” preachers. One suggestion to include in this discussion would be to consider Jesus as a preacher in light of His sermons, as recorded in the Gospels. This discussion should also be tempered by Paul’s reflections in 1 Corinthians 13:1–3.

Opening Activity: Ask students to nominate their favorite preachers—people whose sermons teach, inspire, encourage, or challenge. When a class member suggests a name, ask what he or she appreciates about this preacher’s sermons. Make a list of these qualities on a flipchart or blackboard. Allow time for a class discussion and for a variety of suggestions to be made and the list of qualities to grow. In concluding the activity, reflect on the list that has been compiled from class suggestions, and discuss the importance of preaching in the worship and witness of the church.

► **STEP 2—Explore**

Just for Teachers: Exploring the roles of worship and preaching in the early church allows us to consider what significance they might have for the church today. When comparing the three sermons in part II, the class could be divided into three smaller groups to each consider one of the sermons and to report back to the larger group.

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Paul on Mars Hill

In the days of the early church, we can see another example of the issue of worship, and of what people worship—this time in the ministry of the apostle Paul when he was in Athens, the place where three of the world’s most influential philosophers (Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle) once lived.

What a different audience Paul had to deal with here than did Peter years earlier before all those devout Jews in Jerusalem!

Read Acts 17:15–34, the account of Paul’s preaching in Athens. How different was Paul’s witness to these people from that of Peter’s to the audience on the Day of Pentecost?

One of the most obvious differences is that, unlike Peter, Paul does not quote the Bible here. In fact, he quotes a pagan author instead. At the same time, notice how Paul appeals to logic and reason: look around at the created world, he is saying, and you will see powerful evidence of the Creator God. He is starting out, using a kind of natural theology and pointing to the natural world as a reason to believe in the Creator God.

It is interesting to note the issue of worship here. These people were worshiping something that they did not understand. Paul sought to take that devotion and worship and turn it away from idols and other vain things and toward the living God. Humans seem to have an innate need to worship something, anything, and here Paul seeks to point them to the only thing truly worthy of their worship.

On what point did some of these people have a real problem, and why?

In the end, appeals to logic and reason and natural theology can take us only so far. Paul, in his witness, then sought to teach them about repentance, judgment, and the resurrection, teachings that need to be taken on faith. Hence, he did not have that much success with them. Though he had a few converts, most seemed to have gone back to their worship of what is vain, useless, and unable to save.

In what ways can our worship services better reach out to those who do not have a biblical background, who do not start with the same premises as we do? How can we make our worship services more seeker-friendly?

Learning Cycle CONTINUED

Bible Commentary

I. Questions and Doubts (Review Acts 1:1–11 with your class.)

After Jesus' resurrection, the believers who would become the early church had just a short period of time to adjust to the new reality of their resurrected Messiah. In Acts 1 we see evidence of their many questions. Matthew 28:17 sums it up this way: "When they saw him, they worshiped him—but some of them doubted!" (NLT).

Drawing on the Jewish tradition of exploring God by intense study of the Scriptures, author Rob Bell points out that "the rabbis even say a specific blessing when they don't understand a portion of the text. When it eludes them, when it makes no sense, they say a word of thanks to God because of the blessing that will be theirs someday. 'Thank you, God, that at some point in the future, the lights are going to come on for me.'"—*Velvet Elvis: Repainting the Christian Faith* (Zondervan, 2005), pp. 68, 69. Approached in this way, what we don't know or understand can actually be a trigger for worship.

Consider This: What place do questions and doubts have in worship? Are you able to praise God for what you don't know about Him?

II. Comparing Three Sermons (Review Acts 2:14–41, 17:15–34, and 18:1–16 with your class.)

The book of Acts is a casebook of early experiments in Christian life and witness. While these experiments were Spirit-led, the men and women involved in these differing circumstances were working to find out how best to live and express their newfound faith as inspired by Jesus. One aspect of this was preaching, and the verses cited above give examples of three sermons given in quite different circumstances as the message of Jesus spread across the Roman world. These sermons are among the most famous in Christian history, and they provide examples of how these preachers adapted the message of Jesus for the hearers to whom, and the context in which, they were speaking. Consider the following questions as a guide to comparing these three great sermons:

- Who was the preacher?

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Worship “Contrary to the Law”

Worship is not just about what you do in church on Sabbath. Worship encompasses aspects of our whole faith: what we believe, what we proclaim, how we act. Central to worship is the idea of the Lord as our Creator and our Redeemer. Everything about worship should flow from this fundamental and sacred truth. Again, worship is primarily about God and the actions of God in history. Authentic worship should draw participants into a closer walk with their Lord. It should lead us to a sense of awe, reverence, repentance, and love for Him and for others.

Though we always should be thinking about the Lord (*Luke 21:36, Ps. 1:2*), worship time should be something special, something unique. We cannot, however, rely on the church itself or on the worship leaders themselves to provide that kind of experience for us, however much of a role they may play. In the end, it comes down to ourselves and the attitude we bring to church with us on Sabbath.

At the same time, as we have seen all quarter, worship is a means to an end, not an end in itself. Our worship does not save us; rather, our worship is one of our responses to being saved.

Read Acts 18:1–16. What charge was laid against Paul, and what does that tell us about worship?

It is fascinating that Paul was charged with persuading people toward a different kind of worship, a worship “contrary to the law” (*vs. 13*). (Even the Jews who believed in Jesus at times leveled a similar accusation against Paul.) The point in Acts 18 is that these people were so caught up in tradition, so caught up in how things were done in the past, so caught up in the forms of worship, that when Paul presented them with the One who was the whole purpose of their worship, the One whom they worshiped without knowing it, the One whom all the worship services really pointed to—they rejected what he said. They were so caught up were they in the law itself that they missed the One to whom the law pointed.

Again, though our circumstances today are radically different from Paul’s, we need to be careful not to allow our forms and traditions to get in the way of what our faith really should be about. Any worship that does not lead us directly to the Cross is misguided.

Learning Cycle CONTINUED

- To whom was this sermon delivered?
- What was the larger social context in which this sermon was preached?
- How does the preacher specifically connect with his hearers?
- What does this sermon have in common with the other two sermons we are considering?
- What is unique about this sermon among the three?
- What effect is recorded from this sermon?
- In what context might a sermon like this be appropriate or effective in society today?

▶ **STEP 3—Apply**

Just for Teachers: Today some people say that sermons are no longer relevant in societies that are increasingly used to the fast-paced entertainment of television, movies, and the Internet. At the same time, many people will still attest to how a sermon has transformed their lives. Just like the early church in Acts, we need to find the best ways to communicate the good news about Jesus in the contexts in which we live and worship. This is something we need to be able to talk about prayerfully and carefully in our churches.

Application Questions:

- 1 To what extent are the stories in Acts a model for the church today, as opposed to being simply stories of the beginnings of the church?
- 2 Is it wrong to have questions and doubts? Why, or why not?
- 3 How important is preaching as a part of worship in the life of the church? Must every worship service include a sermon? What alternatives could be used to teach and challenge worshippers?
- 4 How important is context to worship and evangelism? Are there risks associated with trying too hard to be contextual? How do we keep this in balance?
- 5 What is needed to be a good listener to a sermon?
- 6 *Love* is a word with many meanings. How would you explain the concept

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Love Conquers All

It is so easy, from our perspective today, to look back at the early church as some sort of model of harmony and peace, an example of what true worship was all about. Unfortunately, New Testament history is so similar to Old Testament history in that both show just how far fallen we all are.

Take, for example, the church in Corinth, which Paul established on his second missionary journey. A commercial hub, known for its luxury and wealth, Corinth was also a center of one of the most sensual and degrading religions of that era. Influenced by their culture, immorality and dissension had invaded the church. And yet, as bad as it was, it was not the only problem there. Paul addressed other issues that were causing factions to develop in the church, including idolatry (*1 Cor. 10:14*) and the seeming overemphasis of the gifts, especially the misuse of the gift of tongues for self-seeking motives (*1 Corinthians 14*).

In the midst of his discourse to the Corinthians and all their problems, Paul gives them the famous chapter, 1 Corinthians 13. What is the essential message here? More important, how can we apply this to our lives and worship today?

Paul suggested that no profession we make, no mighty miracles, no charismatic gifts, and no piety or zeal will profit us unless there is a heart filled with love for God, confirmed by love for one another. That, says Paul, is the ultimate gift for which we should seek, which may not be substituted with anything less.

Spiritual gifts are helpful, and Christians should use their gifts to honor God and to build up the church in unity. But never should any spiritual gift be used for display of self, personal gain, or in a disorderly way, in worship or otherwise.

In the end, a church filled with loving, dedicated Christians will exert an influence and power that extend far beyond the weekly worship service.

How much does unselfish love for others impact your daily life? That is, how much of your own time and energy do you spend on seeking to minister to others? How much of self are you willing to renounce, all for the good of other people? It is not so easy, is it?

Learning Cycle CONTINUED

Paul is talking about in 1 Corinthians 13 to someone unfamiliar with this chapter and biblical language?

► STEP 4—Create

Just for Teachers: Both of these activities are designed to prompt class members to consider the possibilities of preaching as a component of worship. Perhaps not everyone in the class will be preaching in the near future, but as part of communal worship in the church it is something we should all think about and contribute to.

Individual Activities: Begin to plan a sermon that could share some of the principles of worship that have struck you in the course of Bible study and class discussions over the past weeks. What are the ideas or insights that have caught your attention or imagination and that you would be enthusiastic about sharing with others? What could be an effective way to share these with others? You might not have an opportunity to preach this sermon immediately, but if you have an interest in this path, continue to develop your ideas and be open to God's invitation for you to share when opportunities arise.

Group or Team Activities: As a group, develop a list of guidelines for faithful and worthwhile preaching. Use principles from the Bible study this week and perhaps some of the qualities of a good sermon or preacher from the opening activity. If your church pastor or someone else in your church who has been trained in preaching is available, this individual may be able to offer some theoretical perspectives. Try to avoid being too prescriptive in ways that might restrict individual expression and creativity. Instead, develop ideals that could be helpful and encouraging to preachers and worship leaders in your church. Try to avoid a spirit of criticism; instead, emphasize working on these guidelines with a spirit of love. When a satisfactory list has been developed, share this with your church's preachers, elders, or worship committee.

Further Study: Ellen G. White, “Pentecost,” pp. 35–46; “The Gift of the Spirit,” pp. 47–56; “Exalting the Cross,” pp. 201–210; “Corinth,” pp. 243–254; “Called to Reach a Higher Standard,” pp. 309–322, in *The Acts of the Apostles*.

“Holiness is not rapture: it is an entire surrender of the will to God; it is living by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God; . . . it is walking by faith . . . it is relying on God with unquestioning confidence, and resting in His love.”—Ellen G. White, *The Acts of the Apostles*, p. 51.

“What was the strength of those who in the past have suffered persecution for Christ’s sake? It was union with God, . . . with the Holy Spirit, . . . with Christ. Reproach and persecution have separated many from earthly friends, but never from the love of Christ.”—Page 85.

“[These] consecrated messengers . . . allowed no thought of self-exaltation to mar their presentation of Christ. . . . They coveted neither authority nor pre-eminence.”—Page 209.

“By idolatry he [Paul] meant not only the worship of idols, but self-serving, love of ease, the gratification of appetite and passion.”—Page 317.

Discussion Questions:

- 1 In class talk about all the reasons we have for faith. What “proofs” do we have for what we believe? What rational and logical evidence do we have that helps to affirm us in our beliefs? At the same time, what are the challenges to our faith? In the end, even despite these challenges, why do we believe what we do?
- 2 Think about some of the most powerful worship services you ever have attended. What made them so special, so powerful? What elements in particular made the difference? How can these elements be brought into your local church worship, if they are not there already?
- 3 What are some of the potential ways in which our worship services actually could impede our view of Christ and the Cross? How can we make sure that nothing is allowed to do that?
- 4 Dwell more on 1 Corinthians 13. What concrete steps can your church take to manifest the love that Paul talks about here?