

Orthopraxy – 5

Christianity is far more than salvation from sin and the knowledge of some Christian doctrine. Christianity claims to offer true worship to the only true God. Consequently, a Christianity worth conserving is a Christianity deeply concerned with the question of worship.

To conserve the gospel and the whole counsel of God and abandon the battle for biblical worship is to struggle valiantly to win the road and then surrender or flee when it comes to the destination. After all, while the gospel is the boundary of the Christian life, and the whole counsel of God is the life within that boundary, it all aims at one thing: to love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength. In other words, the gospel and the whole counsel of God are means towards the final end: worship. Why men will fight so hard for means, only to abandon ship when it comes to ends, is an enigma. All that doctrine aims at one thing: loving God ordinally. How can church leaders encourage this movement toward fitting, appropriate worship? To begin with, at least four things about worship need to be taught repeatedly.

First, teach on the importance of worship. Whether it be in sermon series specifically devoted to the topic of worship, or whether it be a constant refrain in other sermons, pastors must make the point clear: worship is at the center of the Christian life. The gospel is a means, not an end. All of Christian doctrine is a means, not an end. What is the chief end of man? To glorify God and enjoy Him forever. At the heart of Christianity is the call to ascribe value to God (Ps 29:1-2). Those under your charge should know that there is no greater priority for the Christian than to glorify God by loving Him wholeheartedly.

Second, teach on the importance of corporate worship. While everyone agrees that Mark 12:28-29 is the greatest commandment, not everyone draws a line from that verse to corporate worship. Rather, in an individualized, sentimentalized, and over-therapized culture, people immediately think of their private devotions, or “personal” relationships with God. While I agree that each individual must seek to know God in private worship, it’s obvious that books such as 1 John emphasize loving God in a far more corporate sense than we are used to. A biblical theology of worship is going to place far more emphasis on the gathered worship of God’s people than on individual encounters with God. Corporate worship ought to set the tone for private worship, not vice-versa. Just as the preached Word teaches us how to read it when alone, so public prayers and corporate song and the overall dignity of corporate worship teach how we ought to love God. Corporate worship truly is the catechism of the affections.

Third, teach on the God-centeredness of worship. Worship is not a product we consume; it is an offering we give. We have come a long way from viewing worship as a sacrifice of praise, where what pleases God controls what we do. Instead, the modern discussion about worship revolves around words such as style, preferences, or cultural norms. While these matters deserve serious treatment, the way they dominate the discussion about worship betrays whether our zeal is for God’s pleasure or our comfort. Pastors need to teach on the radical difference between worship and entertainment. In a culture of passive spectators and abundant distraction, Christians must hear the truth that worship is not amusement but a serious engagement with God.

Fourth, teach on God’s prescriptiveness regarding worship. If it is true that there is worship that pleases God and worship that does not, we can be sure that God will give us the principles to distinguish them in Scripture. Christian leaders should remind God’s people that God has been quite prescriptive regarding His worship and service and has often publicly chastened those who innovated. We need to be reminded that sincerity is not a panacea for all worship-ills. Good

intentions do not make up for disobedience. A carefulness and watchfulness over our worship needs to return to the thinking of God's people.

Fifth, teach the importance of discernment and good judgement regarding worship. If church members do nothing more than submit to another's hymn choices, then no one is learning to judge, discriminate and sing with understanding. It is fine for children and beginners to trust the judgments of others, but a maturing conscience is meant to be formed with knowledge and judgment.

Judgment in worship is needed for four reasons:

- 1) To worship God for His excellence, we must be able to distinguish excellence from inferiority, beauty from ugliness, good from bad. We cannot admire God if we do not know what is admirable. We cannot see the beauty of God if we are poor at recognizing beauty.
- 2) To offer God what is worthy of Him, we must be able to judge the worth of our offerings. God is worth our very best offerings, but if we cannot tell tacky from elegant, we will end up offering him what is profane. We are required to discover what is excellent (Phil 1:10) and use it for God's glory. Moreover, since God is true, we must never offer God what is false in any way: false in statement, or false in sentiment.
- 3) To rightly respond to God from the heart, we must be able to distinguish between affections, and judge what is appropriate for worship. To recognize inordinate joy from ordinate, to distinguish between familiarity and boldness, between joyful exuberance and impudent flippancy, or between shades of joy, fear, or sorrow, requires judgment.
- 4) To understand how a song, prayer, sermon or other act of worship represents ordinate or inordinate affection, we need good judgment. We must understand the meaning of the prayer, song, music, or sermon and judge its worth for worship.

This matter of judging between affections, and examining the meaning of things will be the subject of our subsequent chapters. Suffice it to say here that a church serious about corporate worship is going to teach, in varying occasions and formats, the importance, and the practice of wise judgement for matters related to worship.

Biblical worship is the worship revealed in the Bible as pleasing to God. Since the Bible reveals God's nature, will, and works, we should expect that God prescribes in Scripture how He wants to be worshiped. Both Old Testament principle and New Testament precept (1 Tim 3:15) combine to show us that God's worship is not regulated by preference, popularity, or pragmatic concerns. God's worship is regulated by His revealed Word.

Believers in the Regulative Principle of Worship, or the Rule of Prescription, believe that a worship practice can be admitted to the worship of the church if such a practice is unequivocally and positively grounded in Scripture. While all believers in the validity of the Regulative Principle accept that Scripture must command a worship practice before it can be instituted, not all believers agree on which worship practices are commanded or how Scripture makes such imperatives explicit.

Conservatives see fewer elements of New Testament worship. For example, D.G. Hart sees Reformed worship as consisting in the reading and preaching of the Word, prayer, song, the collection, and the sacraments. Ligon Duncan recites the Puritan formula for New Testament worship: to read the Bible, preach the Bible, pray the Bible, sing the Bible, and see the Bible (the

sacraments).

Proponents of a looser application of the Regulative Principle see other elements as having biblical sanction. John Frame sees the elements as greetings and benedictions, reading of Scripture, preaching and teaching, charismatic prophecy (when it operated), prayer, song, vows, confession of faith, sacraments, church discipline, collections and offerings, and expressions of fellowship, which he sees in things like the love feast and the holy kiss. Bryan Chapell lists seventeen: calls, prayers, Scripture readings, music, offerings and collections, creeds and affirmations, benedictions and charges, rubrics, sermon, sacraments, expressions of fellowship, testimonies and ministry reports, oaths and vows, ordinations and commissionings, church discipline, fasting, and other unnamed possibilities.

As a pastor, I find myself uncomfortable with Frame's interpretation of the Regulative Principle but also aware that conservatives like Hart may not have fully dealt with other possible elements such as mutual edification in corporate worship (1 Co 14:26). Like any pastor who holds to the Regulative Principle, I try to wrestle with the New Testament evidence to see what has been commanded or exemplified. This is what a conservative Christian church will have to do: determine which elements of worship are biblically prescribed.

Once determined, the church will need to include only those elements and ruthlessly exclude everything else. This may be difficult when certain traditions have set in. If your church determines that drama has not been prescribed, then what about the Sunday School skit? Or the Christmas play? If your church determines that the handshaking time falls outside of God's prescriptions, will it be able to drop the custom altogether? For that matter, if your church has failed to include one of the biblical elements of worship, will the church be able to begin practicing it?

Here some teaching on each element of New Testament worship will be useful. If a pastor devotes a sermon to each element, he is able to show the biblical rationale and reasonable application for what is included in his church's worship services. Very often, such compelling sermons are all that is needed to show why other elements are not included.

Restoring biblical worship in churches within a culture given over to various forms of narcissism, sentimentalism, consumerism, and amusement is an uphill struggle. If a man is more concerned about retaining or attracting a minimum level of tithers, he is at the mercy of parishioners' tastes, preferences, and stylized worship choices. Conversely, if he is more concerned about offering worship that is pleasing to God or, as a pastor, offering back true worshipers to the Father, then he will be guided by principle and not raw pragmatism. For such men, I suggest a further three practical suggestions for restoring biblical worship.

First, there ought to be pastoral oversight of the corporate worship of the church. A strange practice exists among evangelical pastors of delegating responsibility for corporate worship to the musicians of the church. This, to me, is like delegating the planning of the Lord's Supper to the kitchen staff, simply because they are involved. As important as musicians or kitchen staff are, it is the pastors of a church who are called to provide spiritual wisdom, maturity, and leadership in all areas, worship being the chief. Kitchen staff may be very involved in the preparation and clean-up for the Lord's Table. Musicians may be very involved in providing music in the public services of the church. Even so, why should they select what hymns and songs are sung (and how many times), make comments before or after hymns, settle on the order of service, or choose the offertory? Surely this is the role of the appointed spiritual leader(s) of the church. If hours are spent by the pastor on the sermon (which is the bulk of corporate worship), who better to determine what hymns, Scripture

readings, prayers, and so forth ought to be offered

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This is not to say that there is never a musician who is also a qualified spiritual leader. Several ordained men may serve as pastors with a special focus on music, which can be very beneficial to the church. Nor is it to suggest that pastors ought to micro-manage and personally lead every element of corporate worship. What needs to be redressed is a tendency for pastors (particularly those with little musical knowledge) to feel an obligation to “stick with what they know” and hand over the general direction and composition of worship services to others. Pastors without competent musical knowledge can still become competent to judge a good hymn from an inferior one, an appropriate tune from an inappropriate, an ordinate atmosphere of worship and its opposite. Indeed, spiritual maturity ought to be the ability to perform this kind of discernment (Heb 5:14).

Increasingly rare is the musician who possesses a sound theology of worship and who understands the Regulative Principle and other issues surrounding corporate worship. While enlisting the gifts and abilities of others, the pastors of the church ought to plan, structure, oversee, and review the public services of the church.

The corollary to this suggestion is that pastors ought to train faithful men in the skill of planning, executing and evaluating corporate worship. Too often a church that has traveled a better-than-average path regarding worship loses all the ground it has gained with the change of one pastor. As pastors, we want to leave legacies of ordinate worship after we have gone. It is understandable that a church changes character when its leaders change, but one can ensure more continuity rather than less through the training of men in the matter of corporate worship. This could take the form of a few Sunday-school type lessons in which each element of corporate worship is examined, hymns are considered and evaluated, and basic practical lessons are given in leading corporate worship.

If pastors conduct post-service evaluations, the men being trained ought to sit in on these and listen to each element of the service being evaluated for its appropriateness, execution, and usefulness. These are tremendously helpful training times. Finally, there is no better way for people to learn how to lead and plan worship than to be placed into the situation of having to do just that. Third, pastors ought to settle on a philosophy of worship and preferably put it in writing. A philosophy of worship can become a mini “systematic theology of worship.” It needn’t be more than a few pages long, but it can summarize a church’s approach to worship. It serves as an up-front statement to those inquiring about the church. It guides present and future leaders, particularly when navigating areas of controversy.

A second area of orthopraxy is in the area of the personal piety of Christians.

In some ways, piety describes the individual Christian’s worship. Worship has a public aspect as well as a private one. We are to offer up our love for God when we assemble, but we are to love Him always. This life of love for God is variously called piety, spiritual growth, sanctification, Christlikeness, and Christian maturity. All mean the same thing: a life of knowing and loving God that results in resembling and reflecting Him.

You might think that Christian piety is the most elementary of matters and hardly something worth defining and describing meticulously. Certainly, it is possible to overcomplicate it. Nevertheless, not long after our conversion, we soon find a bewildering number of competing visions of the Christian life.

Wesleyans tell us to seek perfection. Reformed Christians tell us to restrain the flesh and put on

Christian character. Confessionalists tell us to trust in the churchly means of grace. Pentecostals tell us to seek the baptism of the Spirit. Quietists tell us to stop striving and rest entirely on Christ. Pietists tell us to strive for deep inward affections. Keswicks tell us to crucify the old life and surrender entirely to Christ's life. Revivalists tell us to confess our backsliding and re-consecrate ourselves. Chaferians tell us to be filled with the Spirit, disagreeing among themselves on what that means. Some mystics tell us to pursue some sort of beautiful vision of Christ in the form of illumination. These examples do not exhaust the possibilities along the spectrum of views of the Christian life.

Within these visions of the Christian life, there are different views on the priorities of the Christian life and what means should be used to reach those goals. They view prayer, the Word, and the church differently. They have varying views on how Christians are to live in the "secular" realm. To read through some of the classic devotional works of the church is to see these views clash. Compare *The Imitation of Christ to Holiness* (J.C. Ryle). Compare *The Practice of the Presence of God to Communion With God* (Owen). Compare *The Pursuit of God to A Serious Call to a Devout and Holy Life*. Compare *The Practice of Piety* (Bayly) to *Confessions*. Compare *The Dark Night of the Soul to The Religious Affections*. Compare *Spiritual Progress to My Utmost for his Highest*. To read these works is to be confronted with quite disparate views of the priorities and posture of a Christian. And yet, to do so is to be exposed to what is catholic in Christian piety. It's in hearing Christians from the past and present describe the Christian life that we come closer to understanding what a life of love for God is.

Obviously, these competing visions of the Christian life cannot be equally correct on their points of difference. Like our doctrinal views, we will have to decide which vision, or combination of visions, of Christianity most fully represents the Bible's view of piety.

Encouraging Piety:

How can we conserve and promote true piety within the Christians in our churches? Phrasing the question differently reveals the size of the task: how can we teach our people to love God rightly? This is the bulk of the task of ministry, so it is certain that a chapter like this can only scratch the surface. Since my focus is local churches, I will narrow my attention to some practical matters of church life.

While piety must be taught, it is mostly caught. Christians learn to love God ordinately by observing other Christians doing so. It is as Christians worship, serve, and dwell together that younger believers learn what a life of love for God is. This leads to several points where church leaders can direct his attention.

First, corporate worship is central to the development of piety. Someone crisply stated this when he wrote, "corporate worship is the catechism of the affections." Corporate worship does more than offer worship to our worthy God; it also trains believers how to respond to God. If corporate worship treats God flippantly, that much is taught as a response to God. If corporate worship is relaxed and rests lightly on the consciousness of the worshiper, he learns that he should respond similarly to God throughout the week. If corporate worship contains a mixture of reverence, joy, contrition, thanksgiving, and hope, the worshiper comes to expect something similar for his own devotions. Corporate worship communicates volumes regarding how we address God, how we imagine Him, and what we expect when we encounter Him. Each corporate worship event in a local church's life is a concentrated demonstration of how that church imagines God. And as Tozer said, what comes into your mind when you think about God is the most important thing about you. For this reason, church leaders ought to consider each occasion of corporate worship as formative for

the Christian affections of those participating. Everything admitted becomes a form of endorsement; everything practiced becomes a model to follow.

Second, a church ought to encourage the kind of discipleship relationships we spoke of in chapter two. These relationships allow one believer to observe and learn what love for God looks like in the milieu of life by watching another believer. This is simply catechizing the affections through worship in everyday living instead of corporate worship. This is the best reason for churches setting up “fellowship events” outside of corporate worship. The goal is for believers to share their love of Christ with one another in settings beyond formal worship. It is another opportunity for example and exposure to have its effect on the affections. Too often, churches set up fellowship events without this in mind, reasoning that if people are simply thrown together often enough over a meal or dessert, they’ll inevitably be closer. While a superficial closeness may indeed grow, only if what unites believers—Christ—is shared each time they gather can real fellowship take place.

A third form of example and exposure is to encourage church members to spend time with the church of the past, by reading their writings, hymns, and prayers. In so doing, they are exposed to the piety of Christians outside of their current Christian culture, which is by itself enough to cause some cognitive dissonance. Spending serious time with the piety of historic Christianity tends to make most of our worship and piety seem clownish by comparison. Of course, some caveats will have to be supplied, but the doctrinal errors to be navigated are small in comparison to the massive benefits of being exposed to pious Christians.

Next week, we will continue to consider how orthopraxy is to be fostered and taught.