
KEYNOTE

MYTH # 2 ... “WE MUST MAKE OUR CHURCH WORSHIP MEET TODAY’S STANDARDS.”

by Kevin M. Backus

Dr. Backus delivered this address on Friday, August 7, 1998, during the 62nd General Synod of the BPC in Lakeland, Florida. The theme of the Synod was “Myths That Destroy.”

INTRODUCTION

Think back to the Mayflower, to the 102 people jammed with all their worldly possessions into the close quarters of a tiny hold. One of the saints and one of the strangers were sitting near one another at a small sand box with a charcoal burner placed on it. They begin to prepare the evening meal. Desiring to praise the Lord, the saint suggests, “Let’s sing the 100th Psalm.” But the stranger asks if they could sing in parts. Immediately, all are in the thrown into controversy, because the saints would not sing parts to their music, because “that was too worldly.” That was distracting from God. The strangers loved four-part harmony as an embellishment of their worship of the Lord. You might be thinking that I am making this up, but I am not. Even in the church at that time there was a tremendous controversy raging over worship. Chalk another one up for Solomon, I guess. There really isn’t anything new under the sun, is there? We are in the same situation today.

Today, when we talk about worship in so many of our churches — reformed circles even — we often use fighting

words, don’t we? Just start talking about worship and you can get into quite an argument over the issue. In fact, I think that it is getting to the place that it is not going to be long before mothers are going to tell their children, “There are just some things that you don’t bring up in polite society, like talking about worship.”

I have been trying to study this topic for a couple of years now. Every time I get an opportunity to speak to someone, I ask them their criteria and their standards, and I hear things like: “Well, I think that the aesthetic views of the pastor ought to be the overriding consideration.” That was from a reformed leader. I won’t give you his name. Someone else says, “I just like a conservative service.” Another says, “Why can’t we just say that we are a conservative Presbyterian church and forget about it? Let’s not think about it.” “Worship has become dull and boring to me. I want something more exciting.” “Worship, for me, is a time to relax. I just want a place where I can go and feel comfortable.” Statements like these seem foreign to our confessional roots, especially since all of them come from Church officers who have pledged themselves to the confessional statements and the regulative principle.

For many today the chief barometer of whether worship is good or bad is how intense or how sincere the experience is. For others, the barometer is whether or not we have removed any barriers for the unregenerate so that they find it appealing. There is a tremendous confusion about the principles and the practice of worship, especially in reformed circles; and it is increasingly a divisive issue amongst us. I believe that the time may

come when it will affect us severely, because instead of helping one another and planting churches, differences over worship will dull our enthusiasm for those things. The Bible Presbyterian Church is a small church. I know that if we were to have another fight and a division that it could end the Bible Presbyterian Church. But though we can little afford such divisions, least of all can we afford to offend an holy God. This is an area that we need to discuss more than we have discussed hitherto. Possibly with a little more heat, with a little more passion that we have in the past.

A FRAMEWORK FOR DISCUSSION

Though I cannot solve all the issues here, I would like to suggest two areas that I believe need to frame our discussions. The first of them is this: *To worship God in the church of Jesus Christ properly, worship must be seeker-sensitive.* Now, before you file charges against me in my Presbytery for saying that, please listen to what I am going to say so that you get the specifics down when you do so! We have to have a seeker-sensitive worship as a basis for our worship in this church. When the contemporary church growth movement talks about “seeker-sensitive worship” they see worship as part of the church’s overall evangelistic outreach. Churches that follow Rick Warren’s “Purpose Driven Church” model will seek to do a demographic study of that target population to know them: what they think, what they like, what they dislike. Then they build their church and worship around those demographics. If you follow Warren’s model seriously, you will cater to the desires of your target population, once you understand them. Certainly we could make a

case from the practices of the apostle Paul that we need to know and to understand the way the people around our churches who know not the Lord Jesus Christ think. He certainly understood what those people were like.

Today, it does you very little good to understand the Puritan mind and to gear your worship towards the Puritan mind unless you happen to know where a congregation like Baxter’s lives, and you are ministering in that area. Paul could quote the literature of the unregenerate, couldn’t he? Paul could understand where they started from and could tailor-make the gospel so that he could start with their understanding, add to it, build on it, and move from there. Paul was one who was not afraid to cast away Jewish traditional ritual if it got in the way of the gospel going to the Gentiles; but what the contemporary church growth movement suggests is something very different from what the Apostle Paul was doing!

While in Toronto doing a seminar on development for Christian schools, a pastor’s wife of such a growth-oriented church told us, as an example to illustrate her principles, how they planted their church near Orlando, Florida. It was a conservative, reformed Presbyterian church. They followed that Warren model. They targeted an upper middle class neighborhood in the suburbs around Orlando. They did a detailed demographic study of those people. They identified their likes and dislikes. They planned a worship service, a nursery, an overall program that would cater to those people. She said, “On our very first Sunday, we had two or three lower middle class and lower class Hispanic families show up. Do you know what we did? We planted our first daughter church. We got those people out of that church as fast as

we could.” How does that fit with the ministry of Paul the Apostle? How does that fit with the ministry of the Word of God? And more to the point of what we are looking at today, where do we ever see Paul telling his young assistants, Timothy and Titus, that as they go into these Gentile communities, that they should cater the worship to the likes and dislikes of the unregenerate Gentiles? Where, in the entire Bible, do you see God giving instruction for the calling out and gathering of His people to assemble and worship Him and then saying that we are to trim the worship to meet the desires and the interests and the likes and the dislikes of those people?

So what do I mean when we say that Bible Presbyterian worship must be seeker-sensitive worship? Let’s just look at one verse together, John 4:23. I think you are familiar with it. We often use it as a call to worship. It sums up something that we see taking place from the earliest chapters of Genesis all the way through the book of Revelation. Jesus says, “*The hour cometh and now is when true worshippers shall worship the Father in spirit and in truth, for the Father seeketh such to worship Him.*” The Father is the seeker that we must be concerned with! Our worship must be seeker-sensitive worship, because we must be concerned with one Chief Seeker and His desires and His likes and His dislikes, and that is God the Father.

That, I believe, is the first concept that must frame our discussion about worship. It must be the overriding and chief concept. Dr. Alexander from Scotland, speaking at the Philadelphia Conference Center on Reformed Theology, related the experience of a young Scottish minister. After church one Sunday, one of the members of his church ap-

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proached him and said, “Pastor, I believe the Lord is moving me on.” And the minister, not understanding what he said, replied, “I praise the Lord for that and it is excellent. May He move all on in the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ.” And he said, “No, I believe the Lord is moving me on to another kirk [church].” The pastor was concerned and said, “Tell me more.” The man said, “Well, I am surprised that you do not know. It is the worship. For a number of Sundays now, I have come away from the worship saying to myself, ‘I have got nothing out of it.’” And the pastor said, “I am surprised. I am surprised. And that really interests me, because do you know that I have always thought that the whole idea of worship was what God got out of it.”

The whole idea of worship is what God gets out of it. Friends, isn’t that the key? To frame our discussion exclusively in terms of the likes and dislikes of human beings, Alexander would say, is an distortion of the greatest kind, and is, in fact, rank idolatry. When it comes to worship, we must be seeker-sensitive, but we must be clear on who that Seeker is that we are trying to please. We have been created to worship him. In fact, all of our life is worship to God. Since the fall, God has been calling men to worship Him, calling His people out. We see that continuing on through the ends of Scripture. If we get that Target Audience right, then the rest will fall in place. If we get that Target Audience right then we can take Warren’s advice and do the detailed demographic study — but that study will be called *theology*!

Thankfully, as Bible Presbyterians we already have an excellent foundation for just such a study. In the *Confession of Faith*, 21.1, we are told that *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, served with all the heart, with all the soul, with all the might, but (as my Sunday school teacher, Pat Vandermeij, used to always tell me, it is what comes after the “but” that is important) *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 worshipped according to the imaginations and devices of men or the suggestions of Satan under any visible representation or any other way not prescribed in Holy Scripture.* The Confession cites passages like Deuteronomy 12:32 where Moses takes the general principle that applies especially to worship that *whatsoever things I have commanded you, observe to do it, and thou shalt not add thereto nor diminish from it.* It goes on to cite passages that show God’s displeasure with man’s empty forms and will-worship, and emphasizes once again from the prologue to the law in Deuteronomy 4:2 that we should not add to nor diminish from the commandments that God has given to us.

The Shorter Catechism very excellently spells out for us what is required in worship as it echoes this. The answer to Question 51, *What is forbidden in the second commandment?* says that *The second commandment forbiddeth not only worshipping God by images, but any other way not appointed in His Word.* That’s a basis, that is a good theological basis for us to begin our study and our discussion. To let that frame our study and our discussion. I don’t know about you, but I believe that good theology will produce good worship. Defective theology will

produce defective worship. The relationship between theology and worship is so vital that you cannot change one without the other. And if there is a change, a major sweeping change in our worship, is it possible that our theology is unchanged?

Take a look at those churches that tailor their worship to what the unregenerate want and look at the place of sin in their preaching. Harder doctrines within the whole counsel of the Word of God (like the doctrines of grace) are often softened, backpedaled, downplayed. Things like psychology and sociology replace theology in many growth-oriented churches.

It is significant that the Confession of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries emphasized worship. In fact, the Westminster divines didn’t stop with the Confession of Faith and catechisms, they went on to produce directories for public, and even private, worship. The Reformation was as much about reforming worship as it was about the doctrines of salvation. Those Pilgrims left all they had behind for what they called “the waste howling wilderness” over worship, because they would not compromise what they believed God had commanded about worship to the tastes popular in their country at the time.

If we are reformed — don’t get me wrong, by that I mean *biblical* — then our worship will recognize the sovereignty of God, that he is the One that we are to seek to please. That recognition will curb us from many other practices which would allow us to drift away into the things that this world loves. We see the effects of it already in our language. I had a young college age fellow from a Presbyterian church come talk to me one day. He wanted to talk about worship. He said,

“Pastor, I have been thinking about this all afternoon, and the problem, as I see it, revolves around three words.” I said, “What are they?” He said, “Audience. Auditorium. Applause.” When we start using those kinds of words, does that not reveal a change in our focus and our worship? An audience is a passive group there to be entertained or educated, not a participatory group. An auditorium is a passive place where you come to listen. Applause is what you give people who entertain or perform in a way that pleases you. We no longer talk about divine *service* or worship *service*, but a worship *experience*. What’s the difference? A service is a duty that the servant gives to please the Sovereign or the Superior. Worship experience is centered on what I have enjoyed out of that time that we have spent together.

To review, then, *our worship must first be seeker-sensitive*. That seeker must be the Lord. The second major principle that must govern our discussions about worship is that *our worship must recognize the importance of separation*. The topic I have been assigned, *We Must Make Our Church Worship Meet Today’s Standards*, implies a compromise with contemporary society. It assumes that we will do something to make our worship match the standards of the world.

What is the world? John uses that word seven different ways in his writings, but in this sense, it’s the ethical sense. It’s the way that it is used in 1 John 2 when John says, “*Love not the world, neither the things that are in the world, for all that is in the world, the love of the Father is not in him.*” We use the word *world* very commonly this way today. When we talk about “the world of sports,” for example, we are talking about the teams.

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We are talking about the organizations. We are talking about the players. We are talking about the people in the stands. We are talking about the businesses that surround it. The “world of sports” is a group united by a common set of goals and shared values. When the Scripture talks about the world, it is talking about the same thing. It is talking about the people and the organizations that are united with shared goals and values.

What are the common set of goals the world shares? In a word, it is a system that is opposed to God. How can a church accommodate its worship to a system that is opposed to God? How can we have that kind of relationship? What *should* the relationship be between the church and the world? It used to be an easy question to answer. When I was at Shelton College, we knew the call of God. It was hammered into us. We are called to be a holy people, Peter tells us. In his first epistle (2:11) he urges us as strangers and pilgrims to abstain from the fleshly values of this world. Paul’s words in 2 Corinthians 6:14-7:1 were preached more than once to Shelton students and Faith Seminary students as well.

J. Gresham Machen battled worldliness in the church throughout his whole life. In 1925, while at Princeton Seminary, he spoke on Matthew 5:13. He observed that Christ at the very beginning established the distinctness and separateness of the Church. He then warned that if the distinction between the church and the world was ever lost, the power of the church would be gone; the church would then become salt that has lost its savor, fit only to be cast out and trodden under the feet of men.

R. B. Kuiper warned that worldliness is not always identified as easily as we would like to think that it is. It is not just

sexual immorality that is so prominent today. It is not just certain forms of entertainment, it is not just certain forms of dress. He said that few Christians seem to realize that the church may take a strong stand against certain flagrant sins of the world, and yet be decidedly worldly. There are churches which pride themselves on their firm stands against worldliness, and yet want to be great as the world counts greatness. They think in terms of costly stone edifices, rather than wide loose stones that are built up as spiritual houses. They strive after statistical rather than spiritual prosperity. They worship at the feet of the desire to be relevant and credible in the world's eyes, resulting in the Church of Jesus Christ losing its savor. That is also worldliness.

Do we still believe the things that Machen taught? Do we still believe that a church being separate from the world is a good thing? There are many Presbyterian and reformed people who used to speak about separation and antithesis. But these two concepts are no longer widely believed and embraced. Do we still believe them? Do we still believe that it is good to avoid and attack worldliness? Or do we think that maybe there are some forms of worldliness that can be tamed and used to reach and relate to the world? Shouldn't we rather listen to the call of Athanasius who lived *contra mundo*? Kuiper said to be the opposite of the world is not only necessary for the well-being of the church, but it is essential to its very being. If the church should cease to be antithetical to the world, it would no longer exist.

“CALLED-OUT”: TO WHAT?

What does this have to do with worship? What is a worshipping body? We

call it the *ecclesias* — the *called-out* body. Abraham was called out of Ur. The Israelites were called out of Egypt. The New Testament Church was called out of the Gentile world to be a group to worship God. We cannot be the called-out ones if we mix the world back in to the Church of Jesus Christ. The contrast between those who love the Lord and those who hate the Lord, the ungodly, will never be seen more clearly than when we do something that will always seem to be ridiculous, mystifying, and silly. We gather together to worship an unseen God.

Biblical worship is subversive. It's counter cultural. It flies in the face of society and makes them realize that there is a difference. A business man once commented to me that the problem that he saw today with the Christian evangelical world is this: when the people in the business world finally do come to the ends of themselves and they turn to the Church of Jesus Christ and look for an answer, most often what they see is a pale reflection of the business world. They need to see the stewards of the mysteries of God.

Speaking to the graduation class at Westminster in 1931, Machen said:

You as ministers of Christ, are called to deal with unseen things. You are the stewards of the mysteries of God. You alone can lead men by the proclamation of God's Word out of the crash and jazz and noise and rattle and smoke of this weary age into the green pastures and beside still waters. You alone as ministers of reconciliation can get what the world with all its boasting and pride can never give: the infinite sweetness of the communion of the redeemed soul with the living God.

Will we lead in that direction? Will we set the example of our own study of God's Word about the truths of worship so that

our practice will be grounded in it and lead people out of the “crash and jazz and noise and rattle” of this world into “the green pastures” of communion with Christ?

I will close by just suggesting two things. The contemporary confusion about worship arises from very two very fundamental mistakes. The first is an unwillingness to believe God and His promises. We are unwilling to believe that God will use that things He has promised to reach a lost world.

The second mistake is viewing the worship of the church as merely a vehicle for evangelism. We need to correct these mistakes, and I believe that the two principles of God as the Chief Seeker and separation should establish the framework for our future discussions in the Bible Presbyterian Church. It is hard work. It is theological work. It is something that we are bound to do, keeping our eyes focused on the Seeker of our worship. Such a focus will foster hard (for willful human hearts) questions: “What does God want?” “What has He commanded?” “What pleases Him?” “What kind of music does God like?” “What does He want to see in a worship service?”

Are we willing to please Him, even if it means temporarily displeasing others? Are we willing to go against the flow of our society? Are we willing to be separate? Are we willing to be like Athanasius who would live against the world? Do we still believe like Machen believed? Do we want to be a peculiar people, a called-out people, a pilgrim people? To be the church, the church must be separate. 

But the hour is
coming, and
now is, when the
true worshipers
will worship the
Father in spirit
and truth; for
the Father is
seeking such to
worship Him.
God is Spirit,
and those who
worship Him
must worship in
spirit and truth.

John 4:23, 24

APPLICATION

PREACHING AS WORSHIP

by John T. Dyck

The preaching of the Word of God must be central to the worship of the Lord's people. In recent days it has taken a back seat to other elements of worship, and in some cases has been virtually or entirely excluded from "worship" services. One of the significant actions of the reformers was to remove the altar from the church building and to elevate the pulpit to emphasize the centrality of the pure preaching of the Word. This was done according to the example of Nehemiah (Neh. 8:4), where the text indicates that the pulpit he used was elevated (the word is most often translated "tower"). This is not merely a matter of practicality, in allowing all those present to see who is speaking, but it also stresses that the Word of God is of paramount importance in worship.

Why should this be the case? Is this merely a matter of following the example of Nehemiah and the reformers, or is there a more significant reason than this?

The Preaching of the Word is a Means of Grace

Our first consideration is that the preaching of the Word is a means of grace. Consistent with the Word of God itself, the historical reformed confessions declare this to be so. Paul says that "it is the power of God unto salvation" (Romans 1:16); it is what God uses to effect the salvation of a soul, therefore Paul has no reason to be ashamed of it. David made a similar statement in the Old Testament, declaring that "the law of the Lord is per-

fect, converting the soul" (Psalm 19:7). Further, we are told in Hebrews 4:12 that "the word of God is quick, and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing even to the dividing asunder of soul and spirit, and of the joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart."

But might I not read the Word of God in the quietness of my home and blessing be gained in that way? Does this not give more glory to God in that there is no man to stand in the way, so that I have more direct access to God's truths? After all, do not all have the Spirit of God and the ability, by that Spirit, to interpret and understand the Word?

These are pious sounding words indeed, but they reflect the individualistic tone of our day, and disregard the covenant aspect of sound doctrine. Furthermore, they are uncomfortably close to an attitude that resulted in the destruction of those who dared to voice them in the presence of God's servant (Numbers 16:3). The effects of such an approach are seen in the anarchistic and Arminian tendencies in much of what passes for worship today.

In addition, they reject an important Scriptural doctrine. The Bible declares that "it pleased God by the foolishness of preaching to save them that believe" (1 Cor. 1:21). It does not make sense to the unbelieving mind that preaching is the vehicle the Lord has chosen in which to convey his truth. And this unbelief is the very reason why it is set aside in so many worship services. It is suggested that it is impractical and old-fashioned. In some places it is entirely (or almost entirely) replaced by singing (so-called Praise and

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Worship), in others it is replaced by drama, which has been deemed by many to be a more effective means of communicating God's truth, completely disregarding what God himself has said about preaching.

True Preaching

Thus we can see that the plain instruction of the Word of God itself tells us that the true preaching of God's Word is indispensable to the life and worship of the Church. But it must be true preaching. Today the very idea of *communicating* God's truth has taken the place of simple obedience. It has become very popular to refer to those who discourse on the Word of God as "good communicators." Far be it from us to call them good preachers! Admittedly, many of them **are** better communicators than preachers. The difference is that the truth communicated in true preaching is the communication of the Holy Spirit to the soul, not merely the tickling of ears or the entertaining of the carnal mind.

True preaching does not come with the beliefs or ideas of men. It does not say, "in my opinion;" it always seeks to declare "Thus saith the Lord!" The burden of the preacher's heart is to have his hearers take issue, not with himself, but with the Lord of all glory! The Lord's people come to church to hear Christ; the preacher is merely the ambassador of his Lord (2 Cor. 5:20). Like an ambassador he must declare nothing more or less than the message his Master has given him to declare: he has no liberty to make it more palatable, neither does he have freedom to change it to fit his own agenda or programme. If he does not give it out as he has received it, he is guilty of treason against his Sovereign.

The preacher is a man sent from God to declare God's message. Far from coming together to hear the eloquence of men's words, the Church gathers to hear what Christ Himself says. They say, with Cornelius, "Now therefore are we all here present before God, to hear all things that are commanded thee of God" (Acts 10:33). This is God's own ordering of His Church and the growth of it. In Romans 10:14, we should read, not "how shall they believe in him of whom they have not heard?", but rather, "how shall they believe him whom they have not heard?" The small prepositions "in" and "of" are not warranted by the original text. They must hear Christ himself, not merely *about* Him. This is not to be confused with the neo-orthodox concept of preaching *becoming* the word of God, but rather the necessity of the preacher to speak forth the specially revealed Word of God, the Bible. God's people will never tire of hearing the very words of Scripture.

The Great Subject of Preaching Provides the Context for Worship

There is no subject for the preacher but that of the glories of the Lord Jesus Christ. Everything that is touched upon in the pulpit is subservient to the context of the Saviour. The preacher does well to remember the answer to the first question of the Shorter Catechism: *Man's chief end is to glorify God and to enjoy him forever.*

In how many places could it be said that man's chief end has become evangelism? It is a tempting proposition in the ministry. But there will be no evangelism if the gospel is compromised or abandoned. There will be no evangelism if God is not first glorified in it. It is this perversion of our goal that leads to com-

promise in worship, wherein the Lord's people begin to think that they must do absolutely anything to get people into their doors. But if they adopt this approach, they have already compromised the message of the gospel itself.

In other places it seems that God's chief end is to glorify man and to enjoy him forever. God is left to beg his own entrance into the heart of the unbeliever, if only that poor soul will deign to invite him in. The plea is made: "Won't you accept the love of Christ? Can't you see him, begging you to approve of his finished work? Won't you make Christ glad by accepting him as your Saviour?" This only glorifies man by putting the completion of salvation in the hand of man. Salvation is the work of Christ from beginning to end. He is the Alpha and Omega. He will **not** share His glory with another (Isaiah 42:8; 48:11). When preaching emphasizes this, it glorifies God and not man. Indeed, man is put in his place: he is nothing but the dust of the earth and must do the bidding of a holy and just God. He is under the condemnation of the Covenant of Works and must needs be placed into the Covenant of Grace. He must be brought to the place of begging that God will be merciful and gracious, rather than just.

Now a very key question presents itself: **Can** you worship a God like this—the God revealed in the Bible? In fact, the question should be: **Must** you worship such a God? The inevitable answer is that the God that is revealed to us in the Scriptures must be worshipped as the One whom He reveals Himself to be. Anything else is idolatry, is it not? The preaching of the Word always humbles a man and lays him very low. At the same time it exalts Christ as the only One who can and has perfectly fulfilled the just

demands of a holy God. It presents Him as the only Redeemer of God's elect.

And the Church of the Lord Jesus Christ loves to hear about her Saviour. This is when true worship occurs. May Jesus Christ indeed be praised!

Preaching as Active Worship

Preaching has often been thought of as passive worship, and there is a very important aspect of this which must not be undermined. In this portion of worship, there is to be a receiving of the Word of God from the mouth of His servant. When it is, in fact the Word of God, then it is to be received as such, and the humble servant of the Lord will learn submission to it. This passive sense of worship has often degenerated in our day to the passivity of being entertained. When a church service does not please the modern man, or "meet his needs", he simply continues his quest for one that does.

This entertainment aspect was brought strikingly to my attention when I recently had the rare privilege of attending an NHL hockey game between the Edmonton Oilers and the Buffalo Sabres. Before the actual game began, I was "prepared" for it by being subjected to a great variety of sensations in order to "prime" me for the game. There was loud rock music with a strong, steady beat; the arena was blacked out and a display of fireworks erupted as the Oilers lowered an "oil rig" over the doorway to their dressing room in preparation for their grand entrance onto the ice. It was a very exhilarating assault on the senses, and it was very entertaining. But the thought struck me that there were numerous churches in our city who believe that they are competing with the Edmonton Oilers to try to get people to come to church. This is a

sad commentary on the state of the church today. When the pulpit is viewed as a place of entertainment, then there is no longer a true pulpit there. The preacher's job is never to entertain. The preacher's job is to hold forth the Word of life, to exalt the Lord Jesus Christ. It is a spiritual exercise, it must never be a carnal work.

We must never be tempted to think that the chief competition the Church faces is the television set, or the movie theatre, or the hockey or football game, although any of these may pose a real threat to the health of the Church. Opposition to the church will always arise from the world, the flesh and/or the devil. When the Church sets forth Christ in opposition to these, the Lord's people will find consolation and refuge in the Lord Jesus Christ, the only Redeemer of God's elect.

There is, then, an active, participatory aspect to preaching, which has to do with the involvement of the mind and the soul in the message from God. To the soul that comes to worship with a prepared heart, there is anticipation of blessing and growing in grace and in the knowledge of the Lord Jesus Christ. There is an active involvement in the message, as questions are asked: Is this message consistent with the Word of God? Is there here a sin to be repented of? How am I guilty of that sin? In what way is Christ set before me as the fulfilment of the law and the hope of my soul? Does the message honour my Lord and Saviour?

How do you worship? 

How then will they call on Him in whom they have not believed? How will they believe in Him whom they have not heard? And how will they hear without a preacher?

Romans 10:14

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THE MINISTRY OF THE WORD THROUGH THE SACRAMENTS

by John Battle

The ministry of the Word includes the ministry of the sacraments. The Bible was given by God for us to know the truths he wishes to reveal to us. God has given to his church as well various sacraments, which also reveal his truth to us by the use of a visible element, accompanied by the Word and the ministry of his Holy Spirit. In the Old Testament these sacraments included various rituals and sacrifices. In the present dispensation the number of sacraments has been reduced to two, which are more outwardly simple in nature, but still constitute a large portion of the ministry of the Word.¹

SACRAMENTS AS A MINISTRY OF THE WORD

The New Testament sacraments of baptism and the Lord's Supper are a part of God's revelation to his church. The *Westminster Larger Catechism* puts it as follows:

WLC 162 What is a sacrament?

A. sacrament is an holy ordinance instituted by Christ in his church,¹ to signify, seal, and exhibit² unto those that are within the covenant of grace,³ the benefits of his mediation,⁴ to strengthen and increase their faith, and all other graces;⁵ to oblige them to obedience;⁶ to testify and cherish their love and communion one with another;⁷ and to distinguish them from those that are without.⁸

¹Gen. 17:7, 10; Exod. 12; Matt. 28:19; Matt. 26:26-28

²Rom. 4:11; 1 Cor. 11:24, 25

³Rom. 15:8; Exod. 12:48

⁴Acts 2:38; 1 Cor. 10:16

⁵Rom. 4:11; Gal. 3:27

⁶Rom. 6:3, 4; 1 Cor. 10:21

⁷Eph. 4:2-5; 1 Cor. 12:13

⁸Eph. 2:11, 12; Gen. 34:14

The Scripture verses cited above were chosen by the Westminster divines to demonstrate that the sacraments indeed revealed these truths, and thus are a part of the ministry of the Word. As such, they are means of grace.²

The English word *sacrament* comes from the Latin *sacramentum*, which is the term the Latin fathers used to translate the word μυστήριον *mysterion* used by the Greek fathers, which in English is *mystery*. They applied this term to baptism and the Lord's Supper. The Latin term refers to that which is given or done as the result of an oath or pledge. Often it refers to the oath itself. In the famous letter that Pliny the Younger wrote to the emperor Trajan, he remarked that, as a part of their worship, the early Christians would "bind themselves by an oath [*sacramentum*]" not to commit wicked deeds.³ This idea of a binding vow or oath fits well with the idea proposed by Meredith G. Kline, which relates the sacraments to ancient treaty obligations and ordeals.⁴ The Greek term "mystery" and the Latin term "sacrament" actually describe the two aspects of the sacraments. *Mystery* emphasizes the revelation God shows to us, while *sacrament* emphasizes the testimony we give to God, ourselves, and the world.

Jesus commanded that both baptism and the Lord's Supper should be observed in the church until his return.⁵ Both of these sacraments are to be done not privately, but in the church. Obviously, the early church did not meet in particular church buildings. Therefore, we understand that they were to be performed in the stated gatherings of the congregation for public worship. The *Westminster Confession of Faith* states that private celebrations of the Lord's Supper are forbidden.⁶ This seems to refer to those who

desired to avoid public services (such as princes and nobles). It certainly does not rule out administering the Lord's Supper in small groups for those who are ill or are otherwise unable to attend public services. Likewise, baptism is to be performed publicly as a ministry of the church. Since baptism is not required for salvation, it is not necessary to perform "emergency" baptisms privately or in an irregular manner.⁷

Since both baptism and the Lord's Supper are a part of the ministry of the Word by the church, they are to be governed by the biblically constituted officers of the church and performed by the church's ministers of the gospel.⁸ Unlike the Roman Catholic Church, we believe that the godliness or proper intent of the minister is not required for the sacrament to be effective as a means of grace for God's elect. The *Confession* states this most emphatically: "The grace which is exhibited in or by the sacraments rightly used, is not conferred by any power in them; neither doth the efficacy of a sacrament depend upon the piety or intention of him that doth administer it."⁹ Rather, their efficacy rests on the faith of the recipient and the work of God's Spirit. But while God can and does use ungodly or insincere ministers as tools to offer grace through the sacraments to worthy recipients, he does not excuse those ministers from their sin and unfaithfulness to their ministry. By his sincere preaching, prayer, and example the minister is to lead his congregation, and thus be a means God uses in sanctifying the congregation.

THE TEACHING OF BAPTISM

The Reformed understanding

As a part of the ministry of the Word, the sacrament of baptism teaches and

declares certain truths. In the traditional Reformed understanding these truths are as follows:¹⁰

- 1) Ingrafting into Christ
- 2) Forgiveness of sins by his blood
- 3) Regeneration by the Holy Spirit
- 4) Adoption as God's children
- 5) Resurrection to everlasting life
- 6) Admission to the visible church
- 7) Engagement to be the Lord's

The Westminster standards link baptism to the covenant of grace, and combine many of the individual significances found in Scripture. All these significances are positive or beneficial.

These seven significances of baptism can be grouped into four main categories. The first category is our ingrafting into Christ.¹¹ The Scriptures mention this aspect of baptism often, especially in connection with Jesus' death, burial, and resurrection. In Romans 6:3-6 we are brought by baptism into union with Christ, are identified with Christ. In 1 Corinthians 12:12-13 and Galatians 3:27-28 we are baptized into Christ, or into his body. And in Colossians 2:11-12 we are "with him" in our baptism. Some would maintain that all these passages refer to spiritual baptism, not to water baptism. Yet even in that case, it seems that the significance of spiritual baptism is maintained in water baptism.

The second category is forgiveness of sins and regeneration, cleansing and purification from sin. This is seen first in the significance of John's baptism.¹² This explains why, when John was baptizing, "an argument developed between some of John's disciples and a certain Jew over the matter of ceremonial washing" (John 3:25). Likewise, several verses speak of Christian baptism as a cleansing from sin, bringing forgiveness and spiritual purifi-

cation. Thus, it is parallel to our spiritual cleansing from sin, as in Hebrews 10:22, "having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience and having our bodies washed with pure water."¹³

The third category is the baptism of the Holy Spirit. The same term, *baptizo*, is used for both events. The two are linked in Jn. 1:33 = Acts 1:5 = Acts 11:16, which passages compare John's baptism with water to Christ's baptism with the Holy Spirit. The two baptisms are so closely related that some passages can be interpreted to refer to either water or Spirit baptism. Examples include 1 Corinthians 12:13, "For we were all baptized by one Spirit into one body, ... and we were all given the one Spirit to drink" and Galatians 3:27, "for all of you who were baptized into Christ have been clothed with Christ."

The fourth category is our initiation into the visible church. Baptism was linked by Christ to discipleship, and from the beginning was a prerequisite for church membership.¹⁴ Baptism is the divinely appointed means of testimony that the believer is to make to the church and the world.

Baptism and circumcision

All of these teachings are found in baptism. In these regards there is a close parallel significance between baptism and Old Testament circumcision. Baptism has replaced circumcision as the initiatory rite of entrance into the visible church. The New Testament links the significance of circumcision with that of baptism.

In him you were also circumcised, in the putting off of the sinful nature, not with a circumcision done by the hands of men but with the circumcision done by Christ, having been buried with him in baptism and raised with him through your faith

in the power of God, who raised him from the dead. When you were dead in your sins and in the uncircumcision of your sinful nature, God made you alive with Christ.” (Col. 2:11-13)

This parallel is based on the true meaning of circumcision:

A man is not a Jew if he is only one outwardly, nor is circumcision merely outward and physical. No, a man is a Jew if he is one inwardly; and circumcision is circumcision of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the written code. Such a man’s praise is not from men, but from God. (Rom. 2:28-29)

This spiritual significance of circumcision was already taught in the Old Testament. In Deuteronomy 10:16 God told his people to “circumcise your hearts, therefore, and do not be stiff-necked any longer.” This spiritual work is described in the context:

And now, O Israel, what does the LORD your God ask of you but to fear the LORD your God, to walk in all his ways, to love him, to serve the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul, and to observe the LORD’s commands and decrees that I am giving you today for your own good?” (Dt. 10:12-13)

Thus, circumcision signified the recipient’s regeneration and love for God. “The LORD your God will circumcise your hearts and the hearts of your descendants, so that you may love him with all your heart and with all your soul, and live” (Dt. 30:6). Later, Jeremiah made a striking parallel between “circumcising your hearts” and “washing your hearts.”¹⁵ He also stated that being uncircumcised in heart means not to know and love God.¹⁶

Since baptism is practiced in the New Testament dispensation, circumcision no longer is necessary; it now is optional (1 Cor. 7:18-20). As a matter of fact, it was

ruled out in the case of the Gentile Titus (Gal. 2:3-5). When we administer baptism today, we are declaring God’s Word by that visible sign, just as the saints in the Old Testament did when they circumcised their infants when they were eight days old.

Baptism’s underlying significance

Theologians have always wrestled with the biblical data, trying to find a single unifying significance of baptism that would encompass all the points mentioned above. Recent discoveries of ancient Near Eastern treaties have provided the basis for a possible solution.¹⁷ There are striking parallels between ancient covenants made by the conquering king (the suzerain) with the kings subject to him (the vassals) and the covenants God made with his people found in the Old Testament. In fact, the entire book of Deuteronomy closely follows the form of these ancient treaties of the second millennium BC.¹⁸

These ancient suzerain-vassal covenants often were accompanied by an oath and a covenant ritual, especially on the part of the vassal. The covenant ritual usually involved the slaying of animals, with imprecations on the one who should break the treaty obligations. The Old Testament gives two clear examples of this practice: God’s covenant with Abraham (Gen. 15:9-21), and Jerusalem’s covenant with her slaves (Jer. 34:18, 19). The ritual often pictured the sanctions of the covenant,¹⁹ usually the curse for disobedience, perhaps the blessing for obedience. Vassals who assumed the covenant also assumed it for their subjects, who were thus bound to the suzerain’s terms. It appears that both circumcision and baptism perform the same function. Circumcision was the covenant ritual for initiation into

the people of the Abrahamic covenant, while baptism is the covenant ritual for initiation into the people of the new covenant. Since the new covenant is closely tied to the Abrahamic covenant, bringing its promises into reality, there is a substantial unity between the two signs.

There are sanctions in both the Abrahamic and new covenants. The Abrahamic covenant, as well as the Mosaic covenant, demanded loyalty to Yahweh's ordinances. God testified concerning Abraham, long before the law of Moses, that "Abraham obeyed me and kept my requirements, my commands, my decrees and my laws" (Gen. 26:5). He also was faithful in teaching this covenant to his household after him; "For I have chosen him, so that he will direct his children and his household after him to keep the way of the LORD by doing what is right and just, so that the LORD will bring about for Abraham what he has promised him" (Gen. 18:19).

With this background, it is more apparent that the sign of circumcision was the covenant ritual, graphically picturing the sanctions of the Abrahamic covenant. The sanctions for obedience were regeneration and cleansing from sin—both pictured in circumcision. On the other hand, the sanction for disobedience was also pictured—the cutting off of the people from God.²⁰ Jesus Christ fulfilled the sanctions pictured in circumcision: he received the sanctions for disobedience, and he conveys to us the sanctions for obedience.

Just as the Abrahamic covenant required obedience to experience its blessings, so the new covenant of Jeremiah 31, Ezekiel 36, and Hebrews 8, demands obedience for blessing—the life of faith. Without saving faith the person finds himself under even greater curses than those

of the old covenant (Heb. 10:28-29). The New Testament sign of baptism signifies the sanctions of the covenant of grace, as spelled out in the Abrahamic and new covenants. The sanctions for obedience are cleansing from sin and the baptism of the Holy Spirit. The sanctions for disobedience are death and divine judgment (*cf.* Mk. 10:38-39; Rom. 6). Again, Jesus fulfilled the sanctions pictured in baptism. By assuming the covenant curses, he secured its blessings for those united to him.

This understanding of the significance of baptism harmonizes all the various Scriptural passages into one concept, which in turn corresponds to ancient practice. If this correspondence is correct, the underlying significance of baptism is that we place ourselves and those under us (children, in the NT) under the obligations of the new covenant. God has commanded that all people do this. Baptism would therefore symbolize our obligation to accept the blessings available through faith and obedience, and the curses resulting from disobedience and rebellion.

It can be seen that baptism is a powerful aspect of the ministry of the Word. Baptism confers no promise or blessing other than that received through faith (this point would be true at least in the case of adults). It places one in God's covenant community, and obligates one to keep God's new covenant. For the elect, baptism seals the blessings of the covenant; for the nonelect, it seals the curses of the covenant.

THE TEACHING OF THE LORD'S SUPPER

Just as ancient treaties stipulated an initiatory rite to establish the covenant, so they required periodic rituals of covenant renewal. The Lord's Supper serves a similar function under the new covenant.

On a regular basis the church testifies to its acceptance of the new covenant and pledges its loyalty to the Lord of the covenant.

The Lord's Supper and the Passover

It is generally recognized that Jesus celebrated the Passover and instituted the Lord's Supper at the same meal.²¹ Several passages make clear that the two sacraments are related.²²

The Mosaic Passover was a powerful ministry of the Word, graphically picturing the death of the lamb as providing the protection from God's wrath and judgment. As the Lamb of God, Jesus shed his blood to protect us from God's judgment against our sin, "for Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed" (1 Cor. 5:7). At his final Passover on earth Jesus instituted the Lord's Supper to be the equivalent sacrament of the new covenant.

The Passover clearly was a part of the ministry of the Word in the Old Testament. At the very beginning Moses commanded, "When your children ask you, 'What does this ceremony mean to you?' then tell them, 'It is the Passover sacrifice to the LORD, who passed over the houses of the Israelites in Egypt and spared our homes when he struck down the Egyptians.'" (Exodus 12:26-27).

The Lord's Supper is the sign of the new covenant. This is shown by Jesus' words of institution, "this is my blood of the covenant" (Mt. 26:28 and Mk. 14:24), and "this is the new covenant in my blood" (Lk. 22:20 and 1 Cor. 11:25). The church now operates under the new covenant. The old (Mosaic) covenant is no longer operative (2 Cor. 3:6; Heb. 8:6, 13). This event is so pivotal that it appears that the transition to the new covenant appears to be not Pentecost, but the

institution of the Lord's Supper during Passover.²³ Thus it can be seen that, just as baptism is the initial covenant ritual, so the Lord's Supper is a repeated renewal ritual. It is clear that the sanctions of the new covenant are pictured: death for disobedience (the penalty paid by Christ), and life for faith and obedience.

The Significance of the Lord's Supper

The Reformed view of the Lord's Supper best accounts for the biblical statements. The Reformed view denies both the Roman Catholic doctrine of transubstantiation²⁴ and the Lutheran doctrine of consubstantiation.²⁵ It also avoids the pitfall of the Zwinglian view, which empties the sacrament of any spiritual content or any promised grace.²⁶ Rather, the sacrament exhibits and conveys grace to the elect who exercise faith and obedience in receiving it. This grace is always subject to God's sovereign will. This grace operates directly on the spirit, not through the material elements. This grace is of the same type as that conveyed through the other means of grace. In a true but spiritual sense, worthy partakers do feast on Christ in the Lord's Supper.²⁷

The administration of the Lord's Supper in Reformed churches reflects the profound simplicity and solemn dignity of the sacrament:

How hath Christ appointed bread and wine to be given and received in the sacrament of the Lord's supper? A. Christ hath appointed the ministers of his word, in the administration of this sacrament of the Lord's supper, to set apart the bread and wine from common use, by the word of institution, thanksgiving, and prayer; to take and break the bread, and to give both the bread and the wine to the communicants: who are, by the same appointment, to take and eat the bread,

and to drink the wine, in thankful remembrance that the body of Christ was broken and given, and his blood shed, for them. (*WLC* 169)

The pastor and the people should partake of both elements. Obviously, there should be no adoration of the elements; nor is it necessary to receive the elements in a kneeling position. The Lord's Supper was celebrated frequently in the Apostolic church; today many churches celebrate it quarterly, monthly, or even weekly.²⁸ The elements should be "bread and wine." The bread may be leavened or unleavened. There is no New Testament requirement to keep the ceremonial law against unleavened bread at Passover. The wine may be fermented, but need not be. American evangelical churches usually use unfermented grape juice, to avoid giving any offence or cause of stumbling. As A. A. Hodge pointed out, these matters relating to the mode of administration do not comprise the essence of the sacrament.²⁹

The proper administration and reception of the Lord's Supper is indeed a ministry of the Word, as our dependence on Christ for spiritual life is demonstrated (*cf.* Jn. 6:56, 63). At the same time, the command to examine ourselves further ministers the Word to us, as we compare our lives with the righteous standard of his law.³⁰

"IMPROVING" THE SACRAMENTS

The sacraments are a vital part of the ministry of the Word. Yet, as with the preaching of the Word itself and with prayer, they profit nothing when not empowered by the sovereign will of the Holy Spirit and received in faith. We who receive the sacraments have the obligation to "improve" them, to use the old lan-

guage of our Westminster standards. The *Larger Catechism* asks, "How is our baptism to be improved by us?" (*WLC* 167). It further asks, "How are they that receive the sacrament of the Lord's supper to prepare themselves before they come unto it?" (*WLC* 171), "What is required of them that receive the sacrament of the Lord's supper in the time of the administration of it?" (*WLC* 174), and "What is the duty of Christians, after they have received the sacrament of the Lord's supper?" (*WLC* 175). All of these questions, with their attendant answers, demonstrate the profound extent to which the sacraments are vital in the ministry of the Word. As the church member "improves" his baptism and fulfills his duties related to the Lord's Supper, the sacraments continue to work in his life as means of grace.



¹ *WCF* 7:6; *WLC* 35.

² *WCF* 27, *WLC* 161-64, *WSC* 91-93.

³ Pliny to Trajan, *Epp.* 10:96; original Latin and English translation available in Daniel J. Theron, *Evidence of Tradition* (reprinted; Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1980), pp. 14-15.

⁴ Meredith G. Kline, *By Oath Consigned* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1968), p. 81.

⁵ Mt. 28:19-20; 1 Cor. 11:26.

⁶ *WCF* 29:4.

⁷ *WCF* 28:5.

⁸ *WCF* 27:4.

⁹ *WCF* 27:3; see also *WLC* 161; *WSC* 91.

¹⁰ *WLC* 165; see also *WSC* 94 and *WCF* 28:1.

¹¹ This point, union with Christ, is taken by John Murray as the central meaning of baptism in *Christian Baptism* (Phillipsburg, N.J.:

Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., 1980), p. 6.

¹² Mt. 3:6 = Mk. 1:4 = Lk. 3:3.

¹³ See also Acts 2:38; 22:16; 1 Cor. 6:11; Col. 2:12-13; Tit. 3:5; and 1 Pet. 3:21.

¹⁴ See Mt. 28:19; Acts 2:41.

¹⁵ Jer. 4:4, 14.

¹⁶ Jer. 9:24-26.

¹⁷ For the argument of this section, see Meredith G. Kline, *By Oath Consigned*.

¹⁸ This is a powerful argument for the Mosaic authorship of the Pentateuch, as opposed to the critical theory that these books were written during the first millennium BC by unknown authors. See for example Kenneth Kitchen, *Ancient Orient and Old Testament* (1966; reprinted, Chicago, Inter-Varsity Press, 1973), p. 128.

¹⁹ "Sanctions" means rewards for obedience or punishments for disobedience.

²⁰ Cf. the negative connotation in Ex. 4:24-26.

²¹ There is some disagreement as interpreters try to harmonize John with the Synoptics concerning the details and exact date of the supper. E.g., see A. T. Robertson, *A Harmony of the Gospels for Students of the Life of Christ* (New York: Harper and Row, 1922), pp. 279-84, and Alfred Edersheim *The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1967), 2/ 481-84, vs. Ethelbert Stauffer, *Jesus and His Story* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1967), pp.113-18, and F. F. Bruce *New Testament History* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday & Company, 1969), pp. 191-92.

²² Mt. 26:17-20; Lk. 22:15-16; cf. 1 Cor. 5:7-8.

²³ Cf. Jn. 7:39, and the Greek text of Jn. 14:17, ({C} rating in UBS).

²⁴ During the middle ages the Catholic church developed the idea of transubstantiation, which is that the essence of the bread and wine

in the eucharist actually changes to become the body and blood of Christ, physically. However, the accidents, or appearance of the elements, remain the same. Therefore, the elements are actually God, and are to be worshiped. Eating and drinking the elements actually brings Christ into the person, bringing all the grace promised. This doctrine is specifically denied in Reformed theology (*WCF* 29.6: "That doctrine which maintains a change of the substance of bread and wine, into the substance of Christ's body and blood (commonly called transubstantiation) by consecration of a priest, or by any other way, is repugnant, not to Scripture alone, but even to common sense, and reason; overthroweth the nature of the sacrament, and hath been, and is, the cause of manifold superstitions; yea, of gross idolatries.").

²⁵ Martin Luther rejected the Catholic idea of transubstantiation, but he still believed that Christ was corporally present in the elements. The essence of the bread and wine remains, but the corporeal body of Christ is present "in, with, and under" the elements, much as light is present in air. Thus, one "chews Christ with the teeth." This takes place regardless if the communicant is a believer or an unbeliever. Non-Lutherans frequently use the term consubstantiation to describe the Lutheran view. However, Lutheran theologians reject this term, since it was used by several late-medieval writers to describe a somewhat different doctrine of "the body and blood of Christ as becoming substantially present together with the substance of the bread and wine, when the elements are consecrated" (Richard A. Muller, *Dictionary of Latin and Greek Theological Terms* [Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1985], p. 80). For a definitive definition of the Lutheran view (in Latin and English) see the *Formula of Concord*, Art. 7, in P. Schaff, *Creeds of Christendom* 3/135-146; see also the thorough discussion in C. Hodge, *Systematic Theology* 3/661-673. Much stock is placed in (1) Christ's omnipresence, which is referred to his body as well as to his spirit, and (2) the word "is" (*e'sti/n estin*) in the words of institution. Lutherans believe that grace will come

to the person who partakes in faith, through the elements and the accompanying word. The Reformed standards oppose the Lutheran doctrine of real presence (*WCF* 29:7, *WLC* 170). It is theologically difficult to base special significance for the Lord's Supper on such a "sacramental presence" of Christ's body. Also, the word "is" often is metaphorical, meaning "represents, is similar to"; *cf.* "I am the door."

²⁶ This approach to the Lord's Supper makes it to be only a memorial ordinance. There is no promise of grace other than that which comes through obedience to any other command. The objective act is more important than the subjective experience.

²⁷ *WCF* 29:1, 7, *WLC* 168, 170, *WSC* 96; and see thorough treatment by Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* 4:17.

²⁸ *Cf.* *WLC* 177.

²⁹ A. A. Hodge, *Outlines of Theology*, pp. 614-615.

³⁰ 1 Cor. 5:6-7, 13; 10:21; 11:27-29; 2 Thess. 3:6, 14-15; *cf.* *WCF* 29:8, *WLC* 173.

And He took bread, gave thanks and broke it, and gave it to them, saying, "This is My body which is given for you; do this in remembrance of Me."

Likewise He also took the cup after supper, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in My blood, which is shed for you."

Luke 22:19, 20

THE PUBLIC READING OF SCRIPTURE

by Christopher Lensch

"Till I come, give attention to [public] reading, to exhortation, to doctrine." – I Timothy 4:13

Introduction

True Christians have always been known as "People of the Book." This historic identity shows how important truth, revealed truth, is to believing Christians. Other world religions may have their sacred writings, but they also have concomitant traditions that carry as much authority as their constitutional writings (e.g., Judaism adds the Talmud and Roman Catholicism adds the tradition of the fathers). Not so, biblical Christianity.

As our constitution, the Bible alone is the Christian's guide for faith and practice. This book's first emphasis is on what God has done in creation and redemptive history rather than merely serving as a manual on what we should do. His revelation is a window into His being and will, and then it is about how man, made in His image, should reflect His nature.

God's self-communication through the Bible is His primary means of bringing us back to Himself. No wonder, then, that the people of God have always given priority to reading and hearing God's Word in their worship.

Historical Background

In matters of church government and worship, the New Testament church followed the general pattern of the synagogue. The synagogue grew out of the Old Testament church and developed during the intertestamental period. In place of the immature worship of the temple system, it served as the transition

to new covenant worship “in spirit and in truth.” The synagogue of the apostolic church¹ discarded sacerdotalism’s visual crutches of sacrifices and symbolic ornamentation. Instead, through the synagogue’s systematic reading and exposition of God’s mercy and truth found in His inscripturated revelation, God’s people met in God’s presence, heard His Word for themselves, and returned the spiritual responses of prayer and praise.

The early church continued the synagogue practice of weekly Bible reading. Before printing presses and the widespread availability of Bibles, church leaders and pastors served as custodians of the Scriptures. When Roman persecutions came, these leaders would be singled out and commanded to turn over their holy writings. The persecutors believed that if they could rob the churches of their identity by removing the divine message, they could snuff out the church.

During the Reformation Martin Luther’s personal study of the Bible fired his imagination and led him to declare before the princes in the church and state that his conscience was “captive to the Word.” While on forced sabbatical, Luther’s consuming project was to translate this book into German so his people might experience its life-changing power.

Others like William Tyndale would die to make the Bible accessible to their people in their own tongue. Tyndale’s dying prayer at the stake was, “Lord, open the King of England’s eyes.” Within a generation, the English Bible was placed and read in English churches.

Seeing the Reformation impact of having ready access to God’s Word, the Westminster divines codified the principle of putting the Bible into the vernacular for use in the church and Christian homes:

But because these original tongues are not known to all the people of God who have right unto and interest in the Scripture, and are commanded, in the fear of God, to read and search them, they are to be translated into the vulgar language of every nation unto which they come, that the Word of God dwelling plentifully in all, they may worship him in an acceptable manner, and, through patience and comfort of the Scriptures, may have hope (Westminster Confession, I:8).

The open reading of the Word is an essential part of worship. Its message shapes the rest of the worship service as well.

Purpose of Scripture Reading in Worship

We believe that the reading and hearing of God’s Word is a means of grace. When it is attended by the Spirit Who gave it, inscripturated truth has irresistible power to sanctify and build up its hearers in the faith. Hearing the Word is an essential part of God’s means of transforming us by the renewing of our minds so that we might know His will.² Note the Bible’s self-authentication:

Sanctify them by Your truth. Your word is truth.” (John 17:17)

God from the beginning chose you for salvation through sanctification by the Spirit and belief in the truth, to which He called you by our gospel,...” (2 Thess. 2:13,14)

If God sanctifies His people through their personal reading of the Bible, how much more should our attention be given in a public worship service where the congregation gathers to honor God and receive grace. Hence the Bible’s command to pastors in I Tim 4:13: “...give attention to [public] reading....” The original Greek word “reading” always means public, vocal reading.

Who Should Read in Congregational Worship?

The reading of the Word by God's servant in the midst of the congregation is tantamount to God speaking to His people. But what makes the public reading of Scripture in worship more critically important than personal Bible reading at home is the biblical doctrine of the keys. Jesus gave the first pastors of the church, the apostles, the responsibility of pronouncing both God's forgiveness and His judgment of sins. This is done whenever God's gracious Word is read in public. Also, in cases of public discipline, the reading of relevant portions of Scripture must be done by His officials before the congregation.

Hence, the Westminster Directory of Public worship called for church officers to take responsibility for the reading of sacred Scripture in worship. A strict interpretation of the Westminster Directory that precludes spiritually mature men (non-officers) from occasionally reading in worship goes beyond the practice of the synagogue and apostolic church. There a visiting adult male could be invited to read the Scripture text and even offer brief remarks on it.³

Women reading Scripture before the congregation⁴ is another matter. Neither the synagogue tradition followed by the apostolic church, nor the Reformed understanding of the office of the keys allows for women to read the Bible in public worship. Biblical Christianity recognizes Scripture's injunctions that do not permit women to bear authority over the church (I Cor. 14:34,35; I Tim.2:12). More than a didactic exercise, the public reading of God's Word from the pulpit is an authoritative function of the church in worship. The reader stands in God's place

to declare God's will to His people.

The apostle exhorted a pastor to give attention to the public reading of Scripture (I Tim. 4:13); the same pastor was also exhorted to handle the Word authoritatively: "preach the word... reprove, rebuke, exhort with all longsuffering and doctrine" (II Tim. 4:2).

Those that bear authority in the church have responsibility for proclaiming God's Word in the church. While they might occasionally delegate the reading and exposition of the Scripture to other gifted men, they will not contravene the injunctions and patterns of Holy Writ to make a woman God's spokesperson for the authoritative proclamation of the Word.

Care in Public Reading

Remembering the sacred source, content, and purpose of Scripture reading, those who read will want to give diligent care in how they deliver God's Word. Reading the Bible is not like reading an insurance policy; a monotone voice will not do. It is not like reading a newspaper with detached interest. Rather, the intelligible revelation of God Who has condescended to communicate His thoughts to His world calls for reverent reading.

Scripture must be read with gravity to communicate its inherent dignity and with care to reflect its intended meaning.⁵

This, of course, requires familiarity with the text. Before reading in public, the text should be read beforehand to ponder the shape and content of the original message. Good communicators will give attention to the phrasing of the text. What are its units of thought? How do they lead into the next thought? Are there places for dramatic pauses?

The literary form of the reading also will dictate the emotion and timbre of the

voice. Sadly, many public readers handle a narrative like Nathan confronting King David with the same emotion and vocal rate as a genealogy in the book of Genesis.

Conclusion

The public reading of the Word in congregational worship is no less critical today than it was in the early church.

Since the invention of the modern printing press in 1453, acclaimed by more than one survey of scholars as the one development having the most impact on our millennium, the Bible has become the most printed book of all time. Through the agency of Bible societies and mass retailing, most western homes and North American motels contain Bibles. A majority of believing Christians own and read their personal Bibles on a regular basis.

Despite the spiritual benefit and personal pleasure that this brings, access to personal Bibles should not diminish the importance of the authoritative, public reading of God's Word when the saints are gathered. We should the rather "...give the more earnest heed to the things we have heard, lest we let them slip" (Heb. 2:1-3). God forbid that His people ever become "dull of hearing" (Heb. 5:11). 

¹James 2:2

²Romans 12:2

³Luke 4:16; Acts 13:15

⁴See the *Banner of Truth* article on this subject, April 1999, 427:19.

⁵Jer. 23:28—"And he who has My word, let him speak My word faithfully." Neh. 8:8—"So they read distinctly from the book, in the Law of God; and they gave the sense, and helped them to understand the reading."

Give to the
LORD the
glory due
His name;
bring an of-
fering, and
come before
Him. Oh,
worship the
LORD in
the beauty
of holiness!

1 Chronicles 16:29

PERSPECTIVE

THE WRITTEN WORD OF GOD AND THE PEOPLE OF GOD by Tom Tagliente

“After those days,” saith the LORD, “I will put my law in their inward parts, and write it in their hearts...” Jeremiah 31.33

Throughout history, the thrust of every reformation, every great movement of the Spirit of God, has involved the written Word of God — the sacred text — being put back into the hands and hearts of the people of God.

Josiah’s reform (2 Ki. 22-23) involved a rediscovery of the Torah, the Law of God, in the temple. Upon hearing the Word of God — a reading from an ancient manuscript of Deuteronomy — Josiah immediately tore his clothes and ordered that all the people hear the Law of God. He then called for Judah to renew the covenant and for idolatry to be purged from all Israel. This marvelous reformation was brought about as one man heard the Word of God read with clarity from the original text. This same clarity from the sacred text is sorely needed today. The people of God need to hear — indeed, to read for themselves — the Word of God with the clarity that comes only through an encounter with the Spirit of God speaking in the original text of Scripture.

A similar thing occurred in Ezra’s time. By the postexilic period, the Jews, having spent two generations in Babylon, had essentially forgotten their mother tongue, Hebrew. As Ezra and the Levites began reading from the Law of God — the original text — and giving its sense

(Neh. 8), the congregation realized that they had been in violation of the covenant at several points, chiefly intermarriage. Their response, as in Josiah’s day, was immediate repentance (see especially Ezra 10), and the outcome was covenant renewal and reformation.

And what of the Greek Septuagint? Through the exploits of Alexander, by the second century B. C. the whole known world used *Koine* (*common*) Greek as the trade language. The Jews had been scattered abroad as God decreed and had become Hellenized, at least linguistically. Hence, the Diaspora needed a translation of the Scriptures in the language of the common people. The LXX thus constituted the greatest undertaking of Bible translation ever. By God’s providence it paved the way for the gospel of Christ to be preached among both Jews and Gentiles by the apostles.

By the time God raised up the reformers to translate the Word of God into the *linguae francae* of Europe, the sacred text had for centuries remained shrouded in Latin by Rome’s decree, forbidden from the common man’s access. These had truly been the Dark Ages. But the translations by Tyndale, Luther, and others, which put Scripture back into the vernacular of the people, fueled the movement of the Spirit of God that would revive and transform His Church in Europe. Concurrently, Erasmus published several editions of the Greek New Testament that likewise generated renewed fervor for the original text of the Scriptures. It was this fervor, this zeal for the sacred text — and its doctrines — which propelled missionary expansion into Asia, Africa and the Americas in the centuries that followed.

Where is the fervor today? Where is the need today? What will hasten the next revival of God's Church and the final great reformation that we often talk about? I submit that among the people of God there is a growing fervor, and doubtless an immense need, for the written Word of God. The Lord's sheep are hungry for the pure milk and meat of God's Word. Who will feed them? Who will equip them to feed themselves? The Church of God today, especially the Church in the English-speaking world, does not need another translation. There are far more English translations than God's people have need of. There are likewise more commentaries, devotional books, theological treatises, and doctrinal theses than our seminaries can contain. But the Church in the West is dead, and such things will not regenerate her. God's people need to be taught the Word in its original tongues, its original form, which the Holy Spirit inspired. Nothing short of this will do. The Spirit of God uses the Word of God — nothing else — spoken afresh from the sacred text to pierce the hearts of the people of God.



Your word *is* a
lamp to my feet
and a light to
my path.

Psalms 119:105

HOW SHALL WE NOW WORSHIP?: APPLYING THE REGULATIVE PRIN- CIPLE

by E. Bennett Robinson

In our time, this idea of the regulative principle is claimed by so many, and used by so many of different persuasion and practice, that its worth in the general discussion has become obscured. In a day of creativity most ideas of any kind of limitation or regulation are greeted with hostility. This has always been true. Calvin encountered it:

I know how difficult it is to persuade the world that God disapproves of all modes of worship not expressly sanctioned by His Word. The opposite persuasion which cleaves to them, being seated, as it were, in their very bones and marrow, is, that whatever they do, has in itself, a sufficient sanction, provided it exhibits some kind of zeal for the honor of God.¹

I'd like to explore the issues of what is permissible activity in worship, and how the Scriptures control such activity. What obscures these issues is the binding relevance that we give to our cultural preferences. But perhaps objectivity is beyond any of us, so let us submit to the Scripture.

This article will try to establish first the limits and extent of the discussion, defining ideas for our examination. Then I will discuss, in general, the biblical data on regulation. Then I hope, by God's grace, to examine an actual working out of this regulative principle. I believe I am hoping for too much, but I will be satisfied if you are edified and encouraged.

THE IDEA OF WORSHIP

The importance of this whole matter is, I believe, stated most directly by Calvin in the same treatise quoted above:

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If it be inquired, then, by what things the Christian religion has a standing existence among us, and maintains its truth, it will be found that the following two not only occupy the principal place, but comprehend under them all the other parts, and consequently the whole substance of Christianity: that is, a knowledge, *first*, of the mode in which God is duly worshipped; and, *secondly*, of the source from which salvation is obtained.²

Consider with me that Calvin gives a high view to this matter of worship and regulation. Most of us would have reversed the order of Calvin's statement and put a knowledge of salvation first — if we included the idea of worship at all. Although I'm reluctant to assert this as a listing of priority for Calvin, we can assert the true primary importance of both parts.

What is worship that is regulated by God? The most useful definition is one that will describe worship as obedience in a general sense. So then, for our purposes, *worship is an activity in response to God's Lordship*. This is a definition of worship in its broadest and most general biblical sense.

Beginning with this elementary idea is necessary, because worship cannot be separated from regulation. We must become accustomed to this worship as always regulated. This is something to which all should agree. It is the *extent* of this regulation that brings disagreement. There is a common distinction made between a Lutheran principle that permits any worship not forbidden, and a Reformed principle that forbids any activity not prescribed. But both positions contain a form of regulation, with differing conclusions of biblical mandate. We might state a principle here something like this: *No activity of worship should*

be immoral. This is a basic Christian principle with which we all must agree, although our interpretation of what actually is immoral might be different. This kind of principle is basic biblical teaching.

This general idea of worship is the thinking of passages like Romans 12:1, where the idea of *latreia* is this broad. Here the idea of worship becomes another way of understanding and describing "the whole of obedience for the believer." The language of Romans 12 is full of allusion to the sacrificial system of the Old Testament, and all of life is viewed as an offering. We could, perhaps, stop at this point, working out a general program from the framework of Christian obedience.³ But somehow we seem to have diluted the force of Calvin's idea of the importance of worship and its mode.

There does seem to be an idea of worship, containing a more specific idea of regulation, which strikes more at the heart of our question. This idea takes shape in Christ's words in John 4:24, and explains the judgment which Aaron witnesses on his sons in Leviticus 10. It is an idea which takes form historically in the Westminster Confession of Faith 21:1,

I. The light of nature sheweth 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 worshipped 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.

This paragraph begins with the general nature of faith and obedience as discoverable by the light of nature. Worship, on the other hand, in the sense which the confession describes here, is to conform to a more restrictive biblical prescription. A question arises at this point: *Is all worship the same, or is some type of worship more regulated than others?*

The confession continues to be a helpful guide in 21:4,

... God is to be worshipped everywhere in spirit and truth; as in private families daily, and in secret each one by himself; so more solemnly in the publick assemblies.

This is a sensible distinction, for we do naturally distinguish between private or secret worship and public. Some activities may be proper in the private sense that would be improper publicly and vice versa. In more general categories, private family worship and secret worship are part of the believer's spiritual life. The public, corporate worship of the church is legitimately distinguished from general or private worship. The point here is the application of some regulation that is proper to one and not the other.

Consider the nature of private worship:

1. Private worship is *universal*, that is to say that it covers all of life. In this sense it is unceasing in its prayer, doing all things to the glory of God, a doxological offering of all life. This is worship as a quality or description of obedience.
2. Private worship is *personal*. This is to say that it may be a secret worship, confined to the most private life of the individual, or it may also be personal in the family sense of immediate intimacy with others. In this

sense the general activity of intimacy in a prayer meeting could be included.⁴

Contrast private worship with public worship. Public worship should be understood as another *type* of worship, and not as some different *kind* or *species*. Public worship is built indispensably on the practice of private worship, and is part of the fruit and practice of that worship. Public worship, because it involves individuals, could be diagrammed as a subset of the larger set of general or private worship.

1. This public worship is distinguished in its own subset as being *particular*. It is a worship activity set aside and appointed as such. It does not and cannot happen at all times, but happens as an intentional event.
2. Public worship is also *corporate*. It is the activity of worship as carried out by an assembly of God's people. It is the joint activity of that group, met as it were, as one person with one faith and mind. It is the proper activity of the church. Public worship adds a dimension beyond our general definition. Public worship will be defined as a corporate activity of particular response to the proclamation of God's Lordship.

As believers in Jesus Christ we meet as the family of God on many occasions: e.g. Bible Study, Prayer Meeting, Evening Service, or Evening Gospel Hour. Sometimes, even when the intention is to have a worship assembly, a further distinction is introduced. Some Christians claim that it is also proper to distinguish between a formal worship assembly and one that is informal. Really? Doesn't such a distinction infer dif-

fering standards of biblical regulation between different worship assemblies?

Perhaps this distinction describes a common occurrence of human society rather than Biblical mandate. There are social occasions for “form” and occasions that do not demand such “form.” But when the intention is to publicly worship, we always assemble for the same reason, to worship God, who is the same, whenever we come to Him. It seems strange, given an unchanging reason and object of worship, that we should think we could change the nature of our approach, sometimes respecting the regulation of that God and sometimes not. Usually, this formal/informal distinction is culturally driven and doesn’t have a place in our consideration. An “informal” worship service is the subject of God’s regulation.⁵

THE REGULATIVE PRINCIPLE

21:1 of the Confession is a clear definition of the regulative principle, and we have narrowed the scope of application to the worship assembly. Some of the most lucid thinking on this subject is from William Cunningham,

... there are sufficiently plain indications in Scripture itself, that it was Christ’s mind and will that nothing should be introduced into the government and worship of the church, unless a positive warrant could be found in Scripture.⁶

So now we are directed to the Scriptures to discover the regulation of the worship assembly. But several questions are to be asked as a guide in our discussion.

- Is this idea of exclusive regulation taught? If so, how and where?
- Are we to then receive the instruction from the Old Testament in this regard?

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- Is the practice of the New Testament to be prescriptive when it is descriptive?
- Is this a general rule to guide us in principles and elements or does it to bind us to the utmost detail?

Is This Idea of Exclusive Regulation Taught?

The first two questions I will answer together. I believe, in the question of worship regulation, there is a consistent biblical expression of regulation. This comes in the form of God-centered reasoning. It is rather simple logic: “God is B, therefore we must do C.” Dr. Rayburn informs us that a basic structure of theological and biblical ethics moves from the attributes of God to the consequent activities of obedience.⁷ In the subject of worship, this reasoning becomes remarkably explicit.

1. **Exodus 20:4,5.** This is the second commandment, which although it is explicitly forbidding idol worship, is a model for carrying out the regulative principle.⁸ This is seen in the reasoning of the command. God is jealous, therefore you must worship according to *his* prescription and not make idols.
2. **Exodus 25:40.** This is the pattern of the tabernacle made after a pattern to Moses in the mountain. The tabernacle pictures the redemption of Christ. The logic goes like this, God is the God of orderly pattern, and therefore you will worship according to this pattern.
3. **Leviticus 10:3.** Often we focus on the harsh judgment that falls on the sin of Nadab and Abihu. They vio-

lated the pattern established in Ex. 25:40. They rejected the pattern of redemption, i.e., Christ himself. But what is most telling is what Moses says about God's character. God is holy, therefore those who approach him in worship must show that He is holy. See also Leviticus 22:32.

4. **John 4:24.** The question of the Samaritan woman is about regulation of worship, and whether it was true what the Jews required for worship. Christ says it was worship according to knowledge, and then he grounds the idea of worship and its regulation on God's attributes. God is spirit, therefore you must worship in spirit and truth.
5. **I Corinthians 14:33.** In the most practical sense the character of God regulates worship. God is a God of order, therefore we must be orderly in our worship.

Another doctrine contributing to the exclusive nature of worship is the sufficiency of Scripture. The doctrine of sufficiency puts forward the Scriptures as the rule of what God requires of us, including how we shall worship. The Westminster Confession of Faith 1:6 reads:

The whole counsel of God, concerning all things necessary for his own glory, man's salvation, faith, and life, is either expressly set down in scripture, or by good and necessary consequence may be deduced from scripture: unto which nothing at any time is to added, whether by new revelations of the Spirit, or traditions of men.

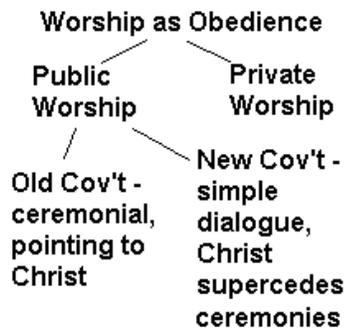
It remains, of course, to establish what such a teaching of Scripture is. This

doctrine teaches that we ought to be able to carry out a program of knowing what God's will is. Scripture contains within itself all of the basic principles which we need to rightly celebrate in Christ and His worship. The words "temple," "priest," and "sacrifice" remain in the language of the New Testament, although fulfilled in Christ¹⁰ (Rom. 12:1,2; 15:16; Phil. 2:17; 4:18; II Tim. 4:6; Heb. 13:16; Rev. 1:6,10). We must be wary of so separating the relevance of the Old Testament so that it becomes a *feeble* shadow.

As we consider the Old Testament statements and examples of regulation, we understand that they are true and binding in this sense: as they applied in principle to the older ceremonial practice, so they also apply in principle to the Christ and His worship as He fulfills and replaces them.

By doing so we recognize that the Scriptures speak with one voice, and the Old and New Testaments are incomplete without one another. We also represent worship as a covenant activity, regulated by the covenant making and keeping God.

May I borrow a figure from mathematics? We have this ruling set of worship as obedience. As a subset of that set, we have public worship. Now, as a subset of public worship we have the ceremonial system. What we are saying is that the rules and principles of the Scripture that are sometimes attached expressly to the subset of ceremonial circumstances are principles that guide the whole subset of public worship. But notice that the ceremonial system as a subset is not identical with its larger set of public worship. Its circumstances have been realized in Christ, the center of our worship. Consider the following diagram:



Is the Practice of the New Testament to be Prescriptive When it is Descriptive?

This is, I believe, a dangerous question in its vagueness, capable of absurd generality or application. There are appeals made to Christ's and the apostolic practice for all sorts of strange customs. There are many practices limited to the nature of the apostolic age, for the building and establishing of the church which are not normative for today.

The regulative principle is not concerned with the details of worship's circumstances in the early church. It is concerned with establishing what parts of worship make the worship assembly what it is. Cunningham says, "It is a caricature of the regulative principle to paint it as effort to dictate the vagaries of New Testament worship as normative."¹¹

At the center of our discussion is Christ. His idea of regulation is outlined in his answer to the Samaritan woman about the place of worship (John 4:1.9-24). He asserts for her that the regulation that the Jews taught, which was from the Scripture, was according to knowledge (v. 22). It was not wrong, it was incomplete and inadequate. The temple would be superseded by worship everywhere in

spirit and truth (v. 23,24). Notice that Christ does not simply announce an unbounded freedom.

Let's make this point while we are in John 4. True worship is fundamentally spiritual. True worship is a matter of the heart. As such, true worship is, in a sense, beyond external regulation. It is the Spirit of God who works in us and brings us to a place of true worship. We might engage in this whole discussion, reach many right conclusions, practice them somewhat diligently, and still not worship. Each person must examine himself, to see what sort of worship goes on in his heart.

In this passage Jesus has already spoken of knowledge. Knowledge, in this sense, means true facts. When Jesus uses "truth," it contains the idea of wisdom as applied knowledge, of being ultimately true. In John this word is loaded with references to Christ Himself (John 14:7) and His words from the Father (John 17:17), and the work of the Spirit in the disciples (John 16:13). Although this idea is broad in one sense, in its context in John 4 it is directly related to the regulation of the worship assembly in the temple. So in this question, Christ binds us to himself and His Word. As Rayburn writes,

Worship "in truth" means to worship God in a manner thoroughly consistent with his revelation of Himself in the Scriptures. God has made known His will; He expects His children to be knowledgeable about what He has said, to believe His Word, and to be obedient unto it.¹²

Christ Himself was active in the practice of worship, still operating under the framework of the Mosaic economy. It is interesting to see what is left of Christ's public worship activities after we remove the temple. Jesus went to the synagogue frequently and participated in teaching

there (Luke 4:16; 6:6; Mark 1:21; 3:1; 6:2; John 18:20).. The synagogue worship was, as far as can be known, the simple activities of reading the Scripture, teaching, praise, and prayer.¹³ Christ commanded preaching (Matt. 28:20; Luke 24:47) as well as modeling it (Matt. 4:17), also modeling and teaching on prayer (Matt 6:9), commanding baptism (Matt. 28:20), instituting the Lord's Supper even with Paul (I Cor. 11:23), and singing (Matt. 14:26; 26:30).¹⁴

A similar list is easily compiled from the apostolic practice. We are first introduced in Acts to a basic formula like the synagogue: preaching, praying, and breaking of bread (which I take to be the Lord's Supper; Acts 2:42; 20:7ff).. In addition there is the reading of Scripture (Acts 13:15; I Thess. 5:27; Col. 4:16), baptism (Acts 2:38; 8:36; 10:47), singing hymns (I Cor. 14:26; Eph. 5:19; Col. 3:16), offerings (Acts 4:32-34; Romans 15:25-26; 1 Cor. 16:1-3), confession of Christ (Romans 10:10; I Cor. 12:3), confession of sin (James 5:16), and numerous benedictions and doxologies (Heb. 13:20-21; Jude 24).

We began this section by looking at the basic proclamation of Christ in New Testament worship, where worship is described as "in spirit and truth." The public worship activity of Christ and apostles, as we have biblically established, becomes prescriptive to our worship. Here we find not only truth, but only with this truth, will we also find spiritual worship.

The regulative principle limits us to the description and practice of Christ and His apostles. These parts of worship are generalized as we see them in the New Testament. What emerges is a simple structure, which became obscured in the Roman church. It is to this simplicity that

Calvin desired to return the Church, to rest on this "invariable custom."¹⁵

This brings us to the foundational Reformed principle of simplicity. Have you ever attended a Roman Catholic baptism or funeral? I have. What immediately struck me was how complicated the affairs are. Layers of ceremony preceded and followed the baptism, all done with the same care and "spirituality" as the baptism itself. Regarding the funerals, the elaborate processions and the conduct of Mass generates the illusion that something almost magical is taking place. It brought into sharp focus the repulsion of the Reformers for the Roman rite, which was doubtless much more elaborate. By looking back to the Scriptures, the Reformers saw the picture of a simple pattern, simply exercised.

The earliest complete report of post-apostolic worship has the same character, as described by Justin Martyr in his *Apology to the Emperor Antonius Pius*, around A. D. 140. It is marked with clear simplicity.¹⁶ It resembles in detail the worship outlined in the Scripture, in an organized pattern. In the third and fourth centuries we begin to see the accumulation of new worship parts, sometimes as "elaborations," or developments of basic elements, now with prayer for the dead and the elevation of the host.¹⁷

In reading Calvin's preface to his service book, it is striking how similar his description of worship is to Justin's in structure and simplicity, an observation obviously intentional, so that he says,

This, therefore, is the whole order and reason for its administration in this manner; and it agrees also with the administration in the ancient Church of the Apostles, martyrs, and holy Fathers.¹⁸

In his treatise, "The Necessity of

Reforming the Church,” Calvin simplifies the parts of worship even further. He boils true worship down to an acknowledgment of God united with an adoration and praise, to which we respond with self-abasement. This is our worship in simplicity, in spirit and truth.¹⁹

This simplicity is a biblical principle, described in the idea of the covenant dialogue.²⁰ God speaks, and we, as His people, respond to Him. Here we have a simple framework of conversation. I would describe this back-and-forth conversation as the *elemental structure* of the worship assembly. The elements of worship, which the Scripture describes, spring from this basic structure. I’m not sure it would not be proper to call the two parts of this dialogue the elements of the worship assembly, they simply are worship itself. The elements are divided between them:

God speaks to us in:

Preaching
Reading of Scripture
The Lord’s Supper
Baptism
Benediction

We speak to God in:

Singing
Praise
Prayer
Offering
Confession & Doxology

Notice that this basic covenant dialogue is also the structure of our basic definitions. The worship assembly is a corporate activity of response to the proclamation of God’s Lordship, and worship is an activity of response to God’s lordship. Our definitions were generalizations of this dialogue, and properly so, since this is the life of faith, knowing the Master’s voice.

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The Regulative Principle, How General or Specific is It?

Finally our discussion comes to the actual principle itself. Again, Cunningham is to the point:

The principle is in a sense a wide and sweeping one. But it is purely prohibitory or exclusive; and the practical effect of it, if it were fully carried out, would just be to leave the Church in the condition in which it was left by the apostles.²¹

It is important to highlight this point, that the regulative principle is a principle or guide. As a principle it may be erroneously used to justify or forbid a particular activity. But it is limited in its use. We earlier quoted the first part of the Westminster Confession of Faith 1:6 on the sufficiency of the Scriptures, here is the second part of that paragraph:

...there are some circumstances concerning worship of God, and government of the Church, 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, which are always to be observed.

In 20:2 of the Confession this area is again addressed as a part of Christian liberty,

II. God alone is lord of the conscience, and hath left it free from the doctrines and commandments of men which are in any thing contrary to his word, or beside it, in matters of faith or worship. So that to believe such doctrines, or to obey such commandments out of conscience, is to betray true liberty of conscience: and the requiring of an implicit faith, and an absolute and blind obedience, is to destroy liberty of conscience, and reason also.

Here we come to an important historical distinction in the application and

understanding of this principle. In the worship assembly there is a distinction between the elements, the parts determined by Scripture; and the circumstances, those parts attendant and necessary to the activity of the elements and governed by the light of nature. Preaching is an element, preaching at 11:30 in a pulpit is a circumstance. The division is best put by James Bannerman as a division of worship into what he calls *in sacris*, that is, “*in* worship as an element of it;” and that which is *circa sacra*, that is, “circumstances *around* worship.”²²

Bannerman makes his most important observation on the distinction between element (that which is simply to be obeyed as an ordinance in the worship assembly) and circumstance (that which is negotiable as worship activity). He says that an activity is said to move from a status of circumstance to element, *when such an activity has attached to it some kind of “spiritual meaning, a sacred significance.”*²³

Here is the glory of Christ! The idea of limiting the elements, the parts *in sacris*, is because only they have a proper biblical mandate for spiritual meaning. Only those elements prescribed by Christ in Himself and His apostles bear the spiritual meaning and content which satisfies Christ’s command to worship in spirit and truth. Rituals added to the worship of God are not in truth, and therefore have no spiritual meaning. To say that some humanly devised activity does have spiritual meaning is a distraction and draws attention from Christ as the central focus in worship. The regulative principle then, is radically Christocentric.

What creeps up into worship is the attributing to certain expressions and circumstances a spiritual significance that they cannot have. Here we have the very

kernel of the principle open to us, giving us a powerful kind of discretion in our evaluation of worship. **No new elements can be added because they do not have this spiritual meaning that comes from being a prescribed element.** It also gives us the ability to judge particular expressions or circumstances in worship, to see if we are guilty of misusing them. Misuse, according to the regulative principle, is when we begin to attach a spiritual significance to an expression, and then make that expression normative. This is a movement from *around* worship to *in* worship. This could happen in circumstances ranging from kneeling to using only a collection of favorite hymns, from the activity of lit candles to the time of worship.

Even armed with this principle, confusion arises between a proper and an improper circumstance of the elements of the worship assembly. There is still an area of expression that remains controversial, into which the regulative principle is sometimes introduced as a blunt instrument.

THE EXPRESSION OF THE ELEMENTS

The Scriptures teach that they are the rule for what our worship should include. Under the authority of Scripture we come to a set number of ways in which the worship assembly is to be conducted. We find that the regulative principle keeps us to this limited list of elements by denying that any new element cannot be spiritually powerful, because it has no truth apart from the Truth Himself.

On the other hand, we have general rules and reason which also guide us in what expressions of these basic elements are permissible or wise. Here there is some liberty, and some responsibility.

The elements are not really up for debate, but regarding circumstances debate is necessary to come to godly discernment about our expressions.

A reason for this complexity is the wide range of activities that the idea of circumstance covers. This includes the pews of the sanctuary and the time of our services; but it also includes whether we use modern or older songs, whether we raise hands, and how long the sermon is. Any of these can have an exalted importance in the eyes of a church member. Some of them are simple questions of wisdom and propriety, while others are far more difficult. It is to these expressions that we direct our attention.

Let us look at some specific examples, and try to work out some responses. In the past decade, some churches have included “liturgical” dancing in the church. How does our understanding of the regulative principle help us? The idea and practice of *ritualistic* dance in worship, because of its activity or special position as a part of worship, is categorically forbidden. Any elevation of body movement, or procession, to any position of ritual, thereby attaching spiritual meaning to it, is abhorrent and idolatrous.

On the other hand, what if we have a generalized corporate expression that is spontaneous and voluntary and does not lead worship nor is led in worship, but is a simple gesture of praise before God? This *might* be defensible, but the Church would be obliged to censure it if it began to represent anything inappropriate, became disruptive, or was offensive in any reasonable sense. There could be any number of good reasons to forbid such activity and all of them would be sufficient for the Church to control it. The Church has a right to such a censure.

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Though the raising and clapping of hands could be set to the same standards and arguments as dancing, I would deal with the issue of drama differently. I believe we are obligated to a biblical understanding of each of the elements. It could be first asked if drama in any way can be supported as a mode of preaching, which I believe it cannot. We must remain biblically guided in our understanding of the nature of a particular element, which will set the expression of that element within limits.

I believe there is reasoning behind the idea of drama that condemns it. In the whole structure of the elements, and in our larger understanding of them as established by Christ, they are never *performed* or done in the sense of *performance*. Any kind of *performance* is really the introduction of a new element, a false element *in sacris*. The very idea of *performance*, which is appropriate to representation of life in human society, has no place at all in our idea of covenant dialogue of worship. Dialogue is between persons. All of the elements have this characteristic in common, they are activities directed toward someone, either God to us, or us to God. Human agents are involved, but they are speaking directly for God, or to Him on our behalf as we join in our hearts. This is not *performance*. The idea of drama is like a violent attack on this very structure in the worship assembly, for in the assembly no one is *performing* at any time. Or at least no one should be! We cannot judge when men do *perform* for us and do not talk to God. But I think it outrageous that we would ever actually begin to make it a part of the worship assembly.

The regulative principle has opened for us a way of confronting the many corruptions from which I believe our wor-

ship is suffering in this day. It will only get worse, for men will accumulate as much as they can in their worship services in order to no longer feel or remember their emptiness.

On the other hand, let us hesitate from quick judgments that find their origin not in the Word, but in the dispositions and tastes of our society or class culture. We should be slow to bind consciences as well, unless we can speak with certainty about a particular circumstance. I recommend no leniency regarding drama. Perhaps if people do clap hands we should not despise them too quickly. We should guard our hearts against the sin of Michal (2 Sam. 6:16).

In all of this we should remember this quote from John Owen,

The principle that the church hath power to institute any thing or ceremony belonging to the worship of God, either as to matter or manner, beyond the observance of such circumstances as necessarily attend such ordinances as Christ Himself hath instituted, lies at the bottom of all the horrible superstition and idolatry, of all the confusion, blood, persecution, and wars, that have for so long a season spread themselves over the face of the Christian world.²⁴ 

END NOTES

¹ John Calvin, *The Necessity of Reforming the Church*, (Dallas: Protestant Heritage Press, 1995), p. 18.

² *Ibid.*, p. 15. This particular treatise is the clearest statement of Calvin on worship and its regulation, see also his *Reply to Sadoleto* and *The True Method of Giving Peace*, and *Reforming the Church* in John Calvin's Tracts and Treatises Vols. I and III (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1958).

³ As far as I understand it, this is John Frame's program for the regulative principle. As our

further discussion will bear out, this is not only unbiblical, I believe such a program is *de-regulatory*. A further paper is now available from Mr. Frame, which I have not seen. See his "Some Questions about the Regulative Principle," *WTJ* 54 (1992), p. 357, and David T. Gordon's response "Some Answers about the Regulative Principle," *WTJ* 55 (1993), pp. 321-29.

⁴ A more worked out program for this division is not within the scope of this paper. There may be room for further divisions of that area of worship that is not public, outlining the distinctions between family and personal worship. But these have not been the domain of the regulative principle historically.

⁵ In the article already mentioned, Frame makes a case for a class of unregulated assemblies in the Old Testament festivals and feast weeks, p. 365. I do not know what criterion Frame requires to establish a biblical regulation, but following the prescriptive power of what the Scripture describes for the Old Testament worshippers in the Psalms we have a large guide for the limiting of worship. The psalms were the manuals not only for the temple, but for all assemblies and feasts. See Sigmund Mowinckel, *The Psalms in Israel's Worship* Vol. 1, (Abingdon Press: New York, 1962), p. 94-95, and Hughes O. Old, *The Psalms as Christian Prayer, A Preface to the Liturgical use of the Psalter*, unpublished, 1978, p. 54-60.

⁶ William Cunningham, "The Reformers and the Regulative Principle," in *The Reformation of the Church*, edit. I. H. Murray (London: Banner of Truth Trust, 1965), p. 38.

⁷ Robert Rayburn, *O Come Let Us Worship* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1980), p. 53.

⁸ This is the Westminster Confession of Faith's understanding in its explication of the law in the Larger Catechism Q. 109.

⁹ Frame, p. 365-6.

¹⁰ Ralph Martin, *Worship in the Early Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975, reprint ed.

1992), p.23; C. F. D. Moule, *Worship in the New Testament* (Grove Books: Nottingham, 1983), p. 62-76.

¹¹ Cunningham, p. 39. See Ernest C. Reisinger, "Thoughts on The Regulative Principle in a Reforming Situation," p. 8, as an example of this misunderstanding.

¹² Rayburn, p. 114.

¹³ Martin, p. 24.

¹⁴ See Morton H. Smith, "The Regulative Principle of Worship: Is it Biblical?" (Greenville, SC: Greenville Presbyterian Theological Seminary, 1995), p. 8-22.

¹⁵ Calvin, as quoted by James H. Nichols, *Corporate Worship in the Reformed Tradition* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1968), p. 29.

¹⁶ William D. Maxwell, *An Outline of Christian Worship* (London: Oxford U P, 1939), p. 11.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 17ff.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 116.

¹⁹ Calvin, p. 16-17.

²⁰ Rayburn, p. 118. Stephen F. Winward, *The Reformation of Our Worship* (Richmond: John Knox Press, 1965), p. 13-31. Richard Gaffin and Jerrell Peterson, "Minority Report on the Involvement of Unordained Persons in Worship," Minutes of the 55th(?) General Assembly, p. 1202ff.

²¹ Cunningham, p. 38.

²² James Bannerman, *The Church of Christ*, Vol. 1, (Edinburgh: T and T Clark, 1869), p. 349ff.

²³ *Ibid.*, footnote on p. 355. I believe it is proper to understand the word *significance* here in its older sense of signification.

²⁴ As quoted by Cunningham, p. 40 41.

Hear, O earth!

Behold, I will certainly bring calamity on this people — the fruit of their thoughts, because they have not heeded My words, nor My law, but rejected it. For what purpose to Me comes frankincense from Sheba, and sweet cane from a far country? Your burnt offerings are not acceptable, nor your sacrifices sweet to Me.

Jeremiah 6:19, 20

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Memorial giving especially is an investment in the values and interests of those who supported the Lord’s work in this life. It is part of the working out of the words of the Spirit in Revelation 14:13, “Then I heard a voice from heaven saying to me, ‘Write: “Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord from now on.” ’ ‘Yes,’ says the Spirit, ‘that they may rest from their labors, and their works follow them.’ ” By giving to the Seminary in the names of faithful saints who have preceded us, you are identifying with their labors, and providing resources to insure that their testimony continues.

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IN MEMORY OF WILMA RUSSELL

Wilma was a faithful member of the Tacoma BPC for many years, and with her husband, John, supported the work of the Seminary. Her testimony as a godly wife and mother was an outstanding example to all who knew her.

- Mr. and Mrs. William King

IN MEMORY OF RUTH JANBAZ

Ruth was the wife of BP minister and WRS board member Dr. John Janbaz, of San Bernardino, California. She shared her husband’s passion and commitment to the Lord’s work, especially the biblical education of the young.

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Please contact Christ Lensch in the office if you would like to contribute to these or any other memorials. Thank you!

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