

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

**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 worshipers 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 approached 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 a 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. 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 *ecclesia*—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.