

WHAT GOD SAID ABOUT WORSHIP

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The title of this paper is “What God Said About Worship,” yet the preposition in this title misses the significance of the relationship between *what God said* and *worship*. The thesis of this paper is that God did not simply say something *about* worship; rather, worship itself is fundamentally *rooted in* what God said. Unlike, for example, discussing what God said about particular ethical issues or church polity or eschatology, wherein we would attempt to catalogue God’s words with relation to them, the very fact that God has spoken is the basis, means, and essence of the nature of worship itself. Therefore, it is my goal in this paper to explore this relationship between God’s revelation and worship in order to get at the heart of what true worship really is.

What God Said About Himself is the Basis of Worship

First, the very idea of worship itself begins with God’s self-revelation. Worship exists only because God said something. God’s speaking the world into existence was in its very essence an act to create worship. God created the universe *ex nihilo* through his spoken word for the express purpose of displaying his own glory (Psalm 19:1), and he created Adam in his image in order that Adam might witness that glory and respond in worship. God’s chief end is to glorify himself, and he calls all men everywhere to fulfill their purpose in life of doing the same (Isaiah 43:6-7).

Yet this desire to be worshiped did not stop with speaking the world into existence; Creation certainly displays the glory of God, but creation alone is not enough to reveal the God to be worshiped. Adam would not have known whom he was to worship except that God spoke to him. God revealed himself to Adam and told him of his purpose in Genesis 2:15: “The Lord God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to work it and keep it.” The phrase “work it and and keep it” seems to imply that man’s purpose was to garden, yet the work of gardening would not have been necessary prior to the fall. Rather, the two verbs in this phrase have a deeper significance. The first verb is *avid*, which, according to Allen Ross, is “used frequently for spiritual service, specifically serving the LORD (Deut. 4:19) and for the duties of the Levites (see Num. 3:7-8; 4:23-24, 26).”¹ The second verb is *shamar*; and Ross notes that “its religious use is that of observing spiritual duties or keeping the commands (Lev. 18:5).”² He explains,

In places where these two verbs are found together, they often refer to the duties of the Levites (cf. Num. 3:7-8; 8:26; 18:5-6), keeping the laws of God (especially in the sanctuary service) and offering spiritual service in the form of the sacrifices and all the

¹ Allen Ross, *Recalling the Hope of Glory: Biblical Worship from the Garden to the New Creation* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2006), 105.

² *Ibid.*

related duties—serving the LORD, safeguarding his commands, and guarding the sanctuary from the intrusion of anything profane or evil.³

Thus from within a pre-Fall context and with an understanding of the semantic range of these verbs, what Genesis 2:15 reveals is God's declaration that man's purpose is to worship and obey. God said something so that mankind might worship him.

The fact that God's first words created the very existence of worship leads to a recognition that all worship begins with what God said. God is the initiator of worship. And in particular, God's revelation of himself is what provides the basis for all true worship.

Worship is Communion with God Based on What He Said

Understanding God as the initiator of worship based on his self-revelation sets the nature of worship in its proper context. God is the initiator of all true worship based upon what he said about himself. This is an important reality, but it does not yet specify what exactly the nature of worship is. In order to move closer to a definition of worship and grasp the significance of God's revelation to that definition, I would like to explore what is perhaps the clearest, most concise explanation of the nature of worship in one single biblical book, especially since this book also links true worship with what God said.

The book of Hebrews provides a helpful framework for understanding the nature of worship in the entirety of Scripture since it specifically compares and contrasts worship in both Testaments. Peter Jones argues that the three primary climaxes in the literary structure of Hebrews reveal that the central theme of the entire book is a call to "come near and worship."⁴ The first climax is found in 4:16: "Let us then with confidence *draw near* to the throne of grace," and the second is found in 10:22: "Let us *draw near* with a true heart in full assurance of faith." The same concept in slightly different form appears in the final climax in 12:22: "But you *have come* to Mount Zion."⁵ The idea of "drawing near" is at the heart of the author's concept of worship in both the Old and New Testaments, and Jones thus notes that "This imagistic portrayal of distinctive Christian worship enjoys a dramatic location in the epistle."⁶

The notion of coming or drawing near is a translation of *proserchomai*, which means more than just a casual coming toward something; Rather, William Lane notes that the term is more than simply a casual expression of "coming," but rather "is used exclusively of an approach to God. The writer compares Israel's approach to God in cultic ceremony to the Christian's experience in worship."⁷

³ Ibid., 106.

⁴ Peter Rhea Jones, "A Superior Life: Hebrews 12:3–13:25," *Review and Expositor* 82, no. 3 (1985): 396.

⁵ Each of the verbs in italics is a translation of a form of *proserchomai*—"draw near."

⁶ Ibid., 397.

⁷ William Lane, *Hebrews* (Dallas: Word Books, 1991), 460.

This idea of drawing near to God in worship permeates the storyline of Scripture. It is what Adam and Eve enjoyed as they walked with God in the cool of the day (Gen. 2:8). It is described in Exodus 19:17 when Moses “brought the people out of the camp to *meet God*” at the foot of Mt. Sinai. He had told Pharaoh to let the people go so that they might worship their God in the wilderness, and this is exactly what they intended to do at Sinai. It is what Psalm 100 commands of the Hebrews in Temple worship when it says, “Come into his presence with singing and into his courts with praise.” It is what Isaiah experienced as he entered the heavenly throne room of God and saw him high and lifted up. To draw near to God is to enter his very presence, to bask in his glory, to have perfect communion and fellowship with him. This is the nature of worship.

And this is exactly what God created man to do. As we have already seen, Man does not come in worship to draw near to God of his own initiative; God has extended the invitation to draw near to him. But drawing near to God in worship must be on his terms; it must be based on what he said. Therefore, failing to obey what God said is failure to draw near in worship.

Disobedience to What God Said Prevents Worship

When Adam disobeyed what God said, he destroyed the possibility of drawing near to him. After Adam and Eve sinned they no longer enjoyed the privilege of walking with God in the garden; instead they hid from him in fear and desperately tried to cover their guilt with leaves. And ever since that time, any attempt to draw near to God results in a profound recognition of guilt and unworthiness. The Israelites experienced this when they drew near to Mt. Sinai; when they witnessed the majesty and greatness and white-hot holiness of God, they trembled in fear and begged God to stop talking. This is the reason that although God inhabited the holy place in the tabernacle and later the Temple, no person could enter his presence except the high priest once a year on the Day of Atonement. This is what Isaiah experienced when he saw the Lord high and lifted up in all of his glory and holiness and cried out with, “Woe is me! For I am undone; for I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts!”

God has commanded all people to draw near to him, but because mankind has disobeyed what God said, no one has the right to draw near to God; no one has access to him. The only way God enabled people to partially draw near to him is through temporary sacrifices, and even then there are barriers keeping us from the very presence of God himself; there is a veil hiding the holy place, only the high priest can enter there and only once a year, and the Bible reveals what happens if someone even touches the symbol of God’s presence, the ark—Remember Uzzah? Even Psalm 100 calls people to come only into the outer courts of the Temple, not into the actual presence of God. The people had no direct access.

The Means of Worship is What God Said Through His Son

So the basis of worship is what God said through his creative act and through revealing himself and man's purpose. Yet this revelation alone was insufficient since mankind disobeyed what God said and therefore forfeited their right of access to communion with him. Thus already the critical link between worship and what God said is apparent. Yet the book of Hebrews further highlights this connection and reveals the solution to the problem of God's revelation actually preventing true worship because of sin. This book, whose primary theme is worship, begins with a contrast between what God said "long ago" (v. 1) and what he has spoken "in these last days" (v. 2), and this contrast is important for understanding the link between worship and what God said.

Throughout the book, the author of Hebrews highlights the essential discontinuity between revelation under the OT and revelation for the Church. OT saints relied heavily upon earthly, transient means through which to receive revelation from God. The first verse of the book notes what would have been for the Jews the primary source of revelation—prophets. Yet as unique and authoritative as these messengers of God's word were to the Jews, the supreme messenger is now the Word himself (John 1:1). "In these last days [God] has spoken to us by his Son" (Hebrews 1:2) This source of divine revelation "is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature, and he upholds the universe by the word of his power" (1:3). In other words, he is not simply a messenger of what God said—he *is* God and he *is* what God said.

The author focuses on another source of revelation in chapters one and two—angels. The Jews considered these mysterious beings as special, visible representations of God's word.⁸ In contrast to what his readers would have considered the supreme sources of revelation and thus images of the authority of God, the author exalts Jesus Christ as superior, both as the source of revelation and as the very person of God himself.

There are a number of reasons Christ is superior to the prophets and angels, but the primary reason has to do with the relationship between what God said and worship. As we've already seen, verbal revelation is essentially the basis for communion with God. The Word from God delivered through prophets or heavenly messengers was the only means through which OT believers could worship the Lord. Without these supernatural insertions into the earthly realm, people had insufficient knowledge for communion with the Creator. Even then, however, this knowledge was lacking, for it came sporadically and, at times, impersonally, and furthermore, disobedience to that revelation actually prevented worship. Yet with the coming of Christ, the revelation that provided a *basis* for communion was also both the *object* and the *means* of that communion.

This revelation of God through his Son changes the way believers approach God in worship. Hebrews 4:16 highlights that the coming of Christians to God in worship is based upon grace, leading to a boldness that the OT Hebrews could not express: "Let us then with confidence *draw near* to the throne of grace." Hebrews 7:25 emphasizes the fact that Christ's High Priestly ministry of intercession makes such an approach possible: "Consequently, he is able to save to the uttermost those who *draw near* to God through him,

⁸ See J. Daryl Charles, "The Angels, Sonship And Birthright In The Letter To The Hebrews," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 33, no. 2 (1990): 169–178.

since he always lives to make intercession for them.” In 10:1, the author reveals the insufficiency of animal sacrifices to purify those who come to God in worship: “For since the law has but a shadow of the good things to come instead of the true form of these realities, it can never, by the same sacrifices that are continually offered every year, make perfect those who *draw near*.” In contrast, 10:22 proclaims that since believers in Christ have “a great high priest,” they may “*draw near* with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with [their] hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and [their] bodies washed with pure water.” Hebrews 11:6 further emphasizes the need for faith in coming to God in worship: “And without faith it is impossible to please him, for whoever would *draw near* to God must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him.”

Sacrifice of Worship

This is all possible, of course, because of Christ’s sacrifice on behalf of his people. God required OT saints to offer sacrifices to him as means of temporary forgiveness for disobeying what he said. These sacrifices themselves were imperfect, and they did nothing to change the heart of the one offering the sacrifice. They did not provide full atonement (Heb. 10:4, 11), but rather a temporary, legal satisfaction of immediate wrath.⁹ They could not cleanse sin, but they could “sanctify for the cleansing of the flesh” (9:13). Although these OT sacrifices were limited, they served as “copies” (9:23) of the perfect, complete sacrifice that was to come in the person of Jesus Christ.

In contrast, Hebrews 12:24 directs the reader’s attention to “the sprinkled blood” of Jesus as the basis for NT worship. This idea of sprinkling is intricately tied to the ratification of the covenant and harkens back to the sprinkling that ratified the old covenant (9:19-21). Yet the blood is a mere metonymy for the whole of Christ’s sacrificial death, which is made clear by its comparison to another violent murder of an innocent victim—that of Abel. According the Hebrews, Abel “is still speaking, although he died” (11:4), and yet the blood of Christ “continues to speak more effectively” (12:24) as a final sacrifice of atonement that makes worship possible. This sacrifice of Christ is God’s gracious voice providing the means to worship.

Summary

While what God said about himself is the basis of all true worship, it is only through ultimate revelation of God—Jesus Christ—that approach to God in worship is really possible. Human prophets, a mediator, priests, animal sacrifices, and a Temple each represent physical realities that revealed God to the people in the Old Testament and

⁹“The blood of slaughtered animals under the old order did possess a certain efficacy, but it was an outward efficacy for the removal of ceremonial pollution . . . They could restore [the worshipper] to formal communion with God and with his fellow-worshippers” (F. F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, Rev. ed. [Grand Rapids: W.B. Eerdmans, 1990], 201, 204). See also John C. Whitcomb, “Christ’s Atonement and Animal Sacrifices in Israel,” *Grace Theological Journal* 6, no. 2 (1985): 208 and Hobart E. Freeman, “The Problem of the Efficacy of the Old Testament Sacrifices,” *Grace Journal* Volume 4, 1 (Winona, IN: Grace Seminary, 1963), 17.

provided a means to worship him. Yet they all stand in stark contrast to the supreme spiritual revelation that replaces them all—Jesus Christ. *He* is the prophet, the mediator, the priest, the sacrifice, and the Temple. It is he who stands as the subject, source, and means of true worship. The OT rituals of worship were indeed shadows of the spiritual realities, but they fell short since they could not actually bring someone into the presence of God. With the coming of Christ, however, believers are actually raised up into the very presence of God, not yet physically, but spiritually.

The Essence of Worship is Spiritual Response to What God Said

If worship is drawing near to God based on what he said and through the ultimate What-God-Said—Jesus Christ, then what exactly does that look like? What does it mean to draw near to God in worship based on what God said?

As the author of Hebrews makes clear, approach to God in worship is not a physical reality in this dispensation; rather, a Christian’s approach to God through Christ is a spiritual matter since we worship now in a spiritual sense with Christ in heaven (12:22). Therefore the essence of drawing near in worship is something spiritual. The Lord explained the essence of biblical worship in John 4 when he told the Samaritan woman, “God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth” (v. 24). Essential to God-pleasing worship is expression of appropriate spiritual responses to God’s truth, that is, responses of the affections.

Yet the nature of this heart response is the subject of confusion today, leading to fundamentally different presuppositions concerning the nature of true, spiritual worship. What we “say” to God with our hearts must be a fitting and appropriate response to what he said, and yet this confusion clouds an understanding of what is really fitting. Thus we must take a few moments to discuss what a response of the spirit really means.

Affections vs. Appetites

Until modern times, Christians have always articulated a distinction between the spiritual affections and the physical appetites. The Apostle Paul distinguished between the *splankna* (Colossians 3:12) and the *koilia* (Philippians 3:19). Martin Luther distinguished between spiritual responses and carnal impulses.¹⁰ Jonathan Edwards distinguished

¹⁰See Daniel Reuning, “Luther and Music,” *Concordia Theological Journal* 48:1 (January, 1984), 18.

between the affections and the passions.¹¹ C. S. Lewis recognized the difference between the chest and the belly.¹²

Affections are spiritual responses to truth, and ordinate affections are those that are appropriate for expression to a holy God and what he has said. Appetites, or passions, are merely artificially stimulated physical impulses. Since what God said about worship involves discussions of the affections, we must learn to recognize the difference between ordinate affection and appetite and chose to use only those worship forms that nurture right affection for God.

A Culture of Appetites

Unfortunately, we live in a culture of appetites. Our thirst for immediate gratification has encouraged forms of entertainment designed simply to titillate the senses. Taking advantage of addictions to these forms, commercialistic entrepreneurs have cultivated these art forms and media with the sole purpose of manipulating the impulses to drive consumers to a decision. Essentially this is what pop culture aims at accomplishing. Pop culture is more than expression of rebellion and sex, although that is certainly the form it has taken since the 60s. But pop culture began much earlier, first with Victorian sentimentalism, then with the amusements of Stephen Foster, Tin Pan Alley, and Vaudeville, and later with the entertainments of Broadway, Walt Disney, and Hollywood. In each of these cases the goal for producing art was no longer to express and nurture noble affections as it had once been, but to amuse and tickle the senses.

But equally as discouraging is the reality that distinction between the affections and appetites has been lost today among most Christians. Without such a distinction church leaders have come to define worship almost exclusively in terms of the passions, since it is far easier to motivate people to action by appealing to their appetites than by patiently nurturing religious affections in response to what God said.

Charles Finney was one of the first to influentially promote targeting the appetites in his religious meetings. Because Finney believed that conversion could be produced by human means,¹³ he sought to create certain experiences in his services that would drive people to accept the claims of Christianity. In his Revival Lectures, Finney

¹¹“The affections and passions are frequently spoken of as the same, and yet in the more common use of speech, there is in some respect a difference. Affection is a word that in the ordinary signification, seems to be something more extensive than passion, being used for all vigorous lively actings of the will or inclination, but passion for those that are more sudden, and whose effects on the animal spirits are more violent, and the mind more over powered, and less in its own command.” Jonathan Edwards, *Religious Affections* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 2001), 26-27.

¹²“The head rules the belly through the chest.” C. S. Lewis, *The Abolition of Man, or, Reflections on Education with Special Reference to the Teaching of English in the Upper Forms of Schools* (San Francisco: Harper, 2001), 24.

¹³“A revival is not a miracle, nor dependent on a miracle, in any sense. It is a purely philosophical result of the right use of the constituted means—as much so as any other effect produced by the application of means.” *Revivals of Religion* (CBN University Press, 1978), 4.

insisted that “there must be excitement sufficient to wake up the dormant moral powers.”¹⁴ Iain Murray explains the connection between Finney's theology of conversion and the means he employed:

If conversion was the result of the sinner's decision, and if the inducing of that decision was the responsibility of a preacher, assisted by the Holy Spirit, then any measure that would bring the unconverted 'right up to the point of instant and absolute submission' had to be good.¹⁵

Finney found pop music as the perfect tool for creating such experiences because it was immediate, it stimulated excitement, and people are naturally motivated to action by such impulses. Finney urged those writing and leading music in his meetings to look to the advertisers of the day for inspiration.

Those earliest forms of pop music may seem innocuous to contemporary ears, but that philosophy began a trend to use pop music to create emotional experiences in the Church that continues to this day. Later Revivalists followed Finney's lead¹⁶ and progressively adopted the newest, most exciting forms of pop music in their services in order to create sensual experiences. Homer Rodeheaver, a later Revivalist song leader taught that “Creating the proper atmosphere for the character of the meeting to be held is an important office of the director.”¹⁷ He taught song leaders how using certain songs and directing methods could create the right “emotional conditioning.”¹⁸

My point here is that the practice of using certain musical forms simply to stimulate the appetites or create an emotional atmosphere is not unique to contemporary churches today. The problem began much earlier and has affected most of fundamentalism and evangelicalism. Most believers today evaluate their worship “experience” based on feeling. This takes all kinds of shapes, of course, depending on the particular movement. Some define spiritual experience by “holy laughter” and “slaying in the Spirit.” Others define it by mystical trance. Others as exciting, rousing energy. But most people define true worship by some kind of intense “enthusiasm” or “zeal” or “passion” for God that amounts to little more than stimulation of the appetites, and thus these physical stimulation

¹⁴Charles Finney, *Revival Lectures*, (reprint, Old Tappan, NJ: Revell, n.d.), 4.

¹⁵Iain Murray, *Revival and Revivalism* (London: Banner of Truth Trust, 1994), 246.

¹⁶Murray notes, “That Charles G. Finney took a considerable part in the great change which was occurring in protestant America in the 1820s and 1830s, is indisputable.” *Revival*, 255.

¹⁷Homer Rodeheaver and Charles B. Ford, Jr., *Song Leadership* (Winona Lake, IN: Rodeheaver, 1941), 8.

¹⁸*Ibid.*, 30. See also Donald P. Hustad, *Jubilate II: Church Music in Worship and Renewal* (Carol Stream, IL: Hope, 1989), 250. “The two men [Billy Sunday and Homer Rodeheaver] brought a new level of secularism and entertainment to evangelistic crusades with crowd-pleasing and crowd-attracting mannerisms.”

comprise almost the entirety of what they “say” to God in worship. Dabney offers a sober warning that believers should heed in this regard:

Millions of souls are in hell because they were unable to distinguish the elevation of animal feelings from general, genuine religious affections.¹⁹

If worship is a dialogue between what God has said and our hearts’ affections, then how we respond to what God has said is of utmost importance. The spiritual nature of God’s self-revelation necessitates a spiritual response of our hearts rather than simply an artificially stimulated physical response.

Corporate Worship is Regulated by What God sSaid

So worship at its core is based upon what God said about himself, it is mediated by what he said through his Son, and it involves what we say back to him through the affections of our hearts.

But there is another issue involving an important relationship between worship and what God said. This issue narrows our discussion to corporate worship in particular and involves the following question: must we limit ourselves only to what God has said with regard to our corporate worship? Answers to this question have generally fallen into one of two categories.

On the one hand are those who believe that as long as we do not do something that God has expressly forbidden, we may worship in whatever ways we think will be most glorifying to God and beneficial for his people in our time, culture, and circumstances. Since times change, cultures differ, and circumstances vary, godly church leaders should strive to discern what will work best for their particular situation, as long as they avoid those things clearly forbidden by God.

On the other hand are those who say that we may worship God only in the way that he has expressly prescribed in his Word. Whatever is not prescribed for worship is forbidden. We may not add or subtract any elements from our worship.

The first position, traditionally called the Normative Principle of Worship, has characterized Roman Catholics, Lutherans, and Anglicans, and is basically the default position of most American churches today.

Presbyterians, Puritans, and Baptists have historically held the second position, traditionally called the Regulative Principle of Worship. In fact, the RPW was arguably the defining principle of the English separatists who later became Baptists. They argued that all of the innovations of the Church of England were beyond what God had prescribed, not the least of which was the baptizing of infants. Note the following passages from the London Baptist Confession of 1689:

¹⁹R. L. Dabney, "A Review of Instrumental Music in the Public Worship of the Church, but Dr. John L. Girardeau," *The Presbyterian Quarterly* 3 (July 1889): 462-69.

LBC 22.1: But the acceptable way of worshipping the true God is instituted by himself, and so limited by his own revealed will, that he may not be worshipped according to the imaginations and devices of men, nor the suggestions of Satan, under any visible representations, or any other way not prescribed in the Holy Scriptures.

John Fawcett, an English Baptist pastor in the mid-1700's summarized this characteristically Baptist conviction:

No acts of worship can properly be called holy, but such as the Almighty has enjoined. No man, nor any body of men have any authority to invent rites and ceremonies of worship; to change the ordinances which he has established; or to invent new ones . . . The divine word is the only safe directory in what relates to his own immediate service. The question is not what we may think becoming, decent or proper, but what our gracious Master has authorized as such. In matters of religion, nothing bears the stamp of holiness but what God has ordained.

The Regulative Principle of Worship

Three general ideas govern the Regulative Principle of Worship that limits what we may include in worship only to what God said:

The Sufficiency of Scripture. 2 Timothy 3:16-17 teach that the Bible is sufficient as the rule of our faith and practice.

All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be competent, equipped for every good work.

The doctrine of the sufficiency of Scripture teaches that "Scripture contained all the words of God he intended for his people to have at each stage of redemptive history, and that it now contains all the words of God we need for salvation, for trusting him perfectly, and for obeying him perfectly."²⁰ Would God leave us without instruction in the most important issue on earth—his worship? Certainly God has given us in his Word all the instruction we need to obey him perfectly in the area of worship. The London Baptist Confession says it this way:

The rule of this knowledge, faith, and obedience, concerning the worship and service of God, and all other Christian duties, is not man's inventions, opinions, devices, laws, constitutions, or traditions unwritten whatsoever, but only the Word of God contained in the Canonical Scriptures.

²⁰ Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 127.

This point alone, however, does not fully answer our question. We may agree that God has given us everything we need in Scripture to worship him rightly, but some argue that God's all-sufficient Word does not give explicit instructions regarding worship, and therefore by implication God has given us freedom to worship as we think best as long as it does not go against what he said. Thus, two additional biblical points clarify the matter.

God Rejects Worship That He Has Not Prescribed. Throughout Scripture, both in the Old and New Testaments, examples abound of God rejecting (often violently) worship that includes elements that He has not prescribed. Rarely are these elements introduced with malicious intent—usually the motive is to enhance the worship of Yahweh. But God nevertheless rejects worship that includes such extra-biblical elements.

Golden Calf - Exodus 32:1-10.

When the people saw that Moses delayed to come down from the mountain, the people gathered themselves together to Aaron and said to him, "Up, make us gods who shall go before us. As for this Moses, the man who brought us up out of the land of Egypt, we do not know what has become of him." So Aaron said to them, "Take off the rings of gold that are in the ears of your wives, your sons, and your daughters, and bring them to me." So all the people took off the rings of gold that were in their ears and brought them to Aaron. And he received the gold from their hand and fashioned it with a graving tool and made a golden calf. And they said, "These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!" When Aaron saw this, he built an altar before it. And Aaron made proclamation and said, "Tomorrow shall be a feast to the LORD."

People often assume that the children of Israel were attempting to worship a pagan god in this instance. However, closer examination will show that they were simply trying to worship Yahweh using means he had not prescribed. In verse 1 the people say, "Come, make us [*Elohim*] . . ." The same term is used in verse 4 when they say, "These are [this is] *Elohim*, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!" Translators render this word, *elohim*, as "gods" because it is a plural reference to deity and because they assume the people of Israel are seeking to worship other gods. However notice what Aaron says in verse 5: "Tomorrow shall be a feast to [*Yahweh*]." There is no doubt here that they people attempting worship Yahweh, who they say brought them up out of Egypt. The name *Elohim* is often used to refer to Yahweh. The plural form signifies majesty and honor. This point is made even more clear when Moses relates this incident in Deuteronomy 9:16:

And I looked, and behold, you had sinned against the LORD your God. You had made yourselves a golden calf. You had turned aside quickly from the way that the LORD had commanded you.

Moses says that they sinned against *Yahweh Elohim*. And He severely punished them. Why? Because they were attempting to worship another god? No. Because, as Moses says, they

had “turned aside quickly from the way that the LORD had commanded [them].” They had introduced elements into the worship of Yahweh that He had not prescribed.

Nadab and Abihu - Leviticus 10.1-3.

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. And fire came out from before the LORD and consumed them, and they died before the LORD. Then Moses said to Aaron, “This is what the LORD has said, ‘Among those who are near me I will be sanctified, and before all the people I will be glorified.’” And Aaron held his peace.

In this passage Nadab and Abihu offer an unauthorized fire—literally a “strange” fire—to the Lord, and they were killed for it. Why were they killed? There was nothing inherently evil or profane about what they were doing. But the fact that, as verse 1 says, the Lord had not commanded this element of worship, they were killed. God is very serious about this. The only acceptable worship is that which he himself has commanded.

Pharisees - Matthew 15:8-9.

This people honors me with their lips, but their heart is far from me; in vain do they worship me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men.

Here Jesus is scolding the Pharisees who have added their own ingenuity to worship, and they are requiring others to take part in these same worship elements that God has not prescribed. Were these added elements evil in and of themselves? No. But the fact that they are not commanded by God renders the worship vain.

What is clear from these few examples is that God rejects worship that is not based on his commands even when it is offered with good motives. This may seem to be a difficult and restrictive truth, but it is what Scripture teaches, as Calvin notes,

I know how difficult it is to persuade the world that God disapproves of all modes of worship not expressly sanctioned by His Word. The opposite persuasion which cleaves to them—being seated, as it were, in their very bones and marrow—is, that whatever they do has in itself a sufficient sanction, provided it exhibits some kind of zeal for the honor of Go. But since God not only regards as fruitless, but also plainly abominates, whatever we undertake from zeal to His worship, if at variance with His command, what do we gain by a contrary course? The words of God are clear and distinct; ‘Obedience is better than sacrifice.’ And ‘in vain do they worship me, teaching for doctrines the commandments of men.’”

In summary, God is the only one who has the right to determine how we worship. The London Baptist Confession says it well:

LBC 22.1-7: But the acceptable way of worshipping the true God is instituted by himself, and so limited by his own revealed will, that he may not be worshipped

according to the imaginations and devices of men, nor the suggestions of Satan, under any visible representations, or any other way not prescribed in the Holy Scriptures.

Extent of the Church's Authority/Liberty of Conscience. The third principle is clearly laid out in the New Testament since this very debate was significant in that some Christians insisted upon introducing Jewish worship elements into Christian worship—elements that had not be prescribed for Church worship. Paul deals with this issue specifically in Romans 14ff.

One person esteems one day as better than another, while another esteems all days alike. Each one should be fully convinced in his own mind. The one who observes the day, observes it in honor of the Lord. The one who eats, eats in honor of the Lord, since he gives thanks to God, while the one who abstains, abstains in honor of the Lord and gives thanks to God.

In Romans 14ff, Paul is dealing specifically with those Christian Jews who desire to maintain religious restrictions and observances from the Mosaic Law.²¹ The important thing to remember here is that these are religious restrictions of ceremonially unclean (*koinon*) food and observances of sacred days. Any proper discussion of so-called "Christian liberty" in this passage must be framed in this context. In other words, while 1 Corinthians 8-10 applies to general things with negative associations from the pagan world like meat offered to idols, Romans 14 deals with the more narrowed topic of adding requirements to religious life. So this passage has direct application to the issue of public worship, and the formulators of the RPW applied it that way.

Within a context of "[making] every effort to do what leads to peace and to mutual edification" (v. 19), Paul insists in verse 5 that "each one should be fully convinced in his own mind" concerning sacred days, and in verse 23 he warns that "the man who has doubts is condemned if he eats, because his eating is not from faith; and everything that does not come from faith is sin." The question is, should we observe sacred days that have not been prescribed for church worship? Paul says that in order to institute something like that, each person must be convinced in his own mind. One must be careful not to impose upon his own conscience or the conscience of another that of which they are not fully convinced. And what is the only way that we can be convinced that God wants us to observe a particular sacred day? Only if he has prescribed it for the Church. If you as an individual are convinced for some reason that you should observe it, then you have every right to do so in your home. But church leaders cannot extend such an observance to gatherings of the church where we have dozens or hundreds of individual consciences that must be convinced from the Word of God that such observance is necessary.

Formulators of the RPW applied this to their situation of all the extra observances the Church (whether the Roman Catholic or Anglican) were adding to public worship. These Church authorities had no right to do so because since the NT did not

²¹ See Mark Snoeberger, "Weakness Or Wisdom? Fundamentalists And Romans 14.1-15.13," *Detroit Baptist Seminary Journal* 12 (Fall 2007).

prescribe them, every man could not be convinced that they were necessary. Delivuk summarizes their problem well:

From the time of the vestments controversy of the latter sixteenth century, the Anglican additions to worship had given many sincere believers serious conscience problems. They believed that these innovations were not worship. Therefore, they had problems of conscience every time they participated in worship. A major goal of the Westminster Assembly was to protect believers with sensitive consciences.²²

Therefore, the original purpose for the RPW was not to unnecessarily restrict corporate worship, but to liberate stricken consciences from practices within corporate worship that were not expressly set forth in the Scriptures. They insisted that no man, including ecclesiastical authorities, had the right to constrain a worshiper to participate in an activity of worship that had no Scriptural directive. Gordon notes,

The issue that gave birth to the regulative principle was the nature and limits of church power. The issue was not, for them, “worship” versus “the rest of life,” but “those aspects of life governed by the church officers” versus those aspects of life not governed by the church officers.²³

The contexts of both Romans 14 and the original formulation of the RPW demonstrate clearly a biblically-warranted distinction between corporate worship and the rest of life, along with the RPW's particularly instructive application for the Church—“In worship, the church is forbidden to add rites and ceremonies to those found in the Bible, because the conscience is to be free of human requirements.”²⁴ What is not commanded is forbidden. This is exactly how the London Baptist Confession frames the issue:

LBC 21.2: God alone is Lord of the conscience, and hath left it free from the doctrines and commandments of men which are in any thing contrary to his Word, or not contained in it. So that to believe such doctrines, or obey such commands out of conscience, is to betray true liberty of conscience; and the requiring of an implicit faith, and absolute and blind obedience, is to destroy liberty of conscience and reason also.

The matter of religious restrictions is also addressed in Colossians 2.20-23:

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—“Do not handle, Do not taste, Do not

²² John Allen Delivuk, “Biblical Authority and the Proof of the Regulative Principle of Worship in The Westminster Confession,” *Westminster Theological Journal* 58, 2 (Fall 1996), 242.

²³ T. David Gordon, “Some Answers About the Regulative Principle,” *Westminster Theological Journal* 55, 2 (Fall 1993), 323.

²⁴ Delivuk, 242.

touch” (referring to things that all perish as they are used)—according to human precepts and teachings? 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.

Here Paul is chiding Christians who are adding to their religious life elements that are merely requirements of men. Again these “Do not handle, Do not taste, Do not touch” requirements are in the context of the Body (vv18-19) and have reference to specific religious restrictions carried over from the Mosaic Law. Paul is saying that for the sake of the unity of the Body, we must limit ourselves to religious requirements that are clearly prescribed in the NT. He even says that these kinds of things do indeed have an appearance of wisdom and spirituality. But because they have not been commanded by God, they render the worship unacceptable to Him. This passage was quoted often by the Reformers against the corrupt and burdensome ordinances of Roman Catholicism. It was again used by Puritans against the Anglicans.

Rejecting Innovations

The implication of these Scriptural truths, then, is that churches must reject any human creativity and innovation with the elements of corporate worship. The content and form of our corporate worship may be only what God said. A truly biblical church will reject contemporary innovations like drama, holy laughter, slaying in the spirit, and karate demonstrations.

Many church leaders recognize these more obvious contemporary innovations, but they must also be careful to reject older innovations that have become “tradition,” for they are still innovations. Many churches claim to be “traditional” because they reject contemporary innovations while they nevertheless retain older innovations. The clearest example of this is the Roman Catholic Church, which claims to be *the* traditional church because of what it retained in spite of the Protestant Reformation. But what it “retained” was nothing more than older innovations. Protestant churches rightly reject such ancient innovations as priests, altars, incense, elaborate rituals, icons, prescribed liturgies, and prayers to saints.

However, the same is true for many churches today that call themselves traditional. They call themselves that because they reject the worst of contemporary worship innovations, and yet they retain and even defend innovations that were introduced in the early 19th century. They reject contemporary innovations, not because they are innovations, but because they don’t think they’re good innovations. They are being conservative to a point, but what they are conserving is the progressivism of days gone by.

Innovations are innovations, and a truly biblical church that is concerned about what God said will not trust its judgment concerning which innovations to accept and which to reject. A biblical church will commit to worship that is regulated by what God said about corporate worship his Word.

Conserving What God Said in Corporate Worship

So what *has* God said about corporate worship? Biblical Christians desire to preserve biblical worship by preserving the elements of worship that God has prescribed for the Church in the New Testament. God has clearly prescribed those elements that he desires be part of New Testament worship:

- Reading the Word (1 Timothy 4:13)
- Preaching the Word (1 Timothy 4:13, 2 Timothy 4:2)
- Singing (Ephesians 5:19, Colossians 3:16)
- Prayer (1 Timothy 2:1)
- Baptism/Lord's Supper (Matthew 28:19, 1 Corinthians 11:23-34)
- Collection of offerings (2 Corinthians 8, 1 Corinthians 16:1-2)

Six simple, straightforward, clear elements of acceptable worship. We must have these six elements in our worship, and if we believe that God rejects worship based on our own creativity as he illustrates throughout Scripture, then we cannot have any other elements in our worship besides these six. So what about elaborate rituals and ceremonies? No, God did not prescribe those as acceptable elements for worship. What about skits and drama? No, God did not prescribe drama as an acceptable element for worship. What about visual aids in worship? No, God did not prescribe visual aids, and in fact He forbids them.

This is why biblical churches who believe that God has the prerogative to determine what is acceptable worship tend to have very simple, unadorned services. Churches that believe that we can add any elements to our services that we think are good have much more extravagant services, whether in the liturgical tradition with rituals and ceremonies or in the "free" tradition with drama and visual elements.

But if we rightly conclude that it is God alone who has the prerogative to determine what elements may be part of acceptable worship, then we must limit what we include in worship to these six simple categories.

Conclusion

What I have attempted to demonstrate is that God has not just said something *about* worship; what God said provides the basis, the means, and the regulation of true, biblical worship. Our worship is drawing near to God through dialogue with him—we listen as he speaks through his Word and then respond to him with appropriate heart expression. Ultimately, worship is possible only because of the sacrifice and continued mediation of the supreme God-Said-Something—Jesus Christ.