

On Being Presbyterian
Chapter 7 - “Gospel-Driven Presbyterian Worship”

“worship wars” in church today

“Presbyterians historically have thought quite a bit about what worship is. Some scholars have even argued that the sixteenth-century Reformation was more a reform of worship than of doctrine.” (p. 116)

If it be inquired, then, by what things chiefly the Christian religion has a standing existence amongst us, and maintains its truth, it will be found that the following two not only occupy the principal place, but comprehend under them all the other parts, and consequently the whole substance of Christianity, viz., a knowledge, *first*, of the mode in which God is duly worshipped; and, *secondly*, of the source from which salvation is to be obtained. (John Calvin, *The Necessity of Reforming the Church*)

I. Worship is Regulated by God’s Word

[T]he 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.

(Westminster Confession of Faith, 21.1)

“regulative principle of worship” → “We must have positive biblical support for all that we do in worship.”

Leviticus 10.1-3

1 Samuel 13.7b-14

1 Corinthians 11.20-22, 29-30

Applying the regulative principle: elements and circumstances

[T]here are some circumstances concerning the worship of God ... common to human actions and societies, which are to be ordered by the light of nature and Christian prudence, according to the general rules of the word, which are always to be observed. (Confession of Faith, 1.6)

Elements: Reading & preaching of Scripture, prayer, sacraments, singing of psalms and hymns, presentation of offerings

Circumstances: Time of worship, instrumental accompaniment, chairs or pews, etc.

“[T]he regulative principle means that the church may not introduce into worship new elements that are not contained in Scripture. In this way, the church’s power is strictly limited.” (p. 120)

II. Worship is Covenant Renewal

“[A]t its heart, worship is covenantal. That means ... that worship involves a two-way movement between God and his people.... Some people have even suggested that in worship there is a dialogue between God and his church. God is the one who makes the first move toward us by calling us to worship, and we respond by invoking his presence in our midst. And the rest of worship is a movement back and forth between God and his beloved people, a movement in which God meets us in Word and sacrament and we respond to his presence with prayers and praises.” (121-122)

“[D]uring worship, the covenant between God and his people is being renewed. Each week we are called into God’s presence and God reminds us of his promises by his Word and Spirit. Likewise, through the central elements of worship, we renew our faith in the promises of God and receive assurance and confirmation that we belong to him. The central acts of this renewal are Word and sacrament.” (p. 123)

On the Lord’s Day God graciously operates on us first and our actions are in grateful response to God’s activity. Indeed, our words and actions are energized by His Spirit’s ongoing operations throughout the service. The fundamental purpose of the corporate Sunday service, therefore, is to *receive* by faith God’s gracious service in Christ and then to respond with thanksgiving in union with Christ *praising* the living God. This is what we call “covenant renewal worship.”

(Jeffrey J. Meyers, *The Lord’s Service*)

III. Worship Is at the Heart of Our Communion With Christ

“[W]orship serves our communion with Christ by re-presenting the gospel in such a way as to glorify God and to sanctify his people.... God comes to us in Word and sacrament and re-presents, reminds, and recalls to us the story of redemption. God’s call summons us to worship and reminds us of his effectual calling in our lives. We confess our sin to God, which recalls our first sense of conviction as well as our continuing need for repentance. God speaks a word of assurance and teaches us that our only hope, from the first steps of faith to the last, is to cling to the gospel by faith alone in Christ’s finished work alone. We sing praises to God’s name, echoing our rejoicing in the salvation that God brought to us from the first moment of faith. God speaks his Word to us in preaching and in the sacramental meal, and he instructs us in the Christian life and the continuing application of the gospel. Finally, God proclaims his good word to us in the benediction, commissioning us to be his witnesses in our Jerusalems, Samarias, and the ends of our earth. The very movement of worship re-presents the gospel to us and recalls for us the hour we first believed.” (pp. 123-125)

[Consider Covenant’s order of worship]

“This continual preaching and re-presenting of the gospel results in a deepening of our communion with God and in our further sanctification as God’s people.” (p. 125)

IV. What About Worship Music?

“Music, as represented in the aspects of singing hymns, psalms, and spiritual songs, is one element that is not absolutely necessary to incorporate worship in the same way that the prayers or the reading and preaching of the Scriptures are. That is why Presbyterians confess that the means of grace are reading and preaching Scripture, receiving the sacrament, and making prayers; singing psalms and hymns has typically been seen as *a way of praying*, not as a discrete element of worship in itself.” (128)

[SW: *But, contra* Lucas, “singing of psalms” is included as an element of worship in *WCF 21.5*. Cf. *commands* in Col. 3.16; Eph. 5.18-19; Psalms *passim*]

Based on biblical evidence, music properly fulfills three roles in the context of worship: *praise*, *prayer*, and *proclamation*. *Praise* is the lauding of God for his acts and attributes, acknowledging his supremacy in all things. *Prayer* is communication addressed to God. *Proclamation* encompasses any activity that proclaims the Word of God – quotation, explanation, teaching, and preaching.

(Paul S. Jones, *What Is Worship Music?*)

Biblical psalms model worship song:

God has given us direction by giving us in the Bible a whole book as a model of what we are to sing. The Book of Psalms (which in Hebrew is entitled the Book of Praises) provides us with songs that God himself has inspired. The Psalms should at least function as the model for what we as Christians sing to God.... A few Psalms are short and have repetitive elements, but most are full, rich, profound responses to God and his work. Singing praise to God, the Psalter reminds us, is not just emotional expression, but a real engagement of the mind. Songs that are very repetitive or shallow and sentimental do not follow the model of the Psalter. (W. Robert Godfrey, *Pleasing God in Our Worship*)

Psalms model variety in worship song: joyful praise, thanksgiving, reflection on creation, recounting God’s saving work, God’s judgment, meditation on perfections of God’s Word, lamentation, repentance, frustration in a fallen world.

Guidelines for choosing worship music:

Each song to be sung in worship should be examined for its biblical content *and* for its musical credibility (melody, harmony, rhythm, and form).... The music and text must also be congruent with each other. (Paul S. Jones)