

Early Christians – Elements of Worship

In Part I of this series, I shared with you some thoughts about how much worship space has changed over the centuries. In Part II, I would like to share some thoughts about some elements of our life together that have not changed from the first century to the twenty-first century.

Luke, the author of the Book of Acts, gives us some important insights into the early church, including what authentic worship looked like to those early Christians. Luke also reminds us of three critical elements, or building blocks, to the worship life of the first century church – and to our church today. These elements are constant and unchanging.

These three elements are:

1. Keep the Lordship of Jesus Christ at the Center. Time and time again, we hear in the Book of Acts that the focus of the church was the Lord Jesus Christ. In their preaching and praying, in their fellowship and outreach, it was all in the name and power of the risen Christ. Worshiping in large gatherings or in small house groups, the focus was on Jesus, and this is what enabled Jewish and Gentile believers to come together in a new and dynamic community of faith. The church and its worship life must be Christ-centered.
2. Growing Disciples. Luke tells us the members of the early church in Jerusalem “devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching” – that is, they immersed themselves in these teachings and became active disciples of Jesus Christ. Later in the church at Antioch (one of the most important cities in the ancient world) large numbers of Gentiles came to Christ, and the immediate priority became helping them grow in their faith. Leaders like Barnabas and Saul (Paul) began teaching these new believers what it means to follow Jesus Christ in their daily lives. As new churches sprang up around the Mediterranean world, the emphasis was always on authentic worship and solid teaching. The same is true today. Vital worship leads to ongoing learning, transformation, and personal growth – a life of Christian discipleship.
3. Serve the Church Universal! Luke also tells us that the believers in Judea were experiencing a great famine during this time. The early Christians in Antioch heard about this famine and responded with a financial offering “in proportion to each disciple’s means.” In addition to sending money, these early Christians sent their best leaders, Barnabas and Saul, to help. Christ-centered worship and authentic discipleship will always result in compassion for brothers and sisters here and around the world who are in need.

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In the church, our life together is grounded in these unchanging realities: worship that focuses on the Lord Jesus Christ, growing disciples, and serving the worldwide family of faith as there is need.

Lord, as we consider changes to the space where this people of faith gather to actively participate in worship, help us to keep our focus on You. Like the early Christians, we want to know You and to follow Your commandment that we “go and make disciples” (Matt 28:19), but we also want to follow Your commandment to Simon Peter to “tend my sheep” (John 21:17). Guide us with Your wisdom! We want to do Your work.

Help us create that space where ALL may come and find You, where ALL may come and grow in their knowledge of You, and where ALL can hear Your call to reach out to the world in love and mercy. Amen.

Bob Sanders