

NEW TESTAMENT WORSHIP: SOME PUZZLING PRACTICES¹

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While the churches that meet us in the pages of the NT and in early Christianity were worshiping communities of believing men and women, not all forms of worship practiced in the NT church are present currently at any given time and place. Some of the early-church worship practices even seem strange or bizarre to many present-day Christians. Why these puzzling practices?

1. *Obscure or Unusual Practices*

Much of the descriptive detail in the NT gives the impression of being *ad hoc* and occasioned by the needs of the hour, especially in 1 Cor 12-14. ² Some of it is tantalizingly obscure. For instance, from our vantage point today we can have only a dim idea of what was in Paul's mind or in the Corinthians' intention in 1 Cor 15:29 by the reference to "baptism for the dead."

The most recent attempt at explanation of this obscure and curious phrase is probably the best—to date. J. C. O'Neill³ suggests that the Corinthians understood their baptism as a means to ensure that their bodies would never die, since they had already con-

¹This article is adapted from a lecture I presented at Andrews University on October 15, 1992. I have also treated the topic in a shorter, popular article: "Following in the First Christians' Footsteps," *Christian History* 12 (February 1993): 42-43.

²For details, see my presentation, "Patterns of Worship in New Testament Churches," *JSNT* 37 (1989): 59-85; and now also Paul F. Bradshaw, *The Search for the Origins of Christian Worship* (New York: Oxford University Press), chap. 2.

³J. C. O'Neill, "1 Corinthians 15:29," *ExpTim* 91 (1980): 310-311. O'Neill paraphrases the Pauline text: "Otherwise, what do those hope to achieve who are baptized for their dying bodies? If the completely dead are not raised, why then are they baptized for themselves as corpses?"

cluded that there was no future resurrection of the dead (1 Cor 15:12). Paul denies their starting point and answers their skepticism about the resurrection. Thus he challenges their practice as having no meaning, given their premise. He is a long way from supporting their position and endorsing their practice. Quite the opposite, in fact. It is therefore a big mistake to build "baptism for the dead" into our theology.

Our real problems lie elsewhere, however. They arise partly out of ignorance of what may have been the intended significance of various worship settings and occasions. For example, there are several meals referred to in the book of Acts and in the NT epistles. In Acts 20:7-12, one such meal involving the breaking of bread at Troas took place at a meeting during which Paul preached until midnight, raised up Eutychus (who had fallen from the third floor), then broke bread and ate. After this, Paul continued his discourse until daybreak.

But what shall we say of table fellowship in Acts 2:46, or of the unusual circumstances surrounding the same or similar descriptions of eating in Acts 27:35, when Paul and his party were storm-tossed on the sea? If some of these meals were common meals, taken simply to satisfy human needs of hunger, how did they relate, if at all, to the solemn eucharist of bread and wine as representing the Lord's body and blood (1 Cor 10:16)?

At Corinth there was evidently a convivial meal, like a modern potluck, when the church members brought their own goodies (1 Cor 11:20-22), and this preceded the sacramental celebration of 1 Cor 11:23-26. Abuse of the former, both as an invitation to excess and drunkenness on the part of the rich and as a disparagement of the poor who came late and had nothing to contribute, led to Paul's stern condemnation of the love feast (in the later church called the *agapē* meal). Yet the common meal persisted as a sign of fellowship and practical sharing (as we learn from Jude 12, 2 Pet 2:13, and the church order called the *Didache*), even if there were attendant problems. And by the time of Tertullian (around A.D. 200) more abuses led to the *agapē*'s falling out of favor. Nevertheless, this is a case of a practice living on, even if we do not know exactly what it meant in the early days.

2. Normative NT Practices Now Discontinued

A further problem is even more teasing. What do we today make of certain practices that are either clearly mandated in the NT or else fully described and valued in the normative scriptures to

which we hold, but which many present-day Christians find difficult to fit into modern worship procedures? Our lack of knowledge is only part of the issue here, for often we can read and understand the texts only too clearly. The point is this: What principle is being illustrated and enforced? To be sure, we are obligated to test later developments by the criteria these principles lay down, insofar as we can ascertain and pinpoint them.

So we now turn to consider certain practical features of worship in NT times. Our interest is to discover what, if any, abiding significance lies behind the particular practice or custom portrayed. The examples which I have selected out of a considerable number of options are all cases where (1) there is an element of prescription (something must or should be done), (2) there is a cultural background that needs to be respected, and (3) there are some vital issues at stake. And in each case, modern Christians are often genuinely puzzled.

Women's Hair and Hats (1 Cor 11:2-16)⁴

The Corinthian church was certainly one of a kind. It claimed a considerable amount of the Apostle Paul's time and attention, and he invested much of himself in this community of believers. This congregation was richly endowed with spiritual gifts and powers (1 Cor 1:7; 14:12), yet its very abundance of energies and vitality posed a threat. The danger was by no means least in the area of Christian worship.

The Corinthian Christians had written to Paul for advice, and he had also indirectly picked up signals that all was not well in the congregation when they came together for public praise. In chapter 11, two features stand in the background: (1) concern about the sense of proper order to be observed in public worship, with certain matters being debated; and (2) the fact that emancipation of women at Corinth created its own difficulty, once it became customary for Christian women to take a speaking role in the congregational service.

As a faithful Jew, Paul, replying to issues noted in chapter 11, took his stand on the divine ordering laid down in Genesis (vv. 3, 7); but as a Christian (and having already written Gal 3:28-29), he tempered his remarks about male priority in creation by giving

⁴On the general background and hermeneutical issues, see Manfred T. Brauch, *Hard Sayings of Paul* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1989), chaps. 22-24, with bibliography.

reminders of mutual honor and interdependence between the sexes (vv. 8, 11, 12).

Paul here has no qualms or reservations about the part women may play in worship. The functions of prayer and prophecy (defined in 1 Cor 14:3, which is virtually what we mean by preaching today) are fully granted to women. The sole proviso is their adopting a proper head attire (11:5), whether as a covering (v. 10) or by having uncut hair (v. 15). Once these protocols are observed, women are said to have a full share in the church's ministries.

But what do these provisos mean? Clearly, cultural considerations and some theological convictions have motivated Paul's teaching, and we should address these. We know from the contemporary literature that women in Graeco-Roman society who chose to shave their heads bore a social stigma, and Paul is clearly concerned that this sign should not spoil the church's influence and witness.

It is less easy to tease out the meaning in v. 10. What is meant by the statement that women should have the sign or symbol (see NRSV) of authority on their heads because of the angels? The covering on women's heads is, for Paul, a token of their freedom in Christ, a freedom that gives them the right to lead the congregation in prayer and proclamation. Yet, if they should choose to do this bareheaded, they would bring shame on their heads by showing disrespect to their husbands and by causing consternation to the angels, who are sharers in divine worship and guardians of the moral order in God's world. That is a role which the angels assume, as confirmed by the evidence of the Jewish literature of the Dead Sea scrolls.⁵

So on both counts, the practical and pragmatic on the one hand, and the theological on the other, there is insistence on respect for the heavenly world. The teaching adds up to one firm conclusion: All worship must be orderly and yet reflect the freedom that believers enjoy in Christ (1 Cor 14:12, 39-40). These are the residual truths embedded in the wrapping of local conventions. Paul's face was set against practices that flouted good order, and

⁵J. A. Fitzmyer, "A Feature of Qumran Angelology and the Angels of 1 Cor 11:10," in *Essays on the Semitic Background of the New Testament* (Missoula, MT: Scholars, 1974), 187-204. D. R. MacDonald's full discussion in *There is No Male and Female* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987), 72-111, covers all the possibilities and concludes with some reason, "The women removed their veils in worship . . . (to) dramatize their authority over the angels" (92), claiming to have transcended sexual differentiation as part of their new status (98).

he equally refused to inhibit his charter freedom of men and women as "one in Christ" and as partners in the praise of God's assembly.

*Washing Feet, as Jesus Did (John 13:1-20)*⁶

The cameo of the washing of the disciples' feet as a prelude to the Last Supper in the Upper Room (John 13:1-20) clearly reflects a civilization that knows only unpaved roads, open-toed sandals or bare feet, and a hot climate to tax the weary foot traveler. The bathing of feet was a mark of needed hospitality for visitors both in Israel and in Graeco-Roman society (Luke 7:44; 1 Tim 5:10).

There are still modern Christians who feel that it is incumbent to adopt this practice. Moreover, a wide variety of meanings are attached to the action by different groups. For some Roman Catholics, especially on Maundy Thursday, it has become a sacramental rite with power to remit sins. The historical justification was worked out with great ingenuity by Ambrose, bishop of Milan, Italy (about A.D. 380). He taught that just as a person's sins were washed away in baptism, so the *pedilavium* washed away the hereditary or birth sins derived from Adam, whose feet had been ensnared by the serpent in Eden.⁷

On the Protestant side, this reasoning is rejected. But the early teaching wherein foot-washing illustrates the bishop's lesson in humility as he stooped to wash individuals' feet has been adopted among German Pietist groups and Anabaptist denominations like the Church of the Brethren, as well as by some Adventist, Holiness, and Pentecostal churches. These take their stand on the plain directive of the Lord's mandated word: "I have given you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you" (John 13:15). The example is doubtless spelled out in the previous verse: "You also ought to wash one another's feet."

Clearly, the practice has dominical sanction, perhaps even more compelling than the eucharistic "This do in remembrance of me." On grounds of logic and clarity the case is apparently irrefutable. Why then do the majority of Christians observe the command to break bread and take the cup in the Supper, and yet

⁶I have considered some of the text-critical and interpretive problems of John 13 in *New Testament Foundations* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1975), 1:306-310.

⁷"This elevated the washing of the feet from a useful and edifying ceremony to a level on an equality with the sacrament of baptism itself," so states E. C. Whitaker, *The Baptismal Liturgy* (London: SPCK, 1981), 49.

regard the foot-washing directive as nonbinding? Two considerations seem germane.

First, Christians who observe the Eucharist but reject foot-washing see reflected in the Lord's command for the latter an obvious cultural conditioning, given that our feet today do not get soiled and stained in modern road conditions. The same criterion does not hold for the Eucharist, since taking bread and wine, or eating and drinking, are universal requirements that are needed to sustain life. In the Eucharist they are enriched with a religious tradition and cultic imagery that is age-old. For some, the bread and cup are dubbed "elements"—because they are elemental to all life.

Second, what Jesus here intended by "example" signifies for many modern disciples more than the precise detail of water ablutions in a church service. What he did was to enforce by dramatic symbolism the spirit that prompted such an act in the first place, namely, a disposition of lowly service on behalf of those who need our practical assistance, done in a way that they can appreciate. Performing "humble duties for fellow Christians" is the Good News Bible's contemporizing rendition of 1 Tim 5:10, encapsulating the spirit of the Lord's command.

*Prayers for the Sick, and
Anointing with Oil (James 5:13-16)*⁸

We turn now to the matter of prayers for the sick and anointing with oil (James 5:13-16). Here we trespass on ground considered sacred—ground where human sensitivities are keen. The church's ministry of healing is part of our worship opportunity, and human need is never greater than when it is expressed in a world of ailing and perplexed people.

To many sufferers and to their relatives and friends, the appeal of James 5 comes like a gift from heaven. The situation is one with which we can all identify when there is a sick individual who calls out for healing and renewal. The directions seem plain and accessible: Let such persons summon the church's elders to pray over them, anointing them with oil in the Lord's name. The result is apparently assured: The prayer offered in faith will make the sick one well, and the Lord will raise up that person. If sins have been committed, they will be forgiven, as mutual confession is made and intercessory prayer for healing is offered. The pledge

⁸For further discussion on this passage, see *James*, Word Biblical Commentary 48 (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1988), 197-216.

is reinforced by the encouraging word that a righteous person's prayer is very powerful in its effectiveness (v. 16).

Would that it were so straightforward! Obviously, it is not. Sufferers do appeal for healing of their malady and pain. Christian leaders, at their behest, do fervently and faithfully pray, using the prescribed formulas and administering the anointing oil. Confession of sins comes from the heart, and much faith is evidently exercised. And, we may record thankfully, some healing does take place—but not always and not invariably. So what has gone wrong? Were expectations raised unnecessarily high? Why are hopes often bitterly disappointed?

I cannot tell. Yet, I can suggest that some needless anxiety and added grief may have been avoided if something of the background to James 5 had been observed. Let me sketch a possible scenario.

These verses with their prescription and procedures are unique in the NT, and this fact should give us pause before we rush to the conclusion that here are simple formulas to be adopted when Christians face the harsh realities of trouble, sickness, sins, and natural disasters. I find the key in 5:13: "Is any one of you facing adversity?" And I suggest that the entire paragraph relates to physical afflictions that incapacitate a sick person and bring the elders onto the scene as a direct consequence of that person's loyalty to the Christian faith.

The setting, then, is not illness in general or sufferings encountered in the rough and tumble of life, but the specific troubles that belong to a persecuted group. In that setting, a person overtaken by distress and illness is given encouragement to enlist the aid of the church leaders, who by visiting that individual express a token of the congregation's continuing concern and of God's faithfulness in not abandoning the one whose faith is at low ebb. In this scenario, the sins that need to be confessed are lapses from faithful endurance under trial, and prayer for restoration to God's favor is made.

But what of the promise, "the Lord will raise up" the needy person, once oil is poured and prayer offered? The oil, I take it, is not therapeutic here, nor is it a hint that anointing is in preparation for death, as in the Catholic rite of "extreme unction." Quite the opposite, since the outlook is for healing, not death. The "raise up" could mean that the Lord will bring the sufferer through death to resurrection life. Yet the tenor of the paragraph is against this view.

The oil has symbolic meaning, as in many places in Scripture, to denote the setting apart for God's favor (e.g., Ps 23:5, Luke 4:18, Acts 4:27, 10:38, 2 Cor 1:21, Heb 1:9). It is used here to mark the link between the person in need and the concern of God's people as seen in their representatives, the elders. So the oil and the praying go together, with the purpose of assuring the dejected one, whose spiritual and physical weakness is the cause of the trouble, that such an individual is not alone. The support of God's own church is available as a pledge, and the Lord will raise up the lowly to new levels of faith, whether a physical cure comes or not.

Believers are still mortal men and women, and no person can be so self-deceived as to imagine that v. 15 guarantees immunity from the final illness and death that comes to all human beings sooner or later. No one can be spared the bitterness of a final end of life. The point of the passage is elsewhere: The prayer of faith is answered when sick believers are carried through to a fresh confidence in God by the fellowship of the church that stands with them in the hour of deep need. That is the timely message of James 5:13-16.

3. Conclusion

Some practices mentioned or exemplified in the NT tend to defy our understanding simply because we lack sufficient information to come to clear conclusions about them. Our main attention in this essay, however, has been given to matters of quite another sort: namely, the kind of practices clearly set forth in the NT, but not practical in the eyes of most modern Christians.

I have culled from the NT three practices which are puzzling to many present-day Christians, though mandated in the NT: women's headgear in church, the foot-washing practice in the Lord's ministry, and prayer and oil brought to sick folk. All three of these have a cultural setting. Yet, whatever modern practice is in regard to them, there are principles that they set forth which remain as valid and obligatory as ever in our day—and in every age.⁹ These principles are, respectively, concern for good order, mutual upbuilding, and a God-honoring attitude in worship; the call to lowly service on behalf of others; and the need to identify with Christians whose faith is sorely tested under trial, pledging them support in the expectation that God will lift them to a new plateau of hope and faith.

⁹In my *Worship of God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1982), 104-208, I consider what these principles may well be as a set of "constants" within the changing and changed cultural conditions of the developing church.