

Corporate Worship (No 2) 4th July 2004

In considering the vital issue of corporate Christian worship I raised some crucial questions that the Church must not avoid.

Let me refresh your memories. Speaking of the rapidly and radically changing patterns of worship on offer in Christian churches today, I asked,

Are all these styles equally commendable?

How are we to evaluate such experimentation?

Should we even attempt to evaluate it?

Is there objective criteria by which we can attempt such an evaluation?

What is Christian worship?

All these questions boil down to one.

Is God concerned with the mechanics/or the manner/way in which we worship Him? And the only way in which we can resolve that question boils down to whether we believe that God has revealed His will to us concerning this vital matter. Worship can only be evaluated if we believe that God has declared His mind on the matter! The vital question then is, "Is the worship of God regulated or controlled by what He reveals in His Word?"

Does the Scriptures/Bible direct or specify the manner in which we shall worship God?

We all understand the importance of 'regulation' in every sphere of life.

Regulation simply means a 'rule' or 'law' that controls our behaviour.

Without regulation people very quickly become disorganised.

Worse, in situations of no regulation, conditions can very rapidly deteriorate so that behaviour degenerates and people act disgracefully.

Within the Education system a lack of regulation with respect to the behaviour of students rapidly leads to conditions that are counter productive to the process of learning.

Children become disadvantaged, because of the disgraceful behaviour of those in the class room who think that they can do as they please.

We have recently seen what occurs in conditions of warfare when thorough and proper systems of regulating soldiers behaviour becomes lax.

Disgraceful and degrading behaviour ensues.

Can Christian worship be degraded and disgraceful?

Let me ask the question again,

"Is the worship of God regulated or controlled by what He reveals in His Word?" In seeking to answer that question let me turn to the matter of obedience in corporate worship. Last week we considered our obligation to worship. With respect to the same matter of worship let me consider,

.Its Obedience

Corporate worship in the OT is 'regulated' worship, ie., God informs Israel of the specific requirements that He sets for them to worship Him.

The regulation begins in the First and Second Commandments.

God will not tolerate any rivals: "you shall have no other gods before Me"!

Nor will He tolerate idols: "you shall not make a graven image"!

Israel's worship of God is regulated to prevent polytheism (worship of many gods) and idolatry (worship that distorts the true image of God by identifying God earthly images).

When John Calvin formulated the First Commandment in a positive form (as Jesus had done in summarising the first section of the OT Commandments) Calvin said that God, "commands us to worship and adore Him .. worship is the first business of life, the ultimate vocation of the human race! p.417/48 'Give Praise to God'.

For Calvin, to worship God was to glorify, honour and reverence God in the manner that He establishes! As the following chapters of Exodus unfolds, God sets forth specific regulations concerning the construction of the Tabernacle, and detail after detail is supplied with respect to their worship of God; details from which the people of Israel must not deviate. Every aspect of Israel's worship is regulated. Israel is to worship God after the pattern that God establishes, and in no other way! God sets the agenda as to the manner in which He will be worshipped!

However, with the emergence of Christ and the gospel, drastic alteration takes place with respect to how Christian worship or the worship of the Church is to be conducted. What is the nature of that alteration?

This is the crucial question! Has the pattern of Christian worship for the Church become simply a matter of individual choice? Can each Church set its own agenda? As we consider this issue, let me refer firstly to

1. Abrogation. It is very clear from the gospels that certain elements in the regulated pattern of worship in Israel was abrogated or abolished by Christ/gospel. All that concerned the sacrificial aspect of Jewish worship ceased to exist in the worship pattern of the NT Church. The death of Christ was the fulfilment or completion of the OT sacrificial system.

The sacrificial system of the OT was rendered obsolete by Christ's death. Christian worship would no longer contain the elaborate regulations of all the Jewish laws related to sacrifice.

On the cross Christ made the perfect sacrifice which established true and permanent reconciliation of God and man, and that sacrifice consequently made redundant the sacrificial system of the OT.

Incorporated within this sacrificial system were all the penalties associated with any failure on Israel's part to keep God's regulations concerning worship. These penalties were also abrogated or abolished.

All the laws associated with Israel as a theocracy were abolished.

It is no longer obligatory for the Church to put to death those who fail to keep 'the Lord's day' holy. Circumcision and laws relating to foods were abrogated.

The letters of the NT point again and again to the fact that the Church is no longer restricted by such regulation. There is no doubt in the NT that that 'death penalties', 'circumcision' and 'food laws' have been abolished.

However, some Christians may still be left in a quandary wondering how then the Lord's Day should be spent. What is obligatory, and what is not, for the Christian's use of the Lord's day? Dr Hughes Old writing of John Calvin says,

"For Calvin .. the main reason for keeping the Sabbath rest was that one might devote oneself to worship. One is freed from one's work in order that one might be open to God's work .. Christians are to observe the commandment in the same way as the Jews in this one respect: we are to assemble to hear the Word, for public prayer, and for other religious exercises. In such observances the Christian's Lord's day succeeds the Jewish Sabbath." p. 432 'Give Praise to God'

In endeavouring to make clear last week that the requirement of corporate worship for the Church is still a obligation of the Lord's Day (as Calvin points out in the words I have just quoted) it is crucial that Christians do not succumb to a legalistic approach to the Lord's Day.

Dr Jim Packer says these helpful words, "Legalism, the habit of mind which stresses what one must not do on the Lord's day and stops there, and pharisaism, the habit of mind which is all too ready to censure others for real or fancied lapses in this matter, are both violations of the spirit of the gospel. Richard Baxter (the Puritan pastor) .. counters both with a constructive evangelical principle of judgement: "I will first look at a man's positive duties on the Lord's Day how he hears and reads and prays and spends his time, and how he instructs and helps his family, and if he be diligent in seeking God, and ply his heaven business, I shall be very backward to judge him for a word or action about worldly things that falls in on the by..." Here, surely, in Christian wisdom".

The coming of Christ abrogated the laws that were peculiar to Israel as a theocracy. Does this then mean that the Church was free to adopt its own patterns of worship? In seeking to answer that question let me proceed from Abrogation, to consider,

2. Apostolic Regulation

The Church in its early days of inception worshiped God within the confines of the walls of the Temple and Jewish synagogues. The broad patterns that regulated such worship, as we have seen, were praise, prayer and teaching/instruction in God's Law. These elements in Jewish worship (which were part of the Jewish Sabbath's Day observance) were not abrogated by the coming of Christ and the institution of the Church. In fact, these elements take on a distinctive dimension, under the Apostolic direction to the Church. Apostolic direction or regulation now specifies what direction the corporate worship of the church will take. It sets out the principle elements of public worship for the Church! It is patently clear from the NT that the church is not free to establish its own agenda for corporate worship. The agenda for public/corporate worship in the Church is established and authorised by Apostolic regulation. It was this regulation that was restated/reaffirmed at the time of the Protestant Reformation.

And it is this regulation that remains the vital guide for us today as the Church increasingly departs from NT practice. Let me peep with you through the window of Church history. When Protestant or Reformation theology was embraced and endorsed in England in the 16th/17th Centuries, the issue of reorganising the public worship of the Church according to Scripture/Apostolic regulation was of crucial importance. Hitherto the Church in England possessed in its public worship many liturgical and ceremonial practices that that were at variance or out of step with Apostolic regulation.

During the 16th/17th Centuries two basic positions were adopted with respect to the principle of regulation. John Calvin, and later the Puritans, declared that nothing could be introduced into the public worship of the Church that did not have the clear endorsement of Scripture. The Reformers, both in England and the Continent generally adopted the broader principle that nothing should be introduced into public worship that was not consistent with Scripture / its teaching / principles.

This broader principle allowed, amongst other things, for the introduction of the singing of Christian hymns in public worship. Those churches today that follow the strict 'Regulative Principle' of Calvin and the later Puritan tradition could best be described as 'restricted/restrained – following the strict 'letter' of Scripture' in their pattern of public worship'. Those Churches that follow the 'Regulative Principle' of Luther and the English Reformers could best be described as following the 'spirit' or 'intention' of Scripture, rather than the strict 'letter' of it. Time does not permit me to explore all the ramifications of these decisions. There are differences in these two positions, but the crucial point is that both Puritans and the Reformers were agreed that the teaching of Scripture was to regulate/control the activities of public /corporate worship. Our own tradition, expressed in the Thirty Nine Articles, states in Article 34 "It is not necessary that Traditions and Ceremonies be in all places one, or utterly alike; for at all times they have been divers (many), and may be changed according to the diversities of countries, times, and men's manners, so that nothing be ordained against God's Word ... Every particular or national Church has authority to ordain, change, and abolish, ceremonies or rites of the Church ordained only by man's authority, *so that all things be done to edifying.*" (ie., only that which accords/agrees with God's Word)

The Regulative principle asserts that the form and content of Christian worship is to be fashioned according to the teaching of Scripture/ Bible alone. All that is done and said in public worship is to be in accordance with sound biblical theology. It is to have the clear imprimatur or approval of Scripture and its principles. If this position is to be the true guide for the public worship for Christ's Church, then we have to ask ourselves some very sobering questions. Are churches today taking seriously this Regulative principle that has been part of the ordering of the church? What does true worship 'look like'; what are its observable features? Before we consider those questions in more detail on another occasion let me close with some words of C S Lewis quoted by an author on the matter of Christian worship: Lewis wrote, "As long as you notice, and have to count, the steps, you are not yet dancing but only learning to dance. A good shoe is a shoe you don't notice. Good reading becomes possible when you need not consciously think about your eyes, or light, or print, or spelling. The perfect church service would be one we were almost unaware of; our attention would have been on God."

And the author continues,

"In a sense, that is what the regulative principle achieves for us in worship – a way of enabling us to be free from the whims of unwarranted (unregulated) structure so that our attention can be given to God, a way of maintaining "decency and order" in such a way that God approves and blesses."

pgs. 92/3 Give Praise to God – article by Derek W Thomas)