

The Outward Elements of Worship

Series: Thoughts on Worship

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Psalm 95 — **Call to Worship.**

Earlier this year we looked together at an incident recorded in the first 11 verses of Leviticus 10. In this account two of Aaron's sons came to the tabernacle and offered strange fire before the LORD. That is, they brought something before God that was foreign to worship.

They had their own ideas about how God should be worshipped—ways of worship that God had not revealed or commanded. When they brought their strange fire, God's judgment was swift and severe. They both immediately died in His presence.

God was teaching His people a hard lesson: He is holy and those who serve Him must regard Him as holy and teach others to regard Him as holy. Unlike God, we are sinful and unholy. And we cannot approach God in our unholiness—by our own sinful ways and methods. No matter how sincere our efforts, no matter how brilliant or creative our plans, they will never measure up to God's holiness. The only way we can come to God and enter into His presence is by a way that He Himself must provide—that is the way of salvation by faith alone in Christ alone.

God is holy and He alone determines how His people are to approach Him and worship Him.

And so we must worship Him as holy as proclaim Him as the holy, sovereign God. We must worship and proclaim Him His way— according to His Word. And we must point people to Christ alone—who is the only way, the truth and the life; no one comes to the Father except through Him (John 14:6).

Tonight I want to return to our study of worship and look in more detail at how we are to worship God now in the time of the New Testament. How can we know the right way to worship God? In this message we will consider the **outward elements of worship**—what activities should comprise and shape our order of worship. In a later message we will look at the **inward reality of worship**—what takes place in the heart when we worship God.

What are we to do when we come together for corporate worship? This is an important issue to discuss. Some churches in our day are incorporating everything from weightlifting exhibitions to puppet shows and calling it worship. How do we know what to include or exclude from times of corporate worship? This is a question we must answer if we are to have good foundation and clear, biblical direction in planning and preparing for our worship services.

Let me suggest a few scenarios.

Let's say a family joins our church and one of their sons is an aspiring painter. He is an artist who paints beautiful landscapes depicting God's creation. The family sees that we have accomplished musicians in the church using their gifts in worship, so, they reason, why not have a service where our son paints a picture to the glory of God. Preaching is proclamation—declaring a message; painting has meaning and communicates a message—so what's the difference? Why not?

Or perhaps their daughter is an accomplished dancer—a ballerina, who has spent countless hours perfecting her art. Who is to deny her the opportunity to share an interpretive dance in service? After all, David and others danced before the LORD in the Old Testament. Psalm 150:4 says to praise God with the dance. Why shouldn't we have discreet and meaningful dance from time to time in our services?

Or maybe Pastor Tom has a busy week and there just isn't much time for him to study and prepare for Sunday morning. But he knows of a good movie—it has a good plot, a helpful message, and it's engaging. Why not forgo the sermon this week and watch a film instead? After all, this is the 21st century, we have the technology—we can do it. Movies proclaim a message. People like to watch movies. Why not seize the opportunities of our day?

These are all issues churches in our day have faced—issues churches have faced and reached different conclusions. So who is right? Who is to say?

Our Confession of Faith (*The London Baptist Confession of Faith of 1689*) provides a good foundation and guidance in how to answer questions like these. The first chapter of the confession is about the Scriptures and it begins by saying we must look to God's Word to know how to be saved from sin and walk in a way pleasing to God. The first sentence of chapter 1 reads: "The Holy Scripture is the only sufficient, certain, and infallible rule of all saving knowledge, faith, and obedience."

That is our beginning point. We need the Word of God if we are to know and understand God's will, if we are to live and walk in obedience to Him in this world. And we certainly need God's Word if we are to know how to worship God in a right way. We don't come up with the elements that comprise our worship by brainstorming what *might* work or what *could* work; we get our elements by looking to Scripture and submitting to its authority.

Chapter 22 of the Confession speaks specifically on worship. It says:

The light of nature shows that there is a God, who is Lord and is sovereign over all. He is just, good, and does good to all; and so He is to be feared, loved, praised, called upon, trusted in, and served, with all the heart and all the soul, and with all the strength. 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 representation, or any other way not prescribed in the Holy Scriptures. [1689 LBC / Chapter 22; Paragraph 1].

This is what has been called the **Regulative Principle** of worship. It simply means that our worship is to be regulated by the Word of God. The Bible sets the boundaries and defines the way in which we are to seek God in worship. Worship is not something we invent in our imaginations. Worship is something God commands and regulates in His Word.

In the Old Testament God gave Israel the festivals and the sacrifices to structure their worship. God used these to foreshadow the work of Christ and point His people toward Him and the cross. All the details recorded in the Old Testament of the rituals and ceremonies are rich with purpose and meaning as God through types and shadows patiently revealed the salvation and redemption that would come in Christ.

When we compare the Old Testament to the New Testament, we see that the New has less detail and less emphasis on outward form. You will search in vain to find any set descriptions of how to prepare an order of worship. About the closest that the New Testament comes to a specific order to be used in worship is the institution of the Lord's Supper in 1 Corinthians 11. But the New Testament does have much to say about worship. God has been pleased in His Word to reveal to us how we are to approach Him as we come in Christ to worship Him together as a New Testament church.

This evening I want to list for you ten (10) elements of worship. Ten activities that I believe are affirmed in the New Testament as on-going elements of worship for the New Testament church.

1) **Reading of Scripture**

1 Thessalonians 5:27; Colossians 4:16; 1 Timothy 4:13

Paul exhorts us in this at the close of some of his letters. At the end of 1 Thessalonians, in 5:27, he says:

"I charge you by the Lord that this epistle **be read** to all the holy brethren."

At the end of Colossians, in 4:16, he says:

"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."

Paul told Timothy in 1 Timothy 4:13

"Till I come, **give attention to reading**, to exhortation, to doctrine."

This is sadly missing in many churches (especially evangelical churches). Too often the only Bible reading found in many church services is a short verse read before the message, and often the pastor will not even refer to it again to explain it or apply it.

We must give attention to reading God's Word.

2) Teaching and Preaching of Scripture

1 Timothy 4:6, 13-16; 2 Timothy 4:2; Matthew 28:20; Acts 2:42; 20:7; Titus 2:15

Paul taught this in his instructions to Timothy:

- 1 Timothy 4:6 If you **instruct** the brethren in these things, you will be a good minister of Jesus Christ, nourished in the words of faith and of the good **doctrine** which you have carefully followed.
- 1 Timothy 4:16 Take heed to yourself and to the **doctrine**. Continue in them, for in doing this you will save both yourself and those who hear you.
- 2 Timothy 4:2 **Preach the word!** Be ready in season and out of season. Convince, rebuke, exhort, with all longsuffering and **teaching**.

When Jesus gave the Great Commission to His disciples in Matthew 28, what did He tell them to do?

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, **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.

We read in Acts 2:42 "And they continued steadfastly in the apostles' **doctrine** and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in prayers." And we have an example in Acts 20:7 where Paul met with the church on the Lord's Day and preached late into the night.

Our services should be marked by faithful teaching and exposition of God's Word.

3) Public Prayer

1 Timothy 2:1, 8; Acts 2:42; 4:23-31

We read in 1 Timothy 2:1-4

Therefore I exhort first of all that **supplications, prayers, intercessions, and giving of thanks** be made for all men, for kings and all who are in authority, that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and reverence. For this is good and acceptable in the sight of God our Savior, who desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth.

And again in Acts 2:42, "And they continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in **prayers**." We have an example of this in Acts 4:23-31 where the church prayed together after Peter and John were released from prison.

Prayer includes intercession—asking God to do something for someone else, supplication—asking God to supply our needs, petition—asking God to do or give something to us, praise, adoration and the giving of thanks.

4) **Public Confession of Faith**

Matthew 10:32–33 / Romans 10:9 / Ephesians 4:4–6

Jesus in Matthew 10:32–33 exhorts us to confess our faith in Him before men.

Matthew 10:32–33 Therefore whoever **confesses** Me before men, him I will also confess before My Father who is in heaven.
But whoever denies Me before men, him I will also deny before My Father who is in heaven.

Confessing faith in the Lord Jesus is the first cry of a new born Christian:

... if you **confess** with your mouth the Lord Jesus and believe in your heart that God has raised Him from the dead, you will be saved. For with the heart one believes unto righteousness, and with the mouth confession is made unto salvation (Romans 10:9–10).

5) **Singing of Psalms, Hymns, and Spiritual Songs**

Ephesians 5:19, Colossians 3:16; Matthew 26:30; 1 Corinthians 14:26

We are to join our voices in singing together in worship.

Ephesians 5:19 ...speaking to one another in **psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody** in your heart to the Lord.

Colossians 3:16 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.

6) **The Lord's Supper**

1 Corinthians 11:23–34; Matthew 26:26–30; Acts 2:42; 20:7

The familiar words of institution in 1 Corinthians 11:23–26 are in the context of verse 18 “when you come together as a church.”

And again this is the testimony of Acts 2:42, “And they continued steadfastly in the apostles’ doctrine and fellowship, **in the breaking of bread**, and in prayers.”

7) **Baptism**

Matthew 28:19; Acts 2:41 / Romans 6:3–6

We have Jesus’ words in the Great Commission in Matthew 28 addressed to His apostles:

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...

We see baptism following Peter’s preaching of the Word in Acts 2:41

Then those who gladly received his word were **baptized**; and that day about three thousand souls were added *to them*.

8) **Silent Meditation / Self-Examination**

Psalms 46:10 / 1 Corinthians 11:28 / 2 Corinthians 13:5 / Philippians 4:8

In preparation for the Lord's Supper, we read in 1 Corinthians 11:28

But let a man **examine** himself, and so let him eat of the bread and drink of the cup.

Paul exhorts us in 2 Corinthians 13:5

Examine yourselves as to whether you are in the faith. **Test** yourselves...

In Philippians 4:8 Paul instructs us in meditation:

Finally, brethren, whatever things are true, whatever things *are* noble, whatever things *are* just, whatever things *are* pure, whatever things *are* lovely, whatever things *are* of good report, if *there is* any virtue and if *there is* anything praiseworthy—**meditate on these things**.

9) **Gathering of Tithes and Offerings**

1 Corinthians 16:1-2; 2 Corinthians 9:7; Galatians 6:6

Paul instructs the church in Corinth.

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: 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.

2 Corinthians 9:6-7 But this I say: He who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and he who sows bountifully will also reap bountifully. So let each one **give** as he purposes in his heart, not grudgingly or of necessity; for God loves a cheerful giver.

10) **Times of Corporate Thanksgiving and Praise Or Times of Corporate Humiliation and Prayer**

Psalms 107; 1 Timothy 2:1; James 4:8-10; Revelation 3:1-6

As the people of God we share life together. Essential to corporate worship is our gathering and sharing. Acts 2:42 (that we have already read) includes fellowship among the activities of the early church: "And they continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine and **fellowship**, in the breaking of bread, and in prayers." This is joining together, walking together in times of sorrow as well as in times of joy.

There are times in the life of a church where God calls us to corporate thanksgiving. The giving of thanks should be in our songs as we see God at work in our midst.

Psalms 107:1 Oh, **give thanks** to the LORD, for He is good!
For His mercy endures forever.

And it should be in our prayers.

1 Timothy 2:1 First of all, then, I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and **thanksgivings** be made for all people...

There are also times in the life of a church when God may call us to corporate repentance and humility. We see an example of this in Revelation 3—

Revelation 3:3 Remember therefore how you have received and heard; hold fast and **repent**. Therefore if you will not watch, I will come upon you as a thief, and you will not know what hour I will come upon you.

Our Confession of Faith affirms this. Paragraph 5 of Chapter 22 begins by listing several elements of worship:

The reading of the Scriptures, Preaching, and hearing the word of God, teaching and admonishing one another in Psalms, Hymns and Spiritual songs, singing, with grace in our Hearts to the Lord; and also the Administration of Baptism, and the Lords Supper are all parts of Religious worship of God, to be performed in obedience to him, with understanding, faith, reverence, and godly fear;

It concludes saying,

*“moreover **solemn humiliation**, with fasting, and **thanksgivings** upon special occasions, ought to be used in an holy and religious manner.”*

Conclusion

These are the activities that Scripture affirms as ongoing elements of New Testament worship. We don't do them simply because we think they are good ideas. We do them because God has given direction in His Word, by command or precedent, that this is how we are to worship Him in the New Covenant in Christ. They are not listed in any certain order, but they do form the necessary content of worship that we must interpret and order into meaningful meetings of God and His people.

The New Testament regulates the content of our worship (the elements) and its essence (in spirit and in truth), but we have much liberty in how we arrange the elements into a meaningful order of worship. And there are many details involved in structuring worship that are not clearly defined by Scripture. These incidentals or **circumstances**—such as the language we speak, the place we meet, the length of our service, our style of music, the types of musical instruments we use—all play a part in shaping our voice in worship. They warrant careful attention in our planning and thinking about worship. We will give more time and discuss them in more detail in a future message.

So, in conclusion, let's return to the scenarios I mentioned a few moments ago. Why not have a painting exhibition, an interpretive dance, or watch a movie as an act of corporate worship? Why not have a weightlifting exhibition, or a clown to entertain the children, or a host of other things churches have tried?

It is because we look to God's Word to guide and regulate our worship, not our own ideas and whims. We have a limited amount of time and God knows what elements are best for us when we engage in times of corporate worship. He has revealed in Scripture where we need to focus our energy and time. If we could just do those things that God has taught us to do in Scripture, and pursue them with all the delight and creativity that God allows, we would have more than enough to keep us occupied.

Sometimes, I am afraid, our "good ideas" stem from an incomplete understanding or a false premise regarding corporate worship. We mistakenly think that only what goes on here in this room is really worship. We can mistakenly think that for our gifts to have relevance and real worth before God, we must bring them here into this venue.

The corporate worship of God's people is a unique and special event. When we gather for worship we are pursuing a well-defined purpose and seeking to communicate a clear, precise message. And it is God alone who determines by His Word the elements that will frame and give shape to our worship—those elements that will best help us express together our love and obedience to Christ—those elements that will best help us keep our focus and attention on Christ.

But God has given other venues for other gifts. We are to live a **life of worship** and glorify Him in every area. We need people gifted in the arts, who love Christ and who desire to see the arts redeemed for God's glory. We need Christian actors, dancers, painters, film makers—active in the community, glorifying God and declaring the gospel in the appropriate venues where we can participate in those art forms to the glory of God.

A farmer, gifted with knowledge of the land and living things, isn't any less a farmer because he can't bring his tractor into the sanctuary and plow to the glory of God. But he exalts his Creator and displays the mercies of God, when he is in his field working to feed the nations for the sake of the gospel.

Corporate worship is a wonderful gift of God. He has cleansed us and brought us into His presence together through the shed blood of Christ that we might enjoy Him, honor Him and love Him. Our God is worthy of all our worship. May our worship here in this place always be in the light of His Word and with all our heart and soul and mind and strength.

Let us pray.

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