

Worship – Who Decides?

When you listen to children arguing, sometimes you will hear one of them question the statement of another by saying “Says who?” Children, even at that stage are calling for one another to make their case using authority. By what authority do you say that, or claim that? Who says?

If only we could transplant that simple attitude to worship, and look at everything we do in worship and ask, 'Says who?' Who gave us the right or command to do this? We would make great strides in the worship wars if we agreed upon who decides what worship must be offered to God. Who authorises worship? Who regulates it?

As we study Scripture, we find that the worship God wants, is the worship He has commanded. And there is a good reason God commands worship. God is holy, and apart from His guidance, we'll fall into idolatry.

The word *holy* is often taken to mean God's moral purity and sinlessness. However, while moral perfection is part of the meaning of *holy*, it is not the primary meaning. The primary meaning of the word *holy* is actually the idea of 'otherness'. What is holy is not common and familiar. What is holy is separate from us. What is holy is set apart from what is average and familiar. Whatever is holy is other, different, set apart.

For God to be holy is for Him to be other than what we are, or what we know. God's holiness is His uniqueness. It is what sets Him apart from us and everything we know. It is what makes God - God. The holiness of God is the Godness of God. It is the uniqueness of God that makes Him unlike any god we can imagine or conjure up. As Scriptures says again and again, there is none like unto God. Nothing in all creation is a full or perfect analogy of God.

This is exactly why God warned Israel about how they would worship Him:

“Deuteronomy 4:15-18 " Take careful heed to yourselves, for you saw no form when the LORD spoke to you at Horeb out of the midst of the fire, ¹⁶ "lest you act corruptly and make for yourselves a carved image in the form of any figure: the likeness of male or female, ¹⁷ "the likeness of any animal that is on the earth or the likeness of any winged bird that flies in the air, ¹⁸ "the likeness of anything that creeps on the ground or the likeness of any fish that is in the water beneath the earth.

“Exodus 20:4-5 " You shall not make for yourself a carved image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth; ⁵ you shall not bow down to them nor serve them.

God does not have some irrational aversion to sculpture. God forbids a physical representation of Himself because it is impossible to physically represent Him. God is holy - He is other. If you try to visualise Him as something material, He is other than that. If you give Him some physical shape in your mind, He is other than that. He is unlike anything we know, and therefore He abominates any attempt to make some sculpture and say, “This is what God is like,” or “This represents God.”

But this presents us with a problem. How do you worship a holy God? If God is like nothing we know, what is the ever present danger when we attempt to worship Him? To worship the invisible, holy God is to be on a knife-edge that can slip into idolatry.

We saw last time that true worship is a response to revelation. God reveals Himself to us, when the Spirit of God takes the Word of God and shows us the Son of God. But God does a lot more than that. God does not merely reveal who He is, but He reveals how to worship Him. God Himself

regulates and prescribes His own worship. And the arena in which He trains us to worship Him is corporate worship.

See, worship occurs in more than one realm. There is private worship, where you appear before God alone to meditate on Scripture, pray, and even sing before the Lord. Jesus Himself would often find desolate or solitary places to be alone with God. That's private worship.

Then there's family worship, where you gather together as a family to read the Scriptures together, pray, learn from the Word, and again, perhaps you sing.

There's what we might call perpetual worship, or lifestyle worship. This is where you offer your whole life up to God as a living sacrifice, seeking to do all that you do, in word or deed in the name of the Lord Jesus and for the glory of God.

And then there's corporate worship, where we assemble together in the name of the Lord Jesus for the purpose of worship, and then with one mouth we pray the Word, sing the Word, read the Word, preach the Word and demonstrate the Word.

Each of these four realms of worship is important. Each one feeds into the others. To weaken or neglect one is to weaken and neglect the others. To feed and strengthen one is to feed and strengthen the others.

Nevertheless, I would suggest that corporate worship, when used rightly, is the first among equals of these four. If corporate worship is ordinate and received properly, a Christian learns volumes for his own devotion and practical consecration in life. In so many ways, worship is learnt by example, and then transferred to the private and lifestyle realm.

If a man misreads the Scriptures, misreading them more often in private will not help him. If a man misunderstands prayer, praying wrongly as he drives will not improve it. But if he is taught how to read the Scriptures and pray in corporate worship, he can transfer that to his private, family and lifestyle realms. Corporate worship serves as the true north with which to reset the compass of our hearts. Therefore God is most insistent that we learn of Him properly and respond to Him properly in corporate worship. Corporate worship is where the believer learns worship by example and exposure.

For that reason, God regulates corporate worship in a very specific way. He regulates corporate worship in a way that He does not for lifestyle worship or private worship. The reason is that corporate worship is the classroom of worship. Corporate worship is the most pronounced, concentrated kind of worship we do. We unite our voices, minds and hearts and specifically meet to hear from and respond to God. For the purposes of this series, we will focus on corporate worship which sets the tone for the others.

Now at this point, someone might object and say, "Where do we see in Scripture that God regulates His own worship?" Let me attempt to introduce that truth both positively and negatively. Positively speaking, we'll see the examples where God's own Word directed worship, and negatively speaking, where God's anger broke out against those who did not follow His prescriptions for worship.

Consider some positive evidence that God has always insisted that people worship Him according to His instructions:

We see Cain and Abel's worship. Abel apparently responding in faith to revelation, Cain failing to do so. Cain's worship was rejected, Abel's accepted.

He did this for Israel, giving them 613 commandments and prohibitions, many of which had to do with worship. God was not satisfied to tell Israel who He was and allow them to creatively come up with a response. God told them who He was and dictated what their response ought to be. Before constructing the tabernacle, God told Moses:

“Exodus 25:40 And see to it that you make them according to the pattern which was shown you on the mountain.

God's Word has always governed worship. When God speaks of false worship, He calls it worship which He did not call for:

Jeremiah 19:5 "(they have also built the high places of Baal, to burn their sons with fire for burnt offerings to Baal, which I did not command or speak, nor did it come into My mind),

When Jesus rebuked the Pharisees for their false worship, He said that they had made their traditions equal to the commandments of God, and had thereby transgressed the Word of God. They had gone beyond what was written, so Jesus says of them, quoting Isaiah:

“Matthew 15:9 ⁹ And in vain they worship Me, Teaching as doctrines the commandments of men.”

When Paul writes to correct the worship at Corinth, with apostolic authority, he tells them to worship in a particular way. He lays down written instructions, and finishes with this statement:

“1 Corinthians 14:37 If anyone thinks himself to be a prophet or spiritual, let him acknowledge that the things which I write to you are the commandments of the Lord.:

Paul writes to the Colossians in the same way, correcting their heresies and additions to worship. Particularly in the pastoral epistles, we see instructions for New Testament worship. We also see this principle negatively. We see the penalty of adding, or modifying, or otherwise tinkering with what God prescribed. Let me refer you to three worship casualties:

The first two were the sons of Aaron, Nadab and Abihu.
The brief word we have on them in is Leviticus:

Leviticus 10:1-3 Then Nadab and Abihu, the sons of Aaron, each took his censer and put fire in it, put incense on it, and offered profane fire before the LORD, which He had not commanded them. ² So fire went out from the LORD and devoured them, and they died before the LORD. ³ And Moses said to Aaron, "This is what the LORD spoke, saying: 'By those who come near Me I must be regarded as holy; And before all the people I must be glorified.' " So Aaron held his peace.

Nadab and Abihu did not start worshipping another God. They did not refuse to wear their priestly garments, or fail to bring the required sacrifice. All they did was substitute some fire of their own devising for the fire God had commanded. All they did, in the act of worshipping God, was to innovate a little when it came to God's worship.

These were two men engaged in the service and worship of God. They were undoubtedly sincere. For reasons we don't know, they used a different kind of fire, or perhaps a different kind of incense. Maybe they thought it didn't matter. Maybe it was difficult to get the fire as God has prescribed it. Maybe they thought they were improving on the kind of fire God commanded. Whatever their reason, they deviated from God's prescriptions, and they paid the ultimate price. Scripture is clear:

the fire they offered was fire He had not commanded them.

Notice, He hadn't forbidden that fire. Many say, if God hasn't explicitly forbidden something, then we can do it. But God hadn't forbidden such fire. Instead He had positively commanded a particular kind of fire in Exodus 30 and 31. Their fire was their own creative innovation.

God's Word to Aaron through Moses is essentially this: "You will not worship me your way. You will worship me My way. I am unique, and you will follow my unique prescriptions of worship to the finest detail. You are not permitted to introduce your own, common ways of worshipping Me.

Let me show you the third person who was a casualty of worship:

1 Chronicles 13:6-12 And David and all Israel went up to Baalah, to Kirjath Jearim, which belonged to Judah, to bring up from there the ark of God the LORD, who dwells between the cherubim, where His name is proclaimed. ⁷ So they carried the ark of God on a new cart from the house of Abinadab, and Uzza and Ahio drove the cart. ⁸ Then David and all Israel played music before God with all their might, with singing, on harps, on stringed instruments, on tambourines, on cymbals, and with trumpets. ⁹ ¶ And when they came to Chidon's threshing floor, Uzza put out his hand to hold the ark, for the oxen stumbled. ¹⁰ Then the anger of the LORD was aroused against Uzza, and He struck him because he put his hand to the ark; and he died there before God. ¹¹ And David became angry because of the Lord's outbreak against Uzza; therefore that place is called Perez Uzza to this day. ¹² David was afraid of God that day, saying, "How can I bring the ark of God to me?"

Now look at the various elements you have present here:

Just like with Nadab and Abihu, you have a worship event going on. This is something being done to and for the glory of God.

You have a good thing going. It is a good thing to bring the Ark to Jerusalem.

You have the glory of God as the motive. There is a celebration of God going on here.

You have a lot of preparation. A preparation worthy of the thing being done.

You have full agreement by the leaders. You have a whole nation of people united for this event. No one, that we know of, is opposing it.

You have excellence in execution.

You have full sincerity.

You have a precedent for it. The Philistines had done this before without a problem.

You have a godly king, and the appointed Levitical priests on hand around the ark.

Providentially, one of the oxen stumbles. The Ark is about to tumble and unceremoniously crash to the ground. Uzza acts to stop that humiliating event, and puts out his hand to stop it from falling. God strikes him dead. And all that celebration comes to a shocking, disturbing halt.

Now what went wrong? You have sincerity here, don't you? You have a very high view of God's glory, don't you? You have a priest who is trying to help, not harm. You have zeal, commitment, devotion, sincerity, unity, good motives, the glory of God as the end goal - all in one.

What did they do wrong? Well, David would have been asking himself that question. David would have reviewed the whole thing. When you've put in that much effort, that much expense, that much zeal, and God breaks out against one of the priests, you are going to play the whole thing back. You're going to go and do some research and find out why that happened.

In the beginning of chapter 15, we see that David has come to the answer:

1 Chronicles 15:2 Then David said, "No one may carry the ark of God but the Levites, for the LORD has

chosen them to carry the ark of God and to minister before Him forever."

*1 Chronicles 15:12-15 He said to them, "You are the heads of the fathers' houses of the Levites; sanctify yourselves, you and your brethren, that you may bring up the ark of the LORD God of Israel to the place I have prepared for it. ¹³ "For because you did not do it the first time, the LORD our God broke out against us, because we did not **consult Him about the proper order.**" ¹⁴ So the priests and the Levites sanctified themselves to bring up the ark of the LORD God of Israel. ¹⁵ And the children of the Levites bore the ark of God on their shoulders, by its poles, as Moses had commanded according to the word of the LORD.*

David realised the problem was that they had worshipped God in a way that He had not commanded. They had transgressed a written prescription for worship:

"we did not consult Him about the proper order."

as Moses had commanded according to the word of the LORD."

David is saying – there was Scripture on this matter which we did not follow. This is the indispensable necessity of worship. You cannot replace this with sincerity, with worthy preparation, with zeal, with excellence.

They violated two prescriptions. The Ark was to be carried on the shoulders of the priests, not on an ox-cart. The Ark was never to be physically touched. What's amazing is that these prescriptions take up just two verses out of 23 000. David had two verses, and a violation of them overturned all the rest of the preparations.

Certainly there were pragmatic reasons why Israel had done this. The Ark could be better seen if on a cart. Maybe they were just copying the Philistines, who had sent it to Israelite territory on an ox-cart. We don't know the reasons, however sincere they may have been. Apparently, sincerity, pragmatism, good intentions, unanimous joy does not mitigate disobedient worship. Doing a good thing, for God, with unanimous human approval, with great excellence and expense, even if there has been a successful precedent for the thing, is not sufficient.

Now once again, God did not forbid carrying the Ark on a cart. He did not have to. By stating how He did want it carried, He necessarily outlawed all other possibilities.

Now we could speak of other negative examples which show God's displeasure at violating His positive directions for worship. We could speak of how God did not accept Saul's taking the priest's office, or his later offering of the spoil from the Amalekites, even though he had a pragmatic reason for it. We could speak of how God struck king Uzziah with leprosy for offering incense, when he was not a priest. We could speak of how many Judean kings allowed the worship of Yahweh to continue on the high places. We could speak of how God rebuked the priests in Malachi's day for bringing lame and diseased animals. All of those are recorded with God's displeasure. These are records of people who offered things in God's direction, but were soundly rejected, and even disciplined.

You see God does not have to accept worship simply because we offer it in his direction. He does not have to accept or worship simply because we mean well. He does not have to accept our worship because we have sincere motives. He does not have to accept our worship because we had sensible, practical reasons for doing it the way we did. If God has prescribed and commanded how He is to be worshipped, to do it any other way is disobedient, arrogant and ultimately idolatrous.

"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...is, that whatever they do has in itself a sufficient sanction, provided it exhibits some kind of zeal for the honour of God. 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?"

God takes deviations from His prescriptions very seriously. Why? Because a deviation in worship, introduced by one person in a position of power will usually result in outright idolatry by successive generations. A deviation from God's prescriptions for corporate worship will have massive effects on those who participate in it. What is done in the name of corporate worship has an authority to it which the other realms do not. When church leaders include elements of worship not prescribed by God, they are baptising those elements as necessary and right.

God's prescriptions are protective. God's prescriptions act like a preservative against the corrosive effects of our own idolatrous hearts. God's prescriptions act like a defensive wall against the ongoing attack from the the human heart's desire to turn God's worship into self-worship.

His prescriptions are designed to protect us from false notions and encourage the true. Some feel that that this principle of doing only what God prescribes, is a kind of legalistic straitjacket. But in truth, there is nothing more freeing than limiting our expression under authority. The man with the limitation of a parachute, and a shortened time of free-fall, enjoys it because those limitations protect him. The man who skydives without a parachute might seem more free, but his apparent freedom is actually his destruction.

Sometimes God doesn't tell us why He wants what He wants in worship. And it is not up to us to dispute that and tweak it. God doesn't have to tell us, and He often doesn't. God knows more than we do how forms communicate. If He forbids a visible depiction of Himself, and calls for musical worship, it is because He knows that one element would warp our view of Him, and another element, rightly used, will not. God knows that *how* we worship affects our view of *who* we worship. To worship the wrong god is idolatry, but to worship the right God in the wrong way is also idolatry.

So, it is hard to explain skits, films, strong-man demonstrations, comedians, magic shows, puppet shows, rap masters, jugglers, barking revivals, motorcycle demonstrations, flag-waving, dance, banner-waving, drama monologues, slain in the Spirit demonstrations and the like, as worship elements according to the New Testament. Yet they are performed every Sunday in churches across the world.

It is equally hard to explain older innovations like a New Testament 'altar', the Lord's Supper as a perpetual sacrifice, incense burning, veneration of saints, prayers to Mary or other saints, or the use of icons as worship elements according to the New Testament. An ancient innovation is still an innovation.

What if we made up our minds to only do in our services the things that please God? How would we know what pleases God? We would know what pleases God by doing only what He has positively commanded us to do in His Word. The principle of sola Scriptura logically leads to the principle of God's Word prescribing positively what we must do in worship. The Regulative Principle or Rule of Prescription states that we must worship God with the elements He has prescribed. If He has not called for it, we do not do it. If He has called for it, we have no business omitting it. And since we are part of the church, and the church is a New Testament entity, we go to the New Testament to find prescriptions for our worship.

So what does the New Testament tell prescribe for us in terms of worship?

First, the New Testament church is expected to gather for worship. This might seem obvious, but they are some who dispute this. They insist that the New Testament doesn't have God's people gathering in one place to worship corporately, like Israel did. Instead, they say, the New Testament church is always worshipping, and when it does gather, it's mainly for mutual encouragement and edification. But there are several reasons why the new Testament assumes that when the church gathers, it gathers to worship. One very important reason is that the New Testament calls the people of God corporately 'the temple of God'.

1 Corinthians 3:16-17 Do you not know that you are the temple of God and that the Spirit of God dwells in you? ¹⁷ If anyone defiles the temple of God, God will destroy him. For the temple of God is holy, which temple you are.

Ephesians 2:19-22 Now, therefore, you are no longer strangers and foreigners, but fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, ²⁰ having been built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ Himself being the chief cornerstone, ²¹ in whom the whole building, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord, ²² in whom you also are being built together for a dwelling place of God in the Spirit.

The temple of God is the place of worship. We individually, are living stones which make up that temple. When we gather together, we are the temple that offers up spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God.

1 Peter 2:4-5 Coming to Him as to a living stone, rejected indeed by men, but chosen by God and precious, ⁵ you also, as living stones, are being built up a spiritual house, a holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.

His church is the Temple. When we assemble, Christ is in our midst.

Second, when we gather, our worship is always a response to revelation. Therefore, at the centre of our worship is the Word of God. The Puritans used to say: read the Word, preach the Word, pray the Word, sing the Word and show the Word.

We are to read the Word publicly.

1 Timothy 4:13 ¹³ Till I come, give attention to reading, to exhortation, to doctrine.

Colossians 4:16 ¹⁶ Now when this epistle is read among you, see that it is read also in the church of the Laodiceans, and that you likewise read the epistle from Laodicea.

Sometimes we might read the substance of the Word in the form of creeds or church covenants. (1 Tim 6:12). Certain salvation testimonies would fall under this category, of confessing the gospel (1 Cor 15:1-3) Sometimes we might read blessings, calls to worship or benedictions from Scripture.

We are to preach the Word publicly.

2 Timothy 4:1-2 I charge you therefore before God and the Lord Jesus Christ, who will judge the living and the dead at His appearing and His kingdom: ² Preach the word! Be ready in season and out of season. Convince, rebuke, exhort, with all long suffering and teaching.

Certain testimonies or confessions are also a form of teaching (1 Cor 14:26), as are the songs (Col 3:16). Evangelistic preaching is part of this.

We are to pray the Word publicly.

1 Timothy 2:1-2 Therefore I exhort first of all that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and giving of thanks

be made for all men, ² for kings and all who are in authority, that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and reverence.

1 Timothy 2:8 ⁸ ¶ I desire therefore that the men pray everywhere, lifting up holy hands, without wrath and doubting;

We are to pray publicly. We need to pray prayers of adoration, and thanksgiving; prayers of confessions, and consecration; prayers of intercession and supplication. Certain oaths or vows are taken before God as prayers. Corporate fasting would also be a form of prayer.

We are to sing the Word publicly.

Ephesians 5:18-19 And do not be drunk with wine, in which is dissipation; but be filled with the Spirit, ¹⁹ speaking to one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody in your heart to the Lord,

Colossians 3:16 ¹⁶ Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly in all wisdom, teaching and admonishing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with grace in your hearts to the Lord.

We are to show the Word publicly.

Luke 22:19 ¹⁹ And He took bread, gave thanks and broke it, and gave it to them, saying, "This is My body which is given for you; do this in remembrance of Me."

1 Corinthians 11:26 ²⁶ For as often as you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death till He comes.

Matthew 28:19-20 "Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, ²⁰ "teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age." Amen.

To that, some might add the **collection of offerings** based on 1 Corinthians 16:1-2

1 Corinthians 16:1-2 ¶ Now concerning the collection for the saints, as I have given orders to the churches of Galatia, so you must do also: ² On the first day of the week let each one of you lay something aside, storing up as he may prosper, that there be no collections when I come.

Now there will be broad and strict interpretations of these prescriptions, but beyond these, we do not have a warrant. There'll be different ways of applying these prescriptions, which we'll talk about next. But the bottom line we all have to agree on, is that God determines how He is to be worshipped, and He determines it in His Word. God's Word is our worship manual. Not pragmatic concerns, not culture, not popularity, not Christian consensus, not tradition, not sincerity, not even God-glorifying motives. The Word of God decides what we do in worship.

Once again, and in closing, the words of the Westminster Confession:

“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, or the suggestions of Satan, under any visible representation, or any other way not prescribed in the holy Scripture.