
Improving Worship: Worship as God Intended it

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Worship and the Gospel: Jonathan Bayes (Hambleton Evangelical Church, Carlton Minniot, Thirsk)

Most of the words translated from Hebrew, Aramaic or Greek by our English word *worship* are concerned entirely with posture. We nonconformists now jump quickly on to the defensive. ‘Yes, but’, we interject: ‘yes, but it’s posture as a symbol of the attitude of the heart.’ We are right, of course. So then we need to consider this: what attitude of heart is indicated if we slouch before the Holy One, if we approach the Most High with the cultivated slovenliness of today’s generation? ...

Out of the response of worship towards God as covenant Saviour arises a wider recognition of his entitlement to worship. The act of bowing down before the LORD is linked with the acknowledgement of his holiness and glory (1 Chr 16:29, Ps 29:2, 96:7–9, 99:5,9), his exalted greatness (Neh 8:6, Ps 86:9f, 95:3–6, 99:5,9), his unchanging blessedness even in times of adversity (Job 1:20), his sovereignty (Ps 22:27f, 66:7, 95:3–6), his awesome judgement (Is 66:23f, Zeph 2:11), his uniqueness (Ps 86:8f), and with the fact that he is the Creator and Preserver of all things (Neh 9:6). The rationale for such worship is seen in Psalm 95:6f. The Psalmist worships the LORD as Creator, but does so because of his covenant commitment to his people. Calvin explains the movement outwards from celebration of God’s triumphant covenant grace to recognition of his awesome glories in these words:

God supplies us with ample grounds for praise when he invests us with spiritual distinction, and advances us to a pre-eminency above the rest of mankind which rests upon no merits of our own¹

Distinguishing grace opens our eyes and hearts to the absolute magnificence of the LORD.

Worshipping the Living God: Iain D Campbell (Free Church of Scotland, Back, Isle of Lewis)

At one level, we can say that *theology is worship* and that *worship is theology*. As we study the great doctrines of the Word of God, and meditate on their content and their implications, we are led to marvel at the being and grace of God. In this sense, ‘theology is done in the presence of God and should therefore be reverent as well as rigorous.’² ...

It is equally true that worship is theology: ‘Worship in all its forms is laden with theological insights...theology is acted out, expressed in practice. Worship is the vehicle of theology.’³ Whether we fully appreciate it or not, every element of our public worship of God is pervaded with doctrine and theology. Our worship is encounter with, and a response to, the presence of the living God who has made himself known to us. As Calvin puts it, ‘The beginning and perfection of lawful worship is a readiness to obey.’⁴ It is the revelation of God in his word that forms the basis for all true worship; and when we are willing to obey the voice of God speaking to us and revealing himself to us in the Bible, then we can worship him aright.

New Wineskins for New Wine—from Old Testament to New Testament: David J Montgomery (Knock Presbyterian Church, Belfast)

While we now approach God through this direct route, the ‘new and living way’ in Christ, we find that the New Testament has actually got very little extra to say on form, aside from Ephesians 5:19 and a few hints in 1 Corinthians 14:26ff (and Corinth is not the best place on which to base our praxis).

There are, however, two key verses in the New Testament which underlie everything else. First of all there are Jesus’ words to the woman at the well in Jn 4:24: ‘God is Spirit and those who worship him must worship in Spirit and in truth.’

If our worship lacks either of these dimensions, Spirit or truth, it is not Christian worship. If it is deadly formal, ritualistic, even legalistic, with no engagement of the heart, it will lack the vibrant life-giving presence of God’s Spirit and is mere religious exercise, what Paul calls ‘a form of godliness, but denying its power’ (2 Tim 3:5). If, on the other hand, it is lively and entertaining and attractive but tells us nothing, or even tells us wrong things, about God then it is simply *enthusiastic* religious exercise, but it is not Christian worship ...

The other key verse is Rom 12:1 where Paul says that we are to ‘offer our bodies as living sacrifices,’ and that is ‘our true spiritual worship’. Here is the remarkable statement that everything that was encompassed in the old system of temple worship was not to be acted out in how the people of God lived from day to day. They were to be living sacrifices.

The Puritan Approach to Worship: Gwyn Davies (Evangelical Theological College of Wales)

Question: What were the differences between the Anglican approach and that of the Puritans?

Answer: The Lutheran/Anglican approach, often called the *normative* principle, upheld the authority of Scripture inasmuch as no practice clearly condemned by the Bible should be countenanced in public worship: ‘What the Scripture forbids not, it allows; and what it allows is not unlawful; and what is not unlawful my lawfully be done.’⁵

On the other hand, the Puritan approach, usually termed the *regulative* principle, upheld the authority of Scripture by allowing in public worship only those practices that are either commanded in the New Testament or have biblical warrant in the

practice of the New Testament Church.⁶ In the words of the Westminster Confession of Faith

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 scriptures.⁷

This statement represents the substance of many of the major confessional declarations of the Reformation.⁸ In the case of the Puritans, however, the long and sometimes bitter debates concerning the proper approach to God that followed the Elizabethan Settlement drew them almost inexorably to argue increasingly for the consistent application of the regulative principle to every aspect of worship—so much so that the principle was regarded by an opponent as ‘the foundation of all Puritans’.⁹

Continuity and Contemporariness in Worship: Ray Evans (Kempston Evangelical Church, Bedford)

Now in connection with form, structure and style—that which tends to dominate in any discussion of contemporariness and continuity in worship—I want to expand on three points about the regulative view as it addresses them.

First, regulation or prescription is not over specified. In one sense one could say that the New Testament is not detailed enough if we are looking for a ‘service programme’ that would fit all places at all times. Rather it gives us the big things that free us from superstition and which unite all true Christians ...

Second, the regulative principle as outworked by our forefathers left open great areas that were left to Christian prudence, the so-called ‘things indifferent’ or ‘adiaphora’. These were the matters of ordering a meeting that in themselves carried no spiritual significance; that is they neither brought the worshipper closer nor further away from God ...

Thirdly ... It is part of the regulative view to say that God has deliberately left areas of decision in worship contexts. He *has prescribed* freedom within prescribed forms and it is part of what it means to respond in love to him to make choices as an expression of our commitment ...

The principle then gives us continuity with the past, for like all Christians we should continuously bring our practice to the Word of the Lord we worship. But it will also make sure we are contemporary.

Worship and the Presence of God: Graham Harrison (Emmanuel Evangelical Church, Newport)

Think what is involved—personal communication and communion with the living God. This is a contrast infinitely more extreme than the wildest known in a merely human context. All analogies based on the differences between two individuals at opposite ends of the human social spectrum hardly begin to set forth the amazing fact that ‘we who are dust and ashes’ (Gen 18:27) not only approach the Creator but can do so with joy, confidence and boldness despite the fact that he is ‘of purer eyes than to behold iniquity’ (Hab. 1:3). We may be confident in the assurance that what we

are doing pleases God; indeed Ps 50:23 ‘Whoso offereth praise glorifieth me’ suggests that it even adds to his glory. It is incredible that such an activity should ever be regarded as a drudgery or a burden rather than an unspeakable privilege.

It is worthwhile pursuing the contrast with the human analogy. Many people would regard being invited to Buckingham Palace to a garden party, with the chance to seeing the Queen, or even possibly having a brief conversation with her, as a great privilege. But in worship, even when we come as members of a crowd (which still happens on some occasions!), potentially we are also coming as individuals, not to the remote monarch but to the Lord God Almighty who is also our Heavenly Father. We speak directly to him. He does not engage in polite pleasantries in which he formally enquires as to some peculiar circumstances, which might explain why we have been singled out for interview. His concern is infinite, all-knowing, and tender. And he is able to communicate to us such feelings of assurance and love as may well be indescribable, or to express this in biblical language we ‘rejoice with joy unspeakable and full of glory’ (1 Pet 1:8).

References

- ¹ J Calvin, *Commentary upon the Book of Psalms*, Baker, 1979, vol 4, p. 34.
- ² D B Forrester, J I H McDonald, G Tellini, *Encounter with God: An Introduction to Christian Worship and Practice*, T & T Clark, 1996, p. 8.
- ³ Forrester, p. 7.
- ⁴ Quoted in G Miller, *Calvin's Wisdom*, Edinburgh, 1992, p. 387.
- ⁵ Owen, ‘Truth and Innocence Vindicated’ in *Works*, XIII, p. 480. These do not represent Owen’s views but rather his summary of the position taken by Samuel Walker, an apologist for the Church of England. The principle is formally enunciated in Richard Hooker, *Of the Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity*, III, xi, p. 168; iii, p. 135. See also the declaration of Articles 20 and 34 of the Thirty-Nine Articles, ‘that the church has power to decree rites and ceremonies’ but ‘that nothing be ordained against God’s Word’; and William Cunningham, *Historical Theology*, I, p. 72.
- ⁶ John Owen drew an important distinction between the worship of the Old Testament and that of the New in ‘The Nature and Beauty of the Gospel Worship’, *Works*, IX, pp. 81–84 and ‘A Brief Instruction in the Worship of God’, *Works*, XV, pp. 468–9.
- ⁷ The Confession of Faith agreed upon by the Assembly of Divines at Westminster (1647), XXI, in *Subordinate Standards*, 32. Cf Swinnock, *Works*, I, pp. 34–35; Manton, ‘Sermons on the Sacraments’ *Works* (1873), XV, pp. 344, 349, 351–2; Flavel, ‘An Exposition of the Assembly’s Catechism’, *Works*, VI, pp. 228–9; Owen, *Works*, XIII, p. 464; XV, pp. 447–530.
- ⁸ See, for example, the Gallican (or French) Confession XXXIII (1559); the Belgic Confession XXIX (1561), the Heidelberg Catechism Q96 (1563). For the views of Independents and Baptists, in virtually the same words as those used in the Westminster Confession, see the Savoy Declaration of Faith and Order (1658) and the Baptist Confession of Faith (1689).
- ⁹ As reported in Owen, *Works*, XIII, p. 462.