

The Westminster Standards and Public Worship

David E. Gilbert

For nearly a century, prior to the call by Parliament of the Westminster Assembly in 1643, Thomas Cranmer's *Book of Common Prayer* (1549) governed public worship for the Church of England. Among the range of topics regulated by it—from requirements regarding baptism to prohibitions concerning burial—the *Book of Common Prayer* mandated a specific liturgy for public worship for the Church of England, the deviation from which might result in fines, imprisonment, and potential charges for treason.¹

From Liturgy to Directory

In June 1643, following eighteen months debate, Parliament called the assembly of theologians to address a series of issues aimed at reforming the Church of England. More than one hundred men were summoned to undertake the work, the initial emphasis of which dealt with the doctrinal framework of the *Thirty-Nine Articles* of the Church of England. However, some six months after the labors of the assembly commenced, the divines undertook the work of revising the liturgical structure

¹ J.V. Fesko, *The Theology of the Westminster Standards*, Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2014, 336–338.

of the *Book of Common Prayer*. With the second commandment in view, and aiming for pure worship by the Word of God, the assembly decided against the mandated liturgy of the *Book of Common Prayer*, and instead they spent virtually all of 1644 developing *The Directory for The Public Worship of God*.¹ Parliament approved the *Directory* on 3 January 1645.

Although the *Book of Common Prayer* advanced the goal of the first Reformers to remove 'vain, erroneous, superstitious, and idolatrous' practices in the public worship of God, the church had learned by 'long and sad experience' that the liturgy mandated in the *Book of Common Prayer* proved offensive and the source of much mischief. It did so by urging the reading of all prayers, by requiring 'many unprofitable and burdensome ceremonies'² sympathetic to the Roman Catholic Church, by leading some proponents of it to hold that God could be worshiped only by following the prayer book, and by hindering preaching and causing a superstitious people to become hardened in their ignorance of saving knowledge and true piety.

Having so concluded, and standing on the foundation of the first Reformers, the divines built upon the earlier work with further reformation. Specifically, the ceremonies of the former liturgy were laid aside in favor of those things prescribed in the Scriptures. With the adoption of the *Directory*, the church would have direction 'in those things that contain the substance of the service and worship of God.'³

The Regulative Principle of Worship

The burden of the divines was to free the worship of God from all practices that were not divinely instituted. Accordingly, as

1 Chad Van Dixhoorn, ed. *The Minutes and Papers of the Westminster Assembly 1643–1652*, vol. 1, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012, 28.

2 Westminster Assembly, *The Directory for the Public Worship of God*, 'The Preface,' Discussed by Mark Never and Sinclair Ferguson, Fears, Ross-shire: Christian Focus, 2008, 79–82.

3 Westminster Assembly, *The Directory for the Public Worship of God*, 'The Preface.'

stated by the assembly some two years after the approval of the *Directory*, '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.'¹

The *Westminster Confession* Chapter 21.1 is perhaps the clearest expression of what is referred to as the regulative principle of worship. Westminster declared that there must be scriptural warrant for everything done in worship. That warrant may be found in positive commands, in examples, or derived from good and necessary consequence.² The worship of the Triune God cannot be directed by our own opinions, our theories, even our tastes. Or as another put it: 'As a principle, this attention to biblical prescription usefully keeps us from promoting in our churches any activity that sounds practical, appears beautiful, smells wonderful, feels comfortable or tastes vaguely theological, but that is not prescribed in the Bible.'³ The regulative principle then is simply *sola Scriptura* applied to worship. If the Word of God is 'the only rule of faith and obedience,'⁴ then the Word must direct every aspect of worship by the people of God. To insist that God's people worship by the Word is to acknowledge three vital principles: the authority of God, the sinfulness of man, and the liberty of conscience.

The Authority of God

Genesis 1 sets forth the majesty, power, and authority of God. He speaks and all things come into existence. He rules over all in transcendent holiness (Exodus 15:11; Isaiah 6). The prophets

1 WCF 21.1

2 J. Ligon Duncan III 'Does God Care How We Worship?' in *Give Praise to God*, ed. Philip Graham Ryken, Derek W.H. Thomas, and J. Ligon Duncan III, Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R Publishing, 2003, 23.

3 Chad Van Dixhoorn, *Confessing the Faith: A reader's guide to the Westminster Confession of Faith*, Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 2014, 277.

4 WLC 3.

describe at great length the incomparability and inscrutability of God (Isaiah 40–46; Jeremiah 10). Jeremiah declares *There is none like you, O LORD; you are great, and your name is great in might. Who would not fear you, O King of the nations? For this is your due; for among all the wise ones of the nations and in all their kingdoms there is none like you* (Jeremiah 10:6–7).

In view of God's exalted majesty and the creaturely existence of all men, how can man undertake to approach him with worship crafted by the wisdom of men?¹ God's thoughts are not our thoughts. His ways are not our ways. Indeed, his thoughts and ways are much higher than ours (Isaiah 55:8–9). If worship is to be pleasing to the glorious Triune God, he must direct it. As the authority over all, the infinite and holy God must tell finite and sinful man how to approach him.²

The Sinfulness of Man

Man's sinful pattern since the Garden has been *to exchange the truth about God for a lie* (Romans 1:25). Noting man's bent towards idolatry, John Calvin concluded that 'man's nature, so to speak, is a perpetual factory of idols.'³ Calvin's words declare what is plain from Scripture, whether in Genesis 3, in Israel's sordid history, or in Romans 1. Man is totally depraved. His whole nature is corrupt. Man is 'utterly indisposed, disabled, and made opposite unto all that is spiritual good.'⁴

Clearly then the worship of man will be tainted with sin. Deceitful hearts (see Jeremiah 17:9) will always err. Accordingly, the *Westminster Confession* declares that God must tell us how to worship. He prescribes how he must be approached. He instructs sinners in the way (Psalm 25:8).

¹ WCF 7.1 describes the Creator/creature distinction.

² J. Ligon Duncan III 'Foundations For Biblically Directed Worship,' in *Glve Praise to God*, ed. Philip Graham Ryken, Derek W.H. Thomas, and J. Ligon Duncan III, Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R Publishing, 2003, 53–54.

³ John Calvin, *Institutes of Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, 2 vols, Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960, I.11.8 (I:108).

⁴ *Westminster Larger Catechism* 25.

The Liberty of Conscience

The burden of both the Reformers and the divines is to let Scripture alone speak concerning the elements of worship, with nothing further to bind the people of God's conscience as they worship. For example, Westminster divine George Gillespie stated that Paul made clear in Colossians 2:20–22 that God's people are not subject to the regulations of the world according to human precepts and teachings.¹ To submit to church practices not rooted clearly in Scripture would be to make ourselves servants of men and not God. Such servitude, he concluded, is tyranny.

Therefore, in the *Westminster Confession of Faith*, chapter 20 'Of Christian Liberty, and Liberty of Conscience,' the divines asserted that 'God alone is Lord of the conscience, and has left it free from the doctrines and commandments of men, which are, in anything contrary to his Word; or beside it, in matters of faith, or worship. So that, to believe such doctrines, or to obey such commands, out of conscience, is to betray true liberty of conscience ...'²

Liberty of conscience would thus be destroyed if the elders of the church were to add to any element of worship without biblical warrant. Such conduct would be binding the consciences of the people to follow an unbiblical standard.

Similarly, James Bannerman has stated 'Within that sanctuary none but the Lord of the conscience may enter; and because it is his dwelling-place and home, his presence protects the conscience from the intrusion of the Church.'³

'What then does the law of God say about our worship? Where in Scripture do we find a regulating principle of worship?

¹ George Gillespie, *A Dispute Against the English Popish Ceremonies Obtruded on the Church of Scotland*, Edinburgh, 1660, 1.3.

² WCF 20.2 (emphasis supplied).

³ James Bannerman, *The Church of Christ: A Treatise on the Nature, Powers, Ordinances, Discipline, and Government of the Christian Church*, rev. ed, Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 2015, 260–261.

Scriptural Foundation of the Regulative Principle

Numerous texts set forth God's regulation of our worship. For example, in the first commandment given to Moses God stated that he alone was to be the object of worship for all mankind. In the following commandment the Lord spoke clearly to Israel concerning what was acceptable worship:

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. You shall not bow down to them or serve them, for I the LORD your God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me, but showing steadfast love to thousands of those who love me and keep my commandments.

Simply put, the Lord was never to be worshiped by means of images. When Israel met the Lord on Sinai, they saw no form that they might use to project an image or likeness of him. Doing so, God explained to Moses, would ignite his wrath (Deuteronomy 4:15–32). By necessary inference, therefore, resorting to man's own ideas in worship, rather than carefully doing those things the Lord prescribes, will also arouse the anger of the Lord. Worship must be done God's way, not according to our imagination.

Accordingly, the divines wrote in the *Larger Catechism* 109 'The sins forbidden in the second commandment are, all devising, counseling, commanding, using, and anywise approving, any religious worship not instituted by God Himself.' As Moses stated in Deuteronomy 12:32, *Everything that I command you, you shall be careful to do. You shall not add to it or take from it.*

Further support for Scripture-regulated worship is found in Leviticus 10:1, where *Nadab and Abihu, the sons of Aaron, each took his censure and put fire in it and laid incense on it and offered unauthorized fire before the LORD*, which he had not commanded them (emphasis supplied). These sons of Aaron did not offer a fire contrary to God's command; they offered fire having no

command to do so by the Lord whatsoever. *And fire came out from before the LORD and consumed them, and they died before the LORD* (Leviticus 10:2). The Lord explained his judgment upon them in these terms: *Among those who are near me I will be sanctified* [or treated as holy] (Leviticus 10:3).¹ Nadab and Abihu came with innovation, so arousing the jealousy of the Lord, who must be worshiped according to his commandment only.

The same principle of Scripture-regulated worship is carried forward into the New Testament, notwithstanding the fact that worship no longer takes place in the tabernacle or the temple. For example, in Matthew 15 the Pharisees accused Jesus of breaking the tradition of the elders by permitting his disciples to eat without first ceremonially washing their hands. Jesus answered *And why do you break the commandment of God for the sake of your tradition? For God commanded, 'Honor your father and your mother,' and, 'Whoever reviles father or mother must surely die.' But you say, 'If anyone tells his father or mother, 'What you would have gained from me is given to God,' he need not honor his father. So for the sake of your tradition you have made void the word of God* (Matthew 15:3–6).

Jesus thus exposed the practice of the Pharisees of taking away from God's word by adding to it,² further declaring 'You hypocrites! Well did Isaiah prophesy of you, when he said: *This people honors me with their lips, but their heart is far from me; in vain do they worship me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men* (Matthew 15:7–9). This indictment from the Lord was that the Pharisees' external behavior betrayed an internal problem. While they appeared serious about, and zealous for,

¹ Moses had done precisely that, treating the Lord as holy all throughout the construction of the tabernacle. Exodus 39 alone repeats nine times that things were done as the Lord commanded Moses. Exodus 39:1; 5; 7; 21; 26; 29; 31; 32; 42. One could also consider how the instructions for the Tabernacle were given in Exodus 26–30 and then repeated as the work was accomplished in Exodus 36–40. There was no deviation from the Lord's instructions.

² Their rule of *korban* (given to God) supplanted the fifth commandment by permitting a person to devote an article to God and thus free himself from supporting his parents.

God's law, in reality they replaced it with man-made regulations. Their zeal was superficial, contrived, and empty. Their disregard for the law of God manifested a shameful lack of love for him.

The stinging rebuke from Jesus in this passage demonstrates his concern about the way God is worshiped. He cannot be honored with mere human prescriptions or with rules having merely an appearance of sincerity. "God must be worshiped in the way he prescribes. To do otherwise dishonors God.

Jesus further underscored this principle in John 4. There he pressed the confused Samaritan woman about matters of eternal life, and in the course of the discussion he brought her moral bankruptcy fully to light: she had been married five times and was living in an immoral relationship with yet another man. As Jesus pressed her regarding her condition, she attempted to avoid the further exposure of her sin by redirecting the conversation to the Samaritan principal place of worship on Mount Gerizim, as opposed to Jerusalem for the Jewish people. Jesus responded with these familiar words:

Jesus said to her, 'Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem will you worship the Father. You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews. But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father is seeking such people to worship him. God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth' (John 4:21-24).

In the course of explaining that a time had come when no one place on earth will be the place of worship,¹ Jesus revealed the idolatry of both this woman and her people. He stated clearly *You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews* (John 4:22).

Jesus made two significant statements concerning worship in this passage. First, he declared that "ignorance is culpable. Worship separated from truth leaves the purported worshipers

empty by presenting them with nothing other than a god of their own making.¹ Second, Jesus stated that worship and salvation are integrally related. To worship in ignorance is to be separated from the God and the salvation he provides.

Notwithstanding this frank assessment of the Samaritan woman's spiritual condition, hope nonetheless remained for her. As Jesus said, *the hour is coming, and now is here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father is seeking such people to worship him* (John 4:23). What is the Father doing through his Son? What is the aim of Jesus' ministry, of his death and resurrection? It is to seek worshipers.² It is to rescue sinners from blindness that they might boast in the Lord.

It is noteworthy that Jesus' words in John 4 speak specifically to public worship. Even though there is a degree to which 'all of life is worship,' the biblical worship model anticipates the act of public worship where the people of God, ransomed from sin and wrath, join to proclaim the greatness of God (Psalm 34:1-3). Peter explains *you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light* (1 Peter 2:9). His message is that worship, extolling the glory of God, is the primary duty of the corporate people of God, assembled together, and not just alone in private worship. We are saved to proclaim.

If, therefore, salvation drives the believer to worship, and if redemption compels God-directed praise, two questions immediately follow: how are believers to worship God, and what is the acceptable way of worshiping him? In addressing the wrongly worshipping woman, Jesus said *true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father is seeking such people to worship him* (John 4:23).

1 John Calvin puts it this way, 'unless there be knowledge, it is not God that we worship, but a phantom or idol.' See John Calvin, *Commentary on the Gospel According to John*, Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 2009, 159.

2 Terry L. Johnson, *Reformed Worship: Worship That Is According to Scripture*, Greenville, SC: Reformed Academic Press, 2000, 15.

Worshipping the Father *in truth* means that we approach him through the blood and righteousness of Jesus Christ in the enabling power of the Spirit.¹ Worshipping the Father *in spirit* means we worship out of the spiritual life given by the Holy Spirit in accord with his truth.² And *spirit and truth* worship anticipates a right conception about who God is—namely, that he alone is God. He will not give his glory to another and his praise to idols (Isaiah 42:8). There can be no adoration of angels or bowing to images (Colossians 2:18; Exodus 20:3–6). And we worship him as the Triune God—the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit.³

But we must not only know who God is to worship, we must know how he is to be worshiped. To replace God's Word with clever ceremonies steps out of line with the truth. The Scriptures, therefore, must direct our worship.

The Elements of Worship

The question naturally follows, what are the elements of public worship? What do believers have as the authority for their worship practices? In the *Confession* Chapter 21, 'Of Religious Worship, and the Sabbath Day,' the divines include the following as the parts of ordinary worship: prayer, with thanksgiving; the reading of the Scriptures with godly fear; the sound preaching and conscionable hearing of the Word; singing of psalms with grace in the heart; and the due administration and worthy receiving of the sacraments instituted by Christ.

In addition to these ordinary elements there are extraordinary elements (biblical patterns of worship that may or may not be part of the worship of God's people every Lord's Day): oaths, vows, solemn fastings, and thanksgiving upon special occasions.⁴

¹ Ephesians 2:18

² D.A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1991, 225.

³ WCF 21.2

⁴ WCF 21.3–5

The *Confession's* framework in chapter 21 is not to be understood as a mere proposal for available worship practices to be supplemented with such additional activities as a minister considers fitting. It is a directory of what Scripture mandates for public worship by his people. *Mandated Elements*

Prayer

The first of the elements is prayer, with thanksgiving. The *Confession* 21.3 denotes the description 'with thanksgiving' which comes from Paul's command to the Philippians, *Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God* (Philippians 4:6). In everything, in private worship, in family worship, and in public worship, prayers and supplications must be lifted up to God with thanksgiving. He is the God who hears prayer (Psalm 65:2). He commands us to cast our cares on him (1 Peter 5:7). He gives us access through Christ in one Spirit (Ephesians 2:18). Failure to pray is a grievous sin.

An examination of the life of the infant church in Jerusalem makes clear that the people continuously devoted themselves to prayer (Acts 2:42). When trouble arose, when persecution began, they prayed (Acts 4:24ff). Likewise, when they chose leaders, they prayed (Acts 6:6; 13:3). Prayer was imbedded in the fabric of the church.

The divines further directed that, as the church prayed, intercession should be made for all 'sorts of men,'¹ Paul encouraged Timothy that *prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for all people, for kings and all who are in high positions, that we may lead a peaceful and quiet life, godly and dignified in every way* (1 Timothy 2:1–2). Jesus prayed for coming generations as he made intercession for those who would believe the Gospel through the ministry of the disciples (John 17:20). The elders in Bethlehem prayed for the child that would come from the union of Boaz and Ruth (Ruth 4:12). Prayer was the lifeblood of believers throughout sacred history. However, finding no

¹ WCF 21.4

warrant for prayers for the dead, the divines made clear that such prayers were never to be made, as was common in papist churches.¹ Indeed, the opposite is found in Scripture, when King David discontinued praying for the son born to his relationship with Bathsheba after he was informed of the young child's death (2 Samuel 12:21-23).

The divines expanded their instruction concerning those for whom prayers should be made in the *Larger Catechism* Questions 178-196 and the *Shorter Catechism* Questions 98-107. For example, *Larger Catechism* Question 186 asks, 'What rule has God given for our direction in the duty of prayer?' Answer: 'The whole Word of God is of use to direct us in the duty of prayer; but the special rule of direction is that form of prayer which our Saviour Christ taught his disciples, commonly called The Lord's Prayer.' Furthermore, in the *Directory for Public Worship*, the divines provided lengthy instructions on the minister's public prayers to be offered both before and after the sermon. The divines likewise wrote, 'And because the prayer which Christ taught his disciples is not only a pattern of prayer, but itself a most comprehensive prayer, we recommend it also to be used in the prayers of the church.' Though recommended, however, the *Directory* did not mandate the use of the Lord's Prayer in worship services.

The Reading of the Word

The second element of worship found in the *Westminster Confession*, 21.5 is 'The reading of the Scriptures with godly fear ...' Paul's exhortation to Timothy is the source for this element of worship, *Until I come, devote yourself to the public reading of Scripture, to exhortation, to teaching* (1 Timothy 4:13). Paul literally stated 'give attention to the reading.' The Greek word for 'the reading' is found in two other places in the New Testament (Acts 13:15; 2 Corinthians 3:14), and in each instance reference is made to the regular practice of the public reading of authoritative texts in the synagogue, namely the Law and the

¹ Westminster Confession of Faith, 21.4.

Prophets.¹ What Paul commanded Timothy to do was in no way new or innovative. The reading of the Bible had been a central part of the worship of God for centuries. *Millennia*

Clearly, therefore, the divines recognized the reading of Scripture to be an essential part of the worship of God, and in the *Directory of Public Worship* specific instruction is given concerning such reading. The *Directory* spells out who should read: the pastors and teachers and occasionally those who had the ministry in view.² It indicates what should be read: 'all the canonical books of the Old and New Testament (but none of those which are commonly called Apocrypha),' and particularly the Psalms. It recommends how much should be read: ordinarily one chapter of each Testament at every meeting and that they be read in order, although it is acknowledged that the length of the reading was a matter of pastoral wisdom. And the *Directory* provides instructions for how the Scriptures should be read: in the common tongue, out of the best translation, and distinctly, 'that all may hear and understand.'

The *Directory* also states, 'When the minister who reads shall judge it necessary to expound any part of what is read, let it not be done until the whole chapter or psalm be ended; and regard is always to be had unto the time, that neither preaching, nor other ordinances be restricted,³ or rendered tedious.' This statement is not a direction to make exposition on the reading, as it was a practice already found among the divines.⁴ Rather, the wisdom displayed concerning the timing and length of the explanatory comments is insightful: the reading of the Word should be given foremost attention, and all commentary that follows must be brief.

¹ The regular practice of the Scripture reading is further attested in the writings of Philo and Josephus, first-century Jews. See Larry W. Hurtado, *At the Origins of Christian Worship*, Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2000, 33.

² See WLC 156.

³ The original word was 'straitened.'

⁴ Richard A. Muller & Rowland S. Ward, *Scripture and Worship: Biblical Interpretation & The Directory for Worship*, Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R Publishing, 2007, 121-122.

The Preaching of the Word

The Westminster Confession 21.5 mentions 'the sound preaching ... of the Word.' Paul exhorted Timothy, *Preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, and exhort, with complete patience and teaching* (2 Timothy 4:2). It is apparent from Jesus' sermon at Nazareth (Luke 4:16-21) and Paul's custom of preaching in the synagogue (cf. Acts 13:15; 14:1; 17:1-3) that preaching was a regular part of the worship of God's people. And preaching clearly predates post-exilic synagogues, as the exhortations from Moses on the plains of Moab, known commonly as Deuteronomy, constitute preaching. The same is found in numerous Old Testament evidences of preaching, from Joshua to Ezra and throughout the prophets. It is only logical to find that the New Testament church began with preaching (see Acts 2; 3; 7; 10; 13; 17).

Preaching was (and is) the foundational element of the worship of the church. Luke writes that the early believers *devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching* (Acts 2:42). And when the worship service in Acts 20:7ff is considered, Paul's lengthy sermon is prominently in view. The rationale for this practice is explained by Paul, *Faith comes from hearing and hearing through the word of Christ* (Romans 10:17), and in that context Paul was explicitly speaking of the preaching of the Word. Through this element of worship, God is pleased to cause his people to be born again (1 Peter 1:23-25) and to grow them in godliness (John 17:17; 1 Corinthians 1:18; 1 Peter 2:2-3). Recognizing the pre-eminence of preaching in worship, the divines made instructions about preaching a significant part of the *Directory*.¹

The divines used an interesting adjective to describe preaching in worship. They referred to 'the sound preaching ... of the Word.' While the divines provided no Scriptural proof for their use of this particular word, there is no doubt they had in view the sound exhortations in the Pastoral Epistles. Paul told

¹ Rowland Ward notes that, 'Some 12 percent of the directory is taken up by a fine section on preaching.' Ibid, 125.

Timothy, *If anyone teaches a different doctrine and does not agree with the sound words of our Lord Jesus Christ and the teaching that accords with godliness, he is puffed up with conceit and understands nothing* (1 Timothy 6:3-4a). Likewise Paul commanded Timothy, *Follow the pattern of sound words that you have heard from me, in the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus* (2 Timothy 1:13).

Moreover, the word translated 'sound' literally means healthy. Paul employed metaphorical language from the medical field to describe what he understood as good preaching. Hence, the words preached must promote spiritual health and expose spiritual sickness. The words preached must equip believers to see and hear gospel truth while guarding against doctrinal error and biblical untruth. The divines sought to equip ministers in these goals by urging them to follow the pattern of sound words. These goals may be achieved as ministers hold to a standard of healthy doctrine, which are the truths that center on Christ Jesus. But lest we think this means that preaching only consists in declaring powerful gospel indicatives (the facts of God's grace), Paul's model was to declare the whole counsel of God (Acts 20:27). He did not shrink away from *anything that was profitable* (Acts 20:20), which he achieved by uniting the gospel indicatives with powerful and timely gospel imperatives.¹ He explains and applies what Christ's doctrine demands of the believer, which is at the core of healthy Christian preaching.

The Hearing of the Word

In addition to sound preaching, the divines identified in the Westminster Confession 21.5 the 'conscionable hearing of the Word, in obedience unto God, with understanding, faith, and reverence' as an element of worship. Although the word 'conscionable' is used substantially less frequently than in earlier eras, the term communicates the proposition that the Word must be listened to in a careful manner. That is, worshipers

¹ See the book of Ephesians for a clear example of how Paul uses gospel indications (Ephesians 1-3) and gospel imperatives (Ephesians 4-6), and notice the 'therefore' in Ephesians 4:1.

must have their consciences engaged when in Christian worship. We must not be mere hearers of the Word (James 1:22), those upon whom the Word of God makes no lasting impression. We must be those who hear and in whom the Word works an effect.

In the parable of the sower in Mark 4, Jesus spoke of the seed of the Word falling upon four different hearers. First mentioned was the seed which fell along a stony path and was eaten by birds. He explained that this image represents that kind of listener, who, on hearing the Word, *Satan immediately comes and takes away the word that is sown in them* (Mark 4:15). The pavement-like soil of the path is illustrative of a hard, faithless, and uncultivated heart. It is as if the seed, which is the Word of God, simply bounces away. The devil quickly moves to snatch away the Word before it can produce an impact of any description on the hearer, and the listener is left unmoved. They did not ready themselves to receive the Word, and they give no further thought to it. Sermons are nonsense to them. Indeed, their mind is focused on other things. 'I need to make that doctor's appointment this week.' 'Does my lipstick need refreshing?' 'I wonder what we are having for lunch.' Hundreds of other examples could be given. The point is that, for this kind of person, there is not 'conscionable' hearing of gospel truth. His or her mind is not engaged on the Word!

The contrast to this poor listening (and the other two negative examples in Mark 4: the rocky-ground hearer and the thorny-ground hearer) is seen in the good-ground hearer. Jesus said of those who are like good soil they *hear the word and accept it* (Mark 4:20). This word translated 'accept' is a rare word in the New Testament, but its use in Acts 15:4 illuminates the significance of it. In Acts 15 Paul and Barnabas had made their way from Antioch to Jerusalem for a church council. The circumcision question was causing contention within the church as some men had been saying, *Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved* (Acts 15:1). That requirement, of course, was not the message Paul and Barnabas proclaimed on their first missionary journey. In reality,

Paul had said just the opposite. *Look, I Paul, say to you that if you accept circumcision, Christ will be of no advantage to you* (Galatians 5:2).

In God's providence, *When they [Paul and Barnabas] came to Jerusalem, they were welcomed by the church and the apostles and the elders* (Acts 15:4, emphasis supplied). The word translated 'welcomed' is the identical word translated 'accept' in Mark 4:20. The one who hears the Word properly is the one who 'welcomes it.' Such a person gladly takes it in, embraces the truth, and aims to conform his life to it. Such a person listens to the Word proclaimed so that he may understand the doctrines, be rebuked and corrected, and be trained in righteousness (2 Timothy 3:16-17). Unlike the Israelites in the wilderness, the good-ground hearer listens with faith.

The author of Hebrews states that some of the Exodus generation did not benefit from the message they heard *because they were not united by faith with those who listened* (Hebrews 4:2). The good news had been proclaimed to these people, but they did not appropriate by faith the promises of God. They did not believe God would care for the needs they would have on the journey, or that he would provide the rest they required. They possessed evil, doubting hearts of unbelief and never humbled themselves to welcome and appropriate God's Word.

Such illustrations from the Word led the divines to see that 'conscionable' hearing is the kind of hearing required in worship. The believer must tremble before the Word. The believer must obey God by taking heed to what he says. In truth, conscionable listeners labor alongside the minister to hear, appropriate, and apply the truths spoken from the Word. The conscionable hearer prepares himself to listen, prays for understanding, and pays attention with great diligence. The conscionable hearer loves the Word as it comes to his soul, believing it to be the life-giving, soul-transforming, heart-rejoicing Word of God.¹

¹ It's hard to improve upon the *Larger Catechism* answer to Q.160 'What is required of those that hear the Word preached? A. It is required of those that hear the Word preached, that they attend upon it with diligence, preparation, and prayer; examine

Singing

Together with ears eager to listen to God's Word, those who worship in spirit and truth must have mouths ready to praise the Lord. Genuine worship anticipates and requires the 'singing of psalms with grace in the heart.'¹ The people of God who have been drawn up from the miry bog have a song of praise to God in their mouths (Psalm 40:2-3). God's gracious deliverance produces joyful, singing hearts. After Israel passed through the Red Sea and Pharaoh's army was destroyed, Moses led the people of Israel in song (Exodus 15). After the Lord used Deborah, Barak, and Jael to be the tools of his salvation, Deborah and Barak sang (Judges 5). After David was rescued from the prolonged pursuit of Saul, he sang before his Deliverer (1 Samuel 22; Psalm 18)! *Why can't I sing of Deliverance songs?*

God's mighty acts, his flawless character, and the particulars of his providence demand, and will produce in true worshippers, exultation. Thus, the Psalmist says, *Praise the LORD! Praise God in his sanctuary; praise him in his mighty heavens! Praise him for his mighty deeds; praise him according to his excellent greatness ... Let everything that has breath praise the LORD! Praise the LORD* (Psalm 150:1-2, 6). The language of praise in the Psalms alone is extensive. The response to our God for his stupendous power, unflappable sovereignty, unsearchable holiness, and indelible grace is to sing to his name.

The preparation and preservation of the sacred hymnbook, the collection of the 150 psalms, demonstrates the Lord's call for his people to lift their voices in song. Terry Johnson puts the logic of singing psalms crisply, 'God wrote the psalms. He wrote them to be sung. Therefore, we ought to sing them.'² Paul underscored this injunction, telling the church that when

what they hear by the Scriptures; receive the truth with faith, love, meekness, and readiness of mind, as the Word of God; meditate, and confer of it; hide it in their hearts, and bring forth the fruit of it in their lives.'

1 Westminster Confession of Faith, 21.5.

2 Terry L. Johnson 'Restoring Psalm Singing to our Worship,' in *Give Praise to God*, ed. Philip Graham Ryken, Derek W.H. Thomas, and J. Ligon Duncan III, Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R Publishing, 2003, 258.

they assemble for worship there must be singing (1 Corinthians 14:26), and that those who are filled with the Spirit should be *addressing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody to the Lord with your heart* (Ephesians 5:19). Paul further explained that singing serves not only to give thanks to God but also as a means of instructing God's people. *Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, with thankfulness in your hearts to God* (Colossians 3:16). Though it may seem otherwise, singing is a means of teaching God's people.

Not unexpectedly, the phrase, *psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs* has been the source of much controversy, especially in light of the call in Westminster Confession of Faith 21.5 for worshippers to engage in the 'singing of psalms with grace in the heart.' The criticism of some that follows is that proper singing is exclusively from the Psalms. However, Matthew Poole, a well-known seventeenth-century Presbyterian commentator, writing one generation after the Westminster Assembly, distinguished between these three words and provided helpful, revealing insights on the word 'psalm' in Colossians 3:16. Poole notes that the word 'psalm' may be understood 'more generally, as the genus, noting any holy metre, whether composed by the prophets of old, or others since, assisted by the Spirit extraordinarily or ordinarily.'¹ His view is that believers are not confined to the biblical psalter for lyrics in worship.²

'Singing psalms with grace in the heart' does not exclude hymnody, therefore, but it most certainly does mean the church

1 Matthew Poole cited in Nick Needham, 'Westminster and Worship: Psalms, Hymns? And Musical Instruments?', in *The Westminster Confession of Faith into the 21st Century*, Vol. 2, ed. Ligon Duncan, Ross-shire, Scotland: Mentor, 2005, 249.

2 Thomas Manton, an eminent Westminster divine, demonstrates such a view in his commentary on James 5:13 *Is anyone among you suffering? Let him pray. Is anyone cheerful? Let him sing praise [or let him sing a psalm].* Manton writes, 'I confess we do not forbid other songs; if grave and pious, after good advice they may be received into the Church.' *The Complete Works of Thomas Manton*, Vol. 4, ed. Thomas Smith, London: James Nisbet Co., 1871, 572.

But does WCF limit to psalms to preserve liberty

ought to regularly engage in the robust singing of the Psalms. Thomas Manton noted that 'Scripture psalms not only may be sung, but are fittest to be used in the church, as being indited [written] by an infallible and unerring Spirit.'¹

And as Christian worship engages in faithful singing, the divines anticipated that believers do so 'with grace in the heart.' This phrase is a quotation of Colossians 3:16 rendered with an accurate sense in the *ESV with thankfulness in your hearts to God*. The appropriate response to the grace of God in Christ is to express gratitude to God in song. Thus, in the *Directory for Public Worship*, the divines state the following in the section 'Of Singing of Psalms': 'It is the duty of Christians to praise God publicly, by singing of psalms together in the congregation, and also privately in the family. In the singing of psalms, the voice is to be tunably [signing in tune] and gravely [seriously] ordered; but the chief care must be to sing with understanding,² and with grace in the heart, making melody unto the Lord.'³

The Sacraments

The final element of the ordinary religious worship of God is 'the due administration and worthy receiving of the sacraments instituted by Christ.'⁴ Christ instituted two sacraments in the Church, Baptism (Matthew 28:18-20) and the Lord's Supper (Mark 14:22-25), and it is precisely these two sacraments which the church historically and routinely practiced (Acts 2:38-42; 1 Corinthians 11:23-32).

The phrase 'the due administration ... of the sacraments' requires that the sacraments be dispensed only by a minister of the Word lawfully ordained.⁵ Jesus' instruction to baptize, found in the Great Commission was given to men he had called to labor full-time in the ministry of the Word. This is equally

¹ The Complete Works of Thomas Manton, 4:574.

² 1 Corinthians 14:15

³ Colossians 3:16; Ephesians 5:19

⁴ Westminster Confession of Faith 21.5.

⁵ WCF 27.4

the case with respect to the distribution of the elements in the Lord's Supper. When the apostles, the original stewards of the mysteries of God (1 Corinthians 4:1), died and the office of apostle ceased, Christ provided the gift of pastor/teachers (Ephesians 4:11). To these full-time men, those called and ordained to preach the Word, the administration of the sacraments has been entrusted.¹

Furthermore, the lawfully ordained minister of the Word is given further instructions in the administration of each sacrament. In baptism, water (not mixed with oil)² must be applied in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit (Matthew 3:11; 28:19-20). The divines likewise stated in the *Westminster Confession of Faith* 28.3 that 'Dipping of the person into the water, is not necessary; but, Baptism is rightly administered, by pouring, or sprinkling water upon the person.' While not excluding immersion as a permitted mode of baptism, the divines made clear that baptism of any sort represents symbolic washing as a sign and seal of regeneration (Titus 3:5-6), cleansing (Acts 2:38), and union with Christ (Romans 6:1-4). That may be with a little water (Ezekiel 36:25), or a lot of it. Under no circumstances, however, was baptism to be administered more than once to any person.³

With respect to the Lord's Supper, the divines specified what constitutes 'due administration.' *Westminster Confession* 29.3 states 'The Lord Jesus has, in this ordinance, appointed His ministers to declare His word of institution to the people; to pray, and bless the elements of bread and wine, and thereby to set them apart from a common to an holy use; and to take and break the bread, to take the cup, and (they communicating also themselves) to give both to the communicants; but, to none who are not then present in the congregation.'

None not present

¹ Guy Prentiss Waters, *How Jesus Runs the Church*, Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R Publishing, 2011, 94-95.

² Chad Van Dixhoorn, *Confessing the Faith: A Reader's Guide to the Westminster Confession of Faith*, 369.

³ WCF 28.7

As to those to whom baptism may be administered, it is not disputed that those who make a profession of faith should be baptized. However, great dispute has arisen over the assertion of the divines that 'the infants of one or both believing parents are to be baptized.' Nevertheless, in view of the continuity of the covenant of grace (Genesis 17:7-14; Galatians 3:14; Acts 2:38-39), the connections between circumcision and baptism (Colossians 2:11-12), the household baptisms of Acts (Acts 10:2, 44-48; 16:14-15; 16:30-34; 18:8; see also 1 Corinthians 1:14-16), Paul's designation of the children of a believer as holy (1 Corinthians 7:14), and Jesus' blessing of the children (Matthew 19:13-15), the divines rejected any views to the contrary and held confidently to the view that children ought to be baptized.¹ *Shorter Catechism* 95 was written to address this issue. 'To whom is baptism to be administered? Answer: Baptism is not to be administered to any that are out of the visible church, till they profess their faith in Christ, and obedience to him; but the infants of such as are members of the visible church are to be baptized.'

The worthy receiving of the Lord's Supper has been equally disputed. But once again the divines are clear. The *Shorter Catechism* asks in Question 97 'What is required to the worthy receiving of the Lord's Supper? Answer: It is required of those who would worthily partake of the Lord's Supper, that they examine themselves of their knowledge to discern the Lord's body, of their faith to feed upon him, of their repentance, love, and new obedience; lest, coming unworthily, they eat and drink judgment to themselves.' With this statement, the ignorant and the scandalous (those who do not understand the content of the Christian faith and those whose manner of life contradicts their profession of faith), are excluded from the table.² This is what the Lord requires (1 Corinthians 11:27-29).

¹ For a full treatment of infant baptism see Robert R. Booth, *Children of the Promise: The Biblical Case for Infant Baptism*, Phillipsburg: P & R Publishing, 1995.

² WLC Q.173 'May any who profess the faith, and desire to come to the Lord's supper, be kept from it? Answer: Such as are found to be ignorant or scandalous,

Summary

As we consider the nature of public worship, believers may confidently recognize that the inerrant Word is the final authority concerning each aspect of our approach to him. Nothing must take place in the public worship of God which has not been instituted by the Word. In this sense, it may be said that Christian worship is actually quite simple. Prayer books and crafty rituals are unnecessary. Consciences need not be bound by the whims and innovations of men. The clear principles of the Bible provide the framework.

This does not mean that every worship service looks like every other, but it does suggest that public worship in spirit and truth will be built around the biblical principles that serve as a sweet aroma to our God and King. As one pastor has helpfully and succinctly stated, in worship, we 'read the Bible, preach the Bible, pray the Bible, sing the Bible, and see the Bible.'¹ Such is the teaching of the *Westminster Confession*, and may we who love the Lord continue this biblical pattern in our worship today.

notwithstanding their profession of the faith, and desire to come to the Lord's supper, may and ought to be kept from that sacrament, by the power which Christ hath left in his church, until they receive instruction, and manifest their reformation.'

¹ J. Ligon Duncan III 'Foundations For Biblically Directed Worship,' in *Give Praise to God*, ed. Philip Graham Ryken, Derek W.H. Thomas, and J. Ligon Duncan III, Phillipsburg: P & R Publishing, 2003, 65.