Worship in Spirit and in Truth

Text: John 4:24

Rev. David Waldron

**Scriptures:** Genesis 4:1-7; Exodus 20:1-6; John 4:1-28

**Songs Chosen:** [SttL] 359, 116, 180, 227, 264

Series: Heidelberg Catechism (LD35 Q&A96)

Theme: The application of the 2nd commandment to the corporate worship of God

Proposition: We must obey the 2nd commandment at all times, including when we worship the Lord together as a congregation.

**Introduction**

Here’s an extract from an article in a United States newspaper objecting to new trends in church music: “*It’s too new. It’s often worldly, even blasphemous. The new Christian music is not as pleasant as the more established style. Because there are so many songs, you can’t learn them all. It puts too much emphasis on instrumental music rather than Godly lyrics. This new music creates disturbances making people act indecently and disorderly. The preceding generation got along without it. It’s a money-making scene and some of these new music upstarts are lewd and loose*”. This article was apparently written by a pastor in 1723 attacking Isaac Watts, the writer of great hymns like *When I Survey the Wondrous Cross, Joy to the World,*and*O God, Our Help in Ages Past.*

All this to say that the ‘worship wars’ are nothing new in the church. We can go further back in history and see for example that when the Gregorian Chant became the official music of the church, it was characterized by a single, monophonic, unaccompanied melody sung only by men.  Later young boys whose voices had not yet ‘broken’ started singing with the men, but their voices were an octave higher.  There were many who objected.  Later harmony was added to the music of the church, but many were against this change.

In 1540 Calvin stated that only the Old Testament Psalms sung in a metrical rhythm were appropriate for worship (The style of the Genevan Psalter).  Jazz influences of the early twentieth century resulted in an edict from the Pope that the piano was forbidden in the Catholic church, because of its worldly influences. Soon after came the Jesus movement with drums, guitars, and other instruments.

Over the years, as a result of the ‘worship wars’ there have been church and denominational splits, personal strife, and relationships broken with those in the church bitterly quarrelling whilst those outside the church look at the Body of Christ with contempt. The ‘worship wars’ are not God-honouring.

How then can the church of the Lord Jesus Christ be protected from this strife and conflict? By rightly understanding the 2nd commandment. This sermon explores connection between the 2nd commandment and the way we worship God when we gather together, under two headings:

1. Unregulated worship
2. Regulated worship
3. **Unregulated Worship**

What happens when the worship of God is not regulated by His will as expressed in His commands? The sweep of Scripture through history helps us to rightly respond to this question. {The short answer is that things do not go well}.

Let’s begin by considering Cain and Abel, both of whom worshipped the Lord God. It is reasonable to infer that Adam and Eve provided some instruction as to how the Lord was to be reverenced in worship. As we read from Genesis chapter 4, Cain brought an offering of fruit from the ground, Abel the firstborn of his flock and their fat portions. Each brought an offering resulting from their own labour. ‘*Abel was a keeper of sheep and Cain a worker of the ground*’ (Gen 4:2) Whilst Abel brought the first and best, there is no mention that Cain did so. We do know that ‘*The Lord had regard for Abel and his offering, but for Cain and his offering he had no regard*’ (Gen 4:5).

Some commentators have suggested that Abel brought a blood sacrifice whilst Cain did not, however there’s no specific indication from the text of Scripture that this was why the Lord did not regard Cain’s offering. Grain offerings do feature in later Old Testament worship regulations (e.g. in Exodus, Leviticus, and Numbers). What is explicitly made clear in later revelation is that Cain’s offering was not accompanied by faith, whereas ‘*by faith Abel offered to God a more acceptable sacrifice than Cain*’ (Heb 11:4). The story of Cain and Abel certainly teaches us that there is a right way to worship God (according to His instructions) and a wrong way (not according to His instructions). Worship unaccompanied by faith is not acceptable to God. We see this later in history, when the Lord said of idolatrous Israel through the prophet Isaiah “*This people draw near with their mouth and honour me with their lips, while their hearts are far from me, and their fear of me is a commandment taught by men*” (Isaiah 29:13).

In Leviticus 10:1-3 we read of Nadab and Abihu, the sons of Aaron, who each ‘*took his censer and put fire in it and laid incense on it and offered unauthorized fire before the LORD, which he had not commanded them*’ (Lev 10:1). The consequence of their ‘unregulated worship was that ‘*fire came out from before the LORD and consumed them, and they died before the LORD’* (Lev 10:2).

In Deuteronomy, the Lord warns His people not to worship Him in the ways that the pagan nations worship their gods (12:31), but rather He says: "*Everything that I command you, you shall be careful to do. You shall not add to it or take from it*” (Deut 12:32). Later in history, Saul wrongly offered sacrifices to the Lord not according to the Lord’s commands (1 Samuel 13:7-14). In the 1st century AD, Jesus rebuked the Pharisees and scribes whose traditions contradicted the law of God (Matt 15:1-14).

In Colossians 2:21-23, God’s people are warned not to indulge in ‘man-made religion’. For example, the songs which form part of corporate worship must be spiritual and are to be sung with sincerity from the heart (Eph 5:19). It is clear from Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians that congregational worship in the church at Corinth was not well regulated. Paul concludes the section in 1 Corinthians 12:29-39 where he deals with the worship practices of the church by writing: “*But all things should be done decently and in order*” (1 Cor 14:40).

Well-regulated worship is vividly pictured in the book of Revelation where God is glorified in the presence of those who praise and honour Him (e.g. Rev 4:9; 5:9; 7:12; 11:16; 14:3; 15:3; 15:5; 22:3). True worship focusses primarily on God the Father and the Lamb. We see this clearly in the book of Revelation. “*Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honour and power and might be to our God forever and ever! Amen*” (Rev 7:12). “*Worthy are you to take the scroll and to open its seals, for you were slain, and by your blood you ransomed people for God from every tribe and language and people and nation*” (Rev 5:9).

Gospel writer John records Jesus presenting the gospel to woman at a well in chapter 4, from which the text for this sermon is taken. She was a Samaritan woman who, perhaps seeking to change the subject of her conversation with Jesus about her living with a man who was not her husband, spoke to Him about worship, saying: “*Our fathers worshiped on this mountain, but you say that in Jerusalem is the place where people ought to worship*" (John 4:20). She was referring to the Samaritans who built a temple on Mount Gerizim and continued to worship there after that structure was destroyed around 130BC. Jesus then explains that God is spirit and is to be worshipped in ‘spirit and in truth’.

We know that the temporary regulations of the Old Testament ceremonies involving sacrifices and special places of worship were fulfilled in Christ (Matt 5:17); the long-awaited Messiah. There are clearly differences in Old Testament corporate worship regulations and New Testament commands, but there is also a continuity throughout the revelation of Scripture. The second commandment in the decalogue (‘ten words’), focusses on the worship of God when He commands: "*You shall not make for yourself a carved image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth*” (Exo 20:3). Clearly, the 2nd commandment is an abiding law which prohibits the worshipping of any object or representation of God Himself, or anything or anybody which He has made. For example: the worship of a golden calf by the Israelites who had been delivered by the Lord from slavery in Egypt was sin.

However, the application of the 2nd commandment goes further than just the making of images. The Heidelberg Catechism, drawing from the body of Scripture as we have just briefly reviewed in part, makes the following deduction: that we must not “*worship him in any other way than he has commanded in his Word*” (A96b). This brings us then to consider how God regulates the corporate worship of His people through the commands in His Word, the focus of our second point

1. **Regulated Worship**

The Bible is not a book of exhaustive rules and regulations which cover in detail every aspect of life, including the worship of God. In order to know the will of God, it is necessary to meditate regularly and consistently on Scripture (e.g. Psalm 1:2; 119:15), studying the principles and patterns of God’s will so that we can faithfully apply these to the varied circumstances of life. For God’s glory we aim to be those who ‘*rightly handle the word of truth*’ (2 Tim 2:15).

So, should we sing Genevan tunes in church? Should we have musical instruments? Is an organ in the worship services of the church essential? How long should the sermon be? Should the preacher stand still or move around? Should we sing old songs or new ones? Should we have flowers in the church building where we gather for worship? When we pray should we stand, sit or kneel? What time should we meet together for congregational worship?

In all these detailed matters we have a degree of liberty. However, this blessed freedom is to be regulated by God’s Word. The Westminster Confession of Faith (1:6) helpfully expresses this truth in these words: “*The whole counsel of God concerning all things necessary for his own glory and man’s salvation, faith, and life, is either expressly stated in Scripture or* ***by******good and necessary inference may be deduced from Scripture****, unto which nothing at any time is to be added, whether by new revelations of the Spirit or by traditions of men. Nevertheless, we acknowledge that the inward illumination of the Spirit of God is necessary for the saving understanding of such things as are revealed in the Word. We also acknowledge that there are some circumstances concerning the worship of God and the government of the church—circumstances common to human activities and societies—which are to be ordered by the light of nature and Christian prudence, according to the general rules of the Word, which are always to be observed*”.

Notice those words ‘by good and necessary inference may be deduced from Scripture’. An ‘inference’ is a ‘conclusion reached on the basis of evidence or reasoning’. To ‘deduce’ something is to reason from general principles to particular instances.

We could ask the question what different components or parts should make up the liturgy (that is the order of worship) when we meet together on the Lord’s Day? The Bible does not prescribe a fixed liturgy; however, we do know that the New Testament church met and worshipped the Lord in these ways:

1. They sang the Bible (Eph 5:19; Col 3:16).
2. They heard the Bible preached (2 Tim 4:2).
3. They prayed the Bible (Matt 6:9).
4. They heard and/or read the Bible (1 Tim 4:13).
5. The saw the Bible in the sacraments of baptism and Lord’s Supper (Matt 28:19; Acts 2:38-39; 1 Cor 11:23-26; Col 2:11-12).

We have no indication that they enacted the stories and messages of Scripture with dramas, plays, puppet shows or dances. Or that they blessed domestic animals during their worship services. The Belgic Confession (article 32) refers to these types of activities which have found subsequently their way into the worship practices of some churches as ‘*inventions and laws introduced into the worship of God which bind and compel... consciences*”. When we break the 2nd commandment and worship God together in ways which He has not commanded, not only do we sin, we also bind the conscience of our brothers and sisters in Christ, compromising their Christian Liberty.

It is also possible for us not to break the 2nd commandment, but still to bind the consciences of others. An example of this is Christmas, Good Friday and other ‘special’ or ‘feast day’ services which are not prescribed in Scripture. We may (exercising Christian liberty) meet together to praise the Lord and remember the incarnation of Christ or His death, or His ascension, or the day of Pentecost, but we must not compel each other to attend such services, for they are not commanded by God.

Within the principles of worship revealed by the Lord in Scripture, there is much freedom; a blessed flexibility and wide variation in what is permissible. We can decide whether or not to sing Genevan tunes, new songs or old ones, or to have a range of musical genres which helps us all, young and old, from many different cultures to worship the Lord together. We can adopt different postures for prayer, have worship service times which work best for the majority of us and aim to have sermons which are sufficiently deep in their content without being so long that many struggle to concentrate on what is being said throughout.

I hope that you are convinced from Scripture that the Lord does regulate how He is to be worshipped when His people gather and that within these Scriptural regulations we have freedom. This truth is referred to as the ‘Regulative Principle of Worship’ by Reformed and Presbyterian churches. The Regulative Principle can be formulated as stating that ‘*the acceptable way of worshipping the true God is instituted by himself and so limited by his own revealed will*’ (WCF 21.1).

Some Christians object to the Regulative Principle of Worship, saying that we don’t find the words ‘regulative principle’ in Scripture. They are correct in saying that we do not find the actual words ‘regulative principle of worship’ in the Bible. However it is clear that the way we worship God is to be regulated by His Word if we are to worship Him in spirit and in truth. Calling this application of the 2nd commandment ‘the regulative principle’ gives a man-made name to a Biblical concept.

It is a rich blessing for the church to understand the truth that is expressed in WCF21:1 – That “*the acceptable way of worshipping the true God has been instituted by himself, and so limited by his own revealed will, that he may not be worshipped according to the imaginations or devisings of men, or the suggestions of Satan, or under any visible representation, or any other way not commanded in Holy Scripture*”. This is a good and necessary inference from the Bible in light of the 2nd commandment which preserves the liberty of conscience of God’s people and also protects us from unbiblical innovations.

When our corporate worship is regulated by God’s Word, applied to our worshipping hearts by the Holy Spirit, then we are enabled to worship our God in spirit and in truth. This is pleasing to our Lord. As Jesus said to the Samaritan woman “*God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth*." (John 4:24).

AMEN.