

WORSHIP: THE MISSING JEWEL

A BIBLICAL PHILOSOPHY OF CORPORATE WORSHIP

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Man exists to worship God. God saves and sanctifies sinners in order that they will love and worship Him. There is nothing more central to the Christian life than the moment-by-moment worship of God and the weekly gathering of God's people for the express purpose of lifting praise to Him.

The biblical doctrine of corporate worship is under attack today and the man-centered approach to worship that is replacing biblical worship will eventually lead to the denial of the gospel and biblical Christianity. When the focus changes from the glory of God and submission to His Word, to the satisfaction of man, it will not be long before the Christian message and the church's true biblical mission are forgotten. Examples of this fact are found in the academic world (Harvard, Princeton & Brown Universities), in the world of social services (the YMCA) and in the histories of countless theologically liberal churches that were once orthodox.

I. The **Definition** of Worship

The purpose of all history and the obligation that rests upon all men is to glorify and worship God. Human beings exist for that exclusive purpose. A study of the biblical text indicates that **worship is the right response to biblical revelation about God² and therefore has two parts: a presentation of biblical truth about God and an appropriate response to God based upon that truth** (2 Chron 20.14-18; Neh. 8:1-6; Matt 28.9).

O come, let us **sing** unto the LORD: let us make a **joyful noise** to the rock of our salvation. ² Let us come before his presence with **thanksgiving**, and make a **joyful noise** unto him with psalms. ³ **For** [because] the LORD *is* a great God, and a great King above all gods. ⁴ In his hand *are* the deep places of the earth: the strength of the hills *is* his also. ⁵ The sea *is* his, and he made it: and his hands formed the dry *land*. ⁶ O come, let us **worship and bow down**: let us **kneel** before the LORD our maker. ⁷ **For** [because] he *is* our God; and we *are* the

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² J. Ligon Duncan, "Foundations for Biblically Directed Worship" in *Give Praise to God*, edited by Philip Graham Ryken (Phillipsburg: P&R Publishing, 2003) 54-55.

people of his pasture, and the sheep of his hand. (Ps. 95:1-7)

Make a **joyful noise** unto the LORD, all ye lands. ² Serve the LORD with **gladness**: come before his presence with **singing**. ³ **Know** ye that the LORD he *is* God: *it is* he *that* hath made us, and not we ourselves; *we are* his people, and the sheep of his pasture. ⁴ Enter into his gates with **thanksgiving**, *and* into his courts with **praise**: be **thankful** unto him, *and* **bless** his name. ⁵ **For** [because] the LORD *is* good; his mercy *is* everlasting; and his truth *endureth* to all generations. (Ps. 100)

“In general terms ‘worship’ refers to the appropriate response to the revelation of the holy God of glory. More specifically, Christian worship, whether individual or collective, is the *structured and ordered expression of the proper response* of the people of God to the revelation of God in Christ.”³

“Genuine worship is the natural and proper response to the revelation of the holy Lord God of glory. It will bring about reverential fear, confession, sacrifice, praise and commitment.”⁴

“Worship is a spiritual response to God as a result of understanding spiritual truth about God.”⁵

“Worship is our innermost being responding with praise for all that God is through our attitudes, actions, thoughts and words, based on the truth of God as He has revealed Himself.”⁶

A pithy version of MacArthur’s definition is “Worship is all that we are, reacting rightly to all that He is.”⁷ That being true, our worship services should be saturated

³ Allen Ross, *Recalling the Hope of Glory: Biblical Worship from the Garden to the New Creation* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publishing, 2006) 50; emphasis his. On pages 173-179 Ross discusses Israel’s worship in terms of revelation and response.

⁴ Ibid, 60. Warren Wiersbe writes, “Worship is the believers’ response of all that they are—mind, emotions, will, and body—to what God is and says and does.” *Real Worship* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 2006) 26.

⁵ Scott Aniol, *Worship In Song* (Winona Lake: BMH Books, 2009) 30.

⁶ John MacArthur, *Worship: The Ultimate Priority* (Chicago: Moody Press, 2012) 165.

⁷ Ibid, 186.

with biblical truth exposing God’s people to the true and living God in such a way as to engender deep affection, love, reverence, awe, and joy. As God’s people learn of God—His person and works—they should long for Him, humbly submit to Him, love Him, adore Him, and delight and rejoice in Him. Before continuing it would be helpful to consider Ross’ encouragement.

“Worship is not a choice, but a divine imperative. God has been calling his people to worship from the beginning. Accordingly, Jesus declared that the Father was seeking true worshippers (John 4:23). Knowing the will of God in this matter, believers down through the centuries have been trying to appreciate and develop proper and meaningful worship practices. . . . At the heart of this effort is the need for believers to recapture the vision of the exalted and holy Lord of glory, that is, the sublime; for to the degree that worshippers apprehend the glory of the Lord, their worship will be purified of base instincts and elevated to the level of true spiritual worship. Unfortunately, almost everything in our nature and in our world pulls us back from that; and without a good knowledge of the biblical revelation on the subject, worship becomes routine, centered on people and performances, and secularized. . . . How then shall we proceed to recapture this vision of the central focus of worship? One good way to start is with regular meditation on those passages that describe the glorious manifestations of the Lord . . . (Exod. 24; Isa. 6:1-3; Ezek. 1:4-28; Matt. 17:1-14; 2 Cor. 3:7-18; Rev. 1:9-20).”⁸

II. The **Recipient** of Worship

According to Scripture the focus of worship is God⁹ (Ps 100; 135; 1 Cor 14:24-25; Heb 12:28-29). “Worship God” (Rev 19:10). Certainly the worshiper should benefit from worship, but the primary focus of worship must be the Creator, never the creature. Nowhere does Scripture describe worship as something for the enjoyment or entertainment of the worshiper. The faithful Jew certainly did not enjoy the sounds of animals being butchered and the sight and stench of flowing blood. There was no pleasure in placing one hand on the head of a spotless animal and while confessing sin slaying it with the other hand. The joy of Old Testament worship was in the knowledge of forgiveness and in the privilege of standing in a right relationship with God because of sacrifices offered in faith. But even though

⁸ Ross, 73.

⁹ For excellent discussion of this see: Michael Barrett, *The Beauty of Holiness, A Guide to Biblical Worship* (Greenville: Ambassador International, 2006) 39-75.

he rejoiced as he worshiped, he was not the focus of it—God was. Worship occurs when believers approach God as He prescribes in His Word; in a spirit of contriteness because of sin, and delight because of forgiveness; joyfully recognizing and resting in His absolute authority; and ascribing to Him praise and honor for His attributes and actions. Worship does not focus on the creature and his pleasure, but on the Creator and His deserved pleasure.

III. The **Leader(s)** of Worship

The human leaders of the worship service are the elders of the church. Often pastors give this responsibility to others because they are not trained in certain aspects of the worship, such as music or because the time commitment involved in arranging and preparing for the service is often great. Since one of the pastor's primary responsibilities is "to equip the saints for the work of ministry" (Eph. 4:12), involving God's people in the worship service is certainly appropriate. However, corporate worship on the Lord's Day is the most important event of each week for the Christian (Heb 10:24-25), and therefore, pastors should exercise oversight and leadership. Pastors are shepherds of God's flock (1 Pet 5:2) and are therefore accountable to Him for every aspect of the ministry, which certainly includes the worship of God on Sundays. He may delegate to others, but should oversee and approve of what is offered to the Lord in worship.

IV. The **Place** of Worship

How is worship influenced by the type of building in which the church is meeting? Does it matter whether a church family is meeting in a building with cathedral ceilings, stained glass windows and a pipe organ, or a plain building with a piano and chairs, or a church member's living room with a couch, plastic folding chairs and a keyboard, or a mud hut with dirt floors for seating and *a cappella* singing? Does it matter? Certainly some types of structures will provide better acoustics for speaking and singing, allow for greater ease of learning and provide greater comfort. Pastors should seek to encourage ease of undistracted worship whenever possible, and this includes worshiping in the best structure available. However, ultimately where we worship is less important than is sometimes thought. The early church was commanded to "offer to God acceptable worship, with reverence and awe" (Heb. 12:28) regardless of where that worship took place. Sometimes believers worshiped in upper rooms (Acts 20:7-11), other times in houses (Acts 12:11-12; Rom 16:5; 1 Cor 16:19; Col 4:15; Phile 2), and believers throughout the history of the church have worshiped in virtually every type of structure and sometimes with no structure at all (open fields). A structure may in some ways aid

in worship, but a structure is not necessary for worship. Indeed, if we are dependent on a building, we have missed the true meaning of “acceptable worship, with reverence and awe.”

V. The **Parameters** of Worship

A. Worship God **Despises**

God does not accept all worship. Many would disagree with that statement because they have bought into the idea that as long as a person is sincere, God will accept his worship. “Worship in evangelical churches today is too often a congregational adaptation of good old American pragmatism—people do what they like and they like what they do.”¹⁰ Gangel is correct. Today we ask, “what do I want in a church?” instead of “what does God want in a church?” We ask, “what do I think worship should be?” instead of “what does God command and describe worship to be?” It will surprise many to know that some worship is acceptable to God, and some is not. God loves some worship and loathes other worship. There are many types of worship that God does not accept.¹¹

1. God does not accept the worship of other gods.

The first two commandments make this clear (Ex 20.3-5; Deut 5.7-19). God does not accept worship focused on anyone or anything other than Himself as He has revealed Himself in special revelation (Job 31.24-28; Deut 4.14-19). Some professing evangelicals reject the exclusivity of the God of the Bible and therefore broaden Christian worship to include false gods. In his book *A Wideness In God’s Mercy*, Clark Pinnock writes,

“When Jews and Muslims, for example, praise God as Creator of the world, it is obvious that they are referring to the same Being. There are not two almighty creators of heaven and earth, but only one. We may assume that they are intending to worship the one Creator God that we also serve. The same rule would apply to Africans who recognize a high God, a

¹⁰ Kenneth Gangel, “Reexamining Biblical Worship.” (*Bibliotheca Sacra*, April 1985) 165.

¹¹ MacArthur provides a similar list in *Worship*, 17-25.

God who sees all, gives gifts to all, who is unchangeable and wise. If people in Ghana speak of a transcendent God as the shining one, as unchangeable as rock, as all-wise and all-loving, how can anyone conclude otherwise than that they intend to acknowledge the true God as we do? . . . People fear God all over the world, and God accepts them, even where the gospel of Jesus Christ has not yet been proclaimed.”¹²

Pinnock, of course, is wrong. Both testaments communicate that there is one true God and that His worship must be controlled by biblical revelation (Ex 34.14; Is 48.11; 1 Cor 10.20).

2. God does not accept the worship of Himself in a creative manner.

Leviticus 10.1-6 tells the story of Nadab and Abihu who disregarded God’s commands and offered unauthorized fire to the Lord. Their worship was creative and they died for it. So abominable was their sin that God promised to kill Aaron and his other sons if they mourned. These young priests did not worship idols or false gods. They attempted to worship the true God substituting God’s prescribed ways of worship with their own. It is not clear what made their offering unauthorized. Maybe they used coals from some place other than the altar thus violating Leviticus 16.12. Maybe they made this offering at the wrong time of day violating Exodus 30.7-9. The biblical text simply states that they offered the Lord unauthorized fire and God killed them. Exodus 25-31 demonstrates how explicit God was about the place, tools, and people connected to worship under the Mosaic Law.

- a. 25.8-9 — the Tabernacle must follow God’s pattern exactly.
- b. 25.10-22 — the Ark of the Covenant must be just what God commands.
- c. 25.23-40 — the Table and Lampstand must follow an assigned pattern.
- d. All of chapter 26 describes the Tabernacle’s exact dimensions and accoutrements.
- e. 27.1-8 — describes the Alter in detail
- f. 27.9-19 — describes the Courtyard in detail.

¹² Clark Pinnock, *A Wideness In God’s Mercy* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1992) 96-97.

- g. 27.20-21 — even the Lampstand oil is described.
- h. All of chapter 28 describes the Priestly garments (they couldn't wear just anything).
- i. All of chapter 29 describes the consecration of the priests.
- j. 30.1-10 — describes the Alter of Incense
- k. 30.11-16 — the Atonement Money is described
- l. 30.17-38 — the Wash Basin, Anointing Oil, and Incense are described. Notice how specific and exacting God's instructions were when it came to the making and using of the incense.

Many today are clamoring for creativity in worship, but creativity must be controlled by biblical revelation.

- 3. God does not accept the worship of Himself in the right way but with a wrong attitude and sinful life.

The Old Testament Prophets consistently summoned Israel to love God and obey His Word. Often the Israelites worshiped God with correct form, but without a correct heart. They had no real devotion to God. In Isaiah's day Israel approached the Lord's worship with blood-stained hands and wicked hearts. The problem was not with the form of their worship, but with the attitude that undergirded it. Isaiah 1.11-17 records God's disdain for their sickening worship.

To what purpose *is* the multitude of your sacrifices unto me? saith the LORD: I am full of the burnt offerings of rams, and the fat of fed beasts; and I delight not in the blood of bullocks, or of lambs, or of he goats. ¹² When ye come to appear before me, who hath required this at your hand, to tread my courts? ¹³ Bring no more vain oblations; incense is an abomination unto me; the new moons and sabbaths, the calling of assemblies, I cannot away with; *it is* iniquity, even the solemn meeting. ¹⁴ Your new moons and your appointed feasts my soul hateth: they are a trouble unto me; I am weary to bear *them*. ¹⁵ And when ye spread forth your hands, I will hide mine eyes from you: yea, when ye make many prayers, I will not hear: your hands are full of blood. ¹⁶ Wash you, make you clean; put away the evil of your doings from before mine eyes; cease to do evil; ¹⁷ Learn to do well; seek judgment, relieve the oppressed, judge the fatherless, plead for the widow. (Isa. 1:11-17)

Excursus: A Close Look At Malachi One

God's hatred for free and creative worship is a theme found in the Prophets. One very revealing passage is Malachi 1.6-14.

A son honoureth *his* father, and a servant his master: if then I *be* a father, **where is mine honour?** and if I *be* a master, **where is my fear?** saith the LORD of hosts unto you, **O priests, that despise my name.** And ye say, Wherein have we despised thy name? ⁷ Ye **offer polluted bread** upon mine altar; and ye say, Wherein have we polluted thee? In that ye say, The table of the LORD *is* contemptible. ⁸ And if ye **offer the blind for sacrifice, is it not evil?** and if ye **offer the lame and sick, is it not evil?** offer it now **unto thy governor;** will he be pleased with thee, or accept thy person? saith the LORD of hosts. ⁹ And now, I pray you, beseech God that he will be gracious unto us: this hath been by your means: will he regard your persons? saith the LORD of hosts. ¹⁰ Who *is there* even among you that would **shut the doors for nought? neither do ye kindle fire on mine altar for nought. I have no pleasure in you,** saith the LORD of hosts, neither will I accept an offering at your hand. ¹¹ For from the rising of the sun even unto the going down of the same **my name shall be great** among the Gentiles; and in every place incense *shall be* offered unto **my name,** and a pure offering: for **my name shall be great** among the heathen, saith the LORD of hosts. ¹² But ye **have profaned it,** in that ye say, The table of the LORD *is* polluted; and the fruit thereof, *even* his meat, *is* contemptible. ¹³ Ye said also, Behold, **what a weariness is it!** and ye **have snuffed at it,** saith the LORD of hosts; and ye brought *that which was* **torn, and the lame, and the sick;** thus ye brought an offering: should I accept this of your hand? saith the LORD. ¹⁴ But cursed *be* the deceiver, which hath in his flock a male, and voweth, and sacrificeth unto the Lord a corrupt thing: **for I am a great King, saith the LORD of hosts, and my name is dreadful among the heathen.** (Mal. 1:6-14)

God hated the worship offered in Malachi's day. His disdain for it surfaces throughout this chapter. Twice in verse 8 God calls Israel's practice of offering blind, crippled, and diseased animals to Him, "evil" (עָרָב). Through the use of sarcasm in

verse 8, God indicates that Israel's sacrifices were not just unacceptable by His standards, but by any standards. The Hebrew word rendered "governor" (הַקָּנֵן) actually refers to a low level politician. Malachi is arguing from the minor to the major premise. His argument runs—you certainly would not offer blind, diseased, and crippled animals to your lowest political leader. You would not dream of giving such an animal to a satrap or a governor. You know he would reject such an animal and hold you in contempt. Yet you would offer such an animal to the Great King of the Universe? There are two points to this sarcasm. First, to offer to the Sovereign Creator of heaven and earth what one would not offer a lesser government official is unthinkable and reprehensible. Second, if a lesser government official would not accept such an offering, rest assured God won't either.

Did God hate their offerings? Absolutely. According to verse 10, God's hatred for Israel's worship was so great that He would have preferred no worship to what He was getting. God possessed such disdain for Israel's worship in Malachi's time that even though He created and called Israel to be a tool of His worship, He would rather the temple doors be closed and the altar fires snuffed out than to see her evil worship continue. In verse 12 God comments on the result of Israel's rebellious worship by stating that she has "profaned it" ("defiles and polluted it"—לִלְוֶה). The word "it" refers back to God's name mentioned in verse 11. God's name represents all that He is. So God sees Israel's diseased sacrifices as that which defiles and pollutes His very name and person. What is God's verdict regarding the sacrifice of diseased and crippled animals? God sees it as evil. He sees it as reprehensible and unacceptable by divine, and even human standards. He sees it as worse than having no worship at all, and He sees it as polluting and debasing His very name and person. In short, God hated Israel's worship. It was sickening, disgraceful, and despicable to Him. Four things are clear from this passage.

1. God hates worship that is not controlled by biblical revelation (1.7-8, 13-14).

The people and priests consistently offered the Lord that which was defiled and unacceptable. Their sacrifices are referred to as “polluted food” (vs 7). They offered “blind,” “lame,” “sick” and “blemished” animals (vs 8, 13, 14). Israel had rejected the standards and mandates of the Mosaic Law when it came to the Lord’s worship. When the Bible provides clear instruction regarding the Lord’s worship, believers have no flexibility.

2. God hates worship that does not honor Him for who He is (1.6).

Verse 6 demonstrates that one reason the Israelites rebelled in their worship was because they possessed an extremely low estimation of God. Their worship lacked because their view of God was low. For a man’s worship to be acceptable he must honor God as Father and fear God as master. The Hebrew verb rendered “honor” (כָּבֵד) in verse 6 literally means “to be heavy” or “to be weighty.” When a son honors his father properly, or when a person honors God properly, he is acknowledging “weight,” “importance” and “authority.” Malachi springboards off the fifth commandment and common knowledge about the owner/slave relationship to make the point that Israel was not giving God His proper weight. Israel did not see God as important. She did not acknowledge His authority over her. God had the weight and the authority to tell Israel how to live and worship, but she would not honor His claim. The word “fear” (מוֹרָא) in verse 6 has the idea of “terror,” “respect,” or “reverence.” God not only deserved to be honored by Israel as her father, He deserved to be feared and revered as Israel’s king. Israel was God’s slave. God owned her but Israel saw God as unimportant and insignificant. His greatness, majesty, and grandeur deserved to be acknowledged. His authority as both father and Master deserved a humble and servile response. But instead, God was marginalized. His

greatness was ignored. His splendor was disregarded. His sovereignty was rejected, and His authority was spurned. The very heart of true worship is giving God His proper weight. One cannot worship God apart from a biblical understanding of and a humble response to God's "godness." It is strange that the people and priests of Israel would go through the motions of worship, while having no genuine understanding of God's godness, and no desire to ascribe to Him the honor, praise, and respect He deserved? God hates that kind of loveless worship. But are not believers today often guilty of similar offenses?

- How often do we sing hymns of praise to God while our thoughts are miles away?
- How often do we listen to the preaching of the Word with dull ears and hard hearts?
- How often do we gather in God's presence with no real desire to grasp His greatness, submit to His authority, or conform to His image?
- How often do we approach the Lord's worship harboring sin, with every intention of leaving a few hours later still harboring that same sin?

God hates it when believers go through the motions of worship while not giving Him His proper weight and authority.

3. God hates worship that is thoughtless, rebellious and lethargic (1.6-7).

In verses 6-7 God speaks specifically to the priests. Israel's corruption and rebellion had reached the highest levels. In response to God's rebuke the priests asked, "How have we shown contempt for your name?" and "How have we polluted you?" They were so insensitive to their sin that they were unaware and even surprised that God was displeased with their worship. God's people today can easily fall into the same trap. Many falsely believe that just because they

are attending a Bible-preaching church their worship is acceptable. Periodically, each believer must examine his worship of the Lord to ensure its purity and acceptability.

4. God hates worship that is mixed with a spirit of disdain (1.12-13).

Because the people and priests had no true understanding, respect, or love for God, His worship bored them. The Hebrew word translated “weariness” (מְהִלָּאָה) in verse 13 could also be rendered “hardship.” The phrase “you snort at it” is the Hebrew equivalent to “you turn your nose up at it.” When the priests and people of Israel appeared before the Lord, their attitude was “What a hardship.” “What a weariness.” “What a waste of time.” They approached the Lord’s worship with their noses in the air, thinking, “I don’t need this.” “I am above this.” “I have no time for this.” The person who finds worship in a good Bible-preaching church boring, is a person who at the very least has a low view of God, and is very possibly unregenerate. The person who sees true worship as an inconvenient weariness has no understanding of the sovereign God of creation.

There is such a thing as worship that God despises. He hates worship that rejects His biblical directives, that does not honor His greatness or submit to His authority, that is spiritually thoughtless and lazy and that is offered disdainfully and condescendingly. Such worship is reprehensible to God.

B. Worship In Which God **Delights**

“The single greatest obstacle to the reform of worship in the evangelical church today is evangelicalism’s general belief that New Testament Christians have few or no particular directions about how we are to worship God corporately: what elements belong in worship, what elements must always be present in well-ordered

worship, what things do not belong in worship.”¹³

Duncan’s observation is correct and it explains why the church’s worship often reflects the face of the world instead of the face of God. If the Bible does not provide directives as to how God should be worshiped, then the church has no choice but to look to other sources for help. But if God has told His people throughout history how He desires to be worshiped, they should look to no other source but His Word. **A study of Scripture reveals God’s clear instruction for worship in every dispensation. This is often referred to as the regulative principle of worship. The regulative principle states that true worship is determined by what God has commanded (regulated) in His Word; that the Bible is the only source of directives regarding Christian worship. To worship God truly is to worship Him in the manner which He Himself has prescribed.** “Nothing must be required as essential to public worship except that which is commanded by the Word of God.”¹⁴ The regulative principle is the application of the fundamental principle of the reformation—*Sola Scriptura*—to the sphere of worship.¹⁵ “God’s Word itself must supply the principles and patterns and content of Christian worship. True Christian worship is by the book. It is according to Scripture. The Bible alone ultimately directs the form and content of Christian worship.”¹⁶ Some reject this principle because they desire to exercise freedom and creativity in worship. As Samuel Waldron has said,

“It seems that one of the major intellectual stumbling blocks which hinders men from embracing the Regulative Principle is that it involves the idea that the church and its worship is ordered in a regulated way different from the rest of life. In the rest of life God gives men the great precepts and general principles of his Word and within the bounds of these directions allows them to order their lives as seems best to them. He does not give them minute directions as to how they shall build their houses or pursue their secular vocations.

¹³ J. Ligon Duncan, “Does God Care How We Worship?” in *Give Praise to God*, edited by Philip Graham Ryken (Phillipsburg: P&R Publishing, 2003) 25.

¹⁴ Derek Thomas, “The Regulative Principle: Responding to Recent Criticism” in *Give Praise to God*, edited by Philip Graham Ryken (Phillipsburg: P&R Publishing, 2003) 75.

¹⁵ For a helpful discussion of this see MacArthur, *Worship*, 29-35.

¹⁶ Duncan, p. 20.

The Regulative Principle, on the other hand, involves a limitation on human initiative and freedom not characteristic of the rest of life. It clearly assumes that there is a distinction between the way the church and its worship is to be ordered and the way the rest of human society and conduct is to be ordered. Thus, the Regulative Principle is liable to strike many as oppressive, peculiar, and, therefore, suspiciously out of accord with God's dealings with mankind and the rest of life."¹⁷

The regulative principle is highlighted in the writings of church leaders and theological documents throughout church history. Calvin wrote, "God disapproves of all modes of worship not expressly sanctioned by His Word."¹⁸ *The Westminster Confession of Faith* of 1646, *The Second London Baptist Confession* of 1689 and *The Philadelphia Baptist Confession* of 1742 each state,

"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 imagination and devices of men, nor the suggestions of Satan, under any visible representations, or any other way not prescribed in the Holy Scriptures."¹⁹

Similar statements can be found in the writings of John Knox, the English Puritans, conservative Presbyterians, Congregationalists, and Baptists. A consideration of the regulative principle of worship can be divided into three categories.

1. The **elements** of corporate worship

The elements of worship are those activities which God commands of His people in their corporate gatherings. These elements differ depending on the dispensation. Before the Law of Moses was

¹⁷ Sam Waldron, quoted by C. Matthew McMahon, "The Regulative Principle: A Brief Article," *A Puritan's Mind*, <http://www.apuritansmind.com/puritanworship/mcmahonregulativeprinciple.htm>.

¹⁸ John Calvin, *The Necessity of Reforming the Church* (reprint, Audubon, New Jersey: Old Paths, 1994) 7.

¹⁹ *The Westminster Confession of Faith*, Chapter 21, "Of Religious Worship, and the Sabbath Day." *The Second London Baptist Confession*, Chapter 22, "Of Religious Worship and the Sabbath Day." *The Philadelphia Baptist Confession*, Chapter 22, "Of Religious Worship and the Sabbath Day."

instituted, sacrifices from a pure and obedient heart were required of God's people (Cain and Abel, Gen 4.3-8). During the Mosaic economy God's requirements for worship became more involved and clear.²⁰ New Testament worship shares many characteristics with worship from previous dispensations, but there are some differences as well. Local church worship should include:

- a. the reading of Scripture (1 Tim 4:13; Luke 4:16-20; Acts 13:14-15),
- b. the preaching and teaching of Scripture (1 Cor 1:17-2:4; Tim 4:13; 2 Tim 4:2; Acts 20:7-11),
- c. corporate prayer (Acts 2:41-42; 1 Tim 2:1-3),
- d. skilled and God-focused corporate music and singing (Col 3:16; Eph. 5:19; Ps 100:1-2; 150:1-6),
- e. sacrificial giving to the Lord's work (1 Cor 16:1-2; 2 Cor 9:6-7),
- f. the regular observance of the Lord's Supper and Baptism (Matt 28:18-19; Acts 2:41-42; 1 Cor 11:23-26),
- g. spiritual fellowship around the things of Christ (Acts 2:41-42),
- h. the exercise of spiritual gifts in ministry to others (Rom 12:6-8; 1 Cor 12; 1 Pet 4:10-11),
- i. church discipline when appropriate (Matt 18:15-17; 1 Cor 5:1-5).

Furthermore, a worship service must be driven by a biblical philosophy. It should be God-oriented, doctrine-oriented, affection-oriented, and congregation-oriented. God clearly delineated how He wanted to be worshiped in every dispensation. Where God was clear in the Old Testament He allowed no variance or creativity. Where God is clear in the New Testament He allows no variance or creativity today.

²⁰ See previous discussion of unacceptable worship.

2. The **forms** of corporate worship²¹

Forms of worship have to do with the way in which these elements of worship are carried out. The elements of church worship are clear, but other than general principles, God gives no guidance as to the content and arrangement of these elements. There is some freedom as to the order of the worship service— when music is sung and played, what passages of Scripture are read and expounded, when and how often the ordinances are observed, etc. Here Christian discretion and common sense are needed. Creativity is allowed as long as all that is done is controlled by biblical principles and a desire to enhance the congregation’s worship.

3. The **circumstances** of corporate worship

There is some freedom in regard to the circumstances of worship as well. What time, how often, and how long will believers meet on Sunday? Will the church meet in a rented storefront, a home, or a purchased building? Will the church sit in chairs or pews or on the floor? Will the hymn texts be sung from memory, from a hymnal, or from a screen? Because God provides no information regarding these things, each church must make its own decisions in accordance with biblical truth, discretion, common sense and cultural norms. An understanding of these distinctives assures that God is the supreme authority over the church’s worship while at the same time allowing each church to worship within the context of its situation and culture. Some issues relating to worship are culturally controlled and God allows for that. Those issues allow for human creativity and freedom within the confines of biblical directives and principles.

VI The **Appropriate Responses** to Biblical Truth in Worship

When the Bible describes God’s worship, certain terms are consistently used. These terms give us insight into the demeanor God desires in His worship. They describe the appropriate response to biblical truth about God.

²¹ For very helpful discussion of the forms and circumstances of worship see Duncan, “Does God Care How We Worship?” p. 25; Brian Schwertley, “The Regulative Principle of Worship,” *Reformed online Library*, <http://www.reformedonline.com/view/reformedonline/xmas.htm#C2S3>

A. Our Worship Should Be Characterized by Joy, Thanksgiving, Gladness, Praise and Reverence.

O come, let us **sing** unto the LORD: let us make a **joyful noise** to the rock of our salvation. ² Let us come before his presence with **thanksgiving**, and make a **joyful noise** unto him with psalms. ³ **For** [because] the LORD *is* a great God, and a great King above all gods. ⁴ In his hand *are* the deep places of the earth: the strength of the hills *is* his also. ⁵ The sea *is* his, and he made it: and his hands formed the dry *land*. ⁶ O come, let us **worship and bow down**: let us **kneel** before the LORD our maker. ⁷ **For** [because] he *is* our God; and we *are* the people of his pasture, and the sheep of his hand. (Ps. 95:1-7)

Make a **joyful noise** unto the LORD, all ye lands. ² Serve the LORD with **gladness**: come before his presence with **singing**. ³ **Know** ye that the LORD he *is* God: *it is* he *that* hath made us, and not we ourselves; *we are* his people, and the sheep of his pasture. ⁴ Enter into his gates with **thanksgiving**, *and* into his courts with **praise**: be **thankful** unto him, *and* **bless** his name. ⁵ **For** [because] the LORD *is* good; his mercy *is* everlasting; and his truth *endureth* to all generations. (Ps. 100)

Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly in all wisdom; teaching and admonishing one another **in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with grace in your hearts to the Lord**. ¹⁷ And whatsoever ye do in word or deed, *do* all in the name of the Lord Jesus, **giving thanks** to God and the Father by him. (Col. 3:16-17)

B. Our Worship Should Be Characterized by Repentant, Humble and Contrite Hearts.

For **thou art not a God that hath pleasure in wickedness**: neither shall evil dwell with thee. ⁵ The foolish shall not stand in thy sight: thou hatest all workers of iniquity. ⁶ Thou shalt destroy them that speak leasing: the LORD will abhor the bloody and deceitful man. ⁷ **But as for me, I will come into thy house in the multitude of thy mercy: and in thy fear will I worship** toward thy holy temple. (Ps. 5:4-7)

Have mercy upon me, O God, according to thy lovingkindness: according unto the multitude of thy tender mercies **blot out my transgressions**. ² **Wash me thoroughly from mine iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin**. ³ For I acknowledge my transgressions: and my sin *is* ever before me. ⁴ Against thee, thee only, have I sinned, and done *this* evil in thy sight: that thou mightest be justified when thou speakest, *and* be clear when thou

judgest . . . or thou desirest not sacrifice; else would I give *it*: thou delightest not in burnt offering. ¹⁷ **The sacrifices of God *are* a broken spirit: a broken and a contrite heart**, O God, thou wilt not despise. (Ps. 51:1-4, 16-17)

C. Our Worship Should Be Characterized by Holiness, Reverential Fear, Honor, Awe, and Majesty.

I will declare thy name unto my brethren: in the midst of the congregation will I praise thee. ²³ **Ye that fear the LORD, praise him**; all ye the seed of Jacob, **glorify him**; and **fear him**, all ye the seed of Israel. (Ps. 22:22-23)

Give unto the LORD, O ye mighty, give unto the LORD glory and strength. ² Give unto the LORD the **glory due unto his name**; worship the LORD in the **beauty of holiness**. (Ps. 29:1-2)

O sing unto the LORD a new song: sing unto the LORD, all the earth. ² Sing unto the LORD, bless his name; shew forth his salvation from day to day. ³ **Declare his glory** among the heathen, **his wonders** among all people. ⁴ For the LORD *is* great, and greatly to be praised: he *is* to be feared above all gods. ⁵ For all the gods of the nations *are* idols: but the LORD made the heavens. ⁶ **Honour and majesty *are* before him: strength and beauty *are* in his sanctuary**. ⁷ Give unto the LORD, O ye kindreds of the people, **give unto the LORD glory and strength**. ⁸ Give unto the LORD **the glory due unto his name**: bring an offering, and come into his courts. ⁹ **O worship the LORD in the beauty of holiness: fear before him**, all the earth. (Ps. 96:1-9)

A son honoureth *his* father, and a servant his master: if then I *be* a father, **where *is* mine honour?** and if I *be* a master, **where *is* my fear?** (Mal. 1:6)

Wherefore we receiving a kingdom which cannot be moved, let us have grace, whereby we may **serve [worship] God acceptably with reverence and godly fear**: ²⁹ **For our God *is* a consuming fire**. (Heb. 12:28-29)²²

²² “‘Reverence and awe’ refers to a solemn sense of honor as we perceive the majesty of God. It demands both a sense of God’s holiness and a sense of our own sinfulness. Everything in the corporate worship of the church should aim at fostering such an atmosphere.” MacArthur, *Worship*, 38.

“Worship must have both solemnity and joy.”²³ “We must worship God according to his revelation, not according to our disposition. We must worship God with reverence and awe, for our ‘God is a consuming fire.’ This is an individual, domestic, and corporate necessity.”²⁴

Let’s consider a few questions in light of these texts. As we do, we should keep these ideas in mind: joy, thanksgiving, gladness, praise, holiness, repentance, godly sorrow, trembling, fear, reverence, honor, awe, and majesty.

1. What moods should our worship services cultivate: lite, informal, chatty, humorous, humble, joyful, thankful, serious, reverent?
2. Should our services be: homey, folksy, sometimes silly? Should the format copy a late night talk show, or should it be serious, weighty, joyous and deliberate?
3. Should we consider replacing congregational singing of doctrinally rich hymns with pyrotechnics, disco balls, fog machines, rock bands, and entertainment?
4. Should we consider replacing or blending conservative, beautiful, majestic, joyous and reverent music with jazzy, rocky, worldly, or silly and trite music?
5. How should these passages influence our faithfulness to church?
6. How should they influence the way we sing, the way we pray, and the way we listen to God speak when His Word is preached?
7. How should they influence what we sing and how serious we are with God’s Word?

Let’s also notice one final thing. When God’s worship is discussed, described or commanded in the Old and New Testaments we never find ideas like: trite, silly, folksy, humorous, entertaining, haphazard, worldly, world-copying or sensual.

VII. The Presence of **Human Emotion** In Worship

Human beings are emotional creatures, and unless worship involves both the

²³ Sinclair Ferguson, Unpublished Class Notes On Worship.

²⁴ R. Kent Hughes, “Free Church Worship” in *Worship By the Book*, edited by D. A. Carson (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002) 165.

intellect and the emotions, it is not worship.²⁵ “It is not sufficient to utter the praise of God with our tongues, if they do not proceed from the heart.”²⁶ “Outward worship without inward is but the carcase of worship.”²⁷ At the same time, we must recognize that not all emotions are the same. Throughout church history, Christian leaders have sought to highlight the difference by distinguishing between “affections” and “passions.” Passions are feelings in the body sparked by external stimuli, like shock, surprise, sudden terror, excitement, and sexual arousal. They are “surface-level feelings that are merely physical, chemical responses to some sort of stimulus.”²⁸ They are not wrong, but they should not be allowed to control us. **Affections, on the other hand, involve the mind. They are deep responses of the will to processed information; feelings like love, joy, fear, and indignation. Affections are not merely surface level physical responses, but “arise as a result of some sort of cognitive understanding of truth.”**²⁹ Jonathan Edwards referred to our highest affections as “holy affections” because they involve the positive response of the believer’s will to what his mind has learned about God from His revelation. **Holy affections include feelings of desire and love for God, hope in God, joy in God, reverent fear of God, gratitude to God, grief, anger, and disgust over sin, and so on.** In his book, *The Religious Affections*, Jonathan Edwards states that “true religion, in great part, consists in holy affections.”³⁰

This is certainly consistent with the biblical definition of worship delineated earlier. As believers understand truth about God they respond with their entire person—their understanding, wills and affections.³¹ They mourn over sin and delight and rejoice in the Lord and His goodness (Ps 1:2; 43:4; 95:1; 112:1). If we are going to worship God in a way that pleases Him, our worship services must never aim to stoke men’s passions. Rather, they should seek to reveal God, His

²⁵ “Worship engages the whole being . . . authentic worship cannot be dispassionate.” Hughes, 162.

²⁶ John Calvin, *Commentary on the Book of Psalms* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1979) 1:126.

²⁷ Richard Sibbs, *Works of Richard Sibbs*, reprint ed. (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1977) 5:71.

²⁸ Aniol, 53.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Jonathan Edwards, *The Religious Affections*, reprint ed. (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 2007) 23.

³¹ Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. ⁵ You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might. ⁶ And these words that I command you today shall be on your heart (Deut. 6:4-6). See also: Matt 22:37; Mark 12:30; Luke 10:27.

person and works, in such a way as to engage men's mind and cultivate holy affections within him.

VIII. The Potential **Impact** of Worship On the **Unsaved**

If therefore the whole church be come together into one place, and all speak with tongues, and there come in *those that are* unlearned, or unbelievers, will they not say that ye are mad? ²⁴ But **if all prophesy, and there come in one that believeth not, or *one* unlearned**, he is convinced of all, he is judged of all: ²⁵ And thus are the secrets of his heart made manifest; and so falling down on *his* face he will worship God, and report that God is in you of a truth. (1 Cor. 14:23-25)

In verses 21-25 Paul considers the impact of tongues-speaking and prophesying on the unsaved outsider who enters a church worship service. The unbeliever will be repelled by tongues-speaking but not necessarily by the revelation of God (prophecy). The clear proclamation of the Word of God “has the potential to penetrate the innermost sanctum of the unbeliever’s soul with the laser light of divine judgment. It presents evidence that causes the individual to be scrutinized, exposed and convicted of sin.”³² **The implication of this passage is that our worship services should not be customized for unbelievers, but for God. They should be saturated with the clear and passionate proclamation of the Word of God because it is the Word that God uses to convict believers and unbelievers alike. It seems clear that the presence of the unsaved, while welcomed, must not control Christian worship. The purpose of the service is to worship God and reveal Him to all in attendance regardless of their spiritual condition. Therefore, our worship services should seek to be God-centered and God-focused.** The elements of the service, the demeanor of the people, the content of the conversation, prayer, preaching and singing should all be saturated in the Word of God. **Our hope is that when an unbeliever attends, he will be overwhelmed by the gospel and the God of the gospel, and will be “convicted by all . . . called to account by all,” that “the secrets of his heart” will be laid bare and that he will fall “on his face . . . will worship God and declare that God is really among you.”³³**

³² David Garland, *1 Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 2003) 652.

³³ In his classic book *The Work of the Pastor*, a compilation of sermons from 1964, William Still states, “The pastor is called to feed the sheep, even if the sheep do not want to be fed. He is certainly not to become an entertainer of the goats. Let goats entertain goats, and let them do it out in goatland. You will certainly not turn goats into sheep by pandering to their goatishness.” (*The Work of the Pastor*, p. 10).

“Despite all efforts to devise ‘programs’ for evangelism and outreach, the gathered congregation, in its life and ministry remains a potent force for gathering in the ‘outsider.’ Churches and their ministers, however, must ensure that the Word of God is intelligibly and powerfully taught so that the visitor will indeed say, ‘God is with you,’³⁴

“The human condition is tragic because men ‘suppress the truth’ and do not ‘honor him as God’ (Romans 1:18, 21). True worship has unique evangelistic value because it confronts man’s need by putting God on display and shows how God’s people honor him. It is worship malfeasance to do otherwise!”³⁵

“Our desire should be that every service, every activity, everything that we say or do in the Lord’s name will cause people to say, ‘God is certainly among you.’”³⁶

IX. Conclusion

Worship is the most important aspect of human existence. Nothing is more important or more necessary for the Christian than worship, especially corporate worship. In spite of its importance, however, few believers today seek to understand what God has said about it. Instead of realizing that worship must be learned from the Scriptures, many today are simply transferring what they have learned from the world to their worship priorities and practices. They assume that God will be pleased with them even though they are taking their cues from the world. This simply is not so. God is and has always been very particular about His worship. Pastors should therefore be thoroughly biblical in their approach to the worship of God’s people. They should arrange and orchestrate their services in such a way as to include every element of worship which God has prescribed. The services should endeavor to expose God’s people to Him through the preached, read, and sung Word. The goal of each worship service should be the exaltation of Christ through the lifting up of adoring voices and the submission of every heart. Pastors should endeavor to encourage their people to “enter His courts” with praise from pure hearts. That will not happen as it should if God’s people do not allow God to teach them what He wants of them.

³⁴ Paul Barnett, *1 Corinthians* (Geanies House, Scotland: Christian Focus Publications, 2000) 260.

³⁵ Dr. Steven Thomas, private conversation.

³⁶ John MacArthur, *1 Corinthians* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1984) 384.

APPENDIX

One Example of How to Arrange a Worship Service

The worship service of one particular Baptist Church attempts to present biblical truth about God in such a way as to encourage God's people to exalt, adore, and serve Him. Sunday morning services are thought through and deliberate. They are neither sloppy (a stress on being casual and perhaps unprepared), nor slick (a stress on professionalism).

- I. The Sunday School hour is from 9:00-10:00. It is immediately followed by a twenty-five minute fellowship time allowing God's people to engage in meaningful conversation and biblical encouragement. Christian fellowship is important and significant time is provided for it.
- II. The Preparation for Worship
 - A. The morning service actually begins with *The Preparation for Worship* five minutes before the worship service begins (at 10:25). At this time reverent music begins to play throughout the building signaling believers to put down their coffee cups and make their way to the auditorium. Believers are encouraged to enter the auditorium, clear their minds of the cares of the week and truly prepare to worship the Lord (meditate on a passage of Scripture, pray, etc.).
 - B. After everyone is gathered, someone stands before the congregation, welcomes God's people and visitors, and reads a Scripture passage (often a Psalm) designed to focus the people's thoughts on God and His worthiness of worship.
 - C. That reading is followed by a time of silent congregational prayer and confession, and then an invocation prayer by a church member.
- III. The Service of Worship
 - A. The second portion of the service is *The Service of Worship* which consists of The Ministry Toward God, The Ministry From God, and The Response to God.
 1. The Ministry Toward God begins with the call to worship consisting of a congregational hymn, Scripture reading, or other musical selection. This portion of the service affirms biblical truth about God

and allows God's people to respond in worship by means of congregational hymns, Scripture readings, doctrinal readings, other doctrinal musical selections, and acts of giving and consecration.

2. The Ministry From God is that time in the service when the Word of God is expounded. Through clear and passionate Bible exposition God speaks to His people.
3. The Response to God is a time of confession and consecration immediately after the Word is preached. Two hymns are sung by the congregation. The first encourages God's people to be humble before the Lord and submit to His Word (an invitation to repent of sin). The second is a worship hymn encouraging the exaltation and adoration of God as the service comes to a close. The service ends with a benediction.

Because true worship consists of a presentation of biblical truth about God and a biblical response to that truth, every church service seeks to do both. Every service exposes believers to the true and living God and encourages them to lift up their hearts and voices in praise to Him.