

Christ-Centered Worship

Session 2: Guidelines for Worship

Opening Question: Is there such a thing as right or wrong worship? If so, what would make something wrong?

Can We Worship Incorrectly?

The private nature of religion has prevented us from critiquing another's expression of worship. As long as it is authentic, who are we to judge? This subjective view of worship doesn't fit with the Bible.

Deuteronomy 12:4–5, 13–14, 32

[4] You shall not worship the LORD your God in that way. [5] But you shall seek the place that the LORD your God will choose out of all your tribes to put his name and make his habitation there. There you shall go... [13] Take care that you do not offer your burnt offerings at any place that you see, [14] but at the place that the LORD will choose in one of your tribes, there you shall offer your burnt offerings, and there you shall do all that I am commanding you... "Everything that I command you, you shall be careful to do. You shall not add to it or take from it.

Leviticus 10:1–2

[1] Now Nadab and Abihu, the sons of Aaron, each took his censer and put fire in it and laid incense on it and offered unauthorized fire before the LORD, which he had not commanded them. [2] And fire came out from before the LORD and consumed them, and they died before the LORD.

Matthew 15:9

[9] in vain do they worship me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men."

Colossians 2:20–23

[20] If with Christ you died to the elemental spirits of the world, why, as if you were still alive in the world, do you submit to regulations— [21] "Do not handle, Do not taste, Do not touch" [22] (referring to things that all perish as they are used)—according to human precepts and teachings? [23] These have indeed an appearance of wisdom in promoting self-made religion and asceticism and severity to the body, but they are of no value in stopping the indulgence of the flesh.

1 Corinthians 11:27

[27] Whoever, therefore, eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty concerning the body and blood of the Lord.

What's wrong with claiming freedom to worship God anyway you want?

The Regulative Principle

Westminster Confession of Faith 21.1

The light of nature showeth that there is a God, who hath lordship and sovereignty over all, is good, and doth good unto all, and is therefore to be feared, loved, praised, called upon, trusted in, and served, with all the heart, and with all the soul, and with all the

might. But 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 representation, or any other way not prescribed in the Holy Scripture.

What does this passage teach us about how to worship?

This principle is good news because it protects us against ourselves and against any religious authorities that might attempt to abuse their authority.

T. David Gordon notes, *“the issue that gave birth to the regulative principle was the nature and limits of church-power.”*

Abuse of Church Power

- The church mediates the authority of Christ (Matthew 16:17-19, 18:15-20; 1 Cor. 5)
- The church must not invent commands or rituals (going beyond scripture) which condemn Christ’s sheep.
- “To bind” or accuse someone of sin with a command that is not found in scripture is a gross abuse of power and binds the conscience in an area where Christ has given freedom.
- WCF 20.2 2. *God alone is Lord of the conscience, and hath left it free from the doctrines and commandments of men, which are, in anything, contrary to his Word; or beside it, if 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.*

Westminster Confession of Faith 1.6

*The whole counsel of God concerning all things necessary for his own glory, man's salvation, **faith and life**, is either expressly set down in Scripture, or by good and necessary consequence may be deduced from Scripture: unto which nothing at any time is to be added, whether by new revelations of the Spirit, or traditions of men. Nevertheless, we acknowledge the inward illumination of the Spirit of God to be necessary for the saving understanding of such things as are revealed in the Word: and that there are some circumstances concerning the worship of God, and government of the church, common to human actions and societies, which are to be ordered by the light of nature, and Christian prudence, according to the general rules of the Word, which are always to be observed.*

19th Century Scottish theologian James Bannerman wrote this about the regulative principle:

“The direct object of the Confession in this passage is no doubt to assert the right and extent of liberty of conscience; but along with that, it very distinctly enunciates the doctrine, that neither in regard to faith nor in regard to worship has the Church any authority beside or beyond what is laid down in the Bible; and that it has no right to decree and enforce new observances or institutions in the department of Scriptural worship, any more than to teach and inculcate new truths in the department of Scriptural faith.”

Forms and Elements

PCA Book of Church Order, Chapter 47-1

Since the Holy Scriptures are the only infallible rule of faith and practice, the principles of public worship must be derived from the Bible, and form no other source. The Scriptures forbids the worshipping of God by images, or in any other way not appointed in His Word, and requires the receiving, observing, and keeping pure and entire all such religious worship and ordinances as God hath appointed in His Word.

Some things are mandated by scripture and would legitimately be categorized as sin if neglected, added to, or changed. Other things scripture gives us freedom in.

How do we know which is which?

Our tradition makes a distinction between Elements and Forms

1. Elements

BCO 47-9

The Bible teaches that the following are proper elements of worship service: reading of Holy Scripture, singing of psalms and hymns, the offering of prayer, the preaching of the Word, the presentation of offerings, confessing the faith and observing the Sacraments; and on special occasions taking oaths.

1. **Word:** Read and Preached, and Confessed
2. **Prayers:** Spoken and Sung
3. **Sacraments:** Baptism, Lord's Supper
4. **Fellowship:** Collection and Vows

Compare with the snapshot of the early church found in Acts 2:42–47

[42] And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. [43] And awe came upon every soul, and many wonders and signs were being done through the apostles. [44] And all who believed were together and had all things in common. [45] And they were selling their possessions and belongings and distributing the proceeds to all, as any had need. [46] And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they received their food with glad and generous hearts, [47] praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved.

What about everything else, things that are not elements but still a part of worship?

2. Forms

BCO 47-6

"the Lord Jesus Christ has prescribed no fixed forms for public worship but, in the interest of life and power in worship, has given his Church a large measure of liberty in this matter. It may not be forgotten, however, that there is true liberty only where the rules of God's word are observed and the spirit of the Lord is, that all things must be done decently and in order, and that God's people should serve Him with reverence and in the beauty of holiness... "

If it is not an element, church authority cannot impose it on you or bind your conscience to it. Pastors and elders must restrain ourselves to scripture alone as our guide.

We cannot make authoritative claims like...

...it is sinful for worship to include a guitar or a piano

...it is sinful for members to wear red pants in worship

...it is sinful to have a brown carpet in the worship space

If we do not have grounds explicitly stated in scripture or by good and necessary inference can be derived from scripture, we must not falsely accuse or bind the consciences of members.

T. David Gordon, *“Churches that impose on people in public worship elements without biblical warrant have unceasing disharmony and controversy. By contrast, churches that impose no such matters on people have church-fellowship free of controversy or bitterness regarding this aspect of church-life...”*

...The regulative principle has never argued that the forms of worship are fixed by scriptural command; to the contrary, to fix and require them would have been considered an objectional imposition of a liturgy. In fact, the regulative principle was largely developed as a defense against such imposition by the Church of England.”

Forms and Vernacular

Why else is it so crucial that scripture prescribed no fixed forms for public worship? It is the very principle that enables us to worship in English and have access to the gospel.

Acts 2:6,8

And at this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each...And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language?

It was the principle that led Martin Luther to put the Word of God in the language of the people. This sparked the Reformation, one of the greatest revivals in all of human history.

It is also our destiny

Then I looked, and I heard around the throne and the living creatures and the elders the voice of many angels, numbering myriads of myriads and thousands of thousands, saying with a loud voice, “Worthy is the Lamb who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing!” And I heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and in the sea, and all that is in them, saying, “To him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb be blessing and honor and glory and might forever and ever!” And the four living creatures said, “Amen!” and the elders fell down and worshiped. Revelation 5:11-14

Reflection Question: In what ways does our worship need to adjust to fit the vernacular principle? In other words, how can we make sure our forms are fitting Gainesville and surrounding areas? Where are we, perhaps inadvertently, turning forms into elements?