

CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

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The Local Church's Worship

Michael Scott Horton, in commenting on the Gnostic tendencies so rampant in many Evangelical circles, has correctly noted that: "Regardless of the denomination, the American Religion is inward, deeply distrustful of institutions, mediated grace, the intellect, theology, creeds, and the demand to look outside of oneself for salvation." Is true worship really supposed to be characterized in Woodstock fashion as *celebrative, informal* and *spontaneous*? Much *false* worship is done in that way. In fact, if one examines the religious of the ancient and modern world, it is not at all unusual to find worship characterized as being *Woodstockian*! True worship *must* (Note the "must" of John 4:24) stem from a knowledge of the Triune God and offered up to Him exclusively. An age-old debate throughout church history, the struggle to define the extent to which our services must conform to the Bible has obtained fresh relevance. As we have noted (the regulative principle), the Protestant Reformers were concerned that the medieval church had been too "creative," too innovative, in adding ceremonies and worship activities. The result was a fresh look at the ancient worship of the church and the biblical commands, preserving that which had apostolic warrant (the prayers, the forms for worship, minus idolatry and superstition). Their goal was not to reject everything in tradition, but to evaluate everything in the light of Scripture. It had to conform to the pattern described above and the ceremonies, exciting as they might have been for those attending medieval services, had pushed the Word into the shadows. The Reformers' critique of the medieval church as "innovation" in worship can be made of contemporary evangelicalism, where the zeal for the "new and improved" in popular American culture is shared by many Christians. God does not want us to be creative and exciting in our worship. He has given us our guidelines, so that we need not consult the Philistines and Canaanites as to how we should come into God's presence. "God is Spirit, and his worshipers must worship in spirit and in truth" (John 4:24). Our imaginations, our emotions, our clever minds, are "idol factories," as Calvin said, and they will always lead us away from God unless we are constantly judging our worship by the Word. While tradition can err, it does not err quite as easily as individuals. I whole-heartedly concur with this analysis of Horton. "Contemporary worship is not merely a matter of the period. We are all engaged in contemporary worship in that sense, since we are alive now in this time and place and not in another. But, like contemporary Christian music, which in many ways has shaped contemporary praise and worship, we are now talking about a distinct style, a unique genre that is inherently iconoclastic and often deeply influenced by the Gnostic spirit of individualism, subjectivism, mysticism, and a deep suspicion of institutional authority in the form of creeds, confessions, church discipline, and the like. In short, this style of music is shaped by popular culture, and one has to ask, it seems to me, whether popular culture is more suited to carrying the virus of worldliness than cultural expressions that were at least more self-consciously attuned to Christian concerns."¹ Sadly, the reason why people prefer one style to another has little to do with whether or not the music was essential to the worship of God – but rather which style would be most attractive to the unchurched! One person (whose viewpoint is probably widely shared) said the best kind of worship music is the kind that is fun! Worship that is acceptable to God needs to be first and foremost something that is God-centered – not directed toward the unchurched and certainly not something we do because we find it fun and entertaining. From such a mind-set may God deliver us! All that we do in worship we do as *service* to God. "The church" writes Edmund Clowney, "is called to serve God in three ways: to serve Him directly in *worship*; to serve the saints in *nurture*; and to serve the world in *witness*."² What is it then that makes our service of worship pleasing to God?

I. JESUS AND THE REGULATIVE PRINCIPLE

What is the “regulative principle?”³ The Calvinistic wing of the Reformation, following their great reformer John Calvin, were of the opinion that 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 for it could be found in Scripture. This principle was adopted and acted upon by the English Puritans and the Scottish Presbyterians; and we are persuaded that it is the only true and safe principle applicable to this matter. The principle is in a sense a very 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, in so far as we have any means of information – a result, surely, which need not be very alarming, except to those who think that they themselves have very superior powers for improving and adorning the Church by their inventions. The principle ought to be understood in a common-sense way, and we ought to be satisfied with reasonable evidence of its truth.⁴ This approach to Christian worship reflects and is governed by what has come to be known as the “regulative principle,” which is stated by the Westminster Confession of faith this way: God alone is Lord of the conscience, and *hath left it free from the doctrines of men, which are, in anything, contrary to his Word: or beside it, in matters of faith, or worship.* So that, to believe such doctrines, or to obey such commands, 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. (XX/ii) ... The acceptable way of worshiping 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 representations, or any other way not prescribed in the Holy Scripture. (XXI/I; see also *Larger Catechism*, Questions 108-109; *Shorter Catechism*, Questions 50-51).⁵ Read the Gospels and note the numerous times Jesus either corrected a misguided form of worship (John 4:22) or directly rebuked it (Matt. 23:13-36).

II. THE QUALITY OF WORSHIP IS CONDITIONED BY THE OBJECT OF OUR WORSHIP

We are created in the image of God (Gen. 1:26-27), and as such we are made for God and we are therefore made to worship Him. “Worship,” proclaimed Thomas Manton, “is due to God. These two notions live and die together – that God is, and that he ought to be worshipped. It appeareth by our Saviour’s reasoning, John 4:24, ‘God is a spirit, and they that worship Him *must*⁶ worship Him in spirit and in truth.’ He giveth directions about the manner of worship, but supposeth that He will be worshipped. When God had proclaimed His name and manifested Himself to Moses, Exod. 34:8, ‘Moses made haste, and bowed himself and worshipped.’ It is the crime charged upon the Gentiles, that ‘when they knew God, they glorified Him not as God,’ Rom. 1:21. They knew a divine power, but did not give Him worship, at least competent to His nature. God pleadeth His right: Mal. 1:6, ‘If I be a father, where is mine honour? If I be a master, where is my fear?’ And God, who is the common parent and absolute master of all, must have both a worship and honour, in which reverence and fear is mixed with love and joy; so that if God be, worship is certainly due to Him. They that have no worship are as if they had no God.”⁷

III. GOD’S GLORY ATTRACTS OUR WORSHIP

We worship God not simply because of what He has done for us, but chiefly because of who He is—and it is His overwhelming glory that attracts our worship and deserves our adoration. Jonathan Edwards, in his masterful essay The End For Which God Created the World, wrote: the word “glory,” as applied to God in Scripture, implies the view of knowledge of God’s excellency. The exhibition of glory is to the view of beholders. The manifestation of glory, the emanating or effulgence of brightness, has relation to the eye. Light or brightness is a quality that has relation to the sense of seeing: we see the luminary by its light. And knowledge is often expressed in Scripture by light. The word “glory” very often in Scripture signifies or implies honor, as any one may soon see by casting his eye on a concordance. But honor implies the knowledge of the dignity and excellency of him who hath the honor. And this is often more especially signified by the word “glory,” when applied to God. Num. 14:21, “But as truly as I live, all the earth shall be filled with the glory of the Lord,” i.e., all the earth shall see the manifestations I will make of my perfect holiness and hatred of sin, and so of my infinite excellence. This appears by the context. So Ezek. 39:21-23, “I will set my glory among the heathen, and all the heathen shall see my judgment that I have executed, and my hand that I have laid upon them. So the house of Israel shall know that I am the Lord their God. And the heathen shall know, that the house of Israel went into

captivity for their iniquity.” And ‘tis manifest in many places, where we read of God’s glorifying himself, or of his being glorified, that one thing directly intended is, a manifesting or making known his divine greatness and excellency.⁸

A. Unacceptable Worship. Good intentions are not the Biblical criterion for whether or not our worship passes muster. Jesus informed the woman at the well that her worship was rooted in ignorance. (John 4:22 cf also Matt. 5:14 where Jesus speaks of “vain worship”). There is a very important point here. Worship in the biblical sense, can never be defined apart from God. We are not free to be imaginative in our worship. We are not free to worship any way we choose. “When the total abandonment and devotion of worship are directed to any less god, its very nature is perverted. This perversion initiates to downward spiral of idolatry that the apostle Paul traces (Rom. 1:18-32). Worship becomes depraved, not first in cult prostitution, or in rituals of blood lust, but at the point where human creatures refuse to acknowledge the only One worthy of utter, absolute, irrevocable devotion (Rom. 1:21-23).”⁹

B. Acceptable Worship. The *Westminster Confession* XXI. 1 reads, “But the acceptable way of worshipping the true God is instituted by himself, and so limited by his own revealed will, that he may not be worshiped according to the imaginations and devices of men, or the suggestions of Satan, under any visible representation, or any other way not prescribed in the Holy Scripture.”

CONCLUSION: Do the various world religions all worship the same God? You will often hear people say that in the final analysis everyone worships the same God; they just do so in different ways and with different beliefs. Does it really matter what one believes about God? Does this affect our worship? **It most certainly does.** Tragically many evangelical churches have become indifferent to theology and as a result, most of what passes for *worship* in our churches is unworthy of the One who is the King of Kings and Lord of Lords. We are told in Heb. 12:28 that we must *worship God acceptably with reverence and awe*. Our duty and obligation to worship God is an essential aspect of our service to God, and one of the distinguishing marks of a true church.

ENDNOTES

¹ M. S. Horton, *In the Face of God: The Dangers & Delights of Spiritual Intimacy* (Word, 1996), p. 209.

² E. P. Clowney, *The Church: Contours of Christian Theology* (IVP, 1995), p. 117.

³ Cf. the excellent chapter by William Cunningham “The Reformers and the Regulative Principle” in *The Reformation of the Church: A Collection of Reformed and Puritan Documents on Church Issues* ed. Iain Murray (The Banner of Truth, 1965).

⁴ The word trans. “must” in John 4:24 is DEI. This significant little word means “absolutely necessary.” Note the other places it is used to underscore this idea (Luke 2:49; 4:43; 9:22; 13:33; 17:25; 24:7; John 3:14; 10:16; 12:34; Acts 4:12).

⁵ *The Complete Works of Thomas Manton I*, (rpt. Maranatha 1974), p. 317.

⁶ *The Works of Jonathan Edwards I* (rpt. The Banner of Truth, 1975), p. 118. I would urge all of you to read this particular essay by Edwards or to read John Piper’s *God’s Passion For His Glory* (Crossways, 1999), which is based on Edwards’ work.

⁷ “Jesus is not saying that they worship what they do not believe, as if he were attacking their sincerity. Rather, he is saying that the object of their worship is in fact unknown to them. They stand outside the stream of God’s revelation, so that what they worship cannot possibly be characterized by truth and knowledge. By contrast, Jesus says, *we* [Jews] *worship what we do know*: i.e., whatever else was wrong with Jewish worship, at least it could be said that the object of their worship was known to them. The Jews stand within the stream of God’s saving revelation; they know the one they worship.” D.A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John* (Eerdmans, 1991), p. 223.

⁸ Clowney, p. 118.

⁹ J. Burroughs, *Gospel Worship* (rpt. Soli Deo Gloria, 1990), p. 114.