

What Is Reformed Worship?



We live in a place and time of unparalleled individual freedom of choice. We choose how we dress from an almost endless number of options. We decide whether we want our books in paper or digital format. Young people graduating from high school or college enjoy a host of vocational opportunities. Our culture trains us to think that we should be able to have things our way. In the 1990s, Burger King advertised its menu with the slogan, “your way, right away.” In the 1980s, AT&T advertised themselves as “the right choice” for telecommunication and technology needs. Since the 1970s, abortion advocates have referred to their movement as pro-choice, a very clever appeal to that value which seems to enjoy sovereignty in our society.

This emphasis on choice and individual freedom has significant implications for how we view worship. With the combination of personal mobility and the increasing smorgasbord of church flavors, Americans today have almost limitless latitude in terms of how, where, and when we worship. To be fair, these worship options are not necessarily bad or to be avoided, but they do challenge us to sift through the options with biblical wisdom.

Many people seem to weigh their worship options on the scale of personal preference and emotional attraction: “I like more energetic worship, so I attend church X” or, “I prefer more contemplative worship, so I go to church Y.” Too seldom do people reflect on worship by asking the following kinds of questions: “Does God have anything to say about how I worship? Should something more than my feelings and preferences determine how and where I meet with

God? Is there an authoritative guide to Christian worship? What kind of worship pleases God?" To answer these questions, we must turn to Scripture.

Worship is Standardized by Scripture

God reveals in his Word that he is deeply concerned about how he is worshiped. He reserves for himself the right to decide how his people will worship him. In the old covenant, he made this supremely clear to his people when he gave them his law. The first two of the Ten Commandments require that we worship God alone, and only in a way that conforms to his will (Exod. 20:3f). The Second Commandment in particular reveals that Israel was not free to worship God any way they pleased but only in a way that pleased God. In our Reformed churches we call this the "Regulative Principle of Worship"—the proper application of the Second Commandment such that all worship is done in accordance with the Word of God. The Heidelberg Catechism explains clearly what God requires of us in this commandment:

Q. 96. What is God's will for us in the Second Commandment?

A. That we in no way make any image of God nor worship him in any other way than he has commanded in his Word.

In other words, not everything that moves us emotionally (like an image) is appropriate for worship. The governing question in many modern churches is, "What will produce a stimulating spiritual feeling?" The question ought to be, "What does God want worship services to look like?" While no single church or tradition answers that question perfectly, many churches today are no longer asking the question. Nadab and Abihu should have asked that question. God commanded them to worship him in a particular fashion. Ignoring the details about acceptable worship, they offered "strange fire" to God, for which he consumed them with his own holy fire (Lev. 10:1–2).

This principle that God regulates worship flies in the face of much of what passes for worship today. Instead of being regulated by Scripture, much worship nowadays is regulated by personal preference, and driven by an itch for innovation. But our lawgiver governs our worship with full authority. He still says to his people, "Everything that I command you, you shall be careful to do. You shall

not add to it or take from it" (Deut. 12:32; cf. Matt. 28:20). We are not free now in the new covenant to offer God our own strange fire in worship. Rather, we must "offer to God acceptable worship, with reverence and awe, for our God is a consuming fire" (Heb. 12:28f).

The regulative principle of worship is often perceived as a confining and stifling thing that would remove joy and vibrancy from the worship of God. But the truth is, when our worship is regulated by the Scriptures, we have the assurance that our liberty to worship God in an acceptable way is protected from the attempts of man to bind our consciences to do in worship what is designed only to please man. To be ruled in worship by the all-sufficient Word of God is not confining and limiting but actually something that liberates us from the false rule of man, and liberates us for the true worship of God.

Worship Is Structured by Scripture

Not only does the Bible stipulate what particular elements of worship are acceptable to God, but it also suggests to us the overall covenantal structure that worship should have. A covenant is a binding relationship between two or more parties. Worship is a formal covenantal meeting between the Great King and his subjects.

God delivered Israel out of Egypt so that his redeemed people could meet and renew covenant with him (Exod. 6:2–9). Contrary to contemporary opinion, worship is not meant to be an evangelistic crusade. The gospel must always be faithfully preached with both unbelievers and believers in mind. But the worship service is primarily a holy convocation between God and his covenant people, namely professing believers with their children.

Though this teaching often goes unrecognized, Scripture clearly assumes the involvement of the whole family in worship (Deut. 31:10–13; Eph. 6:1–4; Col. 3:18–20). It should not surprise us that God's commandment regarding the manner of proper worship should contain generational curses and blessings (Exod. 20:5f). Our worship services give our children an early and often unshakeable impression of who God is and how we must relate to him. Services which suggest that we can approach God on our terms, governed only by the limits of our imagination, give our children a dreadfully defective impression of who God is and how we must find him. Seeker-sensitive worship can even threaten one's commitment to the biblical Christ, by whose merits alone we can approach God (Heb. 10:19–22).

Another aspect of covenantal worship that the Bible reveals to us is the dialogical nature of our meeting with God, so that the two covenant parties are drawn together in conversation with one

another. While Scripture does not provide us with an explicit liturgy for a worship service, it nevertheless reveals the basic elements. The book of Acts tells us that the first new covenant congregation “devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers” (2:42). As the rest of the New Testament makes clear, these are the essential elements of a worship service: the preaching of the Word (“the apostles’ teaching”), the communion of saints (“fellowship”), the sacraments (“the breaking of bread”), and prayer and singing (“the prayers”).

These elements help form the dialogue between God and his people. God speaks to us in his Word and sacraments, and we respond to him in prayer and song. He calls us to worship, and we respond by pledging our dependence upon him (Ps. 124:8). God then announces his greeting of grace and peace to his covenant people (Rom. 1:7; 1 Cor. 1:3; 2 Cor. 1:2; Gal. 1:3–5; Eph. 1:2; Phil. 1:2; Col. 1:2; 1 Thess. 1:1; 2 Thess. 1:1f). We confess our sins (Ps. 51), and cry out with our needs (Ps. 18:6). God responds with forgiveness (Ps. 32; Ps. 130:3–6) and with his provision for us in his Word and sacraments (2 Cor. 5:18–20; Heb. 12:25; 2 Tim. 4:1–5; 1 Cor. 10:16; Rev. 12:6, 14). We worship him for his goodness (Ps. 147). He sends us forth with his blessing (2 Cor. 13:14). This historic and sound pattern of worship helps to make our covenant meeting with God a spiritually rich one, as God’s gracious word to us enlivens us to respond in accordance with his will.

Worship is Saturated with Scripture

Contrary to the practice of some churches, Christian worship is inherently verbal, not visual. The Second Commandment explicitly condemns making images of God, not just because it is impossible for God to be adequately represented by an image, but because God will not permit us to draw near to him by the use of images that will distract us from his Word. The golden calf was not another god but Israel’s attempt to serve Jehovah by visual means, when they should have waited for his Word (Exod. 32:4f; cf. Deut. 4:9–19). By implication, the historic Protestant church has been critical of the use of images to represent any of the three persons of the Trinity, including Christ.

Images give a biased impression of God based on the artist’s creative abilities and theological proclivities. A beautiful image of Christ would stand in contrast to his description in Isa. 53:2: “he had no form or majesty that we should look at him, and no beauty that we should desire him.” An Anglo-Saxon image of Christ, apart from being historically inaccurate, would communicate an ethno-centricity. A cartoonish image of Christ runs the risk of stripping the second person of the Trinity of the dignity which he deserves. It is not simply that a visible image of Christ would fail to communicate his divinity (thereby implying a separation of his two natures), but that every image of Christ is necessarily an attempt to make an image of God. For a time, God saw fit to send to earth his Son as his fleshly image (Col. 1:15; Heb. 1:3). But then, after taking this image back to heaven, he gave us his written Word, which sufficiently reveals God to us. At this present time, we do not see the Word made flesh, but we are to hear him (1 Pet. 1:8f). Not by crucifixes and paintings are we to see Christ, but through the sacraments of baptism and the Lord’s Supper, those “pictures” of Jesus which have been prescribed by the Lord himself.

When God called Israel out of Egypt to Mount Sinai, it was abundantly clear that he had center stage, and that his speech should stop every mouth (Deut. 5:4f, 23–27). When the church gathers for worship God still speaks (Heb. 12:25–27). We honor God’s Word the way Cornelius received Peter: “Now therefore we are all here in the presence of God to hear all that you have been commanded by the Lord” (Acts 10:33). This means Scripture must be read (1 Tim. 4:13), preached (2 Tim. 4:2), and sung (Col. 3:16). God’s revelation should even permeate our prayers (Matt. 6:9–13).

Worshippers Are Sanctified by Scripture

In the worship service, God serves his people with his Word and sacraments. These are God’s ordained means of grace to sanctify his people. Before he went to the cross, Jesus prayed to the Father, “Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth” (John 17:17). The preaching of the gospel is the means God uses not only to grant us faith (Rom. 10:17) but also to strengthen it (Rom. 16:25). Likewise, the Lord’s Supper is a real communion and participation in the body and blood of Christ in heaven (1 Cor. 10:16; cf. John 6:51–58). These means of grace are indispensable to the sanctification and spiritual growth of every Christian.

Through the prophet Isaiah, God revealed that our very lives depend on hearing and receiving his Word: “Listen diligently to me, and eat what is good, and delight yourselves in rich food. Incline your ear, and come to me; hear, that your soul may live” (Isa. 55:2–3). In the new covenant, God feeds his people with this food for the soul. This is why Jesus commissioned Peter with the words, “Feed my lambs . . . Feed my sheep” (John 21:15, 17). Just as physical food provides nourishment for the body and gladdens the heart, the spiritual food God provides in Word and sacrament gives the believer spiritual nourishment and everlasting joy.

Curved in on ourselves in selfish introspection and idol worship, we need an external Word, a voice that comes from outside of ourselves to interfere with our make-believe worlds and to tell us the truth. We need to hear that surprising message of a holy God justifying the wicked through Christ. The “living preaching of his Word,” as the Heidelberg Catechism puts it in Question 98, is God’s ordained means to accomplish this. It is an intrusive act by the Holy Spirit, driving us out of ourselves and directing our faith to the promises of God, which are all “yes” and “amen” in Christ Jesus (2 Cor. 1:20).

The primary purpose of going to church, therefore, is not to serve God, but to be served by him. The same Lord who once rose from supper, laid aside his outer garments, tied a towel around his waist, and washed the feet of his disciples, continues to condescend to his followers, and to serve them in Word and sacrament. He summons us to a corporate, festive event in the call to worship. Each week, through the Ministry of the Word, he spreads a table in the wilderness, setting before us excellent food and drink for the soul.

Our response to this feast is to worship God with reverence, zeal, and joy. In the worship service, God does not bring us to the terror of Mount Sinai but to the festal gathering of Mount Zion above (Heb. 12:18–24). Yet, he is still a holy God and a consuming fire, and must be worshiped with both gratitude and awe, and in full accordance with his Word (Heb 12:28f).

Appendix 5

What About Infant Baptism?



“Why does your church baptize babies?” This is a common question asked by visitors to a Reformed church. Since the historic practice of baptizing the children of believers has fallen on hard times, what used to be the norm among Protestants is now a foreign concept to many. Consequently, the doctrine of infant baptism can be a difficult hurdle for a person who is interested in joining a confessional, Reformed church.

So why *do* Reformed churches baptize children? The answer is simple: *We baptize the children of believers because they belong to the covenant and people of God.* While this answer is simple, it nevertheless requires some explanation. As with many doctrines, such as the Trinity or the deity of Christ, the doctrine of infant baptism requires a broader approach to Scripture than reading a few proof-texts. In order for us to understand this doctrine, we must first think about God’s covenant of grace with his people, and the nature of his church.

Perhaps the simplest approach to understanding this doctrine is by beginning with the Heidelberg Catechism’s concise explanation of infant baptism:

Q. 74. Should infants, too, be baptized?

A. Yes. Infants as well as adults are in God’s covenant and are his people. They, no less than adults, are promised the forgiveness of sin through Christ’s blood and the Holy Spirit who produces faith. Therefore, by baptism, the mark of the covenant, infants should be received into the Christian church and should be distinguished from the