



What is Reformed Worship?

It Is Biblical

"Why is the worship in a *Reformed* church so different from the worship at almost every other church I have ever gone to?" I cannot tell you how many times visitors ask this question. I have found that what first strikes people about a Reformed church is not our doctrine, but our worship. It has an unfamiliar; even cold feeling at first for many.

We owe it to all serious inquirers to explain not only what we do in worship, but why intelligible worship is a biblical requirement. Children asked their parents when they celebrated the feast of the Passover some 3500 years ago: "What do you mean by this service?" (Exodus 12:26) While worshipping the Triune God is profoundly transcendent and mysterious, it must be understandable. This is also what the Apostle Paul taught in his first letter to the Corinthians, when he said that preaching in foreign languages, commonly called "tongues," must be translated for the edification of those assembled.

This article begins a series intended to introduce you to the basics of Reformed worship so that you will understand and be equipped to explain why we as Reformed churches do what we do in worship. We will do this by looking at eight characteristics of Reformed worship: it is biblical, historical, covenantal, evangelical, liturgical, reverential, joyful, and eschatological.

A Congregation of the Word

As Reformed churches, we do what we do in worship because of the Holy Scriptures. Of course every "Bible believing" church today says, "Our church's worship is biblical!" After all, who wants unbiblical worship? As Reformed Christians, we are zealous to glorify our jealous God in a way He has commanded. This is why we say our worship is biblical. Yet, what does this mean? What does this look like?

First, Scripture describes the Church as a community of faith. The Holy Spirit creates and shapes faith by the Word (Rom.10: 17). In his Pastoral Epistles, Paul writes of the Church as ever learning and ever teaching the following: the words of the faith (1 Tim. 4:6), sound doctrine(1 Tim. 1:10; Titus 1:9,2:1), sound teaching (2 Tim. 4:3), the sound words (1 Tim. 6:3; 2 Tim 1:13), the good doctrine(1 Tim. 4:6), the good deposit (2 Tim. 1:14), the mystery of the faith (1 Tim. 3:9), and the trustworthy word (Titus 1:9).

In order to learn these "words of the faith" and have the word of Christ dwell in us richly (Col.3:16), we gather as a community as Israel did in the wilderness after coming out of Egypt. The story of the book of Exodus shows the Old Testament church gathered at the foot of Mount Sinai in worship. We, as the New Covenant people of God, assemble in worship and ascend "Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem" (Hebrews 12:22).

For this reason, a mark of Reformed worship is its saturation with Scripture. The services of Strasbourg, Geneva, Heidelberg, and the *Book of Common Prayer* in England abounded with Scripture texts and scriptural allusions. In an age of biblical illiteracy, we need a Scripture-filled worship, with scriptural language in every aspect, from responses and songs, to prayers and the reading of Scripture itself. As one has said, "We will not have Jesus Christ at the center of our church services if we do not have His Word at the center." Also, Robert Godfrey asks, "If we are not interested in the Word of God, can we really be interested in God?" Thus, in our worship services we must read, preach, pray, sing, and see in the sacraments the Word.

Furthermore, we need Word-based worship because the Scriptures teach the inseparable link between the Word and Spirit of God. The Bible knows of no false dichotomy between a church focused on the Word and another on the Spirit, each to the exclusion of the other. Instead, what we learn from Scripture that where the Word is, the Spirit is also (Ps. 33:6, Isa. 34:16, 59:21, 61:1, John 3:34, 6:63, James 1:18, 1 Peter 1:23).

A Worship by-the-Word

Secondly, our worship is biblical because of the way in which we determine what we do in worship. This is not determined by "what works" in getting vast numbers of people through the door, or what is enjoyable, or even what we may or may not like. Instead, the Bible regulates our worship. This is why the *Church Order of the URCNA* states that the elders of the churches are to oversee public worship, which "shall be conducted according to the principles taught in God's Word" (Art. 38).

Reformed worship is biblical because we believe God Himself gives us the particular things we are to do in public worship (the "elements" of worship). We call this the "regulative principle of worship," or, RPW for short. This means that God regulates how we are to worship Him in His Word. God is jealous for His Name to be revered and hallowed (Ex. 20:7, 34:13-14; Deut. 4:24; Matt. 6:9 cf. Westminster Larger Catechism, Q&A 110), and when we are jealous for His glory by worshipping Him how He deserves and desires we "serve God acceptably with reverence and godly fear" (Hebrews 12:28). After all, God is God, which means how He is worshipped is His right to demand.

The Second Commandment

Where do we find this principle taught in God's Word? There are many places in Scripture, but we will focus in on a few examples. In the first Commandment the one true God who has redeemed us to be a worshipping people, a "kingdom of priests" (Ex. 19:6; 1 Pet. 2:9), commands us to worship him alone:

"You shall have no other gods before Me." In the second Commandment this one true God tells us the way we are to worship Him negatively by saying how we are not to worship Him: "You shall not make for yourself a carved image" (cf. Deut. 4:15-19). Positively, this teaches that we are to worship God only according to His word.

We see this in the very words of the second Commandment where the "steadfast love" of the LORD is towards those who "love Me and keep My commandments" (Exodus 20:6). Intricately linked with the prohibition of images of the LORD is the language of doing what the LORD says in His word.

The book of Leviticus, as well, expresses this positive aspect as it mentions repeatedly that worship is "according to the rule" (e.g., Lev. 9:16cf. Lev. 10:1; Deut. 12:29-32). Thus, all worship not "according to Scripture," is what the Paul calls "will worship" (Col 2:23; ASV).

At the end of the Ten Commandments, this matter is stated in an unforgettable way: "If you make me an altar of stone, you shall not build it of hewn stones, for if you wield your tool on it you profane it" (Ex. 20:25). If the ancient Israelite would think that he could improve upon the worship commanded of God by carving a more beautiful altar, he was to know that even one mark added by the hand of man to that commanded by God was a complete contamination as far as God was concerned. When men try to improve the worship of God, they ruin that worship, rather than improve it.

This Commandment is impressed upon the people of God with the injunction that the LORD is a "jealous" God. This is the language of marriage. The LORD has forsaken all others for His bride, Israel, and He loves and desires her only. When it comes to worship, then, He expects and desires Israel to respond with the same zeal for Him that He has for her.

Cain and Abel

Worshipping God "according to the rule" is also the essence of the story of Cain and Abel in Genesis 4. Cain was a farmer, a "worker of the ground," while his brother Abel was in the livestock business, "a keeper of sheep" (Gen. 4:2). Cain offered to God an offering "of the fruit of the ground;" Abel offered "the firstborn of his flock and of their fat portions" (Gen. 4:3-4). God accepted Abel's offering but did not accept Cain's (cf. Gen. 4:4-5). They both offered an offering of worship. They both seemed "sincere" -- the one principle according to many today that must guide worship.

Yet, the reason God accepted Abel's offering, and not Cain's, was that Abel offered *what God commanded*, that is, the best of what he had. The best, and the best alone, is what is fitting for worship. On the contrary, Cain offered what he thought worked or what he thought was best. Abel offered "the firstborn" of his flocks and its "fat portions." These are the terms used later in the law when God gave spoke of offering "the best of the first fruits of your ground" (Ex. 34:26) as well as the firstborn of animals (Ex. 34:19; Lev. 27:26).

Yet, we must also keep in mind that performing the right rite is meaningless apart from faith. As Hebrews 11:4 teaches us, it was by faith that Abel offered a more acceptable sacrifice and through that that God testified to him that he was righteous. By faith, Abel understood that just as the LORD God spared Adam and Eve by sacrificing the animals in their place and covering them with their skins (Gen. 3:21), so too he could only be acceptable through the offering of another that would take his place and make satisfaction for his sins.

Nadab & Abihu

In the familiar, yet fearful, story of Nadab and Abihu in Leviticus 10 we recall that they offered "unauthorized fire before the LORD" (v.1). In the preceding verses, we read that Aaron, Nadab and Abihu's father, had offered the first sacrifices in the liturgical life of Israel. In Aaron's case "fire came out from before the LORD and *consumed the burnt offering...*" (Lev. 9:24), yet in Nadab and Abihu's case "fire came out from before the LORD and consumed *them*" (Lev. 10:2).

Both Aaron and his sons were priests and offered sacrifices, yet the reason for the LORD's differing responses was that Aaron offered a sacrifice "as the LORD commanded. . .according to the rule" (Lev. 9:10, 16), while Nadab and Abihu "offered unauthorized fire," that is, worship that was not commanded, and therefore forbidden.

The story of Nadab and Abihu is about worshipping the LORD according to His Word, not according to one's own desire, however, sincere. To offer worship not prescribed was to profane the LORD and take away from his glory. This is why the LORD, through Moses, said to Aaron, after Nadab and Abihu were consumed, "Among those who are near me I will be sanctified, and before all the people I will be glorified" (Lev. 10:3).

Because of the holiness and glory of God, Jehovah prescribed not only that Israel was to worship Him but also how they were to do so. Thus, the place of worship, the tabernacle, was to be made "according to the pattern that was shown you" (Heb. 8:5 cf. Ex. 25:9, 40, 26:30, 27:8; Num. 8:4; Acts 7:44) and the acts of worship, the sacrifices, were to be offered "according to the rule" (Lev. 5:10, 9:16).

The New Testament

"But this is all Old Testament teaching," you might be thinking. Yet Jesus said, "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them...teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you" (Matthew 28:19-20). Is the solemn requirement that the Church teach all things that Christ has commanded not at the same time a solemn prohibition against teaching anything that He has not commanded? If, in the worship of God, we observe all that Christ has commanded, ought we not also to scrupulously avoid anything and everything that He has not commanded?

Jesus said that the Pharisees worshipped God "in vain" (Mark 7:7). Why did God reject their worship? Because, Jesus said, "You leave the commandment of God" preferring "the tradition of men" (Mark 7:78). They worshipped God in vain because they worshipped God as they wished, rather than as He required. In the same way, the apostle Paul warned the Colossians: "Let no one disqualify you, insisting on asceticism and worship of angels, going on in detail about visions, puffed up without reason by his sensuous mind" (Col. 2:18). This was worship offered because they wished to offer it, rather than because God commanded it: "These have indeed an appearance of wisdom in promoting self-made religion and asceticism and severity to the body, but they are of no value in stopping the indulgence of the flesh" (Col. 2:23).

No doubt Jesus was rude by our standards when He said to the woman at the well, "You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews" (John 4:22). Yet, He was only being truthful. "God is spirit," He said, "and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth" (John 4:24).

True worship was impossible for the Samaritans as long as they worshipped God as they wished. They needed to worship God as He commanded in order to find acceptance with Him. "For the Father is seeking such people to worship Him," said Jesus, who would be "the true worshipers [who would] worship the Father in spirit and truth (4:23). When we persist in worshipping God as we will, rather than as God wills, we are not "true worshippers."

In Romans 1:21-25 the Apostle Paul condemns every false kind of worship invented by men. He also reveals the source of such false worship. Men become "vain in their imagination," he says. They invent what they vainly imagine to be "good ways" to worship. They worship as they will, not as God commands. But when they do this, they really "worship and serve the creature more than the Creator," says Paul, and for this reason "they are without excuse." They are without excuse because there is no excuse for departing from the rule, which says "we must not worship God in any other way than He has commanded in His Word."

The Sufficiency of the Scriptures

The third reason why we speak of Reformed worship as being biblical is that as Reformed Protestants we believe that the Scriptures alone are sufficient to teach us the who, what, when, where, and why of worship. The Scriptures alone are our infallible guide for teaching, for theology and doctrine, and for living, practice, and life. Since this Word is sufficient for our salvation and Christian life, then it surely is all we need in order to worship Him as He desires and deserves. The only way we know how to worship Him is by His self-revelation in His Word, which is sufficient to teach us this (2 Timothy 3:16-17). Since the distance between God and us is infinite, we cannot know what would be pleasing in God's sight in worship apart from His revelation of Himself.

The Reformed confessions expressed this doctrine of Scriptures' sufficiency and its application to worship, saying,

The whole counsel of God concerning all things necessary for His own glory, man's salvation, faith and life, is either expressly set down in Scripture, or by good and necessary consequence may be deduced from Scripture. (Westminster Confession of Faith 1.6)

God alone is Lord of the conscience, and hath left it free from the doctrines and commandments of men, which are, in anything, contrary to his Word; or beside it, if matters of faith, or worship. (Westminster Confession of Faith XX.2)

...the acceptable way of worshiping the true God is instituted by Himself, and so limited by His own revealed will, that He may not be worshiped 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 XI.1)
...[the] Holy Scriptures fully contain the will of God, and that whatsoever man ought to believe unto salvation is sufficiently taught therein

...the whole manner of worship which God requires of us is written in them at large. (Belgic Confession, art. 7)

...they [rulers of the Church] ought studiously to take care that they do not depart from those things which Christ, our only Master, has instituted. And therefore we reject all human inventions, and all laws which man would introduce into the worship of God, thereby to bind and compel the conscience in any manner whatever. (Belgic Confession, art. 32)

What does God require in the second Commandment?

That we in no way make any image of God, nor worship Him in any other way than He has commanded us in His Word. (Heidelberg Catechism, Q&A 96)

The Elements of Worship

Finally, our worship is biblical because of *what* we place in the liturgy. The "elements" of worship are the things the Scriptures command us to do in public worship. For example, Acts 2:42 gives an outline description of the worship of the earliest of Christian congregations. There we read that the early Christians were devoted to "the fellowship," which is that mutual bond of love that exists among members of the Church, as expressed in the giving of alms. As the fellowship of Christians, they were also devoted to the apostles' teaching (the Word), to the breaking of bread (the Lord's Supper, as the Greek text says "*the bread*"), and to the prayers. The general categories of acceptable worship are Word, Sacrament, Prayer, and Offering. These categories were used by John Calvin in his *Preface to the Psalter* as well as our *Heidelberg Catechism*, Q&A 103.

The category of the Word includes many elements. In historic Reformed practice worship begins with Scripture, whether the baptismal words of Jesus, a la Strasbourg (Matt. 28: 19), or the *votum*, "Our help is in the name of the LORD who made heaven and earth," as in Geneva (Ps. 124:8). In our day, most Reformed churches begin with the very Word of God calling His people to worship in a Scriptural call to worship (e.g., Ps. 95). The minister, then, speaks God's greeting (e.g., I Tim. 1:2; Rev. 1:4-5). We then read the Law of God (Ex. 20; Deut. 5) along with Jesus' summary of the Law (Matt. 22). After confession, those churches that follow the historic, Reformed, pattern have some form of "Declaration of Pardon" (based on Matt. 18:18; John 20:23), in which another Scripture text (e.g., 1 John 1:9), promising the good news to the hearers is read and applied. We sing the words of Scripture in the Psalms, biblical Canticles, and biblically based hymns, confess the Word as summarized by the *Apostles'* or *Nicene Creeds*, hear the Scriptures read and proclaimed (e.g., I Tim. 4:13), hear the biblical words of the institution of the Lord's Supper, and receive the biblical words of benediction (Nurn. 6:24-26; 2 Cor. 13:14). Our worship, then, is a biblical worship because of what actually makes up the "stuff" of our worship "according to the rule."

Under the category of the sacraments there is the administration of the two New Covenant sacraments, baptism and the Lord's Supper, which were given according to Christ's commands (e.g., Matt. 28:18-20; Luke 22:17-20; 1 Cor. 11:23-26), "according to the rule."

Following John Calvin's division, under the category of prayer are two major types of prayer: prayers spoken and prayers sung. The spoken prayers are the many Scriptural types of prayers such as prayers of intercession (e.g., 1 Tim. 2:1), confession (e.g., Ps. 51), illumination (e.g., Ps. 119), and adoration (e.g., 2 Chron. 6:12-42; Ps. 8). The sung prayers occur when the congregation offers up prayer in the form of singing Psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs (Eph. 5:19; Col. 3:16).

The Psalms, especially, have been the inspired hymnbook of the covenant people of God for 3000 years. During the Protestant Reformation, one of the most radical and earth-shattering reforms was the translation and versification of the Psalms for the laity to sing. Our forefathers insisted upon this reform, for as St. Paul teaches, through the singing of psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs we edify each other (Eph. 5: 19; Col. 3:16).

Finally, the offering of "Christian alms" (*Heidelberg Catechism*, Q&A 103; Phil. 4:10-20), that is, the collection for those in need, is an element of worship according to Acts 2:42. It may also be seen under the category of prayer, since an offering is paying a vow of thanks to the Lord (e.g., Ps. 116:18; 1 Cor. 16:2).

Reformed churches do what they do in worship because of the Bible. After all, the Bible itself speaks of *Christian* worship as being "according to the rule" because of the holiness of God in the same way as it did of Israel's worship in Leviticus 9-10:

Therefore let us be grateful for receiving a kingdom which cannot be shaken, and thus let us offer to God acceptable worship, with reverence and awe, for our God is a consuming fire. (Heb. 12:28-29)

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