

# ACCEPTABLE CORPORATE WORSHIP

## Lesson 8

### The Basis for Corporate Worship

How are Christians to worship God corporately or collectively? How is the gathered church to approach the Living God? What is the criterion for worship? Is it found in how one thinks or feels worship should transpire? Where does one go to find out how the one, true and living God desires to be corporately worshipped?

#### The Bible

The Bible is the only place we can go to find out how to worship God. The Scriptures are the one source that tell us why, when and how to worship as a body of believers. Evangelical Christians since the days of the Reformation have declared that *the Bible is the only rule of faith and practice*, and this surely includes the motivations and methods of corporate worship.

**“All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work” (2 Tim. 3:16).**

The inspired, infallible Word of God becomes the ultimate criterion to judge all of life, and this certainly includes the proper way to conduct corporate worship. Without the objective Bible, the church is cast on a sea of subjectivity so that in worship every person does that which is right in his own eyes (Judges 17:6). God has given the church infallible revelation on how He is to be approached in collective worship, and the body of Christ needs no other man-made criterion to make worship effective.

#### The Regulative Principle

The basic question is not what men think about worship but what does God say? All corporate worship, as all of life, must be regulated and defined by the Scriptures.

For those who are Reformed in theology, the foundational principle for worship has been the Regulative Principle of Worship.

“The living God accepts our worship when we offer it in obedience to his revelation of worship’s true character. Worship ought not to be offered according to imagined fantasies and invented techniques, satanic suggestions, using visible representations of God or through any way not directed by the Scripture. (Westminster Confession of Faith: Contemporary Edition—21:1).

The intention of the Regulative Principle is good in that it seeks to limit worship to what the Bible teaches, allowing the Bible alone to set the standard for corporate worship. The

motivation of this principle is to keep God's people from going to extremes in worship, so as to offer up acceptable worship to the Triune God.

The problem with the Regulative Principle is that the Bible does not mention many things that we use in worship in the 21<sup>st</sup> century – pews, stain glass windows, crosses, certain types of instruments, sound systems, hymnals, over-head projectors, calls to worship, benedictions, etc. What is not specifically mentioned in Scripture must be solved by theological deductions based on biblical texts and principles. Those who view the Regulative Principle this way appeal to the Westminster Confession of Faith,

The entire purpose of God concerning all things necessary for his own glory, human salvation, faith and life style is expressly written in Scripture or *may be reasonably concluded through careful and logical deduction from Scripture.* (Westminster Confession: Contemporary Edition—1-4)

Most Christians would agree that they should worship only in the way God commands. Anything less or more is a violation of the Second Commandment: **“You shall not make for yourself an idol in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below”**(Exo. 20:4).

Various Christian groups or denominations look at how the regulative principle is carried out in theory differently. Those who are of the Puritan-Reformed tradition would say only what is explicitly commanded in Scripture is acceptable in corporate worship. Stated negatively they would say anything that is forbidden in Scripture plus anything not explicitly commanded in Scripture should not be allowed in worship. The Lutheran and Anglican traditions would allow anything in public worship except that which is specifically forbidden. In these groups, much of the Roman Catholic tradition is retained. The tradition of General Evangelicals would state that anything that is appropriate and enhances the service is appropriate for corporate worship. This is a more pragmatic approach to worship. Perhaps the closest tradition to the regulative principle is found in the moderately Reformed group that states all that is forbidden in Scripture plus anything without implicit biblical warrant is not acceptable for public worship. Stated positively, the moderately Reformed believe that whatever has explicit or implicit Biblical support is appropriate for corporate worship. The moderately Reformed accept the premise that whatever is commanded or stated in principle in the Bible alone is acceptable in collective worship. Any thing else is not acceptable. This view says that the Bible alone (both Old and New Testaments) must be the only criterion for public worship.

The biggest issue is how the regulative principle is to be carried out practically. Theory is one thing and the practice of that theory is something else. All corporate worship is made up of content, structure and style. Content has to do with the truth of the gospel and the whole counsel of God. Content is non-negotiable because it is founded upon the inspired and infallible written Word. Structure has to do with the way the church orders its service. Obviously Christian churches do not structure their services alike. Robert Webber suggests that Christian worship is:

“Gathering (we joyfully enter into the presence of God), Word (proclamation in which we hear God speak), Eucharist (we respond with thanksgiving), and Dismissal (we are sent out to love and serve others)” (Richard Kauffman, “Beyond the Battle for the Organ”).

Style has to do with the cultural context of worship. Style varies from country to country and culture to culture. Different churches have different styles – some are traditional and others are contemporary and some have blended worship. It is in the area of style that most of the controversy over worship occurs. The issue is over form and function. Function has to do with things that never change – doctrine, fellowship, communion, prayer and worship.

**“They devoted themselves to the *apostles’ teaching* and to *the fellowship*, to *the breaking of bread* and to *prayer*. Everyone was filled with awe, and many wonders and miraculous signs were done by the apostles. All the believers were together and had everything in common. Selling their possessions and goods, they gave to anyone as he had need. Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, *praising God* and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved” (Acts 2:42-47).**

No church is a true church without these basic functions. Form is over how we do certain things in worship – take offerings, arrange chairs, types of music, ways of expressing worship, order of worship, use of instruments and choirs, overhead screens or hymn books, reciting of creeds or Scripture, etc. These will vary among Christians. Those who are more aesthetic in nature usually drift toward more formal kinds of worship. Those who are more emotive drift towards contemporary worship. Style of worship so often has to do with one’s personality; therefore, worship is a preference. It is related to what we like and what we do not like. Christians around the world worship God in different ways (form) but all are committed to the basic elements of worship, which never change (function).

### **God, The Object Of Worship**

The basis for all corporate worship is the Bible, but the object of worship is the Trinitarian God and the purpose of worship is to glorify God.

**“Exalt the LORD our God and worship at his footstool; he is holy” (Psa. 99:5).**

The Bible is not God. The Bible leads us to God. We worship God, not the Bible.

Worship comes from the old English worth-ship, which means, “to ascribe worth to something or someone.” True worship is to attribute worth to a real Being, one who is truly there and who is truly worthy.

“The function of believers is to learn what God is like and acknowledge him – to ascribe worth to him, to reflect upon the value, beauty, and character of God. This is true worship” (Ray Stedman, “Why Worship?”).

Without God at the center of worship, there is no true worship.

**“Ascribe to the LORD, O mighty ones, ascribe to the LORD glory and strength. Ascribe to the LORD the glory due his name; worship the LORD in the splendor of his holiness” (Psa. 29:1-2).**

“To ascribe” means “to give: or “to acknowledge.” True worship is giving to God not necessarily receiving from God. Worship is not determined by how much a person gets out of worship but how much he gives or puts into worship. The worshipper does get something from worship but only after he gives himself to God in worship.

We get to know the True God through nature. God reveals Himself in common grace through the world of nature. Behind this universe is the Great Designer and through the world the majesty of God is seen in the beauty of His world. In nature we get a sense of God’s wisdom, majesty and power. This can cause the Christian to worship God and the unsaved man to stand in awe of Him.

We get to know God through the Scriptures. God has spoken in His Word through special revelation. The Bible reveals His character; it tells of His work both in creation and redemption, and unfolds the ultimate purposes of God – what He is doing in the universe and the world in which we live. We would know none of this without the Word of God. The Bible alone reveals to us who God is and how He is to be worshipped.

We also get to know God through worship both personal and corporate. When we take the facts of nature and the infallible revelation of Scripture and respond to them in faith, prayer and obedience, we truly worship God. Praising Him, ascribing worship to Him and praying to Him, do something to us internally. This is God’s self-revelation to us through His Spirit to our human spirit. Through worship we get to know God personally and intimately. When we pray, our occupation is with our human needs and problems. When we praise, our occupation in our minds is on God’s blessing – the things He has done to us and for us. Worship is our occupation with God Himself, with His greatness and majesty of His being. We do not worship the Bible. We worship the God of the Bible. The Bible is merely the vehicle or instrument that reveals to us the one and only True God.

**“I will exalt you, my God the King; I will praise your name for ever and ever. Every day I will praise you and extol your name for ever and ever. Great is the LORD and most worthy of praise; his greatness no one can fathom” (Psa. 145:1-3).**