

DO YOU WORSHIP BY FAITH OR BY FASHION?

Today's Text: (a) 1 Peter 4 (b) Luke 9: 49-50

Extracts:

(a) *But the end of all things is at hand; therefore be serious and watchful in your prayers. And above all things have fervent love for one another, "for love will cover a multitude of sins." ... For the time has come for judgment to begin at the house of God; and if it begins with us first, what will be the end of those who do not obey the gospel of God? [1 Pet. 4: 7-17].*

(b) *Now John answered and said, "Master, we saw someone casting out demons in Your name, and we forbade him because he does not follow with us." But Jesus said to him, "Do not forbid him, for he who is not against us is on our side" [Lk 9: 49-50]*

The United Methodist Church (UMC) is the second largest protestant denomination in the world, 30% of whose members live in African countries.¹ With a majority of its membership drawn from the Western world (Europe and America), there has been enormous pressure to modify church practices to make them welcoming to lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) people. At the UMC general conference held in February 2019, the "Traditional Plan" passed narrowly by 6.25% (54 out of 864 in attendance). In other words, the church voted to uphold its Christian values.

That story raises an important question about worship. I had thought that people went to church to worship God, for salvation sake. Do you go to a particular place of worship because it promotes your true faith in Jesus Christ or because it is convenient for your lifestyle? Do you worship by faith or by fashion? In the words of Apostle Peter, the end of all things is at hand; therefore, we need to be serious and watchful in our choices. Today's study will enable us to critically examine those questions..

¹ Story is based on James Michael Nichols, "LGBTQ United Methodist leaders gutted by church's anti-gay decision," March 23, 2019; <https://www.nbcnews.com/feature/nbc-out/lgbtq-united-methodist-leaders-gutted-church-s-anti-gay-decision-n986516>

1. **Background: How did you choose your place of worship?**

Every day, we make decisions that have short or long-term effects on our lives. What to eat, what to wear, where to live, where to school, and where to worship are among such choices. With respect to church-going, how did you choose your place of worship? Is your choice healthy for your spiritual growth and journey to eternity in heaven?

One or some of the following factors may have played a significant role in your choice, among others:

1) *By birth*

Many of us followed our parents from birth to worship where they did. We had no choice in the matter. It did not matter whether we liked or enjoyed it. It was part of our “cultural” upbringing. However, as soon as we had the freedom/choice to do it our own way, many of us broke away from our parents and guardians to worship elsewhere. Some children may give up their faith and become hostile to it. Some grow stronger in it and succeed their parents/family members there for, as the word of God says, “Train up a child in the way he should go, and when he is old, he will not depart from it” [**Prov. 22: 6**].

It is on days of worship, especially Sunday, that Christians congregate into ethnic or denominational “ghettoes.” That is when you hear of Catholics, Protestants or Charismatics, each with its own mode of worship and rituals. Even within the same denomination, worshippers go to churches pastored by their ethnic kith and kin. Our cultural upbringing has played a role in that.

2) *By convenience*

The place of worship may be quite convenient. It is nearby or they are not fussy about true Christian piety. They are more user-friendly than God-fearing. When you listen to sermons there, undue emphasis is placed on material prosperity and building “fire walls” to safeguard the loyalty of the congregation. As long as you contribute a handsome tithe every month and you do not insist on accountability, they are not bothered by your moral conduct.

3) *By popularity*

The place of worship may be quite popular. It may be loud on television or online or by word of mouth. There, the leaders are charismatic. You may find there young professionals and influential business and political leaders who

can meet your career and/or financial needs. Sermons emphasise prosperity, not salvation.

I remember one such church near my place of residence which used to be located in Ikoyi, the exclusive part of Lagos (Nigeria). At that time, Lagos was the Federal Capital of Nigeria. Top government officials, business executives and diplomats lived in that part of Lagos. The church was vibrant, full of young people who played critical roles in the bible class and choir. When Abuja in central Nigeria took over as the new Federal Capital of Nigeria, many top members of that church, government officials, especially, had to relocate there. All of a sudden, the population of young members started to drop. I came across one such former member at a gas station a few months later and asked him why he was so scarce. His answer shocked me. He said, “It’s no longer fashionable to worship there. Most of us, young people, came there for business contracts and privileges. Now that the top government officials no longer come there, we no longer have the incentive to come too.”

Popularity is like fashion-it does not last long or forever! It is threatened by ageing, familiarity or obsolescence. Therefore, you cannot build your spiritual growth on it.

4) *By faith*

The emphasis here is on true worship based on true faith in Jesus Christ. The word of God says that without faith, it is impossible to please God; those who come to Him must believe that He is and is a rewarder of those who diligently seek Him [**Heb. 11: 6**].

Take the case of the church at Antioch, a Gentile city with a collection of believers from varied backgrounds [**Acts 13: 1-4**]. There was Simon (also called Niger, that is, black), Lucius of Cyrene (near Libya) and Manaen (who had been brought up with Herod the tetrarch). Then there were Barnabas, a rich Levite from Cyprus who had sold his land and given all the proceeds to the early church [**Acts 4: 36- 37**] and Paul, formerly known as Saul from Tarsus, a dual citizen of Israel and Rome and a well- educated Pharisee who had studied law under the highly respected Gamaliel [**Acts 5: 34; Acts 22: 1-3, 22-29**]. Yet, when they operated under the influence and command of the Holy Spirit, it was the “lower class people” -Simon, Lucius and Manaen (among others) -who laid hands on Paul and Barnabas when they were commissioned for their first missionary journey [**Acts 13: 2-4**]. They did so because there was more than religion at work. They had a relationship because it was in that church that believers were first called Christians [**Acts 11: 26**]. How did the early Christians behave? They “were of one heart and one soul” [**Acts 4: 32**]. *They were all related by blood- the blood of Jesus!*

From the forgoing, it follows that *where you worship is influenced to a large extent by what you want out of it*. The Psalmist writes, “I was glad when they said to me, ‘Let us go into the house of the LORD’” [Ps. 122: 1]. The Apostle Peter adds, “The time has come for judgment to begin at the house of God; and if it begins with us first, what will be the end of those who do not obey the gospel of God?” [1 Pet. 4: 17]. Do you go to the house of God to worship by faith or by fashion?

2. Lessons for us

On one occasion, John, one of the apostles, asked Jesus, “Master, we saw someone casting out demons in Your name, and we forbade him because he does not follow with us.” But Jesus answered him, “Do not forbid him, for *he who is not against us is on our side*” [Lk 9: 49-50]. By extension, it is not the congregation you belong to that matters but your true faith in God by Christ Jesus. So, what lessons can we learn from today’s study that we can apply to our daily walk with Christ? The following may be helpful:

1) *Determine who you want to please with your worship*

Peter writes, “If anyone suffers as a Christian, let him not be ashamed, but let him glorify God in this matter” [1 Pet. 4: 16]. Therefore, it is God you should strive to please with your worship, not anybody else. *Religion thrives on numbers and affinity but salvation on your personal relationship with God. In religion, we are either Jew or Gentile, male or female, orthodox or protestant; but in a relationship, we are all one in Christ Jesus* [Gal. 3:28].

Therefore, you must first determine who you want to please with your worship. If it is God, you must not continue as a murderer, a thief, an evildoer or a busybody in other people’s matters [1 Pet. 4: 15]. Instead, you must speak as the oracles of God, minister with the ability which God supplies in all things so that God may be glorified in all things through Jesus Christ [v. 11].

2) *God sees your heart, not your worship shows*

Peter writes, “If you are reproached for the name of Christ, blessed are you, for the Spirit of glory, and of God rests upon you” [v. 14]. In other words, God sees your heart, not your church or social rank, not what you wear or how others see you. So, you should focus on worshipping for salvation sake, not to impress other congregants so that when the glory of Christ is revealed, you may also be glad with exceeding joy [v.13].

3) *Your role model is not your priest or pastor*

A good number of worshippers tend to place more emphasis on their relationship with the pastor/head and church rank than on godly relationship

with others for the sake of God and His kingdom. The danger of that approach is that we could be misled by human beings and worldly standards.

For example, in the early church at Antioch, a Gentile city, Peter, the Apostle came to visit, with Barnabas and Paul present. The visiting Jews and Gentiles in the local church ate and prayed together. But as soon as Jewish messengers joined them from Jerusalem, Peter, Barnabas and some other Jews withdrew themselves from the Gentiles. It took Paul to rebuke them for such hypocrisy [Gal. 2: 11-21]. You can imagine the impact of that hypocrisy on young Gentile worshippers that had looked up to Peter and the other church leaders.

The Psalmist writes, “One thing have I desired of the LORD, and that will I seek after; that I may dwell in the house of the LORD all the days of my life, to behold the beauty of the LORD, and to inquire in His temple” [Ps. 27:4]. *Can you imagine what it feels like to worship in the house of God in Spirit and in truth? That should be your aspiration from now on.*

3. **Conclusion: Judgment Day is around the corner!**

It is remarkable that when the enemies of God want to attack believers, they go to their place of worship. Can you imagine calling oneself a believer and yet a disobedient one with unconfessed sins to be caught in such attacks? In the words of Peter, “The time has come for judgment to begin at the house of God; and if it begins with us first, what will be the end of those who do not obey the gospel of God?” [1 Pet. 4: 17].

Worship by faith, not by fashion.