

WITH
REVERENCE
AND AWE





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*Returning to the Basics of
Reformed Worship*

D. G. HART and
JOHN R. MUETHER


P U B L I S H I N G
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To
Jay and Ellen Hart
and
Herbert and Anne Muether





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Introduction

Sound Doctrine and Worship

What's all the fuss? These days Christians seem to have an easy time starting a fight over worship. Mention that the church's hymnbooks ought to be replaced. Suggest that the elders revise the liturgy. Or raise a question over the celebration of Christmas. And responses reveal that *worship* has become a fighting word. Reformed Christians, staunchly united on the God they confess, able to articulate the "solas" of the Reformation and the five points of Calvinism, are increasingly divided over how they ought to worship their God.

If you listen carefully to current debates, you will encounter rhetoric that is strange for Reformed Christians. Here are some comments we have heard, none of which is terribly unusual:

- ◆ "I like a church that is casual, where I know I can go and relax during worship."
- ◆ "I don't always enjoy my church's worship, but that's okay. I know it'll be different next week."
- ◆ "I'm tired of the barrenness of worship—I'm looking for something with more beauty."

- ◆ “Worship is ultimately a matter of taste, and there’s no accounting for that.”
- ◆ “If there is one thing you can say about our worship, it’s not boring!”

These popular sentiments all remind us that there is significant confusion about the nature, purpose, and practice of worship. This confusion extends to the Reformed community, and it underscores the urgency of recovering a biblical view of worship.

“Worship wars” is how some have labeled the battles that often result in congregational worship committees replacing organs with guitars, hymnals with overheads, pulpits with stages. How ought we to evaluate these innovations in our churches? What do we expect from worship? How do we judge good worship from bad? Is there even such a thing as bad worship? How would we recognize it?

And how did we get to this place? After all, Reformed Protestants are agreed on our chief end—to glorify God and enjoy him forever. We also agree about the importance of doctrine and hold to the same system of theology, one that makes God sovereign in redemption and gives him all glory. So how can we differ so much on right worship? Our calling to glorify God may be too often colored by other assumptions. For example, many believe that the *sincerity* and *informality* of the worship experience is the chief barometer of good worship. Because we think we are more sincere when we are spontaneous and liberated from restraint, we are tempted to conclude that informal, casual worship frees the emotions and that formality or restraint represses our emotions. Somehow we can’t enjoy God if we can’t offer up all of our emotions, including our desire to be casual. The problem with this thinking arises when we consider how easily our feelings can fool us. We can all too easily fake sincerity and zeal. What is more, we are fallen and do not always feel the proper emotions. So by themselves, emotions serve as no standard.

Another common assumption has to do with evangelism. Evangelism is an important calling of the church, and we ought to yearn to see new converts. So let's remove the barriers that keep unchurched Harry and Mary away, some say, and make worship more user friendly. But ought the standard for the public gathering of God's people in his presence be those of the unbeliever? Where does the Bible encourage us to design worship for outsiders?

These and other assumptions are derailing us from the task of glorifying God in worship. We need to return to basics on worship. That is the purpose of this little book. On the basis of Scripture and Reformed confessions, we have designed a primer on what is arguably the Christian's most important calling. A primer is defined as a short, introductory book on a single subject. This is exactly what follows—a brief overview of how Reformed theology informs the way we think about, put together, and participate in a worship service. Our aim is to help church officers and members gather corporately for worship and do so in ways appropriate to the God who has revealed himself in Christ Jesus.

Theology Matters

We begin from an explicitly Reformed perspective, because worship inevitably follows from theological conviction. As the apostle Paul wrote to Titus, certain things are “fitting for sound doctrine,” matters such as temperateness, dignity, sensibleness, faith, love, and perseverance (Titus 2:1–2). So too we believe that good theology must produce good worship, corporate acts of praise and devotion that fit the sound theology of the Reformed tradition. On the other hand, defective theology yields inferior or inappropriate forms of worship. The Protestant Reformers understood this. The confessions of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries were all aimed at reforming the worship of the church. For example, the Westminster divines did not merely write a confession and catechisms, but started with the *Directory for the Public Worship of*

God before completing the Westminster Standards. Because of the close connection between good theology and appropriate worship, corporate acts of praise and devotion that conflict with Reformed theology must flow from unsound doctrine. In effect, our worship provides a barometer of our theology.

Consequently, if we are self-consciously Reformed, our worship will embody our confessional commitments in particular ways. As Reformed Protestants we will likely worship differently from non-Reformed Christians. For example, Calvinists will give liturgical expression to the Creator-creature distinction (a doctrine not unique to Calvinism, yet one given fuller attention in Calvinism than in other traditions). The vast gulf separating God from his creation means that God alone is infinite and independent, and that we are finite and dependent. This will restrain the notions of individualism, self-confidence, and assertiveness that our culture privileges. Instead, humility and self-denial will characterize our comportment.

Calvinists also stress the doctrine of divine sovereignty, or the idea that God is Lord over all things. He may do with his creation as he pleases. His “rights” are limited only by his own character, his wisdom, power, holiness, justice, goodness, and truth. The implications for worship are obvious. Worship is pleasing to God when it acknowledges his absolute claims upon his creation, and when believers do not presume, either explicitly or implicitly in their actions and attitudes in worship, to question his sovereignty. In other words, Reformed worship must be explicitly theocentric. If not, if it tends to be directed toward pleasing man, whether believers or unbelievers, then it has lost the Reformed conviction that God, his ways, and his Word must shape our service of worship.

Another doctrine of the Reformed tradition is total depravity. The mind, the will, the affections — all are corrupted by sin. Nothing that we can do by ourselves can please God. This means that we are incapable by our own intelligence, strength, or sincerity of devising God-honoring worship. This is a depressing view to many

and appears to deny the genuine beauty and wisdom that men and women create through their God-given abilities. Still, Reformed Christians have historically felt the weight of this claim and have approached worship accordingly. They have not assumed that whatever they do to worship God, no matter how well intended, is pleasing to him. Scripture, in fact, testifies to precisely the reverse. When Cain presented an offering to God of fruit and vegetables (Gen. 4:3), he might have appeared to act out of genuine devotion. But God was not pleased with Cain's sacrifice. Instead, he "had regard" for Abel's sacrifice of meat (Gen. 4:4). For this reason Calvinists have been particularly committed to the principle that true worship must conform to the Bible, to what God has revealed as being acceptable to him. As John Calvin himself observed, human nature is a "perpetual factory of idols."¹

Soundness in doctrine, then, goes hand-in-hand with what is appropriate in worship. Historically, Reformed worship has always flowed from Reformed theology. Simply put, you can't have one without the other. If our worship differs markedly from the ways in which Reformed believers have worshiped in the past, then there is a good chance that our theology, though apparently unchanged, no longer governs our corporate worship.

We recognize that some in the Reformed camp may be troubled by the connection we are drawing between theology and worship. It is not uncommon to hear people express a desire to see theology quarantined to the sermon. "As long as the sermon is theologically accurate," the argument goes, "whatever you do in the rest of the service is okay." But this way of thinking has dangerous implications. Would we restrict the lordship of Christ in other areas of life, as if God's sovereignty applies only to politics but not to marriage? Even more striking, why do we seem more concerned these days about a Reformed worldview in economics or art but take a more relaxed view when it comes to worship? And if our theology does not shape our worship, then what about the Lordship of Christ over all areas of life? In other words, why try so hard

to act Reformed six days of the week but let up on the first and holy day? Why refuse to practice what we bother to profess?

This connection between theology and worship is so vital that it is impossible to change the form (worship practice) without altering the content (theological conviction). Certainly our theological standards make no such distinction. Even though the Westminster divines wrote a separate directory for worship, for instance, the Westminster Confession is not silent about the proper way to worship. Chapter 21 speaks of the reading of the Word “with godly fear,” “sound preaching, and conscionable hearing of the word, . . . with understanding, faith, and reverence,” the singing of psalms, the administration and reception of the sacraments “instituted by Christ,” and prayers “made for things lawful” (21.5, 4). Likewise the Belgic Confession says that the marks of a true church are visible during worship. “If the pure doctrine of the gospel is preached” and if the church maintains “the pure administration of the sacraments as instituted by Christ,” then you know the church is Reformed according to the Word (art. 29). The Reformers assumed correct theological content would express itself in worship, that is, in proper forms. Being Reformed, then, means more than holding to a certain system of doctrine or a certain kind of church government. It also involves certain practices, and some of the most important of these activities take place in public worship.

We suggest that when churches undergo dramatic changes in what is often called “worship style,” they may actually be changing their theology as well. Form and content cannot be separated. So in congregations where worship has changed, something significant may have happened also to their theology. Is it possible to preach the whole counsel of God in an up-tempo service? Can the hard truths of Calvinism be taught in a setting geared toward attracting outsiders? Can pointing out our sinfulness ever be made appealing? Churches that depart from older patterns of worship may very well abandon the theological coherence assumed by the

Reformed creeds and confessions. When this coherence is lost, something must replace it. In our day the solution comes either through evangelistic zeal that makes soul-winning the sole criterion for evaluating the ministry of the church, or through therapeutic forms of positive reinforcement that orient worship more toward self-fulfillment than to self-denial.

Worship and Language

We need to say a word here about language, the vocabulary we use to talk about worship. Language both shapes and reflects our behavior. Throughout our study we will examine how Christians tend to talk when reflecting on worship.

Consider, for example, the use of the term *worship experience*. This phrase threatens to eclipse the older expression, *worship service*. What difference does it make? We believe the difference is enormous. Service is the work and duty of a servant to and for a superior, and good service is that which pleases the superior. The word *experience* redirects the goal of worship, from God-centeredness to man's pleasure. We become the audience or the consumer, and our criteria for good worship shift. Good worship must excite, exhilarate, and even entertain us; in turn, bad worship is joyless, monotonous, and above all, boring—the word to end all debate.

Another revealing word is *celebration*. This word has a venerable history in worship, as when churches “celebrate” the Lord's Supper. But what happens when the meaning is altered, when celebration suggests the high-fiving, champagne-spraying swagger of World Series champions or the exuberant and raucous festivities on New Year's Eve at Times Square? Of course there are other kinds of celebration, such as the dignity and gravity of a king's coronation or the simple solemnity of a church wedding. We must be mindful of these differences and not sanctioned by our language cer-

tain forms of celebration that are inappropriate for the church gathered for worship.

And does it matter that the sermon is now frequently called a “message”? *Message* sounds softer, less threatening, and more accessible. It may have the effect of turning the speaker into one of us, a regular guy whose effectiveness is measured by how well he relates to his audience by using humor and engaging illustrations. This image seems far removed from the voice of God delivered by his servant, a steward of divine mysteries, who must handle the word of truth with utmost care.

So language is important, and we want to reflect carefully on the words we use in worship. Ecclesiastes reads: “Guard your steps as you go to the house of God and draw near to listen rather than to offer the sacrifice of fools. . . . Do not be hasty in word or impulsive in thought to bring up a matter in the presence of God. For God is in heaven and you are on the earth; therefore let your words be few” (Eccles. 5:1–2). Although the author of Ecclesiastes mixes good and bad advice until the final chapter, clearly this is good advice. Our silence and words in worship require careful attention. We need to watch our tongues lest we offer the “sacrifice of fools.”

Outlining Our Study

At this point readers may be tempted to think: good theology and precise language are well and good, but let’s cut to the chase—what about dance and skits? What’s wrong with praise choruses? How about guitars and overheads? This book may frustrate those looking for answers to such questions because we do not intend to give immediate answers to the debates surrounding contemporary worship. In our view the current controversies have much to do with more basic issues. These fundamental concerns are as much contested as the specific matters of music, dance, and drama. We are convinced that one can only think through the specific exam-

ples of contemporary practice after reflecting on more preliminary and primary matters.

First, *who* is it that worships? Our consideration of worship must first look at the church as the community gathered for worship. In other words, a proper ecclesiology is necessary for understanding worship. It is no coincidence that contemporary confusion about worship is occurring when there is so much misunderstanding about the church of Christ.

Another important question is *when* to worship. Here we will look at the doctrine of the Sabbath and how it informs our worship practice. What does it mean to set apart the first day of the week? Worshiping God appropriately is directly connected to the sanctification of the Lord's Day. This is why, for example, the Westminster Confession teaches about the Sabbath in chapter 21 on worship. Keeping the Lord's Day holy is the foundation for understanding the place of corporate worship in the Christian life.

After considering who worships and when, we turn to a series of *how* questions. What is the "regulative principle" and how does it guide us in worship? What is the "dialogical principle" and how does it shape our liturgy? Who leads in worship and how does the congregation meaningfully participate in the service? What is the proper attitude for worship—how do you worship with reverence *and* joy? What is the place in worship of the means of grace? What are the elements of worship and how do they differ from circumstances?

Finally we take up what is arguably the most controversial topic in worship debates: music. Unfortunately this is often where controversy starts. But we want to cover it at the end after these other matters, so that we treat congregational song in the proper context. By presenting the material this way, we hope that much of the acrimony can be both clarified and diffused. After examining the role of song in worship, we suggest ways in which Reformed Christians should exercise discernment, distinguishing the good from the bad, the true from the false, and biblical worship from blasphemy.

Throughout we will explore the Scriptures along with our Reformed confessions. We will try to do justice to the reverence the Psalmist expressed when he despaired over the holiness required to enter into God's presence: "Who may ascend into the hill of the LORD? And who may stand in His holy place? He who has clean hands and a pure heart, who has not lifted up his soul to falsehood and has not sworn deceitfully" (Ps. 24:3–4). The Bible's demand that worshipers be holy and pure means that our confidence in worship comes only from Christ. As the author of Hebrews put it, "Therefore let us draw near with confidence to the throne of grace, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need" (Heb. 4:16). These mutual demands for purity and confidence in worship help to explain the biblical idea of rejoicing "with trembling" (Ps. 2:11). The Bible regards reverence and joy not as opposites that we turn on and off during worship, but as mutually reinforcing, just as the death and resurrection of Christ nurture both humility and celebration. The Old Testament still informs Christian worship. Contrary to much popular thinking, God has not lowered his standards for Israel's worship to those now in place for the church. Throughout redemptive history, God despises false worship. The fire that consumed Nadab and Abihu (Lev. 10:1–7) still consumes false worshipers today (Heb. 12:22–29).

Recovering Reformed Worship

This primer will not be exhaustive. It is a place to begin to think through the implications of Reformed theology for how we worship. Even less do we claim that this primer's contents will prove immediately agreeable in all its assertions. Sociologists note that we live in postconfessional and anti-intellectual times. American Protestants today have abandoned denominational traditions, opting instead for a blended or generic spirituality and worship. Methodists, Baptists, Presbyterians, and even Catholics are less dis-

cernibly so in the ways they conduct themselves in worship. Without denominational loyalty or creedal constraints, so-called “new paradigm” churches are reinventing worship by developing popular and seeker-oriented “styles.” These innovations cast aside a well-defined piety of the past in the interests of excitement, dynamic spirituality, and relevance.

Although some applaud this transformation as a kind of ecumenical breakthrough, we fear that the decline of distinctively Reformed habits of worship is not a sign of greater tolerance but an indication that many in the Reformed camp no longer see the implications of their theology for their worship services. Recovering the practices of Reformed worship, we concede, will be difficult. But many Presbyterians and Reformed have not let the changes in American Protestantism affect their attachment to Reformed theology. For this loyalty we are thankful. Our task is to show that such faithfulness to Reformed doctrine also requires loyalty to a certain kind of worship. To put it differently, holding on to the content of the Reformed faith also involves adhering to the practices and forms of Reformed worship.

Nevertheless, North American Calvinists have never been known for winning popularity contests. Calvinism does not have the reputation of empowering or affirming those who are faint of theological heart. Ironically, however, there is a sense in which what we propose in this study is profoundly seeker-sensitive. We do not mean that we hope to please any browsers who might step into our sanctuaries on Sunday morning. Rather the seeker we intend to please is the one whom Scripture describes as the seeker of acceptable worship. In his conversation with the Samaritan woman, Jesus says that those who worship God in spirit and truth are the kind of worshipers “the Father seeks” (John 4:23). This is the seeker-sensitivity that the Bible requires and that Reformed worship has traditionally pursued.

One last reminder concerns the importance of our subject. The worship of God is the most fundamental aspect of Christian duty.

We were created to serve God, and our worship on the Lord's Day should be conducted to give him the glory and honor that belong to him alone as our Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer. The Ten Commandments, after all, begin with four commandments that have everything to do with worship. If some would desire a greater adherence to God's law in modern societies, what better way to begin than by making sure that our churches follow God's requirements for worship? Without a proper understanding and practice of worship, we run the risk of failing to obey what Christ called "the great and foremost commandment" (Matt. 22:39).

1

The Church and the World

Q What do you believe concerning the “holy catholic church” of Christ?

A That the Son of God from the beginning to the end of the world, gathers, defends, and preserves to Himself by His Spirit and Word, out of the whole human race, a Church chosen to everlasting life, agreeing in true faith; and that I am and for ever shall remain, a living member thereof.

(Heidelberg Catechism, 54)



What is the relationship between the church and the world in worship? Should the service be a time that makes the church accessible to the world, or should it be one where the church displays her otherworldliness? Should worship be a means to attract the unchurched to the gospel, or should it be an expression of the church's identity as aliens and strangers in the world?

The answer to these questions used to be fairly easy. J. Gresham Machen, who battled worldliness in the church through his whole life, had little trouble defending the idea that the church should be separate from the world. In "The Separateness of the Church," a sermon he preached at Princeton Seminary in 1925 on Matthew 5:13 ("You are the salt of the earth. . ."), Machen declared that these words of Christ "established at the very beginning the distinctness and separateness of the Church." If the distinction between the church and the world was ever lost, Machen warned, "the power of the Church is gone. The Church then becomes like salt that has lost its savor, and is fit only to be cast out and to be trodden under foot of men."¹

The antithesis that Machen recognized as basic to the Bible's teaching about the church prompted him to oppose all the concessions that liberal Protestants were making to the wisdom of the world. In an effort to retain the truth of Christianity in the face of scientific discoveries that made the gospel incredible to college-educated people, liberal Protestantism had reduced Christianity to the seemingly safe and reassuring truths of the Golden Rule and the Sermon on the Mount. But the effort to maintain the church's credibility had resulted in a worldly church, like salt that had lost

its savor. Machen believed that if the church were faithful to the Great Commission she could not let the wisdom of the world obscure both the power and foolishness of the cross.

Conservative Presbyterian and Reformed folk throughout the twentieth century believed with Machen that the antithesis between the church and the world was a good thing. But that no longer appears to be the case. With liberalism no longer the threat that it was in the 1920s, our churches seem to be more concerned about winning the approval of the world and less on guard against the dangers of conforming to the world. What is more, with fundamentalism carrying the negative associations of intolerance and bigotry, many Reformed and Presbyterians try to avoid doing or saying things that might be construed as narrow-minded or sectarian. Instead, in an effort to reach out to the unchurched, some congregations are more willing to reconsider certain forms of worldliness. If the church looks more normal, the logic goes, then it may look more attractive to outsiders.

What Is the Church?

Q&A 54 from the Heidelberg Catechism is a good place to begin a consideration of the separateness of the church. It pictures God as the actor in salvation, who is gathering a people for himself from the ends of the earth. The church is a people called out of the world into fellowship with their God. The very word for church, *ekklēsia* in the Greek, means “called out,” and it describes the relocation involved in salvation. We have left behind our old identity to embrace a new one in Christ. The same point holds for worship. We leave the world and its cares and duties to enter into God’s presence.

This Greek word, *ekklēsia*, is the translation of the Hebrew word *qahal*, which means “assembly.” But more is intended than a mere gathering of people. Israel was the Old Testament assembly of the people of God. In the Exodus, God had taken a chosen people, a

gathered people, out of the world (Egypt) and brought them to himself at Mount Sinai. Israel was an assembly at Sinai because the people were gathered in the presence of God. In Deuteronomy we read, “Assemble the people to Me, that I may let them hear My words so that they may learn to fear Me all the days they live on the earth, and that they may teach their children” (Deut. 4:10). To assemble the people of God is to have them stand before the Lord.

In the New Testament, the church becomes the assembly of God’s people. The author of Hebrews draws the parallel between the worship of the church and the assembly of the Israelites at Sinai in the following manner:

For you have not come to a mountain that can be touched and to a blazing fire, and to darkness and gloom and whirlwind. . . . But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to myriads of angels, to the general assembly and church of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God, the Judge of all, and to the spirits of the righteous [men] made perfect. . . . (Heb. 12:18, 22–23).

Just as Israel was called out of Egypt to Sinai, so the church is the gathering of God’s people, out of the world and into fellowship with God. The church at worship is therefore an assembly that is separate from the world, because it is God who separates the church, in order to gather with him, to be in his presence.

To be a church, an *ekklēsia*, requires being separate from the world. The church cannot gather in the presence of God if it is still in the world. For this reason Paul describes the separateness of the church in strong language:

Do not be bound together with unbelievers; for what partnership have righteousness and lawlessness, or what fel-

lowship has light with darkness? Or what harmony has Christ with Belial, or what has a believer in common with an unbeliever? Or what agreement has the temple of God with idols? For we are the temple of the living God; just as God said, "I will dwell in them and walk among them; and I will be their God, and they shall be My people. Therefore, come out from their midst and be separate," says the Lord. (2 Cor. 6:14–17)

Salvation involves a new identity, which finds expression in our joining the church, that is, the people of God's possession.

What Is the World?

Fundamentalism may have given the notion of being separate from worldliness a bad name, but most Christians who read the Bible understand that God requires some form of renunciation from those who follow Christ. What, then, should the separateness of the church look like in worship? In other words, what is the world that we must leave behind when we gather for worship?

The Bible describes the world in three senses. It can refer simply to the created order, as in Acts: "The God who made the world and all things in it, since He is Lord of heaven and earth, does not dwell in temples made with hands" (Acts 17:24). It can refer also to the nations of the earth, the human race, the world that God will judge. For instance, the apostle Paul raises the question of whether God's wrath is in some way unrighteous and responds: "May it never be! For otherwise, how will God judge the world?" (Rom. 3:6). David Wells argues that it is appropriate for the church to be worldly in these two senses of the term: we are to be good stewards of God's creation, and we are to show love for our neighbors by taking the gospel *into the world*, to the whole human race, to the ends of the earth. The Bible clearly teaches that separation from the world in these ways is forbidden. Jesus prays to his father

that we not be taken from the world, because he has sent us into the world: “I do not ask You to take them out of the world, but to keep them from the evil one. . . . As You sent Me into the world, I also have sent them into the world” (John 17:15, 18).

Scripture goes on to refer to the world in a third sense, the world as fallen humanity in rebellion against God. In Wells’s words this is “the collective expression of every society’s refusal to bow before God, to receive his truth, to obey his commandments, or to believe in his Christ.”² The *world* in this sense is also that way of life that fallen humanity substitutes for God’s holy ways. It is the world as an idol, as a rival to God’s Word, “their appetites, the way that they order their life, their priorities, their behavior, what they really *want*, and what they will do to get it.”³ This is how Christ prayed as a high priest in John: “I glorified You on the earth, having accomplished the work which You have given Me to do. Now, Father, glorify Me together with Yourself, with the glory which I had with You before the world was” (John 17:4–5). Here the *world* refers to something of which Christ was not a part; nor should his people belong to the world in this sense. What is more, this world was the one for which Christ refused to pray. Just a few verses later, Christ prayed, “I do not ask on behalf of the world” (John 17:9).

It is this sense of worldliness that must inform the church’s otherworldliness. The Bible calls Christians strangers in this world. Peter writes, “Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ, to those who reside as aliens, scattered throughout Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia” (1 Peter 1:1). If he were writing today he would have referred to those Christian exiles living in Nigeria, Japan, Serbia, Canada, and Brazil. Wherever Christians live they do so as “aliens and strangers” (1 Peter 2:11), because, in the words of the writer to the Hebrews, “. . . they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God; for He has prepared a city for them” (Heb. 11:16). In this sense the church and the world have nothing to do with each other. The church is *contra mundum*, against the world. As strange

as it sounds, we are to hate the world and the things of the world. As Christ himself said, “If anyone comes to Me, and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be My disciple” (Luke 14:26).

Holiness versus Worldliness

In his sermon on the “Separateness of the Church,” Machen observed that “the real threat to the church has always come from within, not without.” This internal threat is deadly precisely because it denies the separateness of the church by gradually merging the church with the world under the guise of peace. An “all embracing paganism” results, Machen warned, when the church forsakes its call to holiness and pursues worldliness.⁴

When Christians recite the Apostles’ Creed, they say they believe “in the *holy* Catholic church.” What does the holiness of the church mean? Peter links holiness with the idea of gathering: “But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for God’s own possession, so that you may proclaim the excellencies of Him who has called you out of darkness into His marvelous light” (1 Peter 2:9). To be holy, in other words, is to be called and gathered by the Holy One as his treasured possession. Sometimes Scripture describes this holiness in an objective or ceremonial sense (such as the tabernacle and the priests, who were holy because they were set apart for the worship of God), and sometimes in a subjective or ethical sense (such as the infusion of holiness through God’s work of sanctification). To be holy, then, means that we are not worldly, because we are set apart from the world. As Paul teaches, “. . . do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. . . .” (Rom. 12:2).

But what exactly is worldliness? For many Christians, worldliness refers to certain forms of amusement, such as playing cards,

drinking alcohol, smoking tobacco, or going to movies. Others may think of worldliness as sexual immorality—adultery and divorce, for example. R. B. Kuiper, however, warned that worldliness was not so easily identified. “Few Christians seem to realize,” he wrote, “that a church may take a strong stand against certain flagrant sins of the world and yet be decidedly worldly.” He added that there “are churches which pride themselves on their firm stand against worldliness and yet want to be great as the world counts greatness. They think in terms of costly stone edifices rather than lively stones that are built up as a spiritual house (1 Peter 2:5). They strive after statistical rather than spiritual prosperity. That also is worldliness.”⁵

Kuiper’s point is that to think like the world is to be guilty of worldliness. It is not enough to be devoted to the church’s prosperity. If we measure the work of the church in worldly terms, such as material wealth or numerical size or programs for all ages, then the church has become like the world. Scripture commands us to see with the eyes of the Spirit, not the eyes of the flesh. This is partly what the apostle Paul had in mind when he wrote that “we look not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen; for the things which are seen are temporal, but the things that are not seen are eternal” (2 Cor. 4:18). It was this truth that prompted Machen to say to the graduates of Westminster Seminary in 1931:

You, as ministers of Christ, are called to deal with the unseen things. You are stewards of the mysteries of God. You alone can lead men, by the proclamation of God’s Word, out of the crash and jazz and noise and rattle and smoke of this weary age into the green pastures and beside the still waters; you alone, as ministers of reconciliation, can give what the world with all its boasting and pride can never give—the infinite sweetness of the communion of the redeemed soul with the living God.⁶

The church is as different from the world as green pastures and still waters are from the cacophony of a weary age. The church's ways are not the world's ways. And that is because God has called the church to be holy as he is holy. He has gathered the church as his assembly. The church is set apart to serve God.

The Church against the World

The biblical distinction drawn so far between holiness and worldliness means that the church is by nature antithetical to the world. The church is at war with the world, and it has the duty to fight worldliness, a duty that we find throughout redemptive history.

With the first promise of a redeemer in Genesis, God announced that all of history, from that point forward, would witness a cosmic battle between two camps. God declared, “. . . I will put enmity between you [the serpent] and the woman, and between your seed and her seed; he shall bruise you on the head, and you shall bruise him on the heel” (Gen. 3:15). The seed of the woman is the church, which is pitted against the seed of the serpent, that is, the world. The battle in view here is of an absolute spiritual antithesis between those chosen for life and those dead in sin, between the children of light and the children of darkness.

Likewise, when Israel crossed the Jordan, the conquest was the cry of holy war, and God called upon Israel to annihilate her enemies. The holy people of God were forbidden to live in peaceful coexistence with their redeemer's enemies. In the New Testament this antithesis becomes a spiritual warfare, as opposed to a physical or national one like Israel's. The church battles the “spiritual forces of wickedness” (Eph. 6:12). In this warfare the world's aim is to crucify Christ and persecute his church, as Jesus himself predicted: “If you were of the world, the world would love its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, because of this the world hates you. . . . If they persecuted Me, they will also persecute you. . . .” (John 15:19–20). Because

of this antithesis between the church and the world, R. B. Kuiper concluded that “to be the opposite of the world is not only necessary for the well-being of the church but is essential to its very being. If the church should cease being antithetical to the world, it would no longer be the church.”⁷ The church today needs to be willing to accept the terms of the antithesis laid down by Christ. God’s people, whether they know it or not, are at enmity with the world. This antithesis requires the church to be prepared for combat and to withstand the temptation to conform to the world. It means that the church must renounce the ways of the city of man and follow the laws of the city of God.

This is not to deny that Christians must love their neighbors. Indeed, the antithesis between the church and the world does not contradict what Christ called the second “great” commandment: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself” (Matt. 22:39). Still, such love of neighbor does not refute the fundamental difference between the church and the world, between the ways of God’s people and the ways of God’s enemies. The church that is faithful to her holy calling will look and act differently from the world.

Unapologetic Worship

What does this have to do with worship? Perhaps the connection is not immediately obvious. One implication is that if the church is at war with the world, the wisdom and ways of the gospel will appear foolish to those who are enemies of God. As Paul writes, “For the word of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God” (1 Cor. 1:18). Another implication is that the contrast between the church and world will be most obvious when the church is at worship. The church in worship should be like that described by Paul in 1 Thessalonians, that is, turning “from idols to serve a living and true God” (1 Thess. 1:9). The very act of worship, of assembling in the presence of God, therefore, is simultaneously the church’s

renunciation of the world. Worship is a subversive and counter-cultural act of an alien people who, forsaking the world, listen to the voice of her master saying, “follow me.”

True worship, then, will be odd and perhaps even weird to the watching world. This oddness is not lamentable but essential to the church’s faithfulness and witness. For if the gospel is foolishness, it is foolish only to those who do not believe. The church may use a human tongue as its language of worship, it may use worldly time to determine when to meet for worship, it may even use electricity drawn from state-run utilities to heat the building and amplify the minister’s voice. But when the church assembles for worship she is not at all like the world. She invokes the name of Christ. She prays and sings to a God who cannot be seen. She hears words said by a man commissioned by Christ that become, by the work of the Holy Spirit, the power of God unto salvation. She eats a holy meal whose portions are tiny, but which, by the blessing of Christ, nourishes God’s people for eternal life. In all these ways the church at worship is different from the world. All elements of worship look weak and foolish to those outside the house of God. But to God’s people they are manna that sustains for eternal life.

For this reason, the church must be unapologetic in her worship. She must not cater to those bound to ridicule her ways as foolish. Christian worship is, in fact, a bold political act. It subverts the world’s values by assigning glory and praise to the one whom the world despises. And as weak as the church at worship might appear to the watching world, the truth is that the powers of this world are no match for the power of God who is present among his people when they gather to sing praise, pray, and hear his Word. Moreover the church must reject the claim that worship is old-fashioned, irrelevant, and isolated from the “real world.” For believers, the church at worship *is* the real world. The gathering of the saints in the holy of holies is the eschatological foretaste of the new heavens and the new earth, the reality to which all of history is headed.

Of course, visitors to our churches should receive help in finding Joel in the Bible or knowing when to sit or stand. No one objects to this kind of sensitivity. But the world is predisposed to misunderstand the church. Christians cannot expect unbelievers to be comfortable in services of worship that are alien to the ways of the world. “User-friendly” or “seeker-sensitive” worship is not an option for the people of God. In fact, worship that demonstrates the separateness of the church is what Machen called “merciful unkindness” because it testifies to the world of the hope that is within us.⁸ If the world mocks us, so be it. True worship is for the church, not for the world.