

Worship – the Rule of Prescription

Now all over the world today, all kinds of things are taking place in the name of God, and in places that claim to be churches. The people doing these things claim to be worshipping God. Amongst the things that will be done will be plays and dramas, art exhibitions, strongmen demonstrations, comedians, jugglers, magicians, puppet-shows, flag-waving, movie-screenings, dancing, barking and convulsing, people falling over backwards, people jabbering in gibberish, women preaching or prophesying to mixed groups; icons will be kissed; contemplative mystical prayer will be practiced; holy water will be sprinkle; Jesus' body will be sacrificed on an altar for people to eat; priests will burn incense; saints will be praised and prayed to; Mary will be prayed to; rabbinic prayers will be made; Davidic dancing will take place; demons will be cast out publicly; people will be called forward to be healed - and many more.

Now who is to decide which, if any, of these things is to be included in worship? Who decides? One of the most fundamental points of worship we need to understand is this: who decides how we worship God? Who regulates worship? Who decides? Once we determine who decides how we worship God, we can go to that authority, and find out what is acceptable worship to God.

Now at this point, you really only have two choices. Either God decides, and man follows God's prescriptions, or man decides. That is, man takes God's prescriptions as a good starting point, after which he changes, omits, renovates, adds and subtracts.

Once we answer this question, we are on the road to restoring biblical worship.

The first question we must ask is, whose church is it?

That's easy to answer. It's God's church, not man's.

Being God's church, He gives us instructions regarding how He wants us to act in it.

1 Timothy 3:14-15 *These things I write to you, though I hope to come to you shortly; ¹⁵ but if I am delayed, I write so that you may know how you ought to conduct yourself in the house of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and ground of the truth.*

It is God's church, and God breathes out Scripture so that Timothy and all others who would read this may know how to behave in church. Now do you think that this would include worship? Absolutely. God wants His people to know how to conduct themselves in church, when they assemble and outside of it.

The second question we must ask is, how detailed are those instructions?

2 Timothy 3:16-17 All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, ¹⁷ that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work.

If all Scripture results in a Christian being completely and thoroughly equipped, then how sufficient are the Scriptures? How much will we need to add to them to behave correctly in church? How much will we need to add to the worship He prescribes, to worship Him adequately? How much of it can we omit and worship Him adequately?

So, let's just reason together. It's God's church. God tells us how to behave in His church. Behaving in church certainly includes worship. God's instructions for how to worship are totally sufficient and nothing needs to be added to them.

So then, that leads us to a third question. If God's church has received full and complete instructions regarding worship, *what does God think of our adding to His prescribed worship?*

1 Kings 12:25-33 tains of Ephraim, and dwelt there. Also he went out from there and built Penuel. ²⁶ And Jeroboam said in his heart, "Now the kingdom may return to the house of David: ²⁷ "If these people go up to offer sacrifices in the house of the LORD at Jerusalem, then the heart of this people will turn back to their lord, Rehoboam king of Judah, and they will kill me and go back to Rehoboam king of Judah." ²⁸ Therefore the king asked advice, made two calves of gold, and said to the people, "It is too much for you to go up to Jerusalem. Here are your gods, O Israel, which brought you up from the land of Egypt!" ²⁹ And he set up one in Bethel, and the other he put in Dan. ³⁰ Now this thing became a sin, for the people went to worship before the one as far as Dan. ³¹ He made shrines on the high places, and made priests from every class of people, who were not of the sons of Levi. ³² Jeroboam ordained a feast on the fifteenth day of the eighth month, like the feast that was in Judah, and offered sacrifices on the altar. So he did at Bethel, sacrificing to the calves that he had made. And at Bethel he installed the priests of the high places which he had made. ³³ So he made offerings on the altar which he had made at Bethel on the fifteenth day of the eighth month, in the month which he had devised in his own heart. And he ordained a feast for the children of Israel, and offered sacrifices on the altar and burned incense.

Jeroboam quite simply innovated and renovated the worship which God had prescribed for Israel:

1. Firstly, he made a representation of God.
2. Secondly, he compromised when it came to the priesthood, and rewrote the rules as to who could function in that office.
3. Thirdly, he appealed to convenience by setting up two worship centres close to the ten tribes so that they would not have to go down to Jerusalem.
4. Fourthly, he came up with new feast days.

At this stage, this was still worship of Jehovah. But God called it false worship, and it did not take long at all for it to become open idolatry.

What did God think of this innovation?

1 Kings 14:7-11 Go, tell Jeroboam, 'Thus says the LORD God of Israel: "Because I exalted you from among the people, and made you ruler over My people Israel, ⁸ "and tore the kingdom away from the house of David, and gave it to you; and yet you have not been as My servant David, who kept My commandments and who followed Me with all his heart, to do only *what was* right in My eyes; ⁹ "but you have done more evil than all who were before you, for you have gone and made for yourself other gods and molded images to provoke Me to anger, and have cast Me behind your back -- ¹⁰ "therefore behold! I will bring disaster on the house of Jeroboam, and will cut off from Jeroboam every male in Israel, bond and free; I will take away the remnant of the house of Jeroboam, as one takes away refuse until it is all

gone. ¹¹ "The dogs shall eat whoever belongs to Jeroboam and dies in the city, and the birds of the air shall eat whoever dies in the field; for the LORD has spoken!" "

Now for the sake of time, let me just refer to a few more incidents where individuals added to worship:

1. Aaron decided to represent God with a golden calf and told Israel that the next day would be a feast unto Jehovah.
2. Nadab and Abihu decided to offer strange fire on the altar.
3. Saul decided to offer a sacrifice when he thought that Samuel wasn't coming.
4. David had the Ark carried on an ox-cart instead of on the shoulders of the priest, and when it toppled, Uzza the priest stretched out his hand and touched it.
5. Solomon, and numerous kings after him, kept worshipping God on the high places.
6. King Uzziah decided to offer incense in the Temple.
7. The priests in Malachi's day brought sick, lame, stolen or diseased animals to sacrifice.

Now in each case, what was God's response? God was mightily displeased. He killed Uzza, Nadab and Abihu on the spot. He took the kingdom away from Saul. He struck Uzziah with leprosy.

Why did God respond like this? Because in each case, he had already prescribed how He wanted to be worshipped:

1. He had told Aaron not to make a graven image.
2. He had told Nadab and Abihu what kind of fire could be offered in numerous places in the Law.
3. He had told Saul that it was Samuel's job as the judge and priest to offer the sacrifice.
4. He had told Israel how the Ark was to be carried in Ex 25:14
5. He had told all Israel in Deuteronomy 12:2 that He did not want to be worshipped on the high places.
6. He had told Uzziah that it was the job of priests, not kings to offer incense.

In other words, God was offended by the actions of these people because they were deciding for God, how He was to be worshipped, when He had already decided and made it clear.

Now what this means is that when it comes to worshipping God, God has told us how He wants to be worshipped. He has regulated worship by giving us clear commands as to what He wants. Since we are not Israel, but are the church, the New Testament provides us with very clear commands as to how He wants to be worshipped.

Now let me give you a little bit of history to help make sense of this.

The medieval church added all kinds of innovations to worship – the sale of indulgences, the office of a priest, the mass as a sacrifice, the pope's authority, the worship of the saints, the obtaining of merit through good works. These were and are worship innovations. What Martin Luther did was reject these worship innovations.

However, Luther did not object to all of the innovations. He kept some of them. He operated on what theologians call the Normative Principle. If he couldn't see that the Bible prohibited it, he did it.

Calvin and Zwingli went further. They said, it isn't enough to say, if the Bible doesn't say "no" to it, then it's OK because that opens the door to just about anything. If God were to fill His Word listing out everything He forbids in worship, it would take up the whole book. Man's perverted creativity could come with endless worship innovations.

The right approach is to say, God tells us what He doesn't want by detailing what He does want. If He prescribes something, then if something isn't one of the things He has prescribed, it is a worship innovation and to be rejected.

This is what we call the Regulative Principle, or the Rule of Prescription. Put simply it means that God regulates worship. God prescribes how He wants to be worshipped and He tells us in the New Testament.

What are the things He tells us to do?

1. gathering together (Hebrews 10:25, I Cor 11:18);
2. the reading of Scripture, (1 Tim 4:13);
3. exhortation and preaching (I Tim 4:13, 2 Tim 4:2);
4. corporate prayer (I Tim 2:1-8)
5. the singing of psalms, hymns and spiritual songs (Eph 5:19, Col 3:16);
6. the collection of offerings (2 Cor 8, I Cor 16:1-2)
7. the celebration of the Lord's Supper (I Cor 11:23-34); and the administration of baptism (Matt 28:19);
8. and, when necessary- the administration of church discipline (Matthew 18:17-20, I Cor 5:4-5).

Now, we might congratulate ourselves that these are the things which we do. But there are things which go on in our churches which you have to ask, when did God call for this?

Does the New Testament call for skits or plays to teach us truth? Does it call for drama to be acted out in front of us – either by actors, or by a film that is played? Now I don't have an objection to showing a missionary's story or presentation on certain occasions. But does the Bible call us to show the films during a service? Does the New Testament call for puppet shows for the children during a corporate worship service?

Or, let's turn it around- the Bible calls for the public reading of Scripture. Do we do that?

The Bible calls for the Lord's Supper. What are we doing if we don't practice it in our church for months, if not years?

We must discipline ourselves to learn these eight elements of New Testament worship, so that we can spot when something has been omitted, or when something has been added.

Now the Bible doesn't prescribe things that have to do with the circumstances of worship. It doesn't tell us what kind of music to use - whether we should have specials, ensembles, choirs, hymns, folk songs, anthems, offertories, preludes, postludes, solos. It doesn't tell us how much of the Scripture we should read. It doesn't tell us the order for the Lord's Supper service. It doesn't tell us how long corporate prayer should be or who should do it.

These are things that are decided by wisdom and good judgement. When our judgement is being shaped by the Word to discern good from bad, excellent from inferior, better from worse, we can better determine how to use these elements. However, Christian judgement doesn't tell us what elements to use; it simply guides us as we use them. God has already decided how He wants to be worshipped and has told us.

But the lesson of Jereboam, the kings of Judah, the Roman Catholic Church is this: introduce an innovation in worship, and it soon becomes a distraction and a deviation from God. Persist with the deviation, and it becomes a perversion. After a while, the perversion becomes idolatry. When you hear about barking revivals, vomiting revivals, prayers to icons, you are hard pressed not to conclude that such people may already be there – worshipping a god who is not the God of Scripture. That's why God is so protective over His worship. What He prescribes is carefully chosen by Him to reveal Himself to us, so that we may know Him and love Him. Let's remember the Rule of Prescription. Let's not tinker with worship or innovate.