***A Reformed Approach to Worship***

***Studying a Reformed, Architectural Place of Worship***

Chapter Two: Our Approach to Worship

“At that time people began to call upon the name of the Lord.” (Gen. 4:26)

In order for us to consider a proper venue for our worship of God, it is important to first stop and ask ourselves just what worship is supposed to be. What do we mean by worship? How is to be done and by whom? What does worship accomplish?

Man did not always have to give extra energy and thought to his worship of God. When Adam and his wife were in the Garden of Eden their communion with God was ideal, continuing and transparent. There was not a sacred/secular distinction in their lives – all life was *Coram Deo* – holy and full of worship.

But the fall of Adam changed that. The wickedness of man’s heart made him despise the presence of God and His judgment and the man fled from God’s presence, hoping to blend in with the rest of creation, instead. But God overruled this hopeless situation with a new promise and covenant – His own Son would be the Redeemer for all his people. From then on, man’s relationship with God was to be one characterized by a gratitude for His mercy, humility for His grace, and with a striving for new obedience because of His righteousness. Worship, then, is our service given to God in the face of and in response to all three of these gifts.

We call worship a service because that is what it is supposed to be. Worship is, first of all, our duty – we give to God our worship because He, alone, is worthy of it; and worship is also our work – it is an effort earnestly and sincerely offered. This means that to have a casual approach to worship is wrong with regard to both of these elements. We will not regard ourselves as unworthy but rather proud before God if we approach Him casually. Likewise, we will not perceive our need to give Him worship if we come before Him lazily and self-centered. Rather than worshipping a holy God, such attitudes make a mockery of His name.

We also need instruction if we are to worship God properly. We are, after all, not only finite creatures but we are also fallen, and that effects everything in our lives – what and how we think and rationalize, how we form our values and priorities, and what and why we think of ourselves and others. That is why the Westminster Confession of Faith warns us not to try to worship God “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.” (WCF, 21.1) Simply put, worship is given to God and is to be God-centered. And therefore, it must be pleasing to God. We should listen to what God tells us He wants so that our worship may please Him. The Reformers called this the Regulative Principle: we may worship God only in the ways he has prescribed in Scripture.

(For more elaboration on this, listen to the recordings of my classes on Worship and the Sabbath Day from “A Survey of the Westminster Confession of Faith”, available on the church’s website: [www.ncpres.org](http://www.ncpres.org).)

But while the Regulative Principle directs our worship, the debate regarding worship has never been a quiet or a settled one. Questions about culture, context, race, tastes in music, and many other things only seem to cause further division within the church rather than bringing men together before God. Some of these issues and differences are, indeed, good and necessary points of discussion, but others are not. Some discussions reflect the soul-searching desire to reach every nation, tribe and tongue for the gospel and the desire not to allow any man-made tradition to produce a barrier which has no authority. But for others, there is a only a restless impatience and curious interest in taking the worship of God into new directions entirely out of other motives.

Since the rise of the Second Great Awakening in America, there has been more and more emphasis on bringing the worship of God before the unbeliever. The principles of worship prescribed to God’s people by God were set aside in favor of the evangelist’s more pragmatic theory that whatever brings the unbeliever into the service and converts him should be included. From then on, the focus in worship has drifted more commonly toward the addition of these extra elements which can only be described as efforts at entertainment of the congregation – elaborate stage settings, lights and colors, large, visible choirs with colorful robes with special performance-like anthems or solos, projector screens with animation and movie-clips, etc. Meanwhile, those elements which are holy to God’s people – the reading of the Law and confession of sin, the preaching of the Word, the observance of the ordinances, and corporate prayer – are diluted, compromised, and even rather boldly set aside.

The true worship of God is to be a service earnestly given by God’s people in the way God prescribes. Anything else, even the seemingly harmless notions and ideas of men, tend to turn the service around to focus not on God but on the worshipper. In fact, what passes today in some popular church services is actually a worship by the performer of the audience.

All these considerations are in the minds of your elders as we think about designing the room we will offer our service of worship to God in the future. Pray that we enter into this vital effort with submissive hearts and minds tuned to the Word of God.