

How Should We Worship? — Summary

Introduction

It was two years ago, now, that we went through a series of sermons on the subject of worship—and particularly, what “this” is right now. Why are we here? What are we doing? What is happening? What is it that sets this time apart from all other times and even from all other gatherings of the church? This morning, we’re going to try summing up the eight-part series of sermons that I preached two years ago in one message. The goal is that as we’re able to understand what “this” *is*, we’ll then be able to engage in this time more obediently and more faithfully, and also with more joy.

I. Biblical Categories of Worship (Systematic)

In the Bible, we could say that there are different categories in which we should think about worship (systematic theology). There’s a sense in which we could say that worship is to be “all of life.”

- 1 Corinthians 10:31 (cf. Rom. 12:1) — Whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do *all* to the glory of God.

We could call this worship that should be all of life “internal worship.” Internal worship, by definition, is always sincere, and genuine, and true. But the Bible also speaks of worship in terms of outward “acts” of worship. We could speak here of the religious observance of God’s instituted ordinances. Outward religious acts of worship may be idolatrous (bowing down before an image; Isa. 44:17; 46:6-7), or they may be hypocritical (“drawing near” and praying only with our lips; Mat. 15:7-9), or they may be true and genuine, but in each case, they remain religious “acts” of *worship*. In this sense, we see that worship is not all of life. As Christians, we are still to observe a difference between the common (all of life) and the holy (the religious observance of our Lord’s instituted ordinances). Listen to God’s word through the prophet Ezekiel:

- Ezekiel 22:26 — Her priests have done violence to my law and have [treated as common] my holy things. They have made no distinction between the holy and the [common], and they have not taught the difference between the unclean and the clean, and they have disregarded my Sabbaths, and I am [treated as common] among them.

The Old Covenant ritual distinctions between the common and the holy have been fulfilled (and therefore rendered obsolete) under the New Covenant. But the underlying principle of this distinction between the common and the holy is still essential to living as Christians in a fallen world (cf. the Lord’s day [Rev. 1:10]; the Lord’s Supper [1 Cor. 11:20]; baptism in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit [Mat. 28:19]). It’s this distinction between the common and the holy (contra “egalitarianism”) that explains why we’re gathered here today.

In order to understand what religious worship is (a systematic category), we’re going to look at this theme through the lens of redemptive history.

II. Primeval Worship (Biblical-Theological / Redemptive-Historical)

In Genesis chapter 4 we see Cain and Abel *worshipping* God by building an *altar* and bringing *offerings* to the Lord (Gen. 4:3-4; cf. 8:20). After Cain's murder of his brother Abel, we're told that it was in connection with the line of Seth that men began to "call upon [invoke] the name of the LORD" (Yahweh; Gen. 4:26). This formal "calling upon the name of the Lord" describes the essence of all true religious worship. There's a sense in which it's synonymous with "prayer." Calling upon the name of the Lord is that (religious) "act" that expresses, at the most basic level, our proper posture as creatures before our Creator God (cf. Mat. 6:9-13).

In the Old Testament, this "calling upon the name of the Lord" was connected with the shedding of blood and the offering up of gifts to God on an altar. We see again the difference between the common (all of life) and the holy (times and places and activities set apart unto the worship of God). We also see that even though all men know by the law of their creation that they are obligated to "call upon the name of the Lord," because of the fall God must specially reveal His name (the name that we call upon) and His worship (the way we are to call upon His name). Cain and Abel didn't invent the altar or the idea of bringing gifts to God on the altar. Religious worship isn't something we invent and assume God will be pleased with. It's not an arena for human creativity and self-expression (compare "internal worship"). Religious worship is uniquely and exclusively the domain of God and must therefore be engaged in according to His will—according as He has revealed this worship to us. This has been called the regulative principle of (religious) worship (God regulates His worship). We see this principle illustrated when God forbade the use of tools in designing or embellishing an altar. Any use of tools on the stones of the altar profaned the altar (Exod. 20:25). When God's people did build a tabernacle or a temple (with its accompanying altar), they were to build strictly according to the pattern given them by God (Exod. 25:9, 40; 26:30; 1 Chron. 28:9-19). In no other activity are we more dependent upon God and upon His revelation than we are in worship.

III. Patriarchal Worship

In the days of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, we see the patriarchs over and over again building an altar and calling upon the name of the Lord in the place where the Lord appeared to them and gave them His word of promise.

- Genesis 12:7-8 — Then the LORD appeared to Abram and said, "To your offspring I will give this land." So he built **there** an altar to the LORD, who had appeared to him.
- Genesis 26:23-25 — From there [Isaac] went up to Beersheba. And the LORD appeared to him the same night and said, "I am the God of Abraham your father. Fear not, for I am with you and will bless you and multiply your offspring for my servant Abraham's sake." So he built an altar **there** and called upon the name of the LORD and pitched his tent there.
- Genesis 35:1, 6-7 — God said to Jacob, "Arise, go up to Bethel and dwell there. Make an altar there to the God who appeared to you when you fled from your brother Esau" ... And Jacob came to Luz (that is, Bethel)... and **there** he built an altar and called the place El-bethel, because **there** God had revealed himself to him [and gave him the covenant promises] when he fled from his brother.

In Exodus, we hear the Lord speaking these words through Moses:

- Exodus 20:24 — An altar of earth you shall make for me and sacrifice on it your burnt offerings and your peace offerings... In every place where I cause my name to be remembered [called upon / worshiped] I will come to you and bless you.

We see from these Scriptures how inseparably religious worship must be tied together with God's revelatory word. We are not the initiators in this worship. We could say that true worship happens in the context of a dialogue that God initiates (this has been called the dialogical principle of worship). God makes His powerful, saving name known to us in and through His Word of promise, and then we respond by calling upon that name.

What does this mean for our practice of religious worship today? Our worship must be centered around the Inscripturated Word in which God has revealed Himself to us through the eternal and incarnate Word, Jesus Christ. This is why a significant portion of religious worship should be taken up with the reading and preaching of Scripture. Preaching isn't just one of the things we do on Sunday morning in addition to praying. Preaching and praying are both essential to that divine-human "dialogue" that happens in worship.

We've looked at the theme of religious worship in the primeval period (Cain, Able, Seth, Noah) and the patriarchal period (Abraham, Isaac, Jacob). Now we come to look at the theme of worship under the Mosaic covenant.

IV. Old Covenant Worship

It's through covenant that God enters into saving relationship with His elect/chosen people. It's on the grounds of covenant that God says of all those whom He has chosen: "They shall be My people, and I shall be their God." This means, in the first place, that religious worship is fundamentally covenantal. In other words, worship is to be shaped and regulated by the specific covenant that's in effect at the time. We read in Hebrews chapter 9:

- Hebrews 9:1 — Now even the first covenant had regulations of divine worship and the earthly sanctuary.

Under the Old Covenant, worship was centralized at a specific place (the tabernacle/temple), it was engaged in at specific times (sabbaths, feast days, morning and evening sacrifices, etc.), and it was performed by a specific priesthood (the Levites). It was through the covenant that God regulated and prescribed the religious worship that was acceptable to Him. This helps us to see why when the covenant changes, the worship changes.

- John 4:21 — Jesus said to [the Samaritan woman at the well], "Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem will you worship the Father.

The author of Hebrews writes:

- Hebrews 7:11–12 — Now if perfection had been attainable through the Levitical priesthood (for under it the people received the Law [Covenant]), what further need would there have been for another priest to arise after the order of Melchizedek, rather than one named after the order of Aaron? For when there is a change in the priesthood, there is necessarily a change in the Law [Covenant] as well.

Religious worship is covenantal. Therefore, religious worship is always to be the formal maintenance of—and enjoyment of—the covenant relationship in covenant dialogue between God and His people. God says of His elect people in Zechariah:

- Zechariah 13:9 — “They will call on My name, and I will answer them; I will say, ‘They are My people,’ and they will say, ‘The LORD is my God.’”

We see, then, that to voluntarily neglect religious worship is to spurn that covenant relationship that God Himself is pursuing with His people.

If religious worship is covenantal, this means that it’s also fundamentally communal. God entered into covenant not with isolated individuals, but with a corporate people. We see this communal nature of Old Covenant worship in different ways. First, the Levites were chosen to perform the worship at the tabernacle instead of all the firstborn males in Israel, and the firstborn Israelite males stood, in turn, for the people of Israel as a whole (cf. Num. 3:5-7, 11-12; Exod. 4:22-23). Second, the high priest performed the temple worship with the names of the twelve tribes of Israel written upon his shoulders and over his heart (cf. Exod. 28:9, 12, 15, 17, 21, 29). Finally, all the males in Israel (representing the entire covenant people) were to appear before the Lord three times a year at the annual feasts of Unleavened Bread, Weeks, and Booths (Exod. 23:14-17; 34:18-24; Deut. 16:1-17; Ps. 35:18; 149:1). Looking ahead to the New Covenant, we see this communal nature of worship fulfilled in the priesthood of all believers and the temple that’s now being built together with living stones.

- 1 Peter 2:4–5 — And coming to [Jesus] as to a living stone which has been rejected by men, but is choice and precious in the sight of God, you also, as living stones, are being built up as a spiritual house for a holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ...

At the beginning of this sermon, we looked at the categorical (systematic) distinction between “internal” worship (all of life) and “outward” religious acts of worship (*not* all of life). Now we can see also a biblical categorical (systematic) distinction between private religious worship (personal prayer in the “inner room” with the door closed; Mat. 6:6) and what we might call “temple” religious worship. This is an essential biblical distinction. The church is God’s New Covenant “temple” built of living stones (cf. 1 Cor. 3:16-17; Eph. 2:19-22; 1 Pet. 2:4-5), and the temple, throughout the Bible, is the special place of God’s “special presence”—God’s “house of prayer” (cf. 2 Chron. 7:16; Isa. 56:7; compare, omnipresence). Here, again, we see the essential distinction between the common and the holy. We could say, then, that the “worship” that happens here is doubly holy. Not only is it religious worship (the outward, formal observance of divinely instituted ordinances), it’s religious “temple” worship (the outward, formal observance of these ordinances in the context of the stones all assembled together as the place of God’s

special presence). There are some professing Christians today who want to worship God apart from “organized religion”—apart from the gathered church. But this is a denial of the fundamentally communal shape of religious worship under both the Old and New Covenants.

In connection with the Old Covenant, singing was provided for as one of the elements in calling upon—and also proclaiming—the name of the Lord. King David appointed Levitical (priestly) choirs to “minister [continually] before the ark of the LORD” (1 Chron. 16:4, 7-9, 35, 37, 41). These priestly choirs were appointed by God to represent the people (who could not always be at the temple) in covenant dialogue with God and even to represent God in covenant dialogue with His people (1 Chron. 25:1-3). Looking ahead to the New Covenant, we see that these priestly choirs are fulfilled not in special church choirs, but in the singing of the entire congregation because we are all now priests and Levites who minister continually before the Lord (redemptive-historical fulfillment). When we sing together each week on the Lord’s Day, we’re a priestly temple choir calling upon the name of the Lord in prayer and proclaiming the word of the Lord to ourselves and to one another.

It’s only when we’ve come to understand the beauty of religious worship in the Old Testament that we’re prepared to embrace the wonder and beauty of this worship in the New Testament.

V. New Covenant Worship

Because in the New Testament the covenant has changed, therefore some of the basic covenantal forms of worship have also changed (or been fulfilled). There’s no longer any physical altar in New Covenant worship because all that the altar represents has been fulfilled in Christ’s once for all sacrifice on the cross (Heb. 13:10-12). There’s no longer any physical temple in New Covenant worship because all that the temple represents has been fulfilled in Christ, who tabernacled among us (Jn. 1:1-4, 14; 2:19-21) and in whom all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell (Col. 1:19; 2:9). There’s no longer any special tribal priesthood in New Covenant worship because all that the priesthood represents has been fulfilled in Christ who offered up Himself for us and who now intercedes for us at God’s right hand (Rom. 8:34; Heb. 7:11-28; 9:14, 24; 10:12). Under the New Covenant, we even have the guarantee of worshipers who, because of their vital union with Christ, now worship in spirit and in truth (no longer idolatrous or hypocritical; cf. 1 Pet. 2:5).

- John 4:23–24 — Jesus said to her, “...an hour is coming, and now is, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth...”
- Philippians 3:3 — [W]e are the true circumcision, who worship in the Spirit of God and glory in Christ Jesus and put no confidence in the flesh.

And yet even though the covenant has changed, the principles defining what religious worship is are still the same as they’ve always been. By the time we come to the New Testament, our basic theology of worship should be fully formed. And it’s this theology of worship that must shape our practice of worship today. It’s still true that this worship is not “common” (all of life), but something uniquely holy and set apart (divinely instituted ordinances, “temple” and “special presence”). It’s still true that only God can tell us how we are to worship Him (divinely instituted ordinances) and that we are not free to worship Him in any way that we see fit—no matter how

sincere we may be (the regulative principle of worship). It's still true that religious worship is—at its heart—a calling upon (an invoking of) the name of the Lord in connection with the shedding of blood (now the once-for-all shed blood of Jesus) and the offering up of “gifts” on the altar (now the altar that is Christ Himself; 1 Pet. 2:4-5; Heb. 13:10). It's still true that worship is always our response to the word of promise that God first speaks to us (the dialogical principle of worship). It's still true that worship is fundamentally communal and therefore fundamentally congregational (we need each other for worship). And it's still true that religious worship is fundamentally covenantal. It is the formal maintenance of—and enjoyment of—the covenant relationship in covenant dialogue between God and His people. So let's just briefly consider now (in light of these things) the divinely ordained “parts” of New Covenant religious worship.

VI. The Lord's Supper

Because worship is covenantal, it's right that the covenant meal should be observed weekly as an integral part of religious worship. “This cup,” Jesus said, “is *the new covenant* in My blood; do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of Me” 1 Cor. 11:25). Speaking of the bread, Jesus said, “This is My body which is for you; do this in remembrance of Me” (1 Cor. 11:24). The Lord's Supper is a visual word of promise that God speaks to us (accompanied by the written/spoken word) and that we hear and apprehend by faith (1 Cor. 11:23-26). In the Lord's Supper, God assures us that since we've been made partakers of Christ through faith (1 Cor. 10:16) we now have a spiritual and eternal life being nourished within us unto the resurrection (Jn. 6:22-59). We respond to this word that God speaks by partaking of the meal with thanksgiving (cf. Lk. 22:17, 19). “Do this,” Jesus says, “in remembrance of Me [which is to say, ‘calling upon My name’]” (cf. Exod. 3:15; 20:24; Ps. 45:17; 102:12).

Not only does the Lord's Supper display the dialogical nature of worship, it also displays the communal/congregational nature of worship.

- 1 Corinthians 10:17 (cf. 11:28-29) — Since there is one bread, we who are many are one body; for we all partake of the one bread.

A biblical understanding of religious worship will make it difficult to think of engaging in this worship apart from the observance of the Lord's Supper.

The Lord's Supper, as the “remembrance” of Jesus, is in a very real sense the central act of New Covenant worship.

VII. The Reading and Preaching of the Word

The responsive nature of worship means that it must be centered around the reading and preaching of God's Word. It's always God who initiates by speaking to us His word of promise. The apostle Paul wrote to Timothy:

- 1 Timothy 4:13-16 — Until I come, give attention to the public reading of Scripture, to exhortation and teaching... Take pains with these things; be absorbed in them, so that your progress will be evident to all. Pay close attention to yourself and to your teaching; persevere

in these things, for as you do this you will ensure salvation both for yourself and for those who hear you.

- 1 Timothy 5:17 — The elders who rule well are to be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who work hard at preaching and teaching.

The reading and preaching of God’s word in religious worship must always be seen in the light of that covenantal dialogue of which it is a part. Insofar as a fallible man is preaching to other men and women, there is a horizontal element in preaching. However, insofar as the pastor/teacher is called to speak “as one who is speaking the utterances of God” (1 Pet. 4:11; cf. Eph. 4:11), preaching is an essential part of that divine-human “dialogue” that is New Covenant worship.

VIII. Prayer

We’ve seen that if God is the one who initiates by speaking to us His word of promise, we are those who respond by joyfully calling upon His name. “The prayers” (Acts 2:42), therefore, are of the very essence of all religious worship. Luke writes about the early church:

- Acts 2:42 — And they were continually devoting themselves to the teaching of the apostles and to the fellowship, [i.e.] to the breaking of bread **and to the prayers**.

The apostle Paul wrote to Timothy:

- 1 Timothy 2:8 — Therefore I want the men in every place [in every gathered congregation] to pray, lifting up holy hands, without wrath and dissension.

IX. Congregational Singing

Lastly, as members of the priestly temple choir, we know that our singing may take either the form of prayer directed to God (a calling upon His name) or of a proclamation of biblical truth directed to ourselves and each other, or both at the same time. Paul writes (assuming the context of the church gathered for worship):

- Ephesians 5:19 (cf. Col. 3:16) — [All of you, be] filled with the Spirit, speaking *to one another* in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody with your heart *to the Lord*.

Conclusion

We’ve mentioned the Lord’s Supper, the reading and preaching of the Word, Prayer, and congregational singing. Aside from baptism (which for obvious reasons may not be a regular, weekly part of worship), have we missed anything? Have we left anything out? What about special presentations (skits communicating a biblical lesson; interpretive dance with sacred music; instrumental/vocal solos; instrumental/vocal ensembles/choirs)? Can any of these things be expressions of “internal” worship? Yes! They should be. Can any of these be witnessed by the “audience” with an attitude of “internal” worship? Very much so. But none of these things are

divinely instituted ordinances of religious worship. Moreover, in all of these things there's a certain built-in performative element where the congregation become, as it were, "spectators." This is by no means, in and of itself, something negative. But in that covenantal dialogue which is religious worship, we know that there's never any audience and there's never any "spectating." A true understanding of the covenantal and dialogical nature of worship will warn us against any hint of being spectators and call us to engage diligently in every part of religious worship as active participants in a running covenantal dialogue.

What about "one-anothering" or "fellowship"? Can Christians gather for times of praise and testimony or for one-anothering and fellowship? Yes! But it is not biblically fitting that these times should "interrupt" the dialogue that is the religious worship God requires of us (cf. announcements). Very simply, "one-anothering" is not a divinely instituted ordinance of religious "temple" worship. This also explains why we've chosen not to take up the offering as a part of religious worship.

It may be helpful, at this point, to observe that special presentations, sharing times, and offerings (and any number of other things) can all be left out of the church's worship without any disobedience to the word of God. On the other hand, a church may never choose to forsake the Lord's Supper (and baptism as appropriate), the reading and preaching of the Word, prayer, or congregational singing without being guilty of negligence and disobedience. At the very least, then, we see a distinction between the "essential" and the "non-essential" parts of religious worship. But can there really be such a thing as the "non-essential" parts of religious worship? What we see, in reality, is a distinction between those things that *are* parts of religious worship and those things that are not.

When we include only the essentials of what God has *prescribed* for His worship we're never missing out on anything. Worship is not thereby impoverished but rather revealed in its true fullness and richness. What we see here (and what we've seen throughout this message) is the beautiful simplicity of religious worship—a God-ordained simplicity that suits this worship for all places and for all times; a God-ordained simplicity that both affirms and safeguards the true essence of what worship *is*. We also see what a serious sin it is for any professing Christian to neglect the religious worship that God has required of us. What we have in these "parts of religious worship" is the formal maintenance of—and enjoyment of—the covenant relationship in covenant dialogue between God and His people. A true understanding of these things would solve all of the "worship wars" today. It's not about being "traditional" or "contemporary." There are plenty of "traditionalists" who aren't necessarily being biblical. It's about having a theology of worship (both systematic and redemptive-historical) that's biblical.

In the Bible, the congregational "Amen" is a fitting expression of the communal and responsive nature of worship

- Nehemiah 8:6 — Then Ezra blessed the Lord the great God. And all the people answered, "Amen, Amen!" while lifting up their hands; then they bowed low and worshiped the Lord with their faces to the ground.
- Psalms 106:48 (cf. 1 Chron. 16:36) — Blessed be the Lord, the God of Israel, from everlasting even to everlasting. And let all the people say, "Amen."

- 1 Corinthians 14:16 — [I]f you bless in the spirit only, how will the one who fills the place of the ungifted say the “Amen” at your giving of thanks...?

What greater privilege could there be than to gather each Sunday in the special presence of God to engage in this most holy of all activities—which is religious worship? May we do so today and in the coming weeks and months and years all the more faithfully and with all the more joy.