

TOO HOT TO HANDLE

18 Regulating Principles

Scripture Regulates Our Worship

Last week we thought about how Scripture regulates our worship practices and came to the conclusion that Scripture functions in relation to worship in the same way 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.
- There are matters on which God gives us freedom to decide provided we do not contravene any command or principle of His Word.

Biblical Regulations

So what of the specific teaching of God's Word? Are there things that are explicitly forbidden and are there things that are expressly commanded?

The New Testament passages which specifically address matters of conduct in corporate worship are

- 1 Corinthians 11:17 – 34
- 1 Corinthians 14:26 – 40
- 1 Timothy 2
- Hebrews 10:24 – 25
- Revelation 5:8 – 14, 7:11 – 12, 11:16 – 18, 15:1– 4, 19:1 – 7

We have already thought at length about the first two of these passages. Both must be viewed in the light of the fact that their primary purpose is to address problems that had arisen in Corinth. Nevertheless they give us insight into what New Testament worship was like (1 Corinthians 14:26). As for commands and specific exclusions there are none beyond those we have already noted which are to do with maintaining proper order.

1 Timothy 2 urges the inclusion of supplications, prayers, intercessions and giving of thanks, especially for kings and those who are in authority and says something about the manner in which we should come to worship: with holy hands and observing proper order.

Hebrews 10 emphasises the importance of gathering for corporate worship and emphasises the need for mutual encouragement as one reason for doing so.

Revelation gives us examples of the worship of heaven.

In addition we are instructed to administer the sacraments of baptism and the Lord's Supper and since that requires the assembling of the Lord's people, these must be part of our corporate worship. However we are told surprisingly little about how or when they should be administered. In fact, what stands out in all of this is the lack of specific direction for corporate worship in The New Testament.

Biblical Principles

Two weeks ago, in trying to come to an understanding of what worship is, we listed a number of things that are always true of proper worship. Those things stand as biblical principles to guide us.

- Proper worship is God centred.
- Proper worship is an appropriate and sincere response from the heart to who and what God is.
- Worship is an everyday activity. Sacrifice, priesthood and temple have all been fulfilled in Christ and are gone for ever. There are no longer any sacred places or sacred times. Corporate worship is a united expression of lives that are all worship. When people join together in any activity there is an intensifying effect: The outcome is more than the sum of the efforts put in by each individual. So it is with corporate worship. God is more glorified and each worshipper more edified than had they all worshipped alone.
- Everyone is an active participant when God's people gather to worship.
- Preparation in advance, both by those who lead and by those who are led, is required if our corporate worship is to be proper.
- Proper corporate worship gives priority to edification.
- Proper corporate worship includes prayer, singing and learning from His Word

- Our times of corporate worship must be conducted in an orderly, controlled manner.
- In worship, as in all things, we must esteem others better than ourselves.

Biblical Freedom

So then, we have few commands or prohibitions when it comes to the ordering of corporate worship. Nevertheless we have important principles which we are forced to consider and the application of those principles shapes and restricts what we do. However, there is still considerable scope for variety.

We are not told what the content of our prayers should be: rather we are left to search the Scriptures to understand the nature and purpose of prayer.

We are not told what we should sing: rather we are told the purpose of singing and left to think for ourselves.

How often we meet and for how long is left to our discretion.

Where we meet and the devices we use to aid us in our worship are not specified. Pianos, organs, brass bands, overhead projectors: we are left to determine what will enable us to best follow the scriptural principles.

Teaching for edification and with exhortation is essential. God's word is central. But how that teaching is to be delivered is not specified. How long should a sermon last? Who should deliver it? Should there be interaction with the congregation? On these questions we are left to search out the teaching methods used in Scripture itself and apply them to our own circumstances.

Why The Difference?

It seems to me that before the time of Christ God had worship tied down with very specific regulations. He considered those regulations to be important as is shown by the way He dealt with any who despised them. So why is it different in the New Testament?

It cannot be that we are simply required to carry over all those regulations and continue to observe them. Their purpose has been fulfilled. There is no longer any need for sacrifice, priesthood, temple or any of the symbolism that accompanied them. Such practices would be meaningless today. That is not to say that those regulations are of no interest to us for we can see principles behind them that are still relevant because they are rooted in what is pleasing to God. So we can say, for example, that we must always come before the Lord with awe and in humility.

But why are we not given specific practices to replace all that went with the temple? I believe that one reason is that God, who has given us a new heart and written His laws upon it, on one hand wants us to think deeply about what we are doing when we come together to worship Him and if we sincerely desire to please Him we are forced to do that. On the other hand I believe that God, desiring worship that is sincere and from the heart, would give us freedom to express the breadth and depth of all those affections He has placed within our hearts — our praise, thanksgiving, joy, excitement, longing, desire, submission and all those other thoughts and actions that spring from our appreciation of who and what He is.