

I highly commend this work by Ernest Reisinger and D. Matthew Allen. Over forty years ago, in the late '70s, I served as Ernie's associate pastor and then pastor at North Pompano Baptist Church in Pompano Beach, Florida. There Ernie laid the groundwork for the future Founder's Ministries. There he published his views in the church newsletter on the regulative principle, Christian liberty, and the biblical teaching on accommodation for the sake of preaching the gospel. I was privileged to learn much from him then.

This book summarizes the teaching of Scripture and church history, . . . especially documented Baptist history, . . . on the regulative principle of worship (Reformed) vs. the normative principle of worship (Lutheran and Anglican). The regulative principle champions commanded worship versus the normative principle of permitting what is not specifically prohibited. Indeed, Reisinger and Allen show how the very foundations of the Baptist movement rested on the regulative principle against infant baptism and uncommanded worship practices. They document this from Scripture and original sources.

This generation of Baptists and other evangelicals have often left the regulative principle and its commanded worship to introduce uncommanded practices that detract from and/or limit the preaching of the Word in worship. The modern appeal to human desires over biblically commanded worship has made worship more about the felt experience of the worshiper than worshiping God by faith as he has instituted it in the new covenant church (see 2 Tim. 4:1–4). This book draws the reader back to the biblical (and Reformed) doctrine of worship and offers correction to today's confusing scene in the church. One of the elements of regulated worship is the doctrine of Christian liberty, which is often ignored or misunderstood in the wars on worship, thus dividing sincere Christians. One of the best presentations of the right doctrine of Christian liberty is presented in this book. The authors apply it specifically to the regulative principle of worship to teach biblical worship and to correct its errors on all sides, both too restrictive and unrestrictive views. Their explanation of the difference between accommodation and compromise in worship practices is a valuable discussion, especially toward the great errors involved in the modern addition of the "altar call" system.

I do have one caveat for the reader: Ernie's commendation of John Frame for the regulative principle view was written before Frame

introduced his errors concerning the elements of worship and the circumstances of worship in his work, *Worship in Spirit and Truth*. He changed the regulative principle to introduce plays, movies, interviews, dance, etc., as simply circumstances of the biblical command to preach the Word in worship, thus corrupting the practice of the regulative principle of worship and reducing the centrality of preaching in worship. Ernie can be forgiven for his commendation of Frame since these errors only became evident at a later time.

Overall, I commend the reading of this book to students, pastors, and the people in the pew to restore biblical worship to that which is commanded by God instead of invented by man's desires. After all, the best worship of God must be formed by his own commands concerning his worship.

– Fred Malone | Pastor Emeritus at
First Baptist Church, Clinton, LA

Early Baptists in both England and America fervently pursued what Benjamin Keach called “primitive purity” in their worship—that is, worship regulated by the sufficient Word of God. Unfortunately, in more recent times Baptists have lost such a concern, most modern Baptists having never heard of the term regulative principle of worship. This is why I am so thankful for Ernest C. Reisinger’s and D. Matthew Allen’s book, *Worship: The Regulative Principle and the Biblical Practice of Accommodation*. This book explains and defends the regulative principle in a way that is both accessible and thorough. I pray that this book will motivate Baptist churches to pursue biblical purity in their worship as Scripture commands and our Baptist forefathers modeled.

Scott Aniol
Executive Vice President and Editor-in-chief
G3 Ministries

WORSHIP

The Regulative Principle and the Biblical Practice of Accommodation

WORSHIP

The Regulative Principle and the Biblical Practice of Accommodation

ERNEST C. REISINGER AND D. MATTHEW ALLEN



FOUNDERS
MINISTRIES
CAPE CORAL, FLORIDA

Worship: The Regulative Principle and the Biblical Practice of Accommodation

Revised Edition ©2022 Founders Press

First Edition ©2001 Founders Press

Unless otherwise noted, Scripture quotations are from the ESV® Bible (The Holy Bible, English Standard Version®), copyright © 2001 by Crossway, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

Scripture quotations marked NASB taken from the (NASB®) New American Standard Bible®, Copyright © 1960, 1971, 1977, 1995, 2020 by The Lockman Foundation. Used by permission. All rights reserved. www.lockman.org.

Scripture quotations marked (NIV) are taken from the Holy Bible, New International Version®, NIV®. Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 by Biblica, Inc.® Used by permission of Zondervan. All rights reserved worldwide. www.zondervan.com The “NIV” and “New International Version” are trademarks registered in the United States Patent and Trademark Office by Biblica, Inc.® Scripture quotations marked KJV are taken from the King James Version of the Bible.

Scripture quotations marked NKJV are taken from the New King James Version. Copyright 1982 Thomas Nelson, Inc.

Published by Founders Press

P.O. Box 150931 • Cape Coral, FL • 33915

Phone: (888) 525-1689

Electronic Mail: officeadmin@founders.org

Website: www.founders.org

Printed in the United States of America

ISBN: 978-0-9705248-6-7

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopy, recording or otherwise, without prior permission of the publisher, except as provided by USA copyright law.

Cover Design by Perry Brown

Interior Design by InkSmith Editorial Services

CONTENTS

Foreword	ix
Introductory Comments on Worship.....	1
Preface: How Shall We Worship?	5
Chapter 1. Foundational Principles.....	13

The Regulative Principle

Part A: Doctrine

Chapter 2. The Regulative Principle Defined	25
Chapter 3. The Regulative Principle Defended	37
Chapter 4. The Regulative Principle in History	69

The Regulative Principle

Part B: Application

Chapter 5. The Regulative Principle Applied to the Invitation System	107
---	-----

Christian Liberty and Accommodation

Part A: Doctrine

Chapter 6. Christian Liberty	147
Chapter 7. Accommodation	167

Christian Liberty and Accommodation

Part B: Application

Chapter 8. Applying the Practice of Accommodation to the Altar Call.....	191
---	-----

FOREWORD

The material in this book comes from the accumulated wisdom of years of practical ministry in the church. Under the best of circumstances, church life is a challenge. In days of widespread spiritual lethargy and downgrade, local church life and practice can seem almost beyond recovery. Yet, the New Testament makes it clear that even bad churches filled with wickedness are worth reforming (see Revelation 2 and 3).

The work of reformation is not easy, and it cannot be neatly scripted. Too many diverse situations arise to be covered in any comprehensive rule book. But some vital principles can shed light on the path for those who are highly committed to seeing a local church redirected in a God-honoring way. Identifying these principles is a large part of the initial work of reformation. Applying them is its ongoing work.

This book is helpful on both counts. By examining the principles of accommodation and regulated worship, the authors bring to light a number of issues that are fraught with difficulties when a local church gets serious about conforming to biblical practices. By heeding the counsel in the following pages, pastors and church leaders will see

more clearly which battles are worth fighting and which are worth avoiding.

The sixteenth-century Reformers were convinced that the church must be “reformed and always reforming according to the Word of God.” That conviction needs desperately to be recovered by a new generation of men and women who are committed to seeing local churches become all that God intends them to be. May this book be a catalyst to that cause.

– Tom Ascol

INTRODUCTORY COMMENTS ON *WORSHIP*

Worship according to the will and revelation of God is the most important vocation of God's image-bearers. The Ten Commandments include as the fourth commandment a particular day in which we are to do even as God did upon the completion of the execution of the first in the order of his decrees. When he finished creation, he stopped, observed, and admired it as "very good." The seventh day, then, was set aside as rest from labor to be spent in a state of blessedness and holiness (Gen. 2:2, 3).

Even so, the completion of the even greater work, decreed before the foundation of the world, the work of redemption by the Son of God, through whom all things were created, is now set aside as a day of blessedness and holiness. Though the spirit of edification should permeate the entire day, a time of corporate worship has been set aside as a prominent element of the Lord's Day, the Christian Sabbath, the day that rest was established for believers in the completed work of Christ (John 20:1, 19, 26; 1 Cor. 16:1, 2; Heb. 4:4-10; 10:24, 25; Rev. 1:10). The manner of worship and the various elements that should be included are presented with clarity

and by example in the New Testament. Should we feel free to add anything to the worship of God beyond what God has prescribed through apostolic example and regulation? Some say, "Yes, we may add helps to worship beyond what is specifically prescribed as long as we do not include what is clearly proscribed or do something antithetical to love of God and love of neighbor." Such practice is called the normative principle. Others look at such supposedly benign additions as "will worship" or "self-imposed religion" or "self-made religion" (Col. 2:23). They observe that God has given specific practices to be included in Christian corporate worship either by example or command, thus allowing nothing beyond what he himself has required. This conviction gives expression to the regulative principle of worship.

This book presents a defense of the regulative principle. It narrates an overview of the nature of Christian worship and then defines the regulative principle as the guideline that most aptly captures the spirit of New Testament worship. The authors defend its solidly and thoroughly biblical character and give a history of its defense in the context of Reformed biblical exegesis and historic confessions. They pay special attention to its operation among Baptist commentators and theologians. The result of this careful work is a clear biblical and theologically sound presentation of the regulative principle of Christian worship.

Then the principle is applied to a specific evangelistic technique known as the invitation system. Their conclusion is that the system, as it is commonly presented as an ordained means of manifesting saving faith, violates gospel definitions of faith. As practiced in this way, it violates the regulative principle and, therefore, should be eliminated or altered radically. Immediate change, therefore, in obedience

to Scripture must be executed on this practice along with other situations inconsistent with the regulative principle. The authors explore ways to defang the poisonous element while implementing gradual and sensitive amendments of existing patterns.

This reality prompted the authors to include a theological discussion of the principle of accommodation. Their discussion proceeds with great Christian sympathy and with wise recommendations as to how to remove the most glaringly unbiblical elements while still maintaining the expectation that the gospel always calls for the response of the sinner. It is filled with wise, biblically faithful, culturally sensitive advice on how to implement biblical accommodation.

This book is both a desideratum and a necessity for those who seek to plan biblically faithful worship for Christian congregations.

– Tom J. Nettles

Preface

HOW SHALL WE WORSHIP?

This is a book about worship. Our purpose is to scrutinize the biblical foundation of how we worship. This is not an easy inquiry. Doing the subject justice involves more than merely pulling a few proof texts out of one's memory bank and contentedly resting one's case. We hope to go deeper than that. We hope to examine the theological basis for what we do when we worship. How should we worship? How should we conduct church? How can we go about determining whether our worship practices are biblical?

More specifically, this is a book about the forms of worship. Are there any proper forms of worship, and if so, what are they? When it gets down to specifics—yes, there's the rub. Specifics of how we should worship have engendered what some term "worship wars." Good men and women have vehemently disagreed over a number of specific worship practices. No one can even agree on the proper range of the debate. In some circles, the questions are whether we should sing uninspired hymns in worship services or whether we should have musical instruments to accompany the singing.

In other circles, the questions revolve around whether we should sing praise choruses or use drama alongside or in place of preaching. In still other circles, the questions are whether we are free to engage in “holy laughter” or being “slain in the spirit” or other manifestations of ecstatic experience. And in typical Baptist circles, of course, there is the question of the altar call.

With these questions comes a growing unease among many that contemporary evangelical Christianity is loosed from its theological moorings and drifting aimlessly in an ocean of relativism and uncertainty. This expresses itself in the area of worship in the incessant desire to always be “relevant” and “contemporary.” Whether or not one agrees with the changes, John MacArthur is surely not off base in concluding that “the corporate worship of the Lord’s Day is undergoing a revolution that has few parallels in all of church history.”¹

Finally, this is a book about Baptist worship. Historically, Baptists have enjoyed a rich history of reformed, and reforming, worship. In fact, most of our distinctives that separate us from other evangelical denominations arise in the area of worship. Although we are not sanguine about much of what passes as “contemporary worship” in many Baptist churches, we pray that our denomination returns to its roots of deep-seated, biblical worship.

We have divided the book into two uneven sections (excluding this preface and chapter 1, which provides a basic level overview of some foundational biblical principles governing worship). The first section is the largest part of the

1 John F. MacArthur, Jr., “How Shall We Then Worship?” in John H. Armstrong, ed., *The Coming Evangelical Crisis* (Chicago: Moody, 1996), 176.

book. There, we look broadly at the woefully neglected but vitally important doctrine of worship, the regulative principle of worship.

Briefly stated, the regulative principle teaches that God has set forth in Scripture the only acceptable ways of worshiping him and that it is a sin to attempt to worship him in any other way. The opposite view, the normative principle, teaches that we may worship in whatever way we wish as long as it is not forbidden in Scripture.

The regulative principle is perhaps the most unrecognized doctrine in the church today, yet it is perhaps the most vital doctrine of all pertaining to worship. It is important because it provides the construct for examining each and every worship practice and determining whether a specific practice is biblical or not. Yet despite its importance, most Baptists have never heard of it. Fewer still understand it is the foundational theological principle undergirding why we are even Baptists to begin with.

In chapter 2, we offer a full-orbed definition of the regulative principle, and in chapter 3, we defend our definition biblically and examine what we believe to be the elements of proper worship as found in Scripture. In chapter 4, we give a brief perspective on how the regulative principle has been applied in church history, including our own Baptist heritage.

To give the reader a preliminary peek at what we have to say in this section of the book, in a nutshell, we conclude that the regulative principle properly teaches that our worship practices should consist only of what God commands. By confining worship to what is prescribed in Scripture, our churches can avoid many of the difficult questions causing

discord in contemporary Christianity. At the same time, we believe an overly stringent application of the regulative principle has caused almost as many problems as its rejection. While we deeply respect those who do not sing uninspired hymns in worship services or who do not use musical instruments in worship, we do not believe the regulative principle stretches that far.

The regulative principle is not a coartrack on which every aspect, circumstance, and mode of worship must be hung in order to be approved. Rather (to change the analogy), we believe it is a hedge that acts as a boundary around broadly prescribed areas of worship. Outside its boundaries, we should not and cannot go. Yet within its boundaries, there is ample room for variation in worship style and practice.

In chapter 5, a bridge chapter between the first and second sections of the book, we seek to apply the learning of the first part to one specific worship practice—what we call the “invitation system.” The predominant feature of the invitation system is the post-sermonic altar call—the practice of inviting an inquirer to walk down the aisle of the church worship center and “come forward” to “accept Christ” as the inquirer’s “personal Savior.” The invitation system, however, goes beyond the altar call and also consists of the practices of praying the “sinner’s prayer” and offering immediate assurance of salvation to the one who has come forward and prayed. The invitation system has become so entrenched in most Baptist churches that it has only half-jokingly been called a Baptist sacrament. Our conclusion, in brief, is that the altar call as practiced in most Baptist churches is unscriptural and a violation of the regulative principle.

This does not end the inquiry, however. Not by a long shot. Most people in the pews of even reforming Baptist churches

are wholly unprepared to give up entirely their beloved altar call. Although each church situation must be evaluated individually, we venture that it will frequently be impracticable and imprudent for a reforming pastor to simply uproot the altar call without warning and without explanation. This is where the subjects of Christian liberty and accommodation come in, the topics of discussion in the second part of the book. Accommodation is part and parcel of the concept of Christian liberty, which is discussed in bird's-eye fashion in chapter 6. In chapter 7, we turn to a biblical examination of the important but often overlooked practice of accommodation. Finally, in chapter 8, we attempt to briefly apply this practice to the invitation system, concluding that the objectionable aspects of the altar call can be removed, making it appropriate to use the technique in a modified fashion in a reforming situation without violating the regulative principle.

Our conclusions are sure to generate controversy. Why are we tackling this lightning-rod topic? It is not because the authors of the book like controversy. Actually, we don't; we loathe it. Yet we love the truth, for it is the truth, as our Lord told us, that will set people free. Many are involved in attempts to revitalize evangelical Christianity and bring it back to its reformational roots.² Many are returning to the doctrinal grounding of conservative Christianity—that is, the evangelical Calvinism held by most early Baptists and Southern Baptist founders. For these things, we rejoice. Yet, in this effort, we must not be content with doctrinal orthodoxy! We must preach and pray and work for the practical

2 For a brief summary of Southern Baptist reformation work, see Ernest C. Reisinger & D. Matthew Allen, *A Quiet Revolution* (Cape Coral, FL: Founders, 2000).

reformation of our churches as well. A doctrinal root must produce practical fruit!

Inevitably, as pastors and other leaders shepherd their congregations into doctrinal reformation, many questions about how to worship will arise. The practical implications of the regulative principle will have to be grappled with. We hope this book will shed some light on these issues by calling for a return to the regulative principle of worship, suitably tempered by the application of common sense and heaping doses of accommodation. It is our sincere desire to encourage local churches, and we hope the thoughts that follow will be useful to pastors and other leaders in the process of reformation. True reformation is a humbling process, but it also creates a new desire to please God and keep his Word. It delivers us from an inordinate desire to defend traditions for which there is no scriptural warrant and, therefore, enables us to approach, in a new way, church issues that have divided us, and with a new concern to be united with all those who love the truth.

The authors of this book do not claim to have all the answers to many difficult worship questions. We are certainly not experts on issues of church music, which are touched on lightly in these pages. We must be cautious and humble as we tread on holy ground. We must guard against the possibility that our own traditions and preferences are driving our analysis rather than submission to the infallible Word of God. We trust that others will build upon or correct as needed the framework set forth in this book. Our perspective is only as good as the scriptural exegesis on which it is based. With that said, we offer a theology of worship we hope can provide some with a way out of the theological thicket associated with how we should worship.

Therefore, this book is designed to be both theological and experiential. It is theological because we explore the biblical underpinnings of these two significant doctrines for worship: the regulative principle and the practice of accommodation. It is experiential because we apply these doctrines to a specific controversial worship practice—the post-sermonic altar call and related components of the invitation system. Our prayer is that the book is most of all helpful to pastors and other Christian leaders grappling with this difficult issue.

Chapter 1

FOUNDATIONAL PRINCIPLES

It is as natural for man to worship as it is to breathe. Worship is “the very law of his being, as a creature of God, to love, and honor, and serve his Creator.”¹ Everyone worships someone or some thing, whether it is the one true God or an idol made by hands.

Because worship is an inherent, inborn characteristic of man, God prescribes the way we should worship. Paying homage to God is the very end for which man was created and exists. As the answer to the first question of the Westminster Shorter Catechism (as well as Charles Spurgeon’s version of the Baptist Catechism) puts it, man’s chief end is to glorify God and enjoy him forever. God therefore demands that we worship him, the one true God, rather than false idols. This is the first commandment of the law. “You shall have no other gods before me” (Ex. 20:3).

The second commandment of the law is Exodus 20:4, “You shall not make for yourself a carved image, or any likeness

1 James Bannerman, *The Church of Christ* (1869, repr., Edmonton: Still Waters Revival Books, 1991), 1:324.

of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth.” God not only prescribes *whom* we should worship (himself) but also *how* we should worship. The great sin of Jeroboam, the first king of the northern kingdom of Israel after the rending of Solomon’s kingdom into two nations, was not the worship of false gods but the false worship of Yahweh, the one true God, in the form of two golden calves. What was God’s judgment on this worship practice? “And this thing became sin to the house of Jeroboam, so as to cut it off and to destroy it from the face of the earth.” (1 Kings 13:34). God’s pronouncement was that Jeroboam had “done evil above all who were before [him]” (14:9).

Worship should pervade our lives. The late John Murray pointed out that we worship in two ways, generally and specifically.² In the general sense, we owe God the whole of life. God is sovereign over his creation. As the Creator, he has the right to do with us as he pleases. Conversely, as created creatures, we owe him our allegiance and devotion in all that we do. Thus, E. C. Dargan observed that the English word *worship* is simply a contraction for “worth-ship” and denotes the giving of suitable honor to whom it is due.³ We are called on to ascribe worth-ship to our Creator. The psalmist said,

Ascribe to the LORD the glory due his name;
bring an offering, and come into his courts!
Worship the LORD in the splendor of holiness;
tremble before him, all the earth! (Ps. 96:8–9)

2 For an elaboration of this distinction, see John Murray, “Worship,” in *Collected Writings of John Murray 1: The Claims of Truth* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1976), 165.

3 E.C. Dargan, *The Doctrines of Our Faith* (Nashville: Southern Baptist Convention Sunday School Board, 1905), 171.

The apostle Paul said, “So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God” (1 Cor. 10:31). By giving God our lives and living our lives before his face, we engage in worship.

At the same time, we worship in specific or specialized ways. We pray, we give thanks, we read and hear the Word of God, we sing, we take the Lord’s Supper. And we do so in different settings. We engage in family worship, private worship (devotional time), and public worship. Each has its different rules and expectations. J. I. Packer seems to have had in mind both our general worship and specific acts of worship when he wrote,

Worship in the Bible is the due response of rational creatures to the self-revelation of their Creator. It is an honoring and glorifying of God by gratefully offering back to Him all the good gifts, and all the knowledge of His greatness and graciousness, that He has given. It involves praising Him for what He is, thanking Him for what He has done, desiring Him to get Himself more glory by further acts of mercy, judgment, and power, and trusting Him with our concern for our own and others’ well-being.⁴

This book focuses on public worship. There is something undeniably different, something undeniably special, something undeniably unique about public worship. In public worship, we gather in an assembly as the body of Christ to worship our Lord, “not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near” (Heb. 10:25). Gathering

4 J. I. Packer, *Concise Theology* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale, 1993), 98.

as the body of Christ is important because, as John Murray once said, “it is one of the principal ways of giving expression to the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace, and to the communion of the saints with one another in the oneness of Christ’s body.”⁵

Yet, several key questions need to be considered when it comes to public worship.

WHAT IS PUBLIC WORSHIP?

The first question before us is, What exactly is worship—more specifically, public worship? To worship is to pay honor, homage, or reverence to another. Nowhere in Scripture is worship actually defined. But when the key biblical words for *worship* are examined, it becomes clear that the central concepts are homage, service, and reverence.⁶ It is no surprise, then, that theologian John Frame defines worship as “the work of acknowledging the greatness of our covenant Lord.”⁷ The principal Old Testament word for *worship*, used ninety-five places, is *shachah*, meaning to “depress,” “bow down,” or “prostrate.” The Old Testament idea is therefore “the reverential attitude of mind or body or both, combined with the more generic notions of religious adoration, obedience, service.” The principal New Testament word, used fifty-nine times, is *proskuneo*, meaning to “kiss (the hand or the ground) toward.” It is to render homage to someone, whether man, angel, demon, or God.⁸

5 Murray, “Worship,” 166.

6 D.G. Peterson, “Worship” in *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2000) (reproduced in electronic format in The Essential IVP Reference Collection).

7 John M. Frame, *Worship in Spirit and Truth* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 1996), 1.

8 Phillip Wendell Crannell, “Worship” *International Standard Bible*

Public worship, then, is the collective exultation of the gathered church. In fact, worship is the primary purpose of the church. A worship service is not merely a gathering of individuals who sing some hymns and hear a sermon together. Rather, it is the corporate expression of the body of Christ. It is a unique and unified offering of adoration and honor to God our Savior.

WHY SHOULD WE ENGAGE IN PUBLIC WORSHIP?

So then, why do we participate in public worship? The great nineteenth-century Southern Baptist John Broadus succinctly stated in an 1879 sermon, “Why ought we to worship God? Because it is due to him; and because it is good for us.”⁹ It is as simple as that. We owe God our worship as a matter of duty. As we have already mentioned, God alone is worthy of our worship. He requires our devotion. He is a jealous God who demands exclusivity in worship. And yet, doing our duty, worship, is good for us. This is because it is only in the worship of God that we can truly find satisfaction. This was the very purpose for which we were made. We are most satisfied when we find our delight in our God.

This means that public worship is God-directed, not self-directed. When we engage in true worship, we should not focus so much on how we feel as we sing and pray and take Communion and listen to the preaching of God’s Word. We should not even come to church with the purpose in mind of feeling God’s presence. No, our primary purpose in coming is, or at least should be, to corporately express our

Encyclopaedia, (Biblesoft: PC Study Bible Electronic Database, 1996).

9 John A. Broadus, *Sermons and Addresses* (Nashville: Sunday School Board of the Southern Baptist Convention, 1886), 4.

adoration to God our Creator and Christ our Savior. John Frame quotes a former pastor as insightfully saying, “When we leave worship, we should first ask, not What did I get out of it? But How did I do in my work of honoring the Lord?”¹⁰

WHAT SHOULD OUR ATTITUDE BE IN PUBLIC WORSHIP?

Our third question addresses our approach to worship—that is, what kind of attitude should we have in public worship? John Murray suggests that reverence should typify the proper attitude in worship.¹¹ We think he is right. Too much of what passes for worship on the contemporary scene has lost sight of the requirement that worship should be reverent. There is too much frivolity and familiarity in worship today. To be sure, there is a place in life for laughter. There is a place for humor. But when we worship, *reverence* should be our watchword.

At the same time, worship is active. It is something we do. Therefore, our worship is not to be passive. It is not a spectator event. When we sing, we should sing heartily. When we pray, we should pray actively. When we listen to the preaching of the Word, we should listen with hearts open and minds engaged.

HOW SHOULD WE ENGAGE IN PUBLIC WORSHIP?

Finally, how should we engage in public worship? Both substance and form are critical to true worship. Worship is not true worship unless it flows from both a heart of faith

¹⁰ Frame, *Worship in Spirit and Truth*, 5.

¹¹ Murray, “Worship,” 167.

and a heart engaged. Throughout Scripture, God condemns “going through the motions” in worship. The Old Testament prophets repeatedly decried external religion devoid of devotion. Samuel told Saul,

Has the LORD as great delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices,
as in obeying the voice of the LORD?
Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice,
and to listen than the fat of rams.
For rebellion is as the sin of divination,
and presumption is as iniquity and idolatry.
Because you have rejected the word of the LORD,
he has also rejected you from being king.
(1 Sam. 15:22–23)

In Psalm 51, after being confronted with his sin of adultery with Bathsheba and the murder of her husband, Uriah, a contrite and repentant David cries out to God:

Deliver me from bloodguiltiness, O God,
O God of my salvation,
and my tongue will sing aloud of your righteousness.
O Lord, open my lips,
and my mouth will declare your praise.
For you will not delight in sacrifice, or I would give it;
you will not be pleased with a burnt offering.
The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit;
a broken and a contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.

Do good to Zion in your good pleasure;
build the walls of Jerusalem;
then you will delight in right sacrifices,

in burnt offering and whole burnt offerings;
then bulls will be offered on your altar. (vv. 14–19)

Proverbs 15:8 says, “The sacrifice of the wicked is an abomination to the LORD, but the prayer of the upright is acceptable to him.” Proverbs 21:3 likewise says, “To do righteousness and justice is more acceptable to the LORD than sacrifice.” Proverbs 21:27 similarly says, “The sacrifice of the wicked is an abomination; how much more when he brings it with evil intent.” In Hosea 6:6, God says, “For I desire mercy, not sacrifice, and acknowledgment of God rather than burnt offerings” (NIV).

Perhaps the strongest example of how God feels about heartless religion is found in Isaiah 1:10–18:

Hear the word of the LORD,
you rulers of Sodom;
listen to the instruction of our God,
you people of Gomorrah!
“The multitude of your sacrifices—
what are they to me?” says the LORD.
“I have more than enough of burnt offerings,
of rams and the fat of fattened animals;
I have no pleasure
in the blood of bulls and lambs and goats.
When you come to appear before me,
who has asked this of you,
this trampling of my courts?
Stop bringing meaningless offerings!
Your incense is detestable to me.
New Moons, Sabbaths and convocations—
I cannot bear your evil assemblies.
Your New Moon feasts and your appointed festivals

I hate with all my being,
They have become a burden to me;
I am weary of bearing them.
When you spread out your hands in prayer,
I hide my eyes from you;
even if you offer many prayers,
I am not listening.

Your hands are full of blood!

Wash and make yourselves clean.
Take your evil deeds out of my sight;
stop doing wrong.
Learn to do right; seek justice.
Defend the oppressed.
Take up the cause of the fatherless;
plead the case of the widow.

“Come now, let us settle the matter,” says the LORD.
“Though your sins are like scarlet,
they shall be as white as snow;
though they are red as crimson,
they shall be like wool. (NIV)

The point of these verses is not that, during the Old Testament period, the sacrificial system was to be ignored or abolished before its time. The point is a more basic one, that the form of religion apart from “heart circumcision”—a regenerated heart, a justified soul, and a life of faith—is empty and meaningless.

Jesus also spoke against vain repetitions and the emphasis on the externals of religion exhibited by the Pharisees of his day. In Matthew 9:13, he said (quoting 1 Sam. 15:22): “Go and learn what this means: ‘I desire mercy, and not sacrifice.’ For I came not to call the righteous, but sinners.”

There is no question about it; God demands heart worship.

Yet, at the same time, form cannot be ignored. The same God who condemned the Old Testament sacrifices of the wicked instituted the sacrificial system in the first place as the authorized form of Old Testament worship. The same Jesus who overturned the tables of the moneychangers in the temple instituted temple worship in his preincarnate state, and he, of course, faithfully worshiped in the temple during his time on earth. The same Jesus who condemned the hypocritical and self-righteous prayer of the Pharisee and praised the humble and genuine prayer for mercy of the tax collector prayed himself and taught his disciples how to pray. We must, therefore, conclude that God cares about the form of worship. As Monte Wilson well said, “The form pointed the worshiper in the right direction; it ensured that all spoke with one heart, one mind, and one voice. . . . We are humans. Not being wholly spirit, we need external aids to lead and support us in our quest for obedient, spiritual worship.”¹² This is true in both the Old and New Testament dispensations.

Although this book is primarily about the forms of worship—and the forms God prescribes—it would never do for any of us to ignore the heart. God demands worship in spirit and truth. He demands worship grounded in faith. Irrespective of the form, no one who worships does so faithfully unless he is born again. This principle is paramount over all.

12 Monte E. Wilson, “Church-o-Rama or Corporate Worship” in John H. Armstrong, ed., *The Compromised Church* (Wheaton: Crossway, 1998), 71–72.