

**Christian Worship**  
**Class 4: The Transformation of Worship**  
TPC CE, Fall 2023  
September 17, 2023

**I. Recap from Weeks 1, 2, and 3**

**Class 1**

- Worship is ascribing worth to something or someone, but that always has activities connected to it—devotion, service, etc.
- Worship is what we were made for
- Worship is inevitable—no one ceases to worship, they only choose/exchange the true and living God for a substitute **object**
- Idolatry is de-forming, true worship is re-forming... into the image of Christ

**Class 2: Which Worship?**

- Explicit Worship (even though the Bible does commend Implicit Worship)
- Corporate Worship (even though the Bible does commend Private Worship and Family Worship)
- The Goals of Corporate Worship: The Glory of God and The Building Up of the Body of Christ

**Class 3: The Source of True Worship**

- Right Worship is determined by God and revealed to us in his Word—this is true of both the actions of worship and the motives of worship

**II. How Do We Know What True Worship Is?**

**c. God’s Word directs us differently in the different “pieces” of our worship**

**Content, Elements, Forms, Circumstances<sup>1</sup>**

- **Elements are the actions we are doing**
  - They are expressly commanded in Scripture
  - In new covenant worship these are primarily the reading & preaching of Scripture, prayer, singing, and the sacraments, as well as giving of gifts, confessing the faith, on occasion the taking of vows (see WCF 21.5, BCO 47-9)

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<sup>1</sup> Sometimes these are unhelpfully summarized as “Elements and Circumstances.” The problem is that the purveyor of that idea will take our category of “forms” and either attach it to “circumstances” (making it something that God doesn’t care about that much and is really up to us to figure out with our human wisdom) or attach it to “elements” (making it something that God clearly prescribes in the Bible and so anyone whose forms don’t match ours is being unfaithful to God’s commands). The acknowledgement that “forms” are their own thing helps us to be both humble toward God (recognizing that the structure of our worship ought to come from the Bible in some sense) and humble before others (recognizing that the structure of our worship isn’t found in explicit commands from God, but in using human wisdom and Christian prudence to understand and reflect the flow of Scripture). For more on these, see Ligon Duncan, *Does God Care How We Worship* (P&R, 2020).

- **Content is what we are saying in the elements** (lyrics of our songs, things we are thanking or asking God for in prayer, content of our sermons, etc.)
  - Notice that someone could do all of the actions commanded by God, but preach incorrectly, sing songs that have false doctrine, pray prayers that are out of step with Scripture, and have wrong explanations of what is happening in the sacraments
  - The content of our elements should be “the faith that was once for all delivered to the saints” (Jude 3), “the words of the faith and of the good doctrine” that we are taught in God’s word.
  - Additionally, we must strive for this content to be comprehensive (over time). We need to fill our worship services not just with the parts of the Bible we like, but with “the whole counsel of God.” (Acts 20:27)
- **Forms are:**
  - **The shape an individual element takes** (reading Scripture as an assurance of pardon, or call to worship, or benediction; having a prayer of confession or a song of sending)
  - **The shape of the whole service, the way the different elements relate to one another** (singing a song about communion with God while we are celebrating the Lord’s supper, having our corporate prayer confessing sin follow after our song of praise of God, praying for illumination before reading the Scripture for the sermon, etc.)
    - We do not have a line-for-line order of worship given to us in Scripture
    - Though we do have general patterns that are evident in places like Exodus 19-24, 2 Chronicles 5-7, the book of Hebrews (this shows us logical sequence instead of chronological sequence), and Revelation 1-22.<sup>2</sup>
    - These forms, the shape or ordering of our elements in worship, should go “with the grain” of the teaching of Scripture (WCF 1.6)<sup>3</sup>

**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.

- **Circumstances are the practical details about how these things are accomplished** (what time to meet, where to meet, temperature of the room, lights, microphone, printed liturgy or screens, sit or stand or kneel, etc.)

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<sup>2</sup> For more on this, see the amazingly helpful chapter titled “Worship: On Earth as It Is in Heaven” in *Reformation Worship: Liturgies from the Past for the Present*, ed. by Jonathan Gibson and Mark Earney (New Growth Press, 2018).

<sup>3</sup> Bryan Chapell very helpfully shows this to be the case in his book *Christ-Centered Worship: Letting the Gospel Shape Our Practice* (Baker, 2009). Part 1 shows that there are various stories told in the ordering of the elements of worship through various traditions (the medieval Roman catholic church, Luther’s liturgy, Calvin’s liturgy, Westminster, modern evangelicalism, etc.).

- We shouldn't pretend these have no theological implications; so we do need to use sanctified Christian wisdom, but these also need worldly wisdom (see language on WCF 1.6)
- But we also need to be humble about these decisions because they are not expressly laid down in Scripture, and so churches with much in common may make different decisions about these<sup>4</sup>

So, we see that the actions we take (**elements**) in Christian worship are prescribed to us by God's word, and the shape or order of our worship (**forms**) should go with the grain of the message of God's word. But we also need to remember what is most fundamental to what we are doing—the **content**. We sing, pray, read and preach Scripture, and observe the sacraments, but we aren't told to fill those elements with whatever we'd like. Instead, the revelation of God in his word is to be the content of everything we do (see Col. 3:16-17). We sing God's word, pray God's word, hear God's word, and see God's word.

#### d. Scripture and Tradition, or Where Do We Find "Christian Prudence"?

Scripture must prescribe the **elements** of our worship, but we've already acknowledged that Scripture does not say everything about the **forms** or the **circumstances** of our worship (WCF 1.6). But that doesn't mean that those are free-for-alls. Instead, we are to use "the light of nature" and "Christian prudence" according to "the general rules of the Word" to make decisions about those things.

Because we are products of the Reformation, we rightly assert that we are "sola Scriptura" Christians. As the Westminster Confession says, "The supreme judge by which all controversies of religion are to be determined, and all decrees of councils, opinions of ancient writers, doctrines of men, and private spirits, are to be examined, and in whose sentence we are to rest, can be no other but the Holy Spirit speaking in the Scripture." (1.10) In other words, God's word is our supreme and final authority.

However, we are not "nuda Scriptura" Christians—those who profess that Scripture is our only authority and stripping away all other lesser authorities. We don't close our eyes and pretend no one before us has ever read the Bible or sought to live as a Christian in this world. We are surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses (Heb. 12:1) and are joined to the household of faith (Gal. 6:10). We are "catholic" (i.e., universal) Christians, not innovators and Johnny-come-lately's. And so we seek to worship as the true Church has worshipped throughout her history.

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<sup>4</sup> We also need to humbly recognize our "situatedness" or perhaps our biases on these questions. For instance, the length of our services is something that is pretty common where we live and in our general evangelical/reformed tradition. But other times and other traditions have had no problem worshipping for 3-4 hours each Sunday. We may think standing is a posture of reverence, but many previous eras saw standing as a posture of confidence and sitting or kneeling as a posture of humility. Technology has made a worship service without screens seem odd, but for the first 1500 years of the church, having more than one printed Bible in the room (let alone a whole book of hymns, or a freshly printed bulletin with all the prayers, songs, and footnotes) would have been unheard of.

“Tradition is the living faith of the dead, traditionalism is the dead faith of the living. And, I suppose I should add, it is traditionalism that gives tradition such a bad name.” – Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Vindication of Tradition*<sup>5</sup>

We never lift tradition over Scripture. Nor do the two sit side-by-side, as equal authorities. But we also don’t ignore the Christian prudence of our brothers and sisters who followed Christ before us.

So, at Trinity we happily confess the Apostles’ (c. 215 A.D.) and Nicene Creeds (381 A.D.), as well as parts of the definition of Chalcedon (451 A.D.), Heidelberg Catechism (1563), and Westminster Shorter Catechism (1646). We sing songs from many eras of the church, and pray corporate prayers written by the church Fathers, the Reformers, the Puritans, etc.

We do none of these things slavishly—if a line in a song or prayer doesn’t conform to the true teaching of God’s word, we won’t sing it, or we will change it if that seems wise. We also won’t use old things just because they are old or reject new things just because they are new. As C.S. Lewis said, “People were no cleverer [in the past] than they are now; they made as many mistakes as we. But not the same mistakes.”<sup>6</sup> We will also not slavishly drop Calvin’s Geneva liturgy or the Book of Common Prayer in Murfreesboro, Tennessee. Those were written at a particular time and place and we believe that our worship should reflect the history of the church, but also translate that history to our time and place. So, we want to work at retrieving parts of the past for help worshipping God and building up the church in the present.<sup>7</sup>

### III. The Transformation of Christian Worship

**John 4:19-24**, The woman said to him, “Sir, I perceive that you are a prophet. Our fathers worshiped on this mountain, but you say that in Jerusalem is the place where people ought to worship.” Jesus said to her, “Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem will you worship the Father. You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews. But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father is seeking such people to worship him. God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth.”

#### The transformation is not from outward ritual to inward disposition

God calls us to both, not one or the other. And he has always called his people to both. The **Old Testament** is not about **externals**, which then give way to **internals** in the **New Testament**. The call from the beginning is to “love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might.” (Deut. 6:5) Israel was condemned and chastised for mere external ritualism.

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<sup>5</sup> Quoted in *Reformation Worship*, ed. by Jonathan Gibson and Mark Earngey, 48.

<sup>6</sup> C.S. Lewis, Introduction to Athanasias of Alexandria’s *On the Incarnation*. This introduction is one of the best encouragements there is to read old books.

<sup>7</sup> Much more can be said on this. This is the whole argument of the book *Reformation Worship: Liturgies of the Past for the Present* ed. by Gibson and Earngey. See especially chapters 2 and 3.

**Deuteronomy 10:12-13, 16**, “And now, Israel, what does the LORD your God require of you, but to fear the LORD your God, to walk in all his ways, to love him, to serve the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul,<sup>13</sup> and to keep the commandments and statutes of the LORD, which I am commanding you today for your good? ...<sup>16</sup> Circumcise therefore the foreskin of your heart, and be no longer stubborn.

### **The transformation is from shadow and type to the real thing (Heb. 4:14-16; 12:18-29)**

Note that Jesus’s point with the woman is about the location of worship. And why was the temple so important for the people of Israel? It is where the presence of God dwelt (Ex. 40:34-35; 1 Kgs. 8:11; 2 Chr. 5:14). They weren’t just coming to a place of nostalgia, but to the presence of God himself. Worship was the undoing of the curse of the garden—casting Adam and Eve out of God’s generous and loving presence. Why does Jesus say, then, that the location of worship is going to change? We will worship in (the) Spirit and (the) Truth.

**Ephesians 2:18**, For through him (i.e., Jesus) we both have access in one Spirit to the Father.

**Hebrews 4:14-16**,<sup>14</sup> Since then we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession.<sup>15</sup> For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin.<sup>16</sup> Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need. (See also Hebrews 8:1-2, 5; 9:11-14)<sup>8</sup>

“**Draw near**” – this is the author of Hebrews’ term for coming to God in worship (see 4:16; 7:19, 25; 10:1, 22, 25; 11:6)

**Hebrews 12:18-29**,<sup>18</sup> For you have not come to what may be touched, a blazing fire and darkness and gloom and a tempest<sup>19</sup> and the sound of a trumpet and a voice whose words made the hearers beg that no further messages be spoken to them.<sup>20</sup> For they could not endure the order that was given, “If even a beast touches the mountain, it shall be stoned.”<sup>21</sup> Indeed, so terrifying was the sight that Moses said, “I tremble with fear.”<sup>22</sup> But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering,<sup>23</sup> and to the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God, the judge of all, and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect,<sup>24</sup> and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel.

<sup>25</sup> See that you do not refuse him who is speaking. For if they did not escape when they refused him who warned them on earth, much less will we escape if we reject him who warns from heaven.<sup>26</sup> At that time his voice shook the earth, but now he has promised, “Yet once more I will shake not only the earth but also the heavens.”<sup>27</sup> This phrase, “Yet once more,” indicates the removal of things that are shaken—that is, things that have been made—in order that the things that cannot be shaken may remain.<sup>28</sup> Therefore let us be grateful for receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, and thus let us offer to God acceptable worship, with reverence and awe,<sup>29</sup> for our God is a consuming fire.

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<sup>8</sup> John Owen is wonderfully clear on this in his commentary on the book of Hebrews (Crossway, 1998), 99-113.

## **Worship is supernatural—God is present with us in our worship of him.**

**Book of Church Order 47-2**, A service of public worship is not merely a gathering of God’s children with each other, but before all else, a meeting of the triune God with His chosen people. **God is present in public worship** not only by virtue of the Divine omnipresence but, much more intimately, as the faithful covenant Savior. The Lord Jesus Christ said: “Where two or three are gathered together in My name there I am in the midst of them” (Matthew 18:20).

“Therefore, we do not worship in an earthly sanctuary but in the heavenly sanctuary where we are seated with Christ in heavenly places; hence, Jesus’ statement to the Samaritan woman in John 4: True worship comes from the Jews but is no longer attached to any earthly sanctuary, including the temple in Jerusalem.” – Michael Horton, *A Better Way*, 24

“When the saints gather on God’s appointed day and worship Him in the way that He has directed, *God is actually there*. We literally come into his presence... Did you know that when the people of God gather for corporate worship they are drawn by a mysterious work of the Holy Spirit into the heavenly places? That’s what’s happening when we worship, and that’s where worship is happening. Hebrews 12 proves this point.” – Jonathan Cruse, *What Happens When We Worship*, 37, 42

“In the new era of redemptive history, after the coming of Christ and the fulfillment of temple worship, God’s people would no longer have to worry about worshipping in a special place or on a particular mountain... The worship in which Christians now participate is heavenly worship because it is spiritual worship, that is, it is worship filled with and dependent on the work of the Holy Spirit, not on the place of the worshiper.” – D.G. Hart, *Recovering Mother Kirk*, 93, 98

## **That supernatural-ness is fundamentally God-centered and Trinitarian-shaped (Rom. 11:36)**

- **The Holy Spirit** empowers our worship—Eph. 2:18; Rom. 8:26; uniting us to Christ, who is in heaven
- **Jesus** leads our worship as the only true faithful worshipper (Heb. 2) and mediates our worship as our sinless high priest before the throne in heaven (Heb. 4; Jn. 15 “in my name”).
- **Jesus** is also the fulfillment of all the aspects of our worship:
  - Jesus is the true singer of the Psalms (Heb. 2:10-13)
  - Jesus is the one who makes prayer possible (Heb. 4:14-16)
  - Jesus is the true Word, and also the one speaking to us from heaven (Heb. 12:24-25)
  - Jesus is the fulfillment of the law (Matt. 5:17), which is now the law of Christ (Gal 6:2; 1 Cor. 9:21)
  - Jesus is the *telos* (goal, end) of all the sacrifices on behalf of sins, who has won permanent forgiveness for us (Heb. 9:11-28)
  - Jesus is the content of the Lord’s supper (Lk. 22:19-20; 1 Cor. 10:16)
  - Jesus is the giver of the Holy Spirit in baptism (Acts 2:33), and the washing that is pictured is his blood washing away our sins (Acts 22:16; 1 Jn. 1:7)
- Jesus is both the object and subject of all the elements (Col. 1:28)

- **The Father** is the final object of all of our worship—Jesus reveals him to us and brings us to him (Jn. 14:6); Jesus has come to bring him glory (Phil. 2:11); he is who we come to in heaven (Heb. 12:23)

“But greatly mistaken are those who conceive no presence of flesh in the Supper unless it lies in the bread. For thus they leave nothing to the secret working of the Spirit, which unites Christ himself to us. To them Christ does not seem present unless he comes down to us. As though, if he should lift us to himself, we should not just as much enjoy his presence! The question is therefore only of the manner, for they place Christ in the bread, while we do not think it lawful for us to drag him from heaven. Let our readers decide which one is more correct. Only away with that calumny that Christ is removed from his Supper unless he lies hidden under the covering of bread! For since the mystery is heavenly, there is no need to draw Christ to earth that he may be joined to us.” – John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 4.17.31

**Colossians 3:1-4**, If then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. <sup>2</sup> Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth. <sup>3</sup> For you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. <sup>4</sup> When Christ who is your life appears, then you also will appear with him in glory.

**Ephesians 2:4-6**, <sup>4</sup> But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, <sup>5</sup> even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved— <sup>6</sup> and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus.

**Corporate worship is an eschatological foretaste; this is what we will be doing for eternity**

**Psalms 27:4**, One thing have I asked of the LORD,  
that will I seek after:  
that I may dwell in the house of the LORD  
all the days of my life,  
to gaze upon the beauty of the LORD  
and to inquire in his temple.

**Matthew 5:8**, Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.

**1 John 3:2**, Beloved, we are God's children now, and what we will be has not yet appeared; but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is.

**Revelation 22:3-4**, <sup>3</sup> No longer will there be anything accursed, but the throne of God and of the Lamb will be in it, and his servants will worship him. <sup>4</sup> They will see his face.

## Books

### Basic:

- *Does God Care How We Worship?* by Ligon Duncan
- *What Happens When We Worship* by Jonathan Landry Cruse
- *The Westminster Directory of Public Worship*, discussed by Mark Dever and Sinclair Ferguson
- *You Are What You Love: The Spiritual Power of Habit* by James K. A. Smith
- *Counterfeit Gods: The Empty Promises of Money, Sex, and Power, and the Only Hope that Matters* by Tim Keller

### More Specifically-Focused:

- *A Better Way: Rediscovering the Drama of Christ-Centered Worship* by Michael Horton
- *With Reverence and Awe: Returning to the Basics of Reformed Worship* by D. G. Hart and John R. Muether
- *Christ-Centered Worship: Letting the Gospel Shape Our Practice* by Bryan Chapell
- *Reformation Worship: Liturgies from the Past for the Present* by Jonathan Gibson and Mark Earngey
- *The Presbyterian Liturgies: Historical Sketches* by Charles W. Baird
- *Worship: Reformed according to Scripture* by Hughes Oliphant Old
- *We Become What We Worship: A Biblical Theology of Idolatry* by G.K. Beale

## Audio

- Reformed Theological Seminary class, “Theology of Worship” taught by Ligon Duncan, [https://rts.edu/resources/?fwp\\_resources\\_series=theology-of-worship](https://rts.edu/resources/?fwp_resources_series=theology-of-worship) (you can also access this on the free Reformed Theological Seminary app)