

Worshipping God God's Way

The due worship of God is to acknowledge him to be, as he is, The only source of all virtue, justice, holiness, wisdom, truth, power, goodness, mercy, life, and salvation; in accordance with this, to ascribe and render to him the glory of all that is good, to seek all things in him alone, and in every want have recourse to him alone.

We exist for worship.

The Sole end of the creation of the nature of man was the glory of God, in that worship and obedience which it was fitted and enabled to perform. For that end, and no other, was our nature created, in all its capacities, abilities, and perfections.

So wrote John Calvin in *The Necessity and Duty of Reforming the Church*[1]. Having created us to glorify and enjoy Him, and having redeemed us into His very presence in and through Jesus Christ, our Father God calls us into His presence.

There is no more pressing duty, no deeper need, no higher privilege, no purer joy than to "come and bow down" in the immediate and special presence of the living God! Thus far most Christians are in general agreement.

But HOW may we worship God whose revealed will is our only rule for faith and life?

This question reminds us that the name of God is Jealous[2]. Our God is the God of the Second Commandment who has outlawed a whole category of human worship practices. We come to a higher standard than human experience, inclination and pleasure.

It brings us to what the God we worship has instituted in His revealed will.

It carries with it also the obligation to REFORM worship practices that prove to be contrary to His will.

The dilemma facing the churches today is that we have, for the most part, lost contact with what our Reformed fathers believed the Scriptures to teach concerning the worship of God.

The Reformers actually believed something about worship.

What they believed was as radical as it was unpopular, but what they believed reformed the Church! Not only the doctrine of salvation, but the doctrine of worship was thoroughly reformed by belief.

The Reformers saw doctrine and worship as indivisible. The Reformation was deeply concerned with how the sovereign Saviour God to whom belongs all the glory should be worshipped.

What was it that Reformers believed?

What truth could have been so powerful that, once known and believed, it would overturn centuries of tradition, pomp and ceremony? What truth did they see in the Bible that gave them such certainty, strength and courage? What truth was it that delivered Christ's Church from idolatry? What is that biblical principle that regulates and, when needed, reforms the worship of God?

Which Principle?

The Reformed confess Scripture to teach that:

... 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. (WCF 21:1).

What God has not instituted is not permitted. What is not required is forbidden. That is the biblical and reforming doctrine of worship. We don't tell God, He tells us how to worship! This is worship sola scriptura - worship instituted by God alone

in Scripture alone.

There are other, erroneous, views abroad in the Churches. The biblical principle of worship challenges these views to reform by submitting to what God has instituted in his Word.

We will note some of these erroneous views as they appeared in history. Then we will return to the Reformed principle of worship.

First there is the Romish View of worship.

Rome's view is rooted in its doctrine of Church power. Papacy teaches that the Church, not Scripture, has power to regulate God's worship. Instead of the Church having no authority in public worship except to administer what God has already enacted in Scripture, Rome claims unlimited authority to multiply, alter, and repeal the regulations of Scripture.[3] Having arrogated to itself Christ's sole prerogative and power, Rome feels free to institute whatever it pleases. It may add to, alter, and take from both the ordinances and manner of worship appointed in Scripture.

Furthermore, whatever Rome institutes is binding - to withhold obedience is a mortal sin. The worshipper is conscience-bound to observe practices, not only unknown in the Word of God, but expressly forbidden; such things as the worship of images, the adoration of Mary and the saints, additional sacraments, fasts and holy-days, penances, pilgrimages, and all the rest. Rome's view is a fountain head of superstition, idolatry and tyranny of conscience.

The Reformers responded to this tyranny with the reforming principle - Sola Scriptura. That principle applied to Church power with respect to God's worship asserts that the Church has no power to add to or take away from that worship God has ordained in His Word? And that God alone is lord of the conscience, and has 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 and worship (WCF XX, 2).

Does your Church, in practice, deal with God's worship as Rome does? Whenever Churches add, by virtue of ecclesiastical authority, to God's worship something not required by God in His Word, they are acting upon Romish principles. Ought not such behaviour be challenged? Ought it not be reformed? Second, there is the Lutheran View.

Luther's view was that, what is not specifically condemned by Scripture is allowable in God's worship, so long as it may be done unto edification.[4]

Luther! His name and labour evokes affection. We love and live in the blessed freedom and joy of justification by faith alone. Thank God for Martin Luther!

But Luther, being so profoundly impressed by the liberating power of justification mistakenly subjected religious worship to the liberty of the private Christian. As Luther applied this principle of life to God's worship, he concluded that the Church was free to add to God's worship whatever was not specifically forbidden.

Paradoxically, Luther, arriving at this conclusion by another route, agreed with Rome. He agreed that the Church had power to enact religious rites and ceremonies, but he differed with Rome in that he limited Church power to such things as are not positively forbidden in the Word; and he tried to leave the conscience of the worshiper free as it submitted to the things the Church enacted in and around worship. Submission to impositions by authority of the church was a matter of liberty, and so was able to be done without sin.

This liberty view received confessional status in the Augsburg Confession (1530) which says of man-made rites: We on our part also retain many ceremonies and traditions (such as the liturgy of the Mass and various canticles, festivals, and the like) which serve to reserve order in the church. At the same time, however the people are instructed that such outward forms of service do not make us righteous before God and that they are to be observed without burdening consciences ...

Then with respect to church power it states:

The Bishops might easily retain the obedience of men if they did not insist on the observance of regulations which cannot be kept without sin.[5]

Lutheranism consequently produced only partial Reformation. It retained many of the trappings of Rome, and left the Church free to make whatever changes it deems fit - so long as these are not specifically condemned by God in His Word. Luther grasped the mighty truth of Christian freedom, but applied it where it does not apply; namely, religious worship. Michael Bushell explains the mistake when he says:

In the religious worship of God, the primary governing principle is, "Whatsoever is not commanded, is forbidden." But this principle simply does not hold for life in general. An individual has a certain discretionary power in the ordering and formulating of his day-to-day activities, subservient to the general rules of Scripture, which he simply does not have when it comes to self-conscious acts of worship ... Outside of the realms of faith and worship a broader principle, namely, "Whatsoever is not prohibited is permitted," is valid.[6]

Jeremiah Burrows put it well:

I confess that in matters that are civil and natural this may be enough. If it is only according to the rules of prudence and not forbidden in the Word, we may make use of this in civil and natural things. But when we come to matters of religion and the worship of God, we must either have a command or something out of God's Word drawn from some command wherein God manifest His will, either by direct command or by comparing one thing with another, or drawing consequences plainly from the words.[7]

Luther's view was to prove very influential.

It was adopted early on by Anglicanism.[8] It also nudged the Continental Reformed toward a moderate and accommodating view of worship. Article 20 of the English 39 Articles reads:

The Church has power to decree rites or ceremonies, and authority in controversies of faith. And yet it is not lawful for the Church to ordain anything that is contrary to God's word written.

This is a principle for partial reformation. It was to prove problematic. The English Puritans and Scottish Presbyterians, would disagree with Luther and demand the more thoroughgoing reformation of Calvin and Knox. This theological difference, central to the controversy between Prelacy and English Puritanism, led to the codification of the Reformed doctrine of worship as we now have it in our Westminster Confession of Faith.

At this point the Calvinistic/Reformed principle of worship should be considered. But before we turn our attention to that we first mention two more recent adaptations of the worship view espoused by Luther; namely, the Contemporary and Pentecostal views of worship.

Pentecostal worship

Pentecostal worship is a synthesis of the theology of continuing revelation and special gifts of the Spirit with the Lutheran freedom principle. Except, in Pentecostalism we find liberty loosed from tradition. Worship is now a Spirit inspired event - a kind of continuing revelatory experience from the Holy Spirit through the spiritually gifted worship leader.

Pentecostal worship draws from, but transcends the Holy Scripture.

It is carried up and away from Scripture by the "spirit." Like helium balloons its practitioners are swept in all directions by the winds of doctrine.

Here is freedom to devise and develop worship under the immediate authority of the Spirit!

Consequently, Pentecostal worship like Lutheran and Romish defies reformation. Each claims power and freedom that transcends Scripture.

Contemporary worship

Contemporary worship, also working with the libertarian view of worship, approaches worship as the self-expression of the contemporary culture from which its membership is drawn at any given time, or place. John Frame (Professor of Theology at Westminster West), championing contemporary worship music[9], gives the example of how, when the baby boomers went back to church, they carried with them the attitudes, counter-culture and music of their age, and reworked the public worship to suit.

Through the eighties contemporary worship became not only a phenomenon, but a movement of worship reform. This is not a reformation governed by Sola Scriptura, but an adaptation of worship to an every changing (and we might add, degenerating), culture.

Gordon Clark described this in his book: What Do Presbyterians Believe. He tells of visiting a Christmas worship service at which a troupe of ballet dancers performed. He writes:

When I remarked, upon being pressed for an opinion, that ballet was a bit incongruous with divine worship, one of the ministers replied that any exercise that stimulates love of humanity is appropriate in church. Then I tried to tell him of the Puritan principle of the law of God from which we should not turn aside, either to the right hand or the left.

And since this minister expatiated on love verses law, I quoted, "if ye love me, keep my commandments." But he concluded the conversation, politely enough, by saying that my view point appeared legalistic to him. [10]

A recent article in the religious column of The Examiner newspaper (Tasmania, August 4, 2006. p.13), described a seminar to be run by a "music pastor" and leader of Hillsong worship team:

The morning session encompasses everything from those on stage to all the background activities that help to produce the worship event, such as lighting, sound, digital media presentation, Web site management, dance and art as it is used in the worship service.

This tinkling symbol is quoted as saying:

My dream is to use music and song to encourage and inspire God's people to find freedom in the power of praise.

What is the common denominator between Papal, Lutheran, Pentecostal and Contemporary worship? Rome claims the freedom of Papal infallibility. Lutheranism claims the freedom of Christian liberty. Pentecostalism claims freedom to do whatever continuing revelation suggests. Contemporary worship claims freedom to adapt to social norms. But all have this one thing in common: human freedom. Human freedom is the common denominator. From that commonality each tradition takes its own direction, and produces its own worship practices.

The practices are agreed in their animating principle.

Paul called such practices ethelothreskeia, will-worship (Colossians 2:23).
The Calvinistic Principle.

Here we find the principle that reformed the Church from the notion that man is free to determine how God may be worshipped. What was it again?

...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 (WCF 21.1).

To distinguish it from the Lutheran branch of the Reformation, we will call it the Regulative principle of worship. Calvin did not invent the Regulative principle, but as with other truths, he rescued it from the oblivion into which it had been cast by the Roman Catholic Church.[11] In 1544 John Calvin, wrote a brief treatise to King Charles V of France titled The Necessity of Reforming the Church. In that pamphlet, which was a defence of the Reformation against the charge of schism, Calvin set forth the Reformed doctrine of worship.

"We may not," he declared,
adopt any device which seems fit to ourselves, but look to the injunctions of Him who alone is entitled to prescribe.

Anticipating a less than enthusiastic response to this doctrine, he goes on to say:

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 honour of God. But since God not only regards as fruitless, but also plainly abominates, whatever we undertake from zeal to His worship, if at variance with His command, what do we gain by a contrary course? The words of God are clear and distinct, "Obedience is better than sacrifice." "In vain do they worship me, teaching for doctrines the commandments of men" (1 Samuel 15:22, Matthew 15:9). Every addition to His word, especially in this matter, is a lie. Mere "will worship" is vanity. This is the decision, and when once the judge has decided, it is no longer time to debate.[12]

John Knox, the Scottish Reformer and father of Presbyterianism, in his famous polemic against the mass, declared that: All worshipping, honouring, or service invented by the brain of man in the religion of God, without his own express commandment, is idolatry. The mass is invented by the brain of man, without any commandment of God. Therefore it is idolatry.[13]

William Perkins (1558-1602) the influential English Puritan, put the principle this way:

Nothing may go under the name of the worship of God, which he has not ordained in his own Word, and commanded to us as his own worship. For we are forbidden under pain of the curse of God, either to add, or to take away any thing from the precepts of God in which he prescribes his own worship.[14]

Jeremiah Burrows taught the same: "All things in God's worship," he said, must have a warrant out of God's Word. It must be commanded, it is not enough that it is not forbidden. I beseech you to observe it. It is not enough that a thing is not forbidden, and what hurt is there in it? But it must be commanded.[15]

Thomas Manton, another Westminster Divine, wrote:

God loves to be the appointer of his own services, and can best prescribe the way of his own worship. Now God's way is a revealed way; he has written his counsel in his Word; therefore, if we do otherwise than is written, we offend...[16]

Such was the unified belief of the Calvinistic Reformers. The Calvinistic Reformation differed sharply from Lutheranism. Luther claimed freedom to add whatever was not expressly forbidden; Calvin and the Reformed churches denied any such freedom; insisting that God prescribes His own worship in the Word. As our Westminster Shorter Catechism has it: The Second Commandment forbids the worshipping of God by images, or any other way not appointed in the word (SC 51).

The Reformed view of worship is rooted in Sola Scriptura.

Holy Scripture is the only rule, supreme standard, and regulative principle for doctrine of worship in Christ's Church.

But is Scripture sufficient?

Many argue that it is not; Scripture, say they, does not provide express command for every element of worship.

This, however, is not what the Reformed principle asserts, nor is it what is required. What is required is that, in the words of Westminster 1.6:

...all things necessary for ... man's faith and life is either expressly set down in Scripture, or by good and necessary consequence may be deduced from Scripture.

As B.B. Warfield rightly said of the doctrine of the trinity, so it may be said of this Regulative principle:

... it lies in the Scripture in solution; when it is crystallized from its solvent it does not cease to be Scriptural, but only comes into clearer view. It will no doubt continue to be the case that our proofs will not convince the crass literalist who refuses to see anything that is not asserted in express terms, but they are more than sufficient, we believe, to convince those who, without prejudice, are ready to submit their minds to the fair impressions of Scripture's teaching.

It is our belief Holy Scripture delivers principles that strictly limit the power of the church to administering that worship which God has ordained.

In so doing, Scripture delivers a principle that reforms worship to the pattern in the Word.

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- [1] John Calvin, *The Duty and Necessity of Reforming the Church*. (Dallas: Protestant Heritage Press, 1995,) p. 16.
- [2] Exodus 34:13-14 "Ye shall destroy their altars, break their images, and cut down their groves: For thou shalt worship no other god: for the LORD, whose name is Jealous, is a jealous God..."
- [3] James Bannerman, *The Church Of Christ, (Banner Of Truth, 1960,)* vol.1, p. 338.
- [4] We do recognise this principle. It is familiar to us as the principle of Christian liberty that applies to the Christian life. If all life is worship (Romans 12:1-3, and 1 Corinthians 10:31) then this is certainly the biblical principle that should guide us. Luther's principle is indeed the Biblical principle that guides God's free-born children in the worshipful life of gratitude and obedience! But this is NOT the biblical and reformed principle of worship.
- [5] Augsburg Confession , quoted from John Leith, *Creeds of the Churches*, (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1982) pp. 91,105
- [6] Michael Bushell, *Songs of Zion*, (Pittsburg: Crown and Covenant Publications, 1980), p. 26.
- [7] Jeremiah Burrows, *Gospel Worship*, (Ligonier: Soli Deo Gloria Publications, 1990) p. 13
- [8] Horton Davies, *The Worship of the English Puritans*, (Soli Deo Gloria, 1997,) p. 22-24, traces the theological basis of Luther's view. Luther's view was based upon his doctrine of Christian freedom. Having escaped Papal tyranny, Luther did not want to impose another "Christian Leviticus" upon believers. It was not for him, he declared, to produce another binding liturgy with which to fetter the consciences of Christian men. At the same time, he asserted that God had given man five senses with which to worship him and that it would be ingratitude to use less.
- [9] John Frame, *Contemporary Worship Music*, p.16.
- [10] Gordon H. Clarke, *What Do Presbyterians Believe*, (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., 1965), p. 185.
- [11] Michael Bushell, *Op cit*, p.15.
- [12] John Calvin, *Calvin's Selected Works, Tracts*, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker, 1983.) vol. 1, p. 128-129.
- [13]
- [14] William Perkins, *Works*, (London: Printed by John Leggatt, 1635,) p. 698
- [15] Jeremiah Burrows, *Op cit*, p. 13
- [16] Thomas Manton, *The Works of Thomas Manton*, (Worthington: Maranatha Publications,)Vol. 15, p. 349