

CHAPTER 21

OF RELIGIOUS WORSHIP AND THE SABBATH DAY

Religious worship

The first six paragraphs of this section deal with the various aspects of the worship of God. The last two paragraphs deal especially with the Sabbath day.

Requirement to worship

The chapter begins by proving the requirement we have to worship God, and the required object of our worship—the triune God.

Worship defined by Scripture

“1. The light of nature showeth that there is a God, who hath lordship and sovereignty over all; is good, and doeth good unto all; and is therefore to be feared, loved, praised, called upon, trusted in, and served with all the heart, and with all the soul, and with all the might. But the acceptable way of worshipping the true God is instituted by himself, and so limited by his own revealed will, that he may not be worshiped according to the imaginations and devices of men, or the suggestions of Satan, under any visible representation, or any other way not prescribed in the Holy Scripture.”

People can learn much about God from nature, the creation around them, and from their own hearts (Rom 1:20; Acts 17:24). This knowledge should lead people to love and worship God.

Worship is defined as the following activities:

- Fear
- Love
- Praise
- Call upon

- Trust in
- Serve (with all heart, soul, might)

While these activities may be individually directed in a limited sense to other people, the sum of them, and the degree expressed, can properly be directed only to God. In that degree, they constitute worship.

But just as natural revelation is insufficient to show the way of salvation, so it is insufficient to show what God expects in his worship. The Scriptures are now our only infallible revelation of God's will, and they instruct us about the way God wants us to worship him. For example, some may think that punishing their bodies will be good worship, but the Bible clearly contradicts that idea. Some have considered child sacrifice a high expression of worship, but the Bible calls it an abomination. Some believe we should continue the official priesthood, but the Bible declares that the Old Testament priesthood has been ended. While God accepts true acts of worship which come from a heart of love, even though not commanded in Scripture (as Mary in John 12:2-7), we should be cautious lest we either contradict Scripture, or lead others to do so (cf. Col 2:23).

The object of worship

“2. Religious worship is to be given to God, the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost; and to him alone: not to angels, saints, or any other creature: and, since the fall, not without a Mediator; nor in the mediation of any other but of Christ alone.”

We are to worship only God, not Satan, the mighty evil angel (Matt 4:9-10), nor even the good angels (Col 2:18). Nor are we to venerate in worship Mary or any other saint (Acts 14:15). For this reason we do not have pictures or statues of saints in our churches, lest someone would bow to them or pray to them, showing them some form of religious worship. There is nothing wrong with the pictures as such, and they can be very helpful in teaching, but they should not become a part of our worship of the invisible God.

This section also tells us that we must worship God through a mediator, since we are sinful and God is perfectly holy. There is only one mediator through whom we worship—Jesus Christ (John 14:6; 1 Tim 2:5).

Prayer

In a sense, prayer is the essence of worship. It consists of praise, honor, confession, and petition.

The manner of prayer

“3. Prayer, with thanksgiving, being one special part of religious worship, is by God required of all men; and, that it may be accepted, it is to be made in the name of the Son, by the help of his Spirit, according to his will, with understanding, reverence, humility, fervency, faith, love, and perseverance; and, if vocal, in a known tongue.”

God wants everyone to pray, but in the name of Christ—that is, praying through his merits (John 14:13-14). God does not hear the prayers of the pagans, nor of those who pray in pride (Matt 6:5-7).

Our attitude in prayer should be . . .

- Understanding (Ps 47:7)
- Reverence (Heb 12:28)
- Humility (Gen 18:27)
- Fervency (Jas 5:16)
- Faith (Jas 1:6)
- Love (Ps 116:1-2)
- Perseverance (Eph 6:18)

Prayer should be with the help of the Holy Spirit, relying on his leading as we pray, and open to instruction from the Word of God; and it should be according to God’s will, trusting in and accepting his decision (cf. the experience of Moses, Deut 3:23-27).

Public prayer should be understandable to those listening (1 Cor 14:14-15). This rule eliminates public prayer in a foreign language (as Latin), and also the modern idea of praying in so-called unknown tongues.

The objects of prayer

“4. Prayer is to be made for things lawful, and for all sorts of men living, or that shall live hereafter; but not for the dead, nor for those of whom it may be known that they have sinned the sin unto death.”

We are to pray for everyone (1 Tim 2:1-2). We may also pray for those not yet born, as Jesus did (John 17:20). But we are not to pray for the dead, because their eternal state is already decided by their faith and life on the earth (cf. 2 Sam 12:21-23; Luke 16:25-26).

We also are not to pray for those who have committed the unpardonable sin, blaspheming the Holy Spirit (Luke 12:10; 1 John 5:16). However, on this point the Confession may go beyond

the Scripture, since John does not forbid praying for these; he only tells us that he is not saying that we should pray for them. In any case, usually it is impossible for us to know with certainty when someone has committed this sin. Some might have thought that Saul of Tarsus had blasphemed the Holy Spirit, since he hated Christ and Christians (Acts 9:1; 26:9-11), but he was gloriously saved.

Other parts of worship

“5. The reading of the Scriptures with godly fear; the sound preaching, and conscionable hearing of the Word, in obedience unto God, with understanding, faith, and reverence; singing of psalms with grace in the heart; as, also, the due administration and worthy receiving of the Sacraments instituted by Christ; are all parts of the ordinary religious worship of God; besides religious oaths, and vows, solemn fastings, and thanksgivings upon special occasions; which are, in their several times and seasons, to be used in an holy and religious manner.”

There are here listed two categories of religious worship: those which are regular, and those which are special.

The Bible mentions several things that Christians are to do in their public worship of God:

- Reading the Scriptures (Acts 15:21; Col 4:16; Rev 1:3)
- Preaching (2 Tim 4:2)
- Singing Psalms (Col 3:16)
- Partaking of the Sacraments (Matt 28:19; Acts 2:42)

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Special note on singing of Psalms

We should realize that the Puritans and early Presbyterians sang only the Psalms in their worship (see the wording of our Confession). They did not wish to sing any other songs, because they wanted to keep away from anything that resembled Romanism, with its human traditions, and because they thought the second commandment forbade any worship not specifically in the Bible, including other songs or hymns.

Most American Presbyterian churches, and we Bible Presbyterians, however, believe that the Bible does approve and command that we sing hymns and spiritual songs in addition to the Psalms (Col 3:16). It is important that these songs be in accord with Scripture and be truly reverent.

Apparently the early church sang hymns to Christ, in addition to the Psalms. Several New Testament passages seem to be early Christian hymns, written in metered style (for example, Phil 2:6-11; 1 Tim 3:16). And Pliny, the Roman governor in Bithynia, wrote

a letter to the emperor Trajan about the year A.D. 110, stating that the Christians in their worship “sing a hymn to Christ, as to a god.” Therefore, we believe that we should sing both Psalms and other hymns in our worship services. And the Lord has blessed the church with many fine hymns written during its history; these hymns are a great blessing to the Christian, and have been used to bring many unbelievers to Christ.

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In addition to these regular items of worship, other, special acts of religious worship should be given at appropriate times:

- Oaths and vows (Deut 6:13) – examples would be marriage and ordination
- Solemn fastings (Esth 4:16)
- Special thanksgivings (Esth 9:22)

These special acts of worship can be undertaken individually, or can be called for by the appropriate authorities of the church or the state.

The place of worship

“6. Neither prayer, nor any other part of religious worship, is now, under the gospel, either tied unto, or made more acceptable by, any place in which it is performed, or towards which it is directed; but God is to be worshiped everywhere in spirit and in truth: as in private families daily, and in secret each one by himself; so more solemnly in the public assemblies, which are not carelessly or willfully to be neglected or forsaken, when God, by his Word or providence, calleth thereunto.”

We are to worship God in all places (John 4:23-24), not just in the temple, as in the Old Testament. We should worship him:

- In private (Matt 6:6)
- In the family (Deut 6:6-7)
- In public assemblies (Luke 4:16; Heb 10:25)

Note especially the importance of private and family worship. If we are afraid or embarrassed, or not desirous, to worship God by ourselves, or in front of our family members, our children will see that our religion is hypocritical, and very well may themselves give up any pretence of Christianity when they are on their own.

We should gather in our public meetings when commanded by God (the Lord’s day), or directed by providence (prayer meeting, special meetings).

The Sabbath day

In our country there has been less and less emphasis on keeping the Lord's Day holy. This trend is visible not only in the secular society (which views Sunday as a sports and recreation day), but even in the churches. It is important that the public and private worship of God retain their place in our lives.

The Sabbath in history

“7. As it is of the law of nature, that, in general, a due proportion of time be set apart for the worship of God; so, in his Word, by a positive, moral, and perpetual commandment, binding all men in all ages, he hath particularly appointed one day in seven for a Sabbath, to be kept holy unto him: which, from the beginning of the world to the resurrection of Christ, was the last day of the week; and, from the resurrection of Christ, was changed into the first day of the week, which in Scripture is called the Lord's Day, and is to be continued to the end of the world, as the Christian Sabbath.”

The Sabbath was instituted by God from the very beginning. The word “sabbath” means “rest,” and it started in the very first week (Gen 2:2-3). Some writers, who wish to tie the Sabbath in with the law of Moses only, assert that Moses wrote Gen 2:2-3 in order to give strength to the fourth commandment. However, we, as Bible-believers, must take the Scripture at face value. God hallowed the seventh day, not only in the days of Moses, but at the very beginning.

God included Sabbath observance as a part of his permanent moral law in the ten commandments (Exod 20:8-11). In the Old Testament the primary emphasis was on resting from one's normal labors (Isa 58:13-14; Neh 13:15-22).

In the New Testament, the Lord's Day is changed to the first day of the week, and emphasizes the worship of God.

- John 20:1, 19, 26, Jesus' resurrection, meeting with disciples
- Acts 20:7, Communion service
- 1 Cor 16:1-2, taking of offering

Many believe that the weekly Sabbath was simply a part of the Mosaic code, which has passed away in the New Testament. A passage which may give this impression is Col 2:13-17. It seems in the context, rather, that Paul is speaking of the purely Jewish regulations, which included many Sabbath days in addition to the weekly Sabbath. Some early Christians continued the observance of the seventh day, in addition to the Christian worship on the first day. Paul's exhortation would apply to them also. The principle of one day in seven as a day set aside to worship God and rest from our normal occupations and recreations remains. With Jesus' resurrection, we believe that God made a change in the day of the week as a symbol of the new creation—eternal life now being given to people of all nations, a new beginning for the church.

The first day of the week was called “the Lord’s Day” by the early church fathers, and that is its name in Rev 1:10. In that expression, the “Lord” refers to Jesus—“Jesus’ day,” just as it does in the “Lord’s Supper” (the same term “Lord’s” is used in the Greek in both expressions).

Observance of the Sabbath

“8. This Sabbath is then kept holy unto the Lord, when men, after a due preparing of their hearts, and ordering of their common affairs beforehand, do not only observe an holy rest all the day from their own works, words, and thoughts, about their worldly employments and recreations; but also are taken up the whole time in the public and private exercises of his worship, and in the duties of necessity and mercy.”

As seen above, on the Sabbath day we are to cease from normal worldly work and recreation. We should seek to do all our work in the other six days. Exodus 16:23-30 gives a good example of this kind of preparation. While works of necessity are permitted on the Sabbath, it is questionable if they really are necessary if we have simply lazily put them off during the week.

The Lord’s Day should be spent, as much as possible, in a holy resting—physical, mental, and spiritual. But we should use the day profitably, not slothfully. Besides the public worship services, we should worship privately and with our families. Also, the day provides an excellent opportunity to discuss the day’s Sunday School lesson and church sermon with our families, and to pray together that we would profit from them. We can pray also for God’s blessings and our preparation for any other public worship services held later in the day or during the week.

Jesus clearly taught that we are not slaves to the Sabbath. We can do on the Lord’s Day works of necessity and mercy (Matt 12:1-13). Jesus was angry with those who legalistically forbade such works (Mark 3:5). Sundays are an ideal time to visit the sick and shut-ins, to spiritually encourage one another. If we do these things, we will realize that the Sabbath is a blessing, and was given to us for our good.