

# END-TIMES ISSUES



**#87** Commandment #4 – Rituals and practices

GOD DOESN'T TELL US TO KNOW ALL THE END-TIME DETAILS. HE TELLS US TO BE READY.

**A N D B E Y O N D I**

# THE SABBATH OR The Day of Worship

✧ Certain things *are* to be done! ✧

- **A focus on truth** – the message of God's Word:
  - ↳ An awareness of God's worth and our dependency on him.
  - ↳ Recognition that God, *because he is morally upright*, will put an end to the wicked, and will bless the righteous.
- **Praise and thankfulness** for who God is and what he does. Music and singing, rejoicing in God.
- **Prayer** – first for God's kingdom and his people, then for our needs. (This also includes praise and recognition of who God is, etc.)

↳ All this is to be done with the right attitude and a willingness to respond in whatever way necessary to honor God (repentance, trust, changes in values, etc.).

# BUT WHAT ABOUT:

All those other things that people have sometimes made a part of worship and "church"?

✧ The various practices and rituals? ✧  
(Even gimmicks and entertainment!)

- Are they ...
  - ↳ **Good?**
  - ↳ **Bad?**
  - ↳ **Neutral?**
- And ... How do we know?

## Some basic principles.

1. What God *requires must* be done.

- We just looked at these things. The problem is that many people downplay these things, because they don't appeal to the unsaved. They don't attract people who are not being led by the Spirit.

2. Anything that is *prohibited or incompatible with the teachings and principles of Scripture is not* to be done.

- This should be obvious; but many people don't seem to think so. Scripture contains enough direct statements, as well as principles that can be applied in many situations, that there shouldn't really be much to question.
- Here is an example of a principle that can be applied in many ways:
 

For God is not a God of disorder but of peace ...  
1 Corinthians 14:33a (NIV)

Context: Everyone wanted to do things their own way, instead of working together (v. 26).

3. There are many things that are neither required or prohibited.

- These are often called "matters of freedom."
- In these matters, there is no *direct statement* that requires us to view them as necessary or forbidden. By themselves, we cannot say that they are *always* one way or another.
  - ✓ Some people claim that, if something *isn't* mentioned in the New Testament, then its use in worship is prohibited. Others say the opposite – that it is permitted. Neither of these "rules" – invented by people – is supported by Scripture.
- This does not mean that we can always do as we please. Though by itself, something may be a matter of freedom, *nothing in the world exists "by itself," but in a context!*
  - ✓ Circumstances may *cause* certain things to *become* required or prohibited. Yet in a different situation, they may remain a matter of freedom.

4. Some practices just don't fit with worship.

- Worship involves certain attitudes and actions. Some things – even if legitimate in other situations – may not be appropriate during a time of worship.
- Some questions we could ask about such things:
  1. Are they *compatible* with the teachings of Scripture?
  2. Do they *promote* the main purpose for worship?
  3. Are they a *distraction*?

5. "Newness" of something doesn't prove that it is good or bad.  
Example: modern technology.

- Today, we have the ability to do many things that were not possible at the time the Bible was written. This does not mean that the Bible is *silent* about them. Rather, they must be evaluated, based on the teachings and principles of Scripture (and the context of the situation).
- "Oldness" *also* doesn't prove something to be good or bad.

### Examples of things to consider.

#### 1. Things that are found in the Old Testament.

- Some practices were *commanded* in the Old Testament, but not in the New. Are we required to do them? Here are some examples:

#### A. Various sacrifices and temple practices.

- Some of these were fulfilled in Christ (such as the sin offerings); other things continued to be practiced by Jewish Christians – sometimes even by the apostles. The Gentile Christians were *not* required to do them. (Acts 21:20-26).
- Many of these practices ceased to be an option, when God providentially used the Romans to destroy the temple. (This was because of Israel's rejection of Jesus, the Messiah sent by God.)
- Still, we learn a lot about salvation and life from what Scripture teaches about these practices. More than that, there are *still* ways that concepts such as "sacrifice" apply to us. →

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### Sacrifices and their relevance to us.

- We need to remember that there is no salvation without sacrifice. The Old Testament sacrifices were a *temporary* measure, until Jesus became the *final* sacrifice, and paid for our sins, once for all time (1 John 2:2; 4:10; Ephesians 5:2; Hebrews 7:27; 9:26; Romans 3:25).
- We *still* have an *obligation* to offer sacrifices to God. But they are different – not like the burnt offerings of the Old Testament.
  - Regarding God:** Praise, acknowledging ("confessing") who Jesus is – Hebrews 13:15. (Worship; public expressions of loyalty to God.)
  - Regarding people:** Doing good and sharing with others – Hebrews 13:16. Gifts and money, to help other Christians – Philippians 4:18.
  - Regarding ourselves:** Our bodies, as "living sacrifices" – Romans 12:1.

[You are] a holy priesthood, **offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God** through Jesus Christ.

1 Peter 2:5b (NIV)

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#### B. Tithes, offerings, gifts.

- In the Old Testament, every Jew was required to pay tithes (10% of one's earnings or produce). Yet even before the Law came into effect, there are examples of God's people doing it. (Examples: Abraham, Genesis 14:18-20; Jacob, Genesis 28:20-22.)
- There were *several* required tithes, given at various times. These were used to provide for the priests, temple services, yearly national feasts, the genuinely needy, etc. On average, a family's total obligation may have amounted to a little more than 20% per year.
- There were also *freewill* offerings, given freely, according to one's ability and desire.
- The Old Covenant tithing regulations were in *command* form. They applied to *everyone* in the Jewish nation – even to the *unsaved*. Commands would be necessary, since "love for God and neighbor" is not a natural impulse for the sinful nature.

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- In the New Testament era, the Jews practiced tithing, based on the Old Testament regulations. [For some, it was nothing more than a ritual – not an expression of love (Luke 11:42; 18:12).] However, there is no *command* about tithing in the New Testament; and Gentiles are never told to do so.
- Instead of commands to tithe, the New Testament has an emphasis on *generosity* and a willingness (perhaps even an *eagerness*) to support the ministry of God's people. There is also an emphasis on having the right *attitude*, and giving according to one's *ability*.
- How* we give (when not forced to do so) will be influenced by our heart's attitude. If we don't care about God's people, it will influence how we give... as well as how God will treat us!

Remember this: Whoever sows sparingly will also **reap sparingly**, and whoever sows generously will also **reap generously**.

Each one should **give what he has decided in his heart to give**, not out of regret or compulsion. For **God loves a cheerful giver**.

2 Corinthians 9:6-7 (BSB)

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- Yes, attitude is important. But so is helping others. (If our attitude is incompatible with salvation, then our attitude needs to change.)
- Scripture tells us that God's servants have the *right* to be provided for, by God's people. But they can also choose to not exercise this right – like Paul, who chose to not exercise this right, when it had the potential of hindering his ministry.

If others have **this right to your support**, shouldn't we have it all the more? But **we did not exercise this right**. Instead, we put up with anything rather than hinder the gospel of Christ.

1 Corinthians 9:12 (BSB)

#### Why no command? The New Covenant makes it unnecessary!

- Today, all saved people are under this covenant. This covenant tells us that God *embeds* his laws and values in the hearts of his people. Because of this, we *no longer need an external command* to "force" us to contribute to the kingdom of God. Rather, if we "seek first God's kingdom and his righteousness" (Matthew 6:33), we will want to do so.

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#### C. Fasting / abstaining from food (and sometimes water).

- Today, people tend to use the word "fasting" to describe abstaining from just about anything. When referring to food, it is often a reference to dieting or not eating prior to a medical procedure.
- In Scripture, fasting involved abstinence from food (and sometimes water) for a specific time period (which varied). It usually had a *spiritual* focus (prayer, repentance, vows, preparation for service, etc.), but could also be a response to tragedy. It was usually *voluntary*, but could be *commanded* – such as by a king, in a time of *national* repentance. (See Jonah 3 for an example.)
- One's *attitude* while fasting is important. If done merely as a ritual, or without an attempt to live a godly life, God is not impressed. Such fasting has no value (Isaiah 58:3-12).
- In the New Testament, we learn many principles about fasting; but it does not give us a *command* to fast. However, it seems to have been an *expected practice* in the early church.

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### What reason might we have for fasting?

- ✓ There *can* be value in fasting, if it is accompanied by prayer, worship, humility, repentance, preparation for making a decision, etc. (In such cases, the fasting is more like a *help*, rather than the *source* of the value.) In Scripture, important things sometimes occurred during a time of fasting, when accompanied by activities like these. (Examples: Acts 13:2-3; 14:23.)
- ✓ At the same time, the New Testament condemns people who place "religious value" on fasting or abstaining from various types of food. Such practices do not *cause* "spirituality"; and they have no long-term value (1 Corinthians 8:8; Colossians 2:20-23; Hebrews 13:9).

... things taught by demons ... through **hypocritical liars**, ... [who] **order [people] to abstain from certain foods**, which God created to be received with thanksgiving by those who believe and who know the truth.

1 Timothy 4:1b, 2b, 3b (NIV)

- ✓ Scripture tells us to *abstain* from sin. But this is to be a *permanent* way of living, not just a temporary "fasting" from it! (1 Peter 2:11.)

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### D. Vows, promises, agreements.

- ✓ These were voluntary. In both Testaments, we are told to be careful about making vows/promises. If we *do* make a vow/promise, we must make every effort to fulfill it! (This applies to vows/promises made to God, as well as to people.)
- ✓ There are various instructions and warnings about their significance, about making them, and also about abusing them.
- ✓ Do not be hasty to make a vow/promise. If we discover we can't fulfill our vow, we might call it a "mistake"... but God calls it "sin"!

When you make a vow to God, do not delay to fulfill it. He has no pleasure in fools; fulfill your vow. **It is better not to make a vow than to make one and not fulfill it.** Do not let your mouth lead you into **sin**. And do not protest to the temple messenger, "My vow was a **mistake**." Why should God be angry at what you say and destroy the work of your hands? Much dreaming and many words are meaningless. Therefore fear God.

Ecclesiastes 5:4-7 (NIV)

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## 2. Things that are found in the New Testament.

### A. Baptism and the "Lord's Supper" (communion).

- ✓ These must be done (when applicable), but not necessarily on the day of worship.

### B. Foot washing.

- ✓ In John 13, Jesus washed the disciples' feet. In verses 12-17, he explains why he did so. Verse 14 contains a command:

So if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, **you also should wash one another's feet.**

John 13:14 (BSB)

- ✓ Most Christians believe that the command is for us to be willing to *serve others*, and that the foot-washing is given merely as an *example* of doing so (see v. 15). But some believe that the command focuses on the actual act of washing feet; and they treat it as an "ordinance," like baptism and the Lord's Supper.

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- ✓ Regardless of your conclusions about the necessity of this "ritual," make sure that you have the servant attitude that Jesus requires of his people. Throughout the New Testament, this attitude is described as *necessary*; and (unlike foot washing) there is no question about it!

Do nothing out of selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility **consider others as more important than yourselves.** Everyone should look not to his own interests, but rather to the interests of others.

**Adopt the same attitude as that of Christ Jesus, ...**

Philippians 2:3-5 (CSB)

### C. "Love feasts"

- ✓ A few passages describe the early Christians as coming together (as a church) and sharing a meal, perhaps combined with the Lord's Supper. One such example is in 1 Corinthians 11:17-34 – where Paul was correcting some abuses of it. It is not *commanded*, though it seemed to be the practice of many in the early church (and is probably a good practice to have today). If you have such meals, make sure it's an expression of love, like it was intended to be!

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## 3. Rituals and practices invented after the New Testament era.

- There is no possible way to cover all the false teachings and practices that have been introduced into the church. But Scripture doesn't tell us to learn all the *false* ways (so we can identify them). Rather, it tells us to learn the *truth* – and oppose anything that doesn't align with it.
- Many of these things are incompatible with the way God works; and if God saves someone, it is *in spite of* such things, not *because of* them.

### A. Shortcuts to attaining "spirituality."

- ✓ As Christianity spread, and Gentiles began coming to Christ, certain people began introducing pagan Greek philosophy into Christianity. The result was the creation of many false teachings and practices – and they infect the church down to this day.
- ✓ To this day, people are taking whatever the world teaches, and "Christianizing" it. Or taking the techniques used by false religions and introducing them into the church, modifying them, as necessary, to look like legitimate "spiritual practices."

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- ✓ Often, "well-meaning" individuals (called "wolves," from God's perspective, Acts 20:29, John 10:12; etc.) will introduce some practice that is purported to enhance "spirituality." They often describe it with "spiritual-sounding" words and catch-phrases that make their opponents look like "opponents of godliness" – when the *opposite* is actually true.
- ✓ If it's an *older* practice being promoted, they might call it "wisdom from the ancients," or "insights from the church fathers" or whatever. If it's *new*, they might call it "a fresh look" at what the Bible says on an issue (usually when they want to *deny* what the Bible says). Either way, they make it sound like a "refreshing and exciting" way to get "closer to God." And it appeals to many church-goers.
- ✓ These false teachers ignore the fact that God has already given us all that we need for life and godliness (2 Peter 1:3-4).
- ✓ How should we respond? The best way to recognize what is *false* is to learn what is *genuine*. Find out what Scripture says; and don't add to it, or subtract from it!

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### B. Religious organizations, institutions, liturgies, rituals, ceremonies, ornate buildings, opulence and wealth. Even "membership lists."

- ✓ The modern "institutional church" bears little or no resemblance to what the Bible would describe as: "God's people assembling together for worship."
- ✓ Some of these things are expressly forbidden in Scripture; some are a distraction from the purpose for which God's people are to come together; some may be a matter of personal preference (yet with the potential of becoming a problem, if over-emphasized).
- ✓ The rituals, opulence and paraphernalia found in some churches accomplish little more than providing a "religious experience" that leaves people *thinking* they are saved, when they are not.
- ✓ *Our response to any specific matter should be based on Scripture – what it says and what it doesn't say.* Though many modern-day "church" practices have little in common with what the New Testament says we should be doing (which means we have no moral obligation to do them), some may have value in certain situations.

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### C. Tricks and techniques; gimmicks; a focus on outward appearances; things designed to impress the world and gain attendees.

- ✓ God builds his church through the changing of *hearts*, caused by the preaching of the *Word*. People, not satisfied with God's ways, tend to invent their own methods – *substitutes* for God's ways.
- ✓ The world has many tricks and methods for influencing people. These things can help a group increase attendance or add to membership lists. *But they cannot change the heart* – something that only God can do.
- ✓ Such methods of manipulation may get "results"; but they treat the "church" like a club or organization – and *not* like the living body of Christ.
- ✓ Relying on human ingenuity and techniques, *instead of relying on God*, will get human results, not results from God. In addition, many unsaved people see through such pretension, and get turned away from Christ, because of what they see (which they wrongly think has some connection to the Bible).

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- ✓ Some people rely on social events or entertainment or some other type of activity, to get people's attention. A short, sometimes shallow, talk about the Bible might be added. There may be circumstances in which there *is* some value in this; but it can also be a real "turn-off" for unsaved people who aren't expecting the religious "add-on." Also, there is a tendency for people who emphasize this to *de-emphasize* the Bible.

### D. Using "church" as a springboard to promote other things.

- ✓ Some people use "church" as a means of promoting a business, a health fad, marketing scheme, etc. ... People are often left with the idea that, to be "spiritual," they have to participate in these things.
- ✓ Scripture opposes doing this. *So just don't do it!*

... people of corrupt mind, who have been robbed of the truth and who think that godliness is a means to financial gain.

1 Timothy 6:5b (NIV)

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### 4. Personal preferences in matters that *don't* matter.

- There *are* things that seriously don't matter! Should we sing three songs, or four? Should we do things exactly the same way each week, or can we have some variety?

#### A. In some matters, it *doesn't* matter!

- ✓ There is plenty of room for doing things different ways, as long as it is done in a decent and orderly way, without fighting and arguing over it!
- ✓ When other issues and circumstances don't imply a *needed* response, we can do whatever we prefer. This is part of Christian freedom! *But we need to make sure that Christian love influences how we make our choices.*

#### B. We must remember what *does* matter!

- ✓ This takes us back to where we started – the things that Scripture tells us are a part of worship. These things are what we should focus on.

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## OUR MISSION:

**There is no end to the rituals and practices that people have invented, and continue to invent.**

- ↳ A few may be necessary.
- ↳ Some may be optional.
- ↳ Many are harmful.

**Each generation of Christians has to:**

- **Go to Scripture**, to see what it tells us to do,
- **Use Scripture**, to evaluate the practices that are being done (whether *old* ones or *newly-invented* ones),
- **Stay loyal to Scripture**, accepting only practices that are compatible with what God has told us is our ultimate need.

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