

MAJOR BIBLE DOCTRINES

Part 43: The Church: public worship

Worship is general and specific.¹ Generally, all of life is worship, specifically, Christians worship God privately and publically. Public worship is essential to what the church is and does. Everything else serves this end.

There is something undeniably different, something undeniably special, something unique about public worship...Public worship is the collective jubilation of the gathered church. In fact, worship is the primary purpose of the church. A worship service is not merely a gathering of individuals who sing some hymns and hear a sermon together. Rather, it is the corporate expression of the body of Christ. It is a unique and unified offering of adoration and honor to God our Savior—Ernest Reisinger [*Worship*, 16-17]

I. The Church

A. Five aspects of public worship

1. *Its meaning.* Formal public worship entails the worship of God's assembled people, on His day, according to His word. [1] Public worship takes place within God's assembled people. "For where two or three have gathered together in My name" (Matt.18:20); "For first of all, when you come together as a church" (1Cor.11:18). "Not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as is the manner of some" (Heb.10:25). Thus by public worship is meant, "God's instituted communal worship in the assembly of the saints" (Murray). It's within this assembly that God's special presence is known. "For where two or three have gathered together in My name, there I am in their midst" (Matt.18:20). "These things says He who holds the seven stars in His right hand, who walks in the midst of the seven golden lampstands" (Rev.2:1). The phrase "in the midst" refers back to the special presence of God within His OC temple. "Cry aloud and shout for joy, O inhabitant of Zion, for great in your midst in your midst is the Holy One of Israel" (Isa.12:6). Just as God described the OT temple as "the place where I meet with you" (Ex.25:8), so the gathered church is the NC temple with Christ, by His Spirit, within her walls (1Cor.3:16). It's for this reason the Lord loves public worship more than private, as more of His children are assembled. "The LORD loves the gates of Zion more than all the dwellings of Jacob" (Ps.87:2). [2] Public worship takes place on God's day.² The first day of the week is the Christian Sabbath, a day that uniquely belongs to God. "We must not regard the Lord's Day as an ordinary day, any more than we would treat the Lord's Supper as a common meal. In the early church, the association between the Lord's Day and worship was clear. The people that belonged to the Lord gathered for worship on the day belonging to the Lord, the Christian Sabbath" (Hart). "Now on the first day of the week, when the disciples came together to break bread, Paul, ready to depart the next day, spoke to them and continued his message until midnight" (Acts 20:7). [3] Public worship takes place according to God's word. Only that worship expressly commanded by

¹ When we are thinking of worship we must distinguish between the generic and the specific. The generic is the devotion we owe to God in the whole of life. God is sovereign, he is Lord, having sovereignty over us and propriety in us, and therefore in all that we do we owe subjection to him, devotion to his revealed will, obedience to his commandments...The specific is the exercise of worship in the specialized sense—prayer, thanksgiving, reading the Word, preaching, singing God's praises, administering the sacraments. Some of these may be exercised in private, all of them in the public worship of God, which is God's instituted communal worship in the assembly of the saints—John Murray [*Collected Writings*, vol.1, 165]

² God has given us a holy meal (the Lord's Super), holy water (baptism), holy words (preaching), and a holy vocation (the minster of the Word). He has also given us holy time: one day for worship and rest. Contrary to popular claims, Reformed Christians do believe in a liturgical calendar. But it is weekly, not seasonal. Nor is it based on the programming of large congregational or parachurch ministries. Rather, it is the outward and ordinary cadence of Sabbath-keeping—D.G. Hart [*With Reverence and Awe*, 73]

God in His word is acceptable to Him. "The acceptable way of worshipping the true God is instituted by himself, and so limited by his own revealed will, that he may not be worshiped according to the imaginations and devices of men, or the suggestions of Satan, under any visible representation, or any other way not prescribed in the Holy Scripture" (1689). "God is Spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth" (Jn.4:24). "Worship '*in truth*,' John Gill observed, is worship 'according to the word of truth and agreeable to his will'" (Watts). Historically, this is referred to as the regulative principle of worship. "Briefly stated, the regulative principle teaches that God has set forth in Scripture the only acceptable ways of worshipping him and that it is a sin to attempt to worship him in any other way" (E. Reisinger). Simply put, "What is commanded is right, and what is not commanded is wrong" (Williamson).³

The rule which distinguishes between pure and defective worship is of universal application, in order that we may not adopt any device which seems fit to ourselves, but look to the injunctions of Him who alone is entitled to prescribe. Therefore, if we would have Him to approve our worship, this rule, which He everywhere enforces with the utmost strictness, must be carefully observed. For there is a twofold reason why the Lord, in condemning and prohibiting all fictitious worship, requires us to give obedience only to His own voice. First, it tends greatly to establish His authority that we do not follow our own pleasure, but depend entirely on His sovereignty; and, secondly, such is our folly, that when we are left at liberty, all we are able to do is to go astray. And then when once we have turned aside from the right path, there is no end to our wanderings, until we get buried under a multitude of superstitions. Justly, therefore, does the Lord, in order to assert His full right of dominion, strictly enjoin what He wishes us to do, and at once reject all human devices which are at variance with His command. Justly, too, does He, in express terms, define our limits, that we may not, by fabricating perverse modes of worship, provoke His anger against us.

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. 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,*' (1Sam.15:22; Matt.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—John Calvin [*Tracts and Letters*, vol.1, 128-129]

(1) Ps.111:1; Ps.116:17-19; 1Cor.11:17-18; 1Tim.3:14-15

2. *Its elements.* The elements of public worship are the activities performed by the church that constitute that worship. Elements must be distinguished from circumstances. Elements are those parts of worship commanded by God, wherein circumstances merely assist us in performance of the

³ There are three primary proofs for the Regulative Principle of Worship: (1) the second commandment. "Q.96. What does God require in the second commandment? A. That we should not represent him or worship him in any manner than he has commanded in his Word" (Heidelberg Catechism). (2) OT worship. "Upon the establishment of the nation of Israel following the exodus from Egypt, in the Mosaic Law, minute directions concerning the way of worship were given" (E. Reisinger). (3) NT teaching. The NT provides five specific activities associated with public worship. All else is forbidden and unlawful.

elements (musical instruments, pulpit, amplification, etc.).⁴ The Scripture provides five elements of public worship. [1] The preaching and teaching of Scripture. "The central and preeminent component in Protestant and therefore biblical worship is the preaching of the Word of God" (Barrett). "Preach the word! Be ready in season and out of season. Convince, rebuke, exhort, with all longsuffering and teaching" (2Tim.4:2). "Because the church is the Lord's assembly, and because the hearing of the Word of God forms and directs the life of the assembly, there can be no spiritual renewal of the church that does not restore the place and power of preaching" (Clowney). [2] The reading of Scripture. "Until I come, give attention to the public reading of Scripture, to exhortation and teaching" (1Tim.4:13). [3] The singing of Psalms and hymns. "Sing praises to the LORD, who dwells in Zion" (Ps.9:11). "The singing of God's people is another element that marked OT worship and is explicitly continued in the NT" (Clowney). "Be filled with the Spirit, speaking to one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody with your heart to the Lord" (Eph.5:18-19). "Corporate singing has two purposes, to speak to and encourage the members of the church, and provide praises and petitions to God" (Mack). [4] The offering of prayers. "For My house shall be called a house of prayer for all nations" (Isa.56:7). "I desire therefore that the men pray in every place [i.e. every local church], lifting up holy hands, without wrath and doubting" (1Tim.2:8). "The pastoral prayer has a special place in corporate worship. It is a means both of glorifying God and of edifying the people. It is the means of leading the congregation into the presence of the Lord, and the pulpit is the place of leading" (Barrett). [5] The observance of sacraments. "God has established two ordinances in the new covenant—baptism and the Lord's Supper" (Mack). These are to be practiced within the gathered assembly as an element of public worship (Matt.28:17-20; 1Cor.11:17-22).

Prayer, with thanksgiving, being one part of natural worship, is by God required of all men...The reading of the Scriptures, preaching, and hearing the Word of God, teaching and admonishing one another in psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs, singing with grace in our hearts to the Lord; as also the administration of baptism, and the Lord's Supper, are all parts of religious worship of God, to be performed in obedience to Him, with understanding, faith, reverence, and godly fear—LBC [22:3, 5]

(1) Acts 2:42; Col.3:16; 1Tim.2:1-2

3. *Its purposes.* [1] To glorify God. Only God is worthy of worship. "You shall worship the LORD your God, and Him only you shall serve" (Matt.4:10). [2] To edify saints. Public worship edifies because the elements serve as means of grace. "They go from strength to strength; each one appears before God in Zion" (Ps.84:7). "Let all things be done for edification" (1Cor.14:26). "Why ought we to worship God? Because it is due to him; and because it is good for us" (Broadus). [3] To unify saints. "The assembly for worship is one of the principal ways of giving expression to the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace, and to the communion of the saints with one another in the oneness of Christ's body" (Murray). "O magnify the LORD with me, and let us exalt His name together" (Ps.34:3). Public worship not only unites local churches, but in some sense the universal church (Heb.12:22-24).

(1) Ps.29:1-2; Ps.46:4-5; Ps.65:1-4; Ps.96:7-9; Ps.132:13-18; Ps.134:1-3

4. *Its attitude.* The NT describes every Christian as a priest, who offers up spiritual sacrifices to God. These sacrifices must be offered in reverence, joy, and gratitude. [1] Holy reverence and awe.

⁴ The elements of worship are the "*what*" of worship, the fixed and unchanging parts of the worship service. These include prayer, the reading and preaching of the Word, singing, and the sacraments. The circumstances are the "*how*" of worship. These are the conditions that are most conducive to worship that is decent and orderly, including time and place—D.G. Hart [*With Reverence and Awe*, 86]

"To worship is to pay honor, homage or reverence to another" (E. Reisinger). The key OT word means "to bow down or prostrate oneself," and the key NT word means "to kiss the hand or pay homage." "O come, let us worship and bow down: let us kneel before the LORD our maker" (Ps.96:6). Essential to true worship is the acknowledgement of the awesome presence of God. "How awesome is this place. This is none other than the house of God (Gen.28:16-19). "Reverence and fear are at the heart of Christian worship" (Hart). [2] Adoring joy and love. "True worship is the adoration of a redeemed people, occupied with God Himself" (Pink). "I will offer sacrifices of joy in His tabernacle; I will sing, yes, I will sing praises to the LORD" (Ps.27:6). [3] Grateful thanksgiving. "Sing praises to the LORD, you saints of His, and give thanks at the remembrance of His holy name" (Ps.30:4). "Let us continually offer up a sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of lips that give thanks to His name" (Heb.13:15).

Let us now see what is meant by the due worship of God. Its chief foundation 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 need have recourse to Him alone. Hence arises prayer, hence praise and thanksgiving—these being attestations to the glory which we attribute to Him...To this is united adoration, by which we manifest for Him the reverence due to his greatness and excellency...Next after these comes self-abasement, when, renouncing the world and the flesh, we are transformed in the renewing of our mind, and living no longer to ourselves, submit to be ruled and actuated by Him. By this self-abasement we are trained to obedience and devotedness to His will, so that His fear reigns in our hearts, and regulates all the actions of our lives. That in these things consists the true and sincere worship which alone God approves, and in which alone He delights, is both taught by the Holy Spirit throughout the Scriptures, and is also, the obvious order of piety—John Calvin [*Tracts and Letters*, vol.1, 127]

(1) Ps.89:5-7; Ps.100:1-5

5. *Its liturgy.* Liturgy refers to the form or structure of public worship. It entails the ordering of the elements within public worship. Reformed worship has patterned its liturgy after the covenant of grace. "Q. What is the proper way to worship God with decency and order? A. The way to worship with decency and order is to follow the pattern of God's covenant of grace where He tells us that He is our God and we respond that we are His people. *'I will say to those who were not My people, you are My people! And they will say, You are my God'* (Hos.2:23)" (Hart). This presupposes the covenantal nature of public worship. God graciously enters into covenant with man, and man responds to that covenant by faith. "The covenant pattern of Christian worship takes the shape of a dialogue between God and His people" (Hart).⁵

The parts of worship are of two kinds: those which are performed on behalf of God, and those which are performed by the congregation. In the former the worshipers are receptive, in the latter they are active. It is reasonable that these two elements be made to alternate as far as possible—Directory for Worship of the OPC

⁵ Reformed liturgy, then, is a blessed thing. Embodying the doctrine of the covenant of grace, it provides order and coherence in worship through a dialogical structure. Just as we have seen in the notion of the regulative principle, we must not try to be wiser than God. If we disregard the dialogical principle, if we become too lopsided with what we say instead of coming into his presence to hear him speak to us and then responding on the basis of what he has said and done, we will not only rob God of the adoration that is his due, but also deprive ourselves of the blessing he would have for us as he condescends to meet us—D.G. Hart [*With Reverence and Awe*, 102]