

THE HIGHEST DUTY OF THE CHURCH

BY

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The true, holy and biblical worship of God is the highest privilege and duty of the Body of Christ.¹ “We worship God because God created us to worship him. Worship is at the center of our existence, at the heart of our reason for being.”² The Church most directly serves her Lord when she worships God in spirit and in truth.³ Therefore, in the Spirit on the Lord’s Day, the Church militant on earth gathers with the Church triumphant before the throne of God above to give Christ the glory due His name.⁴

However, we cannot rightly worship God if we do not understand God and we cannot understand God without the Bible. The late James Boice once remarked, “To worship God we must know who God is, but we cannot know who God is unless God first chooses to reveal himself to us. God has done this in the Bible, which is why the Bible and the teachings of the Bible need to be central in our worship.”⁵ It only follows that the only acceptable way of worshiping God is according to His Word, limited and regulated by God’s revelation of Himself, and therefore cannot result from the vain imaginations of men, the demands of culture, sincere emotionalism, or “any other way not prescribed in the Holy Scripture.”⁶ This is the “regulative principle” of worship.

THE REFORMATION OF WORSHIP

¹ Westminster Shorter Catechism, “*Man’s chief end is to glorify God, and to enjoy Him forever,*” Answer #1

² Hughes Oliphant Old, *Worship: Reformed According To Scripture*, Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, 2002, p. 1

³ John 4:23-24

⁴ Revelation 1:9-11, 4:1-5:14

⁵ James Montgomery Boice, quoted in “*Give Praise To God*, P&R Publishing, Philipsburg, NJ, 2003.

⁶ Westminster Confession of Faith, *Of Religious Worship, and the Sabbath Day*, Chapter XXI.

Consider this axiom of the Reformation: “The Church reformed, always being reformed, by the Word of God.” The Reformers did not attempt to create new beliefs or practices, but sought to reestablish biblical orthodoxy in matters of polity, doctrine and worship. No significant differences existed between the branches of the Reformation as they united in one voice to answer from the Bible the question of “How are men justified in the sight of holy God?” All Protestants rejected human works of righteousness and embraced the biblical doctrine of God’s sovereign grace. Anglicans, Lutherans and Calvinists alike concluded that according to God’s written revelation, men are justified in the sight of God by grace, through faith, in Christ alone, to God alone the glory!⁷

Notwithstanding the importance of the doctrine of justification by faith to all Protestants, the Reformed branch of the Reformation seemed equally concerned with “How is God to be worshiped?” John Calvin knew from Scripture that within the heart of men was an “factory of idols;” he knew that left to their own devices men would never turn from idols to serve the living and true God. Calvin and his followers were adamant against icons, altars and the sacrificing of Christ again and again in the Roman Catholic Mass. For Calvin, false worship was not simply one style or preference of worship set against another but idolatry of the worst kind. “Calvin defines the place of worship as none of his predecessors had done before . . . Worship, he says, is *the* central concern of Christians. It is not some peripheral matter, but ‘the whole substance’ of the Christian faith.”⁸

A significant minority of evangelical Christians in America are now advocating a 2nd Reformation and a return to the biblical doctrines of grace and faith. For this we are grateful. But precious few are willing to go *contra mundum* (against the world) and work toward the biblical reformation of worship in the American church that the doctrines of the Reformation demand. Never before in the history of our nation has the need for a worship reformation been greater. Michael Horton speaks of the modern church and her “greasy familiarity” with God and the “generational narcissism” that has resulted in the loss of God-centered, transcendent and holy worship.⁹ People in our day demand worship move them emotionally, that worship speak to their “felt needs,” all without making a serious demand on their lives. That is not to say that all

⁷ Terry L. Johnson, *Worship That Is According To Scripture*, Reformed Academic Press, Greenville, 2000, p. 16-17

⁸ *Ibid*, p.18 quoting, Carlos M. N. Eire, *War Against the Idols*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1986, p. 85.

⁹ Michael Horton, *A Better Way*, Baker Books, Grand Rapids, 2002, p. 40.

modern notions regarding worship result in heresy. But contemporary worship innovations do inevitably result in the trivialization of God and the weakening of the faith of God's people. New "alternative worship" is often not prescribed by Scripture and is too often designed for someone other than God. Worship cannot be like Wal-Mart where the masses go because there is something for everyone and it doesn't cost much.

The "worship wars" are not simply about traditional worship set against contemporary expressions of love for God. It is not about one set of preferences over another. It is however about truth, form and substance. It is about, "*one, holy, apostolic and catholic Church.*"¹⁰ It is about us conforming to God and not God conforming to us. It is about worshiping the true God according to His commands.

Those of us who love the Reformation understand that were it not for the Reformers biblical Christianity may have been lost in the 16th Century. Sadly, by the end of the 19th Century "Modernism" infiltrated the Protestant churches with ideas that undermined the evangelical Church in Europe and severely weakened her in America. Mainline Protestant liberals wanted less theology and more humanism with less doctrine and more experience. They wrongly believed they could be more evangelistic by being less biblically dogmatic and more culturally relevant. The historic Protestant Church soon lost what it scripturally meant to be a Christian. The holiness of God and the sinfulness of man were replaced by the universal fatherhood of God and brotherhood of man.

We are at the beginning of the 21st Century facing a new enemy every bit as destructive to biblical faith as "modernism." The new enemy is "pragmatism." Pragmatic contemporary Christianity has theologically, musically, liturgically and intellectually "dumbed down" the faith in exchange for whatever works, whatever pleases the crowd, whatever makes people comfortable with God. This is the 21st Century equivalent of the recurring theme of the Book of Judges where everyone did what was right in their own eyes.

Once before, our Reformed and Presbyterian fathers, "Through the faithful implementation of this regulative principle, the various Reformed churches effected a renovation of Christianity, established a discipleship program unparalleled in Christian history, created a culture that

¹⁰ The Apostles Creed

survives to this day . . . and rejuvenated apostolic norms of corporate worship.”¹¹ God help us to see the restoration of faithful biblical worship in our generation. Let us “contend for the faith that was once for all given to the saints.”¹²

THE OTHERNESS OF GOD

God said, “Among those who are near me I will be sanctified, and before all the people I will be glorified.”¹³ The one attribute of God almost completely lost on contemporary culture is the transcendent holiness of God. When Isaiah saw the Lord he heard heavenly beings calling to one another saying, “Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of His glory!” He knew instinctively his unworthiness to be in God’s presence. He was immediately convicted of sin. He confessed his sin. His only remedy was in God’s assurance of pardon – “your guilt is taken away, and your sin atoned for.”¹⁴

People are created in the image and likeness of God, but He remains distinctly “other” than those whom He created. We cannot fully comprehend the holiness, the transcendent purity, or perfection of God. Yet, it is this holy transcendently pure God we are commanded to meet with and worship each Lord’s Day. The Puritan Jeremiah Burroughs put it this way, “The reason men worship God in a casual way is because they do not see God in His glory. If a man has ever had Isaiah’s vision of the holiness of God, he would be changed in an instant. But until men have seen God as He truly is (as ‘The High and Lofty One’), they will forever be guilty of the same rebuke God gave to the wicked in Psalm 50:21, ‘You thought I was just like you.’”¹⁵

The *otherness* of God requires worship to be different in language, decorum, music, posture and purpose from all other human relationships and interactions. If we enter the church doors and wonder whether we are at a rock concert, a Broadway show, a sports event or a family reunion, chances are we have forgotten the uniqueness of our God and the “reverence and awe” demanded by His Word and character. “Therefore, let us be grateful for receiving a kingdom that cannot be

¹¹ J. Ligon Duncan, *Give Praise To God: A Vision for Reforming Worship*, P&R Publishing, Philipsburg, NJ, 2003, p. 24

¹² Jude 3

¹³ Leviticus 10:3

¹⁴ Isaiah 6:3-6

¹⁵ Jeremiah Burroughs, *Gospel Worship*, Soli Deo Gloria Publications, 1990

shaken, and thus let us offer to God acceptable worship, with reverence and awe, for our God is a consuming fire.”¹⁶

THE LORD OF THE SABBATH

God is a holy God.¹⁷ God has set forth a holy day.¹⁸ God has redeemed for Himself a holy people.¹⁹ Therefore, the worship of holy God on His holy day by His holy people must be holy worship; worship set apart by the object of our worship, the appointed time of our worship and by the proper means and attitude of our worship.²⁰ The worship of holy God must, by necessity, be set apart in all respects from every other human activity.²¹ Our model of worship cannot reflect the values, preferences or demands of the world.²² Worldliness in worship diminishes the glory of God and robs His people of a truthful and real encounter with Him.²³ “When God’s people understand who God is, who they are in His presence, and what is happening to them when they come into His presence, not only their minds but their hearts are transformed.”²⁴

THE SIN OF IDOLATRY

The people of God in every generation face the temptation to either worship falsely by not worshipping the true God or by worshipping the true God the wrong way.²⁵ Either case is idolatrous. The Church cannot worship who she wants, the way she wants, in any manner she chooses. *How*²⁶ we worship is as much God’s concern as *Who*²⁷ we worship. It is rare indeed that in the biblical record God’s people ever demanded from their leadership God’s best for them. This is certainly true in the demands of people today for culturally relevant, personally experiential and sensuously exciting “worship.”

¹⁶ Hebrews 12:28-29

¹⁷ Leviticus 11:45

¹⁸ Exodus 20:9-11

¹⁹ I Peter 2:9

²⁰ Matthew 15:8-9

²¹ Acts 17:24-25

²² Deuteronomy 12:32

²³ II Corinthians 6:14-17

²⁴ Michael Horton, *A Better Way*, Baker Books, Grand Rapids, MI, 2002, p. 14

²⁵ II Timothy 4:3-4

²⁶ Exodus 20:4-6 (2nd Commandment)

²⁷ Exodus 20:3 (1st Commandment)

Church leaders should never forget Aaron yielding to the pressure of the crowd making for Israel a golden calf to worship. The people of Israel were unified, generous, full of zeal and excitement, yet idolatrous. They had mixed worship of the gods of Egypt with worship of the true God. It carried no weight with God at all that Aaron declared, “Tomorrow shall be a feast day to the LORD.” God was angry. The unity, zeal, dancing, enthusiasm and excitement of God’s people didn’t matter. Aaron’s golden calf was not God’s appointed way for His people to come near Him. We should find it enlightening that “While God was giving his redeemed people a written and preached Word through his servant Moses at the top of the mountain, they were busy fashioning a golden calf that they could see, and touch – and control.”²⁸ Mixing the world and the ways and means of the world into Christian worship displeases God.²⁹

We must not forget the “strange fire” that Nadab and Abihu offered to the Lord.³⁰ These young men were the sons of Aaron. Their uncle was Moses. On several occasions they were included with their father and uncle in receiving special revelation from the Lord.³¹ They were consecrated priests of the Lord. Yet, when they “offered unauthorized fire” that God had not commanded, “fire came out from before the LORD and consumed them, and they died before the LORD.” God then said, “Among those who are near me I will be sanctified, and before all the people I will be glorified.” We cannot come to God nor worship God in any way other than that prescribed by His Word.

People today want to have it their way rather than God’s way. They create God in their own imaginations as opposed to accepting God’s self-revelation of Himself in Scripture. They demand “worship” that is casual and comfortable. Too many think that whatever is done sincerely in Jesus’ name is acceptable worship. Sincerity never makes a false thing true or a wrong thing right. In the absence of knowing God truthfully and approaching Him biblically, sincerity doesn’t matter at all. Both the object of worship and the manner of worship matter greatly to God.

Like the kings, priests and prophets of old, pastors and elders must make the choice of whether to acquiesce to the demands of Israel for God in their own image, or, lead God’s people in the worship of God His way, according to His commands, for His glory alone!

²⁸ Michael Horton, *A Better Way*, Baker Books, 2002, p.36

²⁹ Exodus 32

³⁰ Leviticus 10:1-6

³¹ Exodus 24:1, 9; 28:1

GOD CENTERED WORSHIP³²

God centered worship by definition is Word centered worship and is therefore worship rooted in Scripture. The substance, order and propriety of what a church does in worship reflect what a church believes about God. Worship is theological not psychological. The goal of worship is the glory of God and not the worshiper's self-esteem, their need for therapy or their own emotional experiential gratification. Therefore, the doctrines of Scripture, not the culture, the "felt needs" of the people, or individual preferences determine the proper worship of God.

Worship must maintain a biblical doctrine of God. As biblical Calvinists we are committed to maintaining the Creator/creature distinction between God and man. Because of sin there remains a great gulf between infinite God and finite man. Thanks be to God that Christ bridged the gulf between God and man.³³ We cannot, however, focus our attention and hearts in worship in any way that brings God down to our level, makes Him common, or allows men to think more highly of themselves than they should. Sermons, readings, prayers and music that fail to affirm that – *"There is but one only living and true God, who is infinite in being and perfection, a most pure spirit, invisible, without body, parts, or passions; immutable, immense, eternal, incomprehensible, almighty, most wise, most holy, most free, most absolute, working all things according to the counsel of His own immutable and most righteous will, for His own glory; most loving, gracious, merciful, long-suffering, abundant in goodness and truth, forgiving iniquity, transgression, and sin, the rewarder of them that diligently seek Him; and withal, most just, and terrible in His judgments; hating all sin, and who will by no means clear the guilty,"*³⁴ do not glorify God in spirit and in truth.

Worship must also reflect a biblical doctrine of man. Scriptures teach us that men are sinners radically depraved in our ability to know or serve God. By the fall of man we were all "wholly defiled in all the parts and faculties of the soul and body" and "are utterly indisposed, disabled,

³² Taken in part from, Terry L. Johnson, *Worship That Is According To Scripture*, Reformed Academic Press, Greenville, 2000, p. 27-29

³³ II Corinthians 5:21

³⁴ Westminster Confession of Faith, *Of God, and of the Holy Trinity*, Chapter II, part I.

and made opposite to all good, and wholly inclined to evil.”³⁵ We cannot assume that any heartfelt sincere “new concept” of worship is pleasing to God. In fact, we should assume the opposite. As redeemed sinners we must rely upon God and God alone to tell us what is acceptable to Him. To paraphrase John the Baptist, we must decrease that He might increase.

Biblical worship maintains a high view of the doctrine of Scripture. We believe the Scripture to be both the Word of God and the Voice of God and that everything we need for our lives and the worship of God is contained therein.³⁶ When we add to our worship those things not prescribed by God, such as drama, dancing and images, we undermine the truthfulness and sufficiency of Scripture through which God alone reveals Himself. God does not *redemptively* reveal Himself through any medium other than His written Word.³⁷ For us to add more or less to His divine revelation dishonors God and leads to idolatry.³⁸

The reformed doctrine of the Church limits the authority of her power to that specifically delegated by Christ.³⁹ The Church can only require of her members that required of them by God. Church officers cannot demand or permit extra biblical doctrine or practice. Requiring people to worship in a manner other than that prescribed by the Lord binds the conscience of the worshiper to an unbiblical practice. Governing authorities cannot bind the conscience.⁴⁰ To permit worship in a manner other than that prescribed by God is force God’s people to worship falsely. Governing authorities must obey God rather than men in deciding appropriate and acceptable worship in the solemn assembly of the saints on the Lord’s Day.

Worship must reflect the sovereignty of God. It is the glorious doctrine of the sovereignty of God that gives the greatest insight to the proper worship of God. God alone has the prerogative to determine who worships Him, the time they worship Him, the place they worship Him and the manner in which His people worship the Lord of Glory. He is sovereign over worship.

Modern concepts advocating innovative worship, alternative worship, and informal worship are incompatible with the above referenced doctrines. Unbiblical and extra-biblical notions of worship cannot maintain a high view of God or His Word. Losing the “worship wars” to

³⁵ Westminster Confession of Faith, *Of the Fall of Man, of Sin, and of the Punishment Thereof*, Chapter VI

³⁶ II Timothy 3:16, 17

³⁷ Hebrews 1:1-3

³⁸ Deuteronomy 4:2; 12:32

³⁹ Matthew 16:18; 18:18

contemporary and unbiblical notions inevitably leads to the disappearance of the divine transcendence of God from our worship services and to the elevation of man.

The Cambridge Declaration says it well, “Whenever in the church biblical authority has been lost, Christ has been displaced, the gospel has been distorted, or faith has been perverted, it has always been for one reason: our interests have displaced God’s and we are doing his work in our way. The loss of God’s centrality in the life of today’s church is common and lamentable. It is the loss that allows us to transform worship into entertainment, gospel preaching into marketing, believing into techniques, being good into feeling good about ourselves, and faithfulness into being successful. As a result, God, Christ and the Bible have come to mean too little to us and rest too inconsequentially upon us.”⁴¹

THE MEANS OF GRACE IN WORSHIP

Much, if not all, of the clamor for new and innovative worship experiences is justified in the name of evangelism. Soul winning trumps everything. Therefore, the means of drawing people to God doesn’t matter much as long as the ultimate goal is soul winning. This often turns the Lord’s Day into a giant appeal for cultural relevancy so that everyone will feel comfortable with us and with God hopefully creating an environment conducive to making decisions for Christ. In other words, we hope that if sinners like us they may like our Jesus. Every church should desire a winsome and welcoming demeanor in its people. All churches should be aware not to put artificial road blocks in the path of those who may come to God. But there are two fallacies with the premise that evangelism should shape the tenor and focus of worship.

The first issue has to do with purpose. Clearly, the purpose of the Great Commission is evangelism. But evangelism is not the primary purpose of Christian worship. The Lord’s Day gathering remains primarily the meeting place between God and His people through the Word. While we should expect God to save the lost on the Lord’s Day, people come to Christ *only* because of the Holy Spirit working through the Word of God and not through any other means.⁴²

At a recent pastor’s conference, R. C. Sproul was asked about the concern many pastors’ have that if we make the Lord’s Day only about the worship of God the saints won’t stay and the lost

⁴⁰ Westminster Confession of Faith, *Of Christian Liberty*, Chapter XX.2

⁴¹ The Cambridge Declaration – www.alliancenet.org

⁴² Romans 10:17 ESV

won't come. Dr. Sproul obviously concerned and agitated by the question, pulled himself up in his chair and said, "If you pastors create and order your worship services for the ungodly – it's blasphemy." You could have heard a pin drop. Worship really isn't about us – it's about God! The second issue has to do with means. God works *redemptively* one way – by His Spirit through His Word. In times past and in different ways God spoke in extraordinary ways through signs, wonders and miracles. In these last days, God has spoken to us by His Son through the ordinary means of preaching, sacraments, and prayer and through no other.⁴³ As Michael Horton has said, "God has promised to save and keep his people through the means he has appointed and no others; the ordinary means of grace are limited to the preached Word and the administered sacraments; God's rationale for these means is made explicit in Scripture."⁴⁴ The Church may not create other means to communicate grace than those which most directly and truthfully declare His Word nor declare any other message than the gospel proclaimed in Word and sacrament.⁴⁵

THE ELEMENTS OF WORSHIP⁴⁶

The one place in the New Testament that says God seeks anything from us is found in John 4:23-24. "But the hour is coming and now is here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father is seeking such people to worship him. God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth." How then do we do this in the course of Sunday worship? Terry Johnson's simple answer is sufficient, "Read the Bible, preach the Bible, sing the Bible, pray the Bible, see the Bible."⁴⁷

We read the Bible in our public worship. Scripture commands that we "give attention to the public reading of Scripture."⁴⁸ The public reading of the Bible has been at the heart of the worship of God throughout redemptive history. God speaks most directly to His people through the reading of His Word.

⁴³ Hebrews 1:1-3

⁴⁴ Michael Horton, *A Better Way*, Baker Books, 2002, p.29

⁴⁵ Read, WCF, *Of Saving Faith*, XIV.1

⁴⁶ Taken in part from, First Presbyterian Church Jackson MS, *A Guide To Morning Service*, Dr. J. Ligon Duncan III.

⁴⁷ Terry L. Johnson, *Worship That Is According To Scripture*, Reformed Academic Press, Greenville, 2000, p. 35-36

⁴⁸ I Timothy 4:13

We preach the Bible in our public worship. The preached Word is at the heart of Reformed worship. “Faith comes by hearing” the Word of God proclaimed. Faithful preaching must be expositional and evangelistic preaching, based solidly on the text itself. Biblical preaching cannot be personality driven, theologically vague or superficially practical. We must preach the “whole counsel of God”, line by line, precept by precept, book by book. Paul told Timothy, “I charge you in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead, and by his appearing and his kingdom: preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, and exhort, with complete patience and teaching. For the time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching, but having itching ears they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own passions, and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander off into myths.”⁴⁹

We pray the Bible in our public worship. Jesus said that His Father’s house would be called “a house of prayer.”⁵⁰ Our prayers should be permeated with the language and thought of Scripture. We pray to the blessed Trinity to the Father, through the Son, by the Holy Spirit. Public prayers should build faith in God’s people as to His character, attributes, grace and mercy. Prayers should reflect the priority of Scripture. We commit ourselves to prayers of invocation, intercession, illumination and supplication. Our tradition calls for studied prayer prayed from the heart where the Holy Spirit touches both the mind *and* affections of the one praying.

We sing the Bible in our public worship. Scripture commands the singing of God’s people with “psalms, hymns and spiritual songs.”⁵¹ Singing the Psalms was once the primary source of musical worship in the Christian Church. Sadly, Psalm singing by God’s people has been lost to most of His Church. When hymns and spiritual songs are included in worship they too should comport with the substance and style of God’s songbook – the Psalms. Hymns and spiritual songs must reflect the themes, proportions, substance and weightiness of Scripture.⁵²

Both the Old Testament and the New Testament directly encourage the congregational singing of the people of God.⁵³ Special music sung by choirs, ensembles and soloists, must never take the place of the corporate singing of the Body of Christ on the Lord’s Day. Instruments are used to

⁴⁹ II Timothy 4:2-4

⁵⁰ Matthew 21:13

⁵¹ Ephesians 5:19; Colossians 3:16

⁵² Consider the weight and substance of the *Song of Mary* in Luke 1:46-55; the *Song of Zechariah* in Luke 1:68-79; and, the *Song of Simeon* in Luke 2:29-32.

enhance the singing of God's people and therefore should be understated and appropriate to the worship of holy God. To "sing the Bible" means to sing that which is biblical, filled with the language, categories and theology of Scripture.

We "see" the Bible in our public worship. God has given to His Church two visible sacramental signs of His grace. These are baptism and the Lord's Supper.⁵⁴ These signs and seals of the covenant of grace are "visible signs of invisible grace."⁵⁵ In these "visible words" we see with our eyes the promise of God. In reading and preaching God addresses the mind and conscience through hearing. In the sacraments God addresses the mind and conscience through the other senses. Through the senses God's promise is made tangible. The sacraments of God remind and assure us of His covenant. Therefore, these "visible symbols of Gospel truths" are essential to corporate worship.

Clearly, Reformed worship is worship through the Word. Therefore, words and ritual that communicate the Word of God through reading, preaching, praying, singing and sacrament are God's regulated methods of communication. With a biblical standard this rich and clear why isn't this enough for modern contemporary evangelicalism? I suggest three reasons – a decline in biblical doctrine, a wrong view of what is necessary to evangelism and a distorted understanding of the purpose of worship.

For example, many churches now utilize drama as a means to communicate to gospel. Can we not worship God on the Lord's Day with plays and skits? The simple answer is "no." Not only is there no biblical mandate for dramatic expression in worship, people cease to be participants in worship when watching drama; they become spectators. Biblical worship is corporate worship. Contemporary modern churches that have embraced drama as an acceptable expression of worship have done so arguably for three reasons – people really like it, it seems a better way to communicate than sermons, and people are generally not literate enough to have a Word directed worship experience. This is not unlike the Medieval Church that encouraged extra-biblical plays in worship; dramas filled with images, stirring music, and a sense of majesty and mystery. After all, people liked theater in the church, Catholics didn't preach much anyway and passion plays etc. were touted as "the 'books' for the unlearned."⁵⁶ Reformed churches responded, "No, we should not try to be wiser than God. He wants his people instructed by the living preaching of his

⁵³ Psalm 98:1; Revelation 5:9

⁵⁴ Matthew 28:19; Acts 2:38-39; Colossians 2:11-12. Luke 22:14-20, I Corinthians 11:23-26

⁵⁵ Saint Augustine

⁵⁶ Michael Horton, *A Better Way*, Baker Books, 2000, p.15

Word – not by idols that cannot even talk.”⁵⁷ Regardless of what the theme or intent of a drama may be dramatic arts as such are not acceptable in worship on the Lord’s Day according to Scripture.

Dancing in a worship service is a bit more problematic. There are biblical references to dancing in the Old Testament.⁵⁸ Read in context, however, dancing would appear to be either a cultural expression unique to the Middle East or a response to particular things God had done for Israel like bringing them through the Red Sea or giving them victory in battle.⁵⁹ As Edmund Clowney said, “Set in its cultural context, David’s dancing appears to be a circumstance, rather than an element, in worship.”⁶⁰ No reference exists of dancing as worship in the New Testament.⁶¹ It appears from the biblical evidence that dancing was not utilized in covenantal worship in the tabernacle, temple, synagogue or early church worship. The problem is not with the beauty or the intention to glorify God with dance; the real problem is dancing is expression without words. While dancing may convey the aesthetic quality of beauty that may be God honoring it cannot convey truth and therefore cannot clearly communicate the gospel.

Many of the same arguments referenced above are applicable to a biblical church not using any images, DVD presentations, or other new innovative methods in worship. That is not to say that fuller expressions of the fine arts and technology are not only appropriate but desired in other forums than worship on the Christian Sabbath. Every church should embrace the fine arts for the glory of God. There are other meetings, banquets, concerts and conferences where more of the arts would be appropriate and desirable. All things that are true, good and beautiful are expressions of God, but not all things are equally useful in the communication of the Word in worship.

“The elements of worship should be kept in biblical proportions, extra biblical elements excluded, and God ever remain the unambiguous focus.”⁶² Therefore, we regulate ourselves to reading, preaching, praying, singing and seeing the Word in our worship on the Lord’s Day.

WORSHIP STRUCTURED BY THE GOSPEL

⁵⁷ The Heidelberg Catechism (1563), Lord’s Day 35, Question 98.

⁵⁸ I Chronicles 15:25-28; Psalm 149:2-3

⁵⁹ Exodus 15:20-21

⁶⁰ Edmund P. Clowney, *The Church*, InterVarsity Press, Downers Grove, IL, 1995, p. 129

⁶¹ There are negative references, however, to dancing in the New Testament. See, I Corinthians 10:7 and Matthew 14:6

⁶² Terry L. Johnson, *Leading In Worship*, The Covenant Foundation, Oak Ridge, TN, 1999, p. 15

Worship is our response to the divine initiative of God to make covenant with His people through Christ Jesus our Lord. We believe and practice that “God meets his people in Christ as the Holy Spirit works through the liturgy: confession of sin, declaration of forgiveness, songs of praise, confession of the faith, the preaching, the prayers, and the sacraments.”⁶³ In every service we endeavor to praise God, confess our sins and our faith to God, receive the grace of God from preaching and sacraments, give thanks for His blessing and go blessed by His Word into the entire world to preach the gospel as commanded by Christ. Terry Johnson called this order of worship “Gospel logic.”⁶⁴ In other words, worship that is structured or ordered by the gospel.

Consider again the prophet’s encounter with the “High and Lofty One” in Isaiah 6. Isaiah heard the praise and the call of God from the heavenly beings saying, “Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory!” Isaiah’s response “at the voice of him who called” was “Woe is me! For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts!” God then gives grace; He offers atonement for Isaiah’s sin with a burning coal from the altar to touch his lips. Isaiah then receives assurance of pardon, “your guilt has been taken away, and your sin atoned for.” The voice of the Lord speaks again and said, “Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?” Then Isaiah said, “Here am I! Send me.” Isaiah experienced worship structured by the gospel.

Biblical reformed Christians practice an ordered freedom in worship. We have few fixed forms. We are neither “High Church” with every form, prayer and text prescribed for us, nor are we “Low Church” worshiping without form or order.⁶⁵ The Apostle Paul never provided a particular form for public worship. Neither does the New Testament contain an explicit order of worship for us to follow.⁶⁶ Yet, throughout the entire Word of God, it is the character and nature of God’s self-revelation of His transcendent holiness that informs our worship; it is the sinful character and nature of man revealed in Scripture that requires a certain order and form in worship; and, it is the gospel itself that bring the two together. In the Spirit, on the Lord’s Day, God’s people meet with Him through His Word to renew the everlasting covenant of grace between Christ and His Church.

⁶³ Michael Horton, *A Better Way*, Baker Books, Grand Rapids, MI, 2002, p. 27

⁶⁴ Terry L. Johnson, *Leading In Worship*, The Covenant Foundation, Oak Ridge, TN, 1999, p. 15

⁶⁵ I Corinthians 14:40

⁶⁶ Edmond Clowney, in his contribution to “*Give Praise To God*”, p.98

It should be noted that biblical form is not formalism. Scripture warns of godly form not united with believing hearts.⁶⁷ The Church must be careful about ritual not rooted in the Bible expressed by obedient hearts of faith. The answer to mere formalism is not the absence of form, but in having true faith in Christ that informs and directs our worship faithfully to God. All form communicates something. Form is not neutral.

MUSIC STYLE MATTERS

Not only is form not neutral neither is style. It is commonly held that style, particularly in music, is incidental to worship. Many people believe that if what is communicated is true then style doesn't matter. "Behind this thinking is the insistence that all music, language and format are created equal, an aesthetic relativism, if you please."⁶⁸ I once heard R. C. Sproul say something like, "All form is an art form and every art form communicates something." What we do in worship and the manner we do it reflects what we believe about God. Consequently, worship must reflect the glory and character of God and His gospel. We cannot forget God's command that He be worshiped "acceptably with reverence and awe, for our 'God is a consuming fire.'"⁶⁹

This is not to say every worship song or instrumentation must be either traditional or contemporary. There are many traditional hymns void of theological truth that are filled with sappy romanticism. Much modern contemporary music, what Robert Godfrey calls "God is my girlfriend"⁷⁰ music, is sadly lacking in the themes, proportion and weight of the biblical Psalms. New songs or old songs must all be judged by the same standard – are they fully biblical lyrically and are they musically appropriate to the subject matter? Does the content and style of the worship service in general and music specifically create an atmosphere conducive to leading the people of God to an appropriate and reverential response to God's grace? Generally speaking most contemporary expressions of faith and worship do not meet these standards.

Ironically, most so-called contemporary Christian music is not really contemporary at all. More often what is called "contemporary" is often a throw back to the music of the 60's and 70's thereby appealing to the baby boomers and the narcissism of their generation. Certain styles of

⁶⁷ Isaiah 29:13; Amos 5:21-24

⁶⁸ Terry L. Johnson, *Worship That Is According To Scripture*, Reformed Academic Press, Greenville, 2000, p. 11

⁶⁹ Hebrews 12:28-29

⁷⁰ Robert Godfrey, *Pleasing God In Worship*, Crossway Books, Wheaton, IL., 1999

music such as rock, country, blues and rap, to name of few, are simply not acceptable musical forms of worship style because stylistically none can convey the transcendence and holiness of God. Notwithstanding the musical and theological weakness of much contemporary music, this throwback music that makes baby-boomers feel comfortable with God cannot be compared to the really contemporary cutting edge alternative *Christian* music of the day that is ungodly and not suitable as music much less as worship. If parents were to listen carefully to what current contemporary music offers their children as *worship* they would find nothing more than crude, guttural, man-centered and blasphemous noise. In the end that which is exclusively contemporary lacks standards of any kind. What is new and culturally relevant today is gone tomorrow. Soon the Christian faith will be unrecognizable except for the occasional reference to Jesus and His wonderful plan for everyone's life. However strong the appeal to insist on musical ministry forms distinctive to every group and sub-culture for the purpose of evangelism, nothing in modern memory has divided the church like the so called "worship wars" over music.

This war over worship music creates other problems as each generation and ethnic group seeks to define on its own terms the worship of God. Christian apologist, Ravi Zacharias has observed, "Now, as cultures are blended across generations, a whole new ethos is framed, and each generation must reinvent itself without the checks and balances of time and preceding generations. There is no transcending community, and the breakdown is drastic. It is not accidental that music has a generational shelf life, where new music fails to connect with the previous one."⁷¹ If every generation can determine for themselves what is acceptable to God in music, belief and practice we cannot be *one, holy, catholic and apostolic* Church. "A worshipping community should be the fountain from which life flows and the ocean into which your efforts are merged. That is where identity is defined, refined, and consolidated and where continuity remains."⁷² Appropriate biblical psalms, hymns and spiritual songs are critical to maintaining a communion of saints between all generations.

People very much identify themselves with certain styles of music. Therefore, there is a natural desire to sing and worship God in ways familiar to each person. But a church must be careful that the style comport with the message. The question isn't "Is this permissible?" The more important question is "Is this proper?" I heard Dr. J. Ligon Duncan III make reference to the fact that "Amazing Grace" could be sung to the tune of "Gilligan's Island." There is nothing in

⁷¹ Ravi Zacharias, *I, Issac, Take Thee, Rebekah*, p.100

⁷² *Ibid*, p.102

Scripture that prohibits singing “Amazing Grace” to the theme of “Gilligan’s Island.” But it wouldn’t be proper, even for children, because of the serious message of grace communicated so powerfully by that old hymn. When confronted with the permissible versus the proper issues the Westminster Confession of Faith gives guidance – “There are some circumstance concerning the worship of God . . . common to human actions and societies, which are to be ordered by the light of nature and Christian prudence, according to *the general rules of the Word*, (emphasis mine) which are always to be observed.”⁷³ Therefore, even in matters of judgment and discretion the Word of God regulates the worship of His people.

When thinking about worship music style, think about God’s glory; think about the weightiness of God! We say we believe in *solī Deo gloria*, but do we mean it? Does our worship reflect it? “Cultural style is never wholly divorced from theological substance. This is why God, taking His glory so seriously, took His worship so seriously as well.”⁷⁴

THE HEART WANTS WHAT IT WANTS!

Comedian Woody Allen once said, “The heart wants what it wants!” The hardest thing for a father to do is say “no” to a demanding child. More often than not in Scripture the demands of God’s people did not comport with what God wanted for them. Time and again prophets, priests and kings faced the decision to either lead God’s people, God’s way, according to God’s Word or give in to the demands of the moment. Church fathers have the same problem with the children of God ever demanding to give them gods like the other nations. In modern church life people increasingly demand their version of the “golden calf.”

Author Philip Rieff once commented on the increasing non-Christian paradigm of the Church when he said, “Christian man was born to be saved; psychological man was born to be pleased.”⁷⁵ For the bible believing Christian worship is theocentric; worship that centers on the God who saves! For all others, worship is increasingly psychological – it’s about them, it’s about therapy. The current church growth gurus’ tell us that if we make people comfortable, have entertaining services, keep worship casual, stay light on the doctrine, preach practically, and don’t get too

⁷³ Westminster Confession of Faith, *Of The Holy Scripture*, Chapter 1.6

⁷⁴ Michael Horton, *A Better Way*, Baker Books, Grand Rapids, MI, 2002, p. 166

⁷⁵ Philip Rieff, *The Triumph of the Therapeutic*, Harper & Row, New York, 1968.

serious the “seekers” will come – and they will come. But to what end? The Puritans called this “will worship” and it begs the question, “Who is the worship to please God or man?”

“Tell me what the world is saying today,” Francis Shaeffer once remarked, “and I’ll tell you what the church will be saying in seven years.” Why do we monkey and morph the world around us and call it church? Because it’s what most people want and the Church has forgotten that worldliness is sin. So the choice before us is whether to cater to the demands of the world, outside and inside the Church, or to worship in obedience to the Word of God.

CONCLUSION

Every church is defined by worship. You can tell much about what a congregation believes or doesn’t believe about God by observing Sunday morning worship. Those of us that believe in biblical orthodox worship may be in the forefront of God giving us a 2nd Reformation in America, or, we may part of the last gasp of biblical faith before the light goes out again. I’m not sure which way America is heading spiritually. Sometimes I’m hopeful. Other times discouraged. Nevertheless, faithfulness to God in all things, including worship is the hard way, it’s the narrow way, and it is not the popular way.

Ordained pastors and teachers are given the authority and the duty to regulate the worship of His Church according to the Word.⁷⁶ This we will do by God’s grace. But unity in the Church, the “peace and purity” of the Church, is directly related to the unity of her officers. Without ruling elders and deacons committed to the “regulative principle” of worship, most churches cannot survive the “worship wars” of modern Christianity. Therefore, by ordination vow and biblical conviction the officers of the Church of Jesus Christ cannot be moved by what works, what draws a crowd, how we feel, what the cultural demands are or even what the people want, for we too are regulated by God’s Word.

In the worship of God, anything more than the Bible requires is legalism and anything less is license. Neither is acceptable to God. Let us therefore, “Fear God, and give Him glory . . . and worship Him.”⁷⁷

⁷⁶ Westminster Confession of Faith XXVII.4; PCA Book of Church Order 50.1, 52.1-4, 53.1, 56.1, 58.4

⁷⁷ Revelation 14:7

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