

## Worship in the Early Church



### SABBATH—SEPTEMBER 10

**READ FOR THIS WEEK'S LESSON:** Acts 1:1–11; Acts 2:14–41; Acts 17:15–34; Acts 18:1–16; 1 Corinthians 13.

**MEMORY VERSE:** “Suppose I speak in the languages of human beings and of angels. If I don’t [do not] have love, I am only a loud gong<sup>1</sup> or a noisy cymbal [brass plate for making music]” (1 Corinthians 13:1, NlrV).

**SOON AFTER CHRIST RETURNED TO HEAVEN, THE EARLY CHURCH BEGAN TO GROW.** And at first it was almost all Jews who accepted Jesus as the Messiah and became believers. At first many of the believers thought that the gospel was only for the Jews. This showed how much they still had to learn.

At Pentecost,<sup>2</sup> Peter preached to a large group of Jews (Acts 2). “Those who accepted his message were baptized. About 3,000 people joined the believers that day” (Acts 2:41, NlrV). This verse alone shows how foolish the idea is that all the Jews refused to accept Jesus.

Yet, we would be making a mistake if we thought that the early church was only a happy and peaceful time of worship and praise. In fact, it struggled with some of the same issues we struggle with today. These issues influenced everything about their faith, including worship.

This week we will read about the early days of Christianity. We also will study some of the challenges that the church faced as it grew. We will try to learn from the good things and also from the bad.

1. gong—a large metal disc that makes a deep ringing sound when it is struck with a padded hammer.

2. Pentecost—fifty days after Jesus went to heaven, there was an outpouring of the Holy Spirit upon the disciples (followers of Christ) and believers.

**SUNDAY—SEPTEMBER 11****MANY “PROOFS” (Acts 1:1–11)**

To us, Jesus’ earthly ministry (work) might not seem so successful. He attracted many people while He was still alive. But still He did not win everyone. Many leaders refused to accept Him. And then the Romans crucified Him. This caused His closest disciples (followers) to scatter and flee.

Things seemed pretty bad until Jesus rose from the dead. Then Pentecost came. Suddenly Jesus’ followers found a new hope for preaching their crucified<sup>3</sup> Master as the Messiah (Chosen by God) of Israel. After Jesus returned to heaven, the early church started to grow.

**What important truths do we find in Acts 1:1–11 about the Second Coming, baptism,<sup>4</sup> the Holy Spirit, and mission?<sup>5</sup>**

**What do verses 3 and 6 tell us about how much more truth the disciples had to learn?**

Verse 3 is most interesting. Luke says that Jesus gave the disciples many “proofs.” Some Bible versions use the wording “infallible [perfect] proofs.” Another translation calls it “convincing [believable] proofs.” The point here is that the believers in

3. crucified—when someone is killed by nailing or tying his or her hands and feet to a cross and then placing that cross in the ground.

4. baptism—the act of putting a person completely under water and then bringing him or her back up out of it. This means that Jesus has forgiven this person’s sins and has given him or her new life.

5. mission—the special duty (work) for God that a church sends a person or a group out to do.

Jesus were given powerful proof of Jesus as the Messiah. Jesus had also given the believers the great responsibility of preaching the gospel and of winning souls. So, the believers needed all the proof they could get. The good news is that the Lord will give us all the reasons we need for faith. The Lord also will give us all the reasons we need to believe in things that we do not fully understand. As we learn from these verses, the disciples still did not fully understand the Lord’s plans for the nation of Israel. We need to learn to worship, praise, and obey the Lord, even when we sometimes do not understand everything.

**Think about the powerful proof we have for our beliefs and the reasons for our faith. Notice the use of the word *faith*. What does *faith* mean? What good reasons do you have for having faith or a belief in something that you do not fully understand?**

**MONDAY—SEPTEMBER 12****THE PREACHING OF THE WORD  
(Acts 2:14–41)**

A great part of the Protestant worship history has been the preaching of the Word. Preachers are given the holy responsibility of feeding the sheep, of teaching, and of encouraging church members. Music, worship,

prayer, the Lord's Supper, and foot washing all have their place. But, perhaps, sermons preached during the worship hour are most important.



Preachers are given the holy work of feeding God's sheep.

**Read Peter's sermon on the Day of Pentecost (Acts 2:14–41). Why is Peter's preaching on the Bible, doctrine (church beliefs), prophecy,<sup>6</sup> Christ, gospel, and salvation so important?**

What an experience it must have been to hear the fisherman Peter preach with such power. Peter's words did not show any kind of weakness or doubt. Instead, they showed the Spirit of God working through Him. All through his sermon, Peter uses the Bible (then, only the Old Testament). He preaches with power the gospel of Jesus Christ, the risen Messiah. Jesus is now "given a place of honor at the right hand of God" (Acts 2:33,

NirV). It is interesting to see how Peter's few sentences can cover such a great amount of information. Peter covers everything from the outpouring of the Holy Spirit to repentance<sup>7</sup> to the Second Coming.

**According to Acts 2:41, what were the results of Peter's preaching during this worship service? What can we learn from this experience for ourselves and our Sabbath services?**

This must have been a very special worship service. But at the same time, we have the same promises that the people who heard Peter's sermon had. We have the same Bible (and now the New Testament too) that they had. And we have the same Lord who offers us the same Spirit. We, too, should have worship services with the kind of power that we find in these verses. What is holding us back?

## TUESDAY—SEPTEMBER 13

### PAUL ON MARS' HILL<sup>8</sup> (Acts 17:15–34)

In the days of the early church, we find another example of the issue of worship, and of what people worship. This time the issue was addressed by the apostle (teacher) Paul when he was in Athens. Athens, a city-state in

6. prophecy—a special message from God, often an explanation of what will happen in the future.

7. repentance—the act of feeling sorry for having sinned and turning away from sinning with the help of the Holy Spirit.

8. Mars' Hill—a famous hill in Athens, where thinkers and philosophers met to discuss politics and other issues.

Greece, was the place where three of the world's most famous philosophers<sup>9</sup> (Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle) once lived.

What a different group of people Paul spoke to here than Peter did years earlier before all those religious Jews in Jerusalem!

**Read Acts 17:15–34, the story of Paul's preaching in Athens. How different was Paul's witness to these people than Peter's was to his group on the Day of Pentecost?**

The clearest difference is that Peter quoted the Bible. But Paul did not. In fact, Paul quoted a nonreligious author instead. At the same time, notice how Paul used logic (clear thinking) and reason. Paul pointed to the natural world as a reason to believe in the Creator God.

It is interesting to note something about worship here. These people were worshiping something that they did not understand. Paul tried to turn their worship away from idols and other useless things and toward the living God. Humans seem to have a need to worship something. And Paul tried to point them to the only thing truly worthy of their worship (God).

**On what point did some of these people have a real problem? Why?**

In the end, pointing to God in nature through logic and reason can take us

only so far. In his witness, Paul tried to teach the people of Athens about repentance, judgment, and the return to life from death. These teachings need to be taken on faith. So, Paul did not have that much success with them. He had a few converts (believers). But most seemed to have gone back to their old worship that could not save them.

**In what ways can our worship services better reach out to those who do not know the Bible? How can we make our worship services more friendly toward those who seek truth?**



Paul tried to turn their worship away from idols to the living God.

### WEDNESDAY—SEPTEMBER 14

#### WORSHIP THAT GOES “AGAINST THE LAW” (Acts 18:1–16, NlrV)

Worship is not just about what you do in church on Sabbath. Worship

9. philosophers—people who study ideas about knowledge, truth, and the nature and meaning of life.

includes all parts of our faith: what we believe, what we preach, how we act. A very important part of worship is the idea of the Lord as our Creator and our Savior. Everything about worship should flow from this basic truth. Again, worship is all about God and the actions of God in history. True worship should lead believers to a closer walk with their Lord. It should lead us to a sense of deep respect, repentance, and love for God and for others.

We always should be thinking about the Lord (Luke 21:36; Psalm 1:2). But worship time should be something special. We cannot depend on the church itself or on the worship leaders themselves to give that kind of experience for us. But they do have an important part in worship. In the end, it comes down to ourselves and how we feel about worship on Sabbath.

At the same time, as we have learned all quarter, worship is a way of helping us to reach the goal of going to heaven. It is not the end goal in itself. Our worship does not save us. Instead, our worship is how we respond to God for saving us.

**According to Acts 18:1–16, what charge (crime) was laid against Paul? What does that tell us about worship?**

It is interesting that Paul was charged with encouraging people toward a different kind of worship, a worship that is “against the law” (verse 13, NIV). (Even the Jews who believed in Jesus made the same charge against Paul at times.) The point in Acts 18

is that these people were trapped in their ways of worship. So, when Paul taught them about God, who was the whole purpose of their true worship, they refused to accept what Paul said. They were so caught up in the law itself that they missed the true God to whom the law pointed.

Again, our situations today are very different from those of Paul’s time. But we need to be careful to not let our lifestyle and customs get in the way of what our faith really should be about. Any worship that does not lead us directly to the Cross is false.



**Any worship that does not lead us directly to the Cross is false.**

## **THURSDAY—SEPTEMBER 15**

### **LOVE CONQUERS (WINS) ALL (1 Corinthians 13)**

It is so easy for us today to think of the early church as an example of unity (oneness) and peace. We see it as the example of what true worship was all about. Unfortunately, New Testament history is very much the



same as Old Testament history. Both Testaments show just how far fallen all of us are.

For example, think about the church in Corinth, which Paul established on his second missionary journey. Corinth was a busy center known for its wealth. Corinth was also a center of one of the false religions at that time. Influenced by that culture, unrighteous (unholy) living had invaded the church. So, the church was in bad shape. But such living was not the only problem there. Paul addressed other issues that were causing quarrels in the church, including idolatry<sup>10</sup> (1 Corinthians 10:14). And the other issue was that the spiritual gifts were not properly used. One of them was the gift of tongues, which the church people used for their own gain (profit) (1 Corinthians 14).

**Paul gives warnings to the Corinthians about all their problems. But he also gives them the famous chapter, 1 Corinthians 13. What is the important message in this chapter? More important, how can we use this message in our lives and worship today?**

Paul suggested that no miracles or gifts will help us if we do not have a heart filled with love for God and love for one another. Paul says that love is the greatest gift. We should try to have it. And no other thing can take the place of love.



**Love is the greatest gift.**

Spiritual gifts are helpful. Christians should use their gifts to honor God and to build up the church in unity. But no gift should ever be used for self-glory (power), personal gain, or worship in the wrong way.

In the end, a church filled with loving, faithful Christians will give an influence and power that spreads far beyond the weekly worship service.

**How much does unselfish love for others influence your daily life? How much of your own time and energy do you spend trying to help others? How much of self are you willing to sacrifice (give up) for the good of other people? It is not so easy, is it?**

10. idolatry—worship of images; worshipping idols; loving something more than God.

**FRIDAY—SEPTEMBER 16**

**ADDITIONAL STUDY:** Ellen G. White, “Pentecost,” pages 35–46; “The Gift of the Spirit,” pages 47–56; “Exalting [Glorifying; Uplifting] the Cross,” pages 201–210; “Corinth,” pages 243–254; “Called to Reach a Higher Standard,” pages 309–322, in *The Acts of the Apostles*.

“Holiness is not based on feeling. It is an entire surrender of the will to God. It is living by every word that comes from the mouth of God. . . . It is walking by faith. . . . It is depending on God in full faith and on His love.”—Adapted from Ellen G. White, *The Acts of the Apostles*, page 51.

“What made Christians in the past strong enough to go through great suffering for Christ’s sake? It was union [being joined] with God, . . . with the Holy Spirit, . . . with Christ. Suffering and mockery [being made fun of] have separated many Christians from earthly friends, but never from the love of Christ.”—Adapted from Ellen G. White, *The Acts of the Apostles*, page 85.

“[These] dedicated messengers . . . let no thought of self-glory prevent them from preaching Christ. . . . They did not want power or self-glory or honor.”—Adapted from Ellen G. White, *The Acts of the Apostles*, page 209.

“By idolatry he [Paul] did not mean only the worship of idols. He also meant self-serving and the love of comfort and overeating.”—Adapted from Ellen G. White, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 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 reasonable proof do we have that helps to support us in our beliefs? At the same time, what are the challenges to our faith? In the end, why do we believe in what we do even if we have these challenges?
- ② Think about some of the most powerful worship services you ever have attended. What made them so special, so powerful? What parts of worship made the difference? How could these parts be brought into your local church worship?
- ③ What are some of the ways in which our worship services actually could block our view of Christ and the Cross? How can we make sure that nothing does that?
- ④ Think more about 1 Corinthians 13. What positive steps could your church take to show the love that Paul talks about?