

Christian Worship
Class 3: The Source of True Worship
TPC CE, Fall 2023
September 10, 2023

I. Recap from Weeks 1 and 2

Class 1

- This class is about Christian Worship, focusing on what is essential (even while talking about some distinctives)
- 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

II. How Do We Know What True Worship Is?

a. False worship is all over the Bible

- False hearts in the midst of right action (hypocrisy)
 - Deuteronomy 6:4-5; Isaiah 29:13
- Wrong actions in worship (even when we claim right motives)
 - Leviticus 10:1-2

God requires both the right actions and the right motives (see Psalm 51:15-19; John 4:19-24)

b. Right worship is determined by God, and he reveals it to us in his Word

“If the first commandment is against worshipping the wrong God, the second commandment is against worshipping God in the wrong way... Most generally, the second commandment forbids self-willed worship—worshipping God as we choose rather than as he demands.” – Kevin DeYoung, *The 10 Commandments*

c. God's Word directs us differently in the different "pieces" of our worship

Content, Elements, Forms, Circumstances¹

- **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)
- **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 1-22.²

¹ 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).

² 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).

- These forms, the shape or ordering of our elements in worship, should go “with the grain” of the teaching of Scripture (WCF 1.6)³

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.)
 - 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 these⁴

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.

³ 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.).

⁴ 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.

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.

“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*⁵

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.”⁶ 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

⁵ Quoted in *Reformation Worship*, ed. by Jonathan Gibson and Mark Earney, 48.

⁶ 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.

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.⁷

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 (you can also access this on the free Reformed Theological Seminary app)

⁷ 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.