

# TOO HOT TO HANDLE

## 17 Worship God's Way

### Scripture Reading

I Corinthians 14

### So Far

Last week we began to think about what constitutes acceptable worship and we started with those things that are relatively clear from God's Word and generally accepted by most Christians. We learned that proper worship is God centred and is an appropriate and sincere response from the heart to who and what He is. Whilst worship is an everyday activity in the sense that we present our whole lives to God in service and obedience there are special times when God's people assemble specifically to worship Him together. Those times invariably include prayer, singing and learning from His Word. Thinking about the implications of just those few facts showed us how important it is that everyone is an active participant and the necessity of a certain amount of preparation before we come together.

### Order, Order

Worship in the church of Corinth had got out of hand and when Paul wrote to the believers there he gave them some guidance on how to sort out the points on which they were going wrong. Two things stand out in 1 Corinthians 14: priority was to be given to edification — it was important that those who were present should be taught or built up in their faith (verse 26) — and things had to be done in an orderly, dignified manner (verses 31 – 33).

- From what Paul has written in 1 Corinthians 14 and what we can glean from chapter 11, try to put together a picture of what the worship gatherings in Corinth must have been like.
- What do you think was going wrong in the worship gatherings in Corinth?

### But What Is Acceptable To God?

So then, order is important and there are some things that are generally agreed to be important elements of worship but where do we draw the lines?. What can be included in worship and what cannot be included? What is to be considered orderly and what is disorderly? These are the questions that are so divisive in today's church and, indeed, not just in today's church; they have been divisive throughout church history.

### The Regulative Principle

Those who hold to what is known as "the regulative principle" would say that the Bible tells us not only who we are to worship but how we are to worship. We are not allowed to invent our own ways to worship God no matter how helpful they appear to be in bringing us closer to Him: nothing is to be introduced that is not prescribed in His Word.

- They argue that it is the prerogative of God alone to determine the terms on which sinners may approach Him and that no one can know what is pleasing to God except God Himself.
- They say that the introduction of extra-biblical practices inevitably tends to devalue God's appointed ways.
- Quoting 2 Timothy 3:16-17 they tell us that Scripture is sufficient to guide us and that if we were to add any unappointed elements into worship, we would be calling into question the wisdom of Christ and the sufficiency of the Scriptures.
- They cite the cases of Cain, whose sacrifice was not acceptable, and Nadab and Abihu (Leviticus 10:1-3), who offered "strange fire " before God, and they refer to Deuteronomy 4:2; Deuteronomy 12:29-32; Joshua 1:7; Joshua 23:6-8; Matthew 15:7 – 8; Colossians 2:20-23.

"Now, O Israel, listen to the statutes and the judgments which I teach you to observe, that you may live, and go in and possess the land which the LORD God of your fathers is giving you. You shall not add to the word which I command you, nor take from it, that you may keep the commandments of the LORD your God which I command you."

Deuteronomy 4:1 – 2

"Whatever I command you, be careful to observe it; you shall not add to it nor take away from it."

Deuteronomy 12:32

"Hypocrites! Well did Isaiah prophesy about you, saying: 'These people draw near to Me with their mouth, And honour Me with their lips, But their heart is far from Me. And in vain they worship Me, Teaching as doctrines the commandments of men.'"

Matthew 15:7 – 8

## Hard To Apply

In practice the regulative principle is difficult to apply: the fact that it is called up in support of such a wide variety of practices is evidence of that.

Some claim that it rules out the use of musical instruments in worship because there is no example of the use of musical instruments for worship in the New Testament and Old Testament uses were specifically tied to the ceremonial laws of the Temple and therefore not applicable in the church. Some have applied the regulative principle to argue for exclusive psalmody, ruling out the singing of hymns or any other non-Biblical songs. Early Calvinists, for example, would not have allowed the use of musical instruments and advocated exclusive psalmody in worship, and this practice typified Presbyterians and other Reformed and Calvinist churches for some time. Since the 1800s, however, most of these churches have modified their understanding of the regulative principle and now make use of instruments, hymns, and the like.

If the regulative principal is to work at all a distinction has to be made between...

- Elements of worship: things like prayer, singing, preaching etc.
- Forms of worship, which have to do with how the elements of worship are performed.
- Circumstances of worship: things like when to meet, where to meet, whether to sit on chairs or pews and so on.

If we apply the regulative principle rigidly then, we are told, the church has no discretion in the elements and form of worship but we can use common sense in determining the circumstances. So, if the words we sing are a form of worship, we must only sing the words God has given us: the Psalms. But how then can we exercise discretion in the words we pray or the words we preach?

Other questions start to pop up. Do we have discretion over how we dress for worship? What about the posture we adopt in prayer? Is the use of a musical instrument a circumstance or an element? What about the appointment of a precentor? It soon becomes apparent that the distinction between elements, forms and circumstances is not clear. Add to that the difficulty we have in finding a list of approved elements or anything that approaches a definition of the concept of circumstances in the Bible and it becomes more and more difficult to justify the mental gymnastics that the regulative principle calls for.

## The Normative Principle

The regulative principle stands in contrast to the view of others who state that anything can be introduced into worship which is not prohibited by the Scriptures. This is known as the normative principle and has historically been adopted by Lutherans, Anglicans and Methodists. Clearly this allows for a lot more freedom but when we observe what that freedom has led to in some cases it is easy to sympathise with those who cling to the safety of holding to the regulative principle.

## A Sensible Approach

The approach advocated in recent years by John Frame seems to me to be more sensible. He argues that Scripture functions in relation to worship in the same way that it does in every other area of life.

- On those matters on which the Bible has something to say it is the final authority. It is God's Word; its wisdom cannot be bettered.
- If Scripture does not address a matter directly there are often principles which can be applied with the use of godly wisdom. All should be done for the glory of God, Everything should be motivated by faith and love. We must always act in the Name of the Lord Jesus Christ, and so on.
- There are matters on which God gives us freedom to decide provided we do not contravene any command or principle of His Word.

**What Do You Think?**

What is your view on the regulative principle and how do you support that view from God's word?

**Next Week**

God has ordained that His people should assemble to worship Him and warns us that we should not neglect to do so (Hebrews 10:25). He gives us examples of things that can be done and He tells us of things that must be done. Next week we will look more specifically at what those things are and how they should be performed.