

FIVE LECTURES  
on  
THE BIBLICAL PRINCIPLES  
of  
WORSHIP

by

G. I. Williamson

LECTURE NO. 1  
Worship Seminar - May 12-14, 1995  
First Orthodox Presbyterian Church - San Francisco

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**How I Came To The Conclusion  
That Our Reformed Fathers Were Right About Worship**

Thank you very much, Chuck. I feel like I'm bringing coal to Newcastle, because I know everything I've said you've already said. But it's a great privilege and I want to say, by way of preface: I'm not trying to be original here. I'm not trying to impress the scholars. I am seeking to convince you. I believe the doctrines of the Bible are essentially those doctrines that are enshrined in our historic Confession. I also believe they are so clear in the Bible that the rank and file of God's people can understand them. (Similarly, I can understand John Calvin while I can't understand some of the modern theologians!) It is also my conviction that the New Testament is consistent with the Old, and that there is a close relationship between doctrine and practice.

Let me start, then, by asking this question: how can the doctrine of worship in the Reformed churches today be the same doctrine as that of the Reformers when the practice is so radically different? That started to trouble me years ago. And that is why I entitled this first lecture: "How I came to the conclusion that our Reforming Fathers were right about worship" or "A funny thing happened to me on the way to the Candlelight Service." Believe it or not, those of you have read some of the things I have written, I actually did have a Candlelight Service as a young pastor in a presbyterian church in Western Pennsylvania many years ago. I did it because I didn't know any better. I have come to see my great error, and I want to tell you tonight a little bit about the pilgrimage in my own spiritual life that brought me to see the error of my way, and the truth taught by our Reforming Fathers.

We just sang Psalm 78:1-8; in which, among other things, we are told that God

*"..established a testimony in Jacob, and appointed a law in Israel which he commanded our fathers, that they should make them known to their children; that the generation to come might know them, the children who would be born, that they may arise and declare them to their children, that they may set their hope in God, and not forget the works of God, but keep his commandments; and may not be like their fathers, a stubborn and rebellious generation, a generation that did not set its heart aright, and whose spirit was not faithful with God."*

My parents, and all of my grandparents, were members of the old United Presbyterian Church of North America. Our family heritage, then, was from a long line of either Covenanter or Secession presbyterians in Scotland. When they migrated to this country, they came together first in the Associate Reformed Presbyterian Church, and then—with a second union—in the United Presbyterian Church of North America. That union took place in 1858. And for a considerable time after that union, that church was a militant witness of the historic Reformed faith, and the principles and practice of Reformed worship. If you'd like to know what I mean, get hold of the volume entitled *The Psalms In Worship*, recently republished by the Stillwaters Revival Book people in Canada. It is a republication of a symposium by United Presbyterian pastors, published soon after the turn of the century—around 1905. It contains 54 essays on various aspects of biblical worship.

Yet, within two decades after the fine effort of this book, the lines were becoming quite fuzzy in the United Presbyterian Church. Professor John Murray of Westminster, who held firmly to the historic reformation view of worship, once said to me that he knew of no such rapid eclipse of the Reformed faith as that which had taken place in the old United Presbyterian Church of North America. I loved that church because my roots were in it, and my earliest days were spent in its fellowship. And one of the things that I noticed some years later was the ordination vow No. 4 of that church, and it read like this:

*“Do you promise to submit, in the spirit of meekness, to the admonitions of the brethren of this Session, in subordination to the Presbytery, Synod, and General Assembly; and do you promise to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace, and that you will not follow divisive course, either by complying with the defections of the times, or giving yourself up to a detestable neutrality in the cause of God?”*

The fathers that wrote these words saw yielding to the spirit of the age, and the defections of the times—and even neutrality—as a detestable cause of division and apostasy in the church. Sixty-seven years later, the United Presbyterian Church exchanged its historic Confession and vows for one in which the following phrase is found:

*“...forbearance in love which is required by the law of God is to be exercised toward any brethren who may not be able fully to subscribe to the Standards of the Church, while they do not determinedly oppose them, but follow the things which make for peace and things wherewith one may edify another.”*

In 1858 neutrality was seen as an intolerable evil. In 1925 it became an allowable option.

It was not yet a modernistic church when I was born and raised in its midst; but it was a church that no longer diligently catechized its children. I didn't know they had a catechism when I was brought up in that communion. I never realized that my parents knew that catechism either until recently—two years ago, to be exact—when I saw my mother for the last time. She was 95 years of age, and I happened to be speaking with her about spiritual things, and said, “Well Mother, what is the chief end of man?” And right away she said, “Man's chief end is to glorify God and enjoy him forever.” I was stunned!—and immediately said, “What is God?” And she said, “God is a Spirit, infinite, eternal and unchangeable in his being, wisdom, power, holiness, justice, goodness and truth.” What a tragedy that what she had been taught as a girl, the church later ceased to teach.

I thank God that I felt the call to be a minister of the gospel of Christ in that church. It still taught a saving message. During my early years, and also through my years in college and seminary, I was only dimly aware of the magnitude of the calamity that had come upon my ancestral church and those in it—including my family. But it has been a tragic loss.

Then, when I went to the United Presbyterian Seminary in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, and my allotted time under the G.I. Bill—and by the way, that's where my nickname started, during the Army years—and I found it necessary to serve as a student pastor in a small country church, in God's marvelous providence somebody was throwing away a copy of *The Psalms In Worship*, and so they gave it to me. I put it on the shelf and didn't think much about it for quite a long time. After my graduation, I was called to the old Rock Street U.P. Church in Fall River, Massachusetts. And a retired minister, about 80 years of age, decided to give me a shelf full of the minutes of the General Assemblies of the United Presbyterian Church. And then it was that I finally decided to find out what my roots were, and began to study that history—the General Assemblies, the decisions, the argumentation on which they were based, and the like. And within a year and a half, I came to a devastating conclusion that the United Presbyterian Church—the church of my fathers—had abandoned its heritage to such an extent that I could no longer serve in it.

The creed which replaced the Westminster Standards in 1925 was heretical. And so I accepted a call to the Associate Reformed Presbyterian Church in the South; and I accepted it because it had the same genealogical origin as the church of my fathers, and still professed to hold to the Westminster Standards. And so it came to pass that I found myself serving three congregations in rural Arkansas—

all three of which, at that time, still sang the psalms in worship. This stimulated me further: Why was there such a thing as a psalm-singing congregation? Where did that practice come from? Because I hadn't been brought up that way it seemed strange to me, and I wanted to find out why they did this.

In the end, after much study and prayer and inner anguish, I came to the firm conclusion that the fathers—and by that I mean the Reforming Fathers, like Calvin, Knox, and Zwingli...but also the fathers of the United Presbyterian Church that I began to read about in *The Psalms In Worship* volume— were right about worship, and that the modern practices were wrong.

I don't know how many of you are familiar with the writings of John Calvin. But if you never read anything else that Calvin has written get a copy of his treatise entitled *The Necessity Of Reforming The Church*. You'd think he'd written it for 20th Century America.

*“We are accused”* said Calvin, *“of rash and impious innovation, for having ventured to propose any change at all on the former state of the Church. From such persons, all I would ask...is, that they will for a little while suspend their judgment until I shall have shown from fact that we have not been prematurely hasty—have not attempted anything rashly, anything alien from our duty—have, in fine, done nothing until compelled by the highest necessity...”* (p. 25)

There were many people then—as there are today—who raise one primary objection (even to a Seminar like this). “Ah,” they say, “you’re majoring in minors again; on your hobby horse again; always dealing with things that are of secondary importance. Come on, let’s really deal with the primary things.” Well, listen to John Calvin:

*“If it be inquired, then, by what things chiefly the Christian religion has a standing existence among us, and maintains its truth, it will be found that the following two not only occupy the principal place, but comprehend under them all the other parts, and consequently the whole substance of Christianity, viz., a knowledge, first, of the mode in which God is duly worshiped...”*

Did you get that, folks? First! *“first, of the mode in which God is duly worshiped.”* That’s not G. I. Williamson, that’s John Calvin—the great Reformer: *“...and, secondly, of the source from which salvation is to be obtained.”*

Almost anybody today would put the salvation of man first, but not Calvin. He put God first.

*“When these are kept out of view” he said—referring to these two principles in the right order—“though we may glory in the name of Christians, our profession is empty and vain...”*

I believe John Calvin was right. When worship is deformed, the whole church becomes deformed. The lives of God’s people become deformed. Conversely, when there is reformation in the highest act in which man can participate, the approach to the living God, everything else tends to be right also.

Well, then, what is the true worship of God? Well, says Calvin:

*“Its chief foundation is to acknowledge him to be, as he is...[and then]...in accordance with this, to ascribe and render to him the glory...[After that] comes self-abasement, when, renouncing the world and the flesh, we are transformed in the renewing of our mind, and...submit to be ruled and actuated by him. By this self-abasement we are trained to obedience and devotedness to his will, so that his fear reigns in our hearts, and regulates all the actions of our lives. In these things consists the true and sincere worship which alone God approves, and in which alone he delights.”*

To put it in my own words: to know God as he really is, is the number one prerequisite of true worship. But second only to that, is to know ourselves to be what the Bible says we are, and then to humble ourselves to our proper place before him. When these two realities dominate our lives we are left with only one possible question: Lord, what would you have me to do when I come to worship you?

*“I know how difficult it is”* said John Calvin, *“to persuade the world that God disapproves of all...”* — And may I, as an aside, ask you to please take note of little words like *“all”* and *“every”* in the words of the Reformer:

*“...God disapproves of all modes of worship not expressly sanctioned by his Word. The opposite persuasion which cleaves to them—being seated, as it were, in their very bones and marrow—is, that whatever they do has in itself a sufficient sanction, provided it exhibits some kind of zeal for the honor of God. But since God not only regards as fruitless, but also plainly abominates, whatever we undertake from zeal to his worship, if at variance with his command, what do we gain by a contrary course? The words of God are clear and distinct, ‘Obedience is better than sacrifice.’ And ‘In vain do they worship me, teaching for doctrines the commandments of men.’ (I Sam. 15:22; Matt. 15:9)...This is the decision, and when once the judge has decided, it is no longer time to debate.”*

And what did Calvin see in the Christian Church of his day? What do you see in our day? Let me quote him again:

*“Let me have your attention, while I show [you] how utterly at variance with this view [that is, the Reformed view] are all the observances, in which, throughout the whole Christian world in the present day, divine worship is made to consist.” (p. 129)*

*“having observed that the Word of God is the test...we thence readily infer that the whole form of divine worship in general use in the present day is nothing but mere corruption.... If in what I say I seem to exaggerate, let an examination be made of all the acts by which the generality suppose that they worship God. I dare scarcely except a tenth part as not the random offspring of their own brain....” (pp. 132-133)*

So, with Calvin, God was first—then man. Worship was priority number one; then the doctrine of salvation for sinners. And right there you see what is wrong with the Church in our generation. Frankly, it has ceased to be God-centered, and has become man-centered.

When the OPC, my church, produced it’s hymnal, it decided to organize the material in it along the lines of the Westminster Shorter Catechism. I was at that Denver assembly when they argued about which hymns could and which could not go into it. In the section of that hymnal dealing with the attributes of God, take note: it’s mostly psalms. And that for one simple reason: the psalms are God-centered. The hymns, in general, are not. What I’m saying, in other words, is the Trinity hymnal fails to do justice to the fact that the God-centered emphasis ought to be from start to finish in the book of praise for the Church of God. Whether it be justification, adoption, sanctification, the church, or anything else—all of it should be God-centered.

In 1963 it was my privilege to go to serve in New Zealand. When I arrived in Auckland I had a surprise. That church of 400 people had a big choir of young Dutch immigrants. But to my amazement I found that they never sang in the worship services. The reason being that the Rev. William Deenick, who had come to New Zealand from the Gereformeerde Kerken in Holland, taught the people by word and deed that when the congregation assembles to worship God, they don’t entertain one another, but the whole family of God sings to his praise and glory—and nobody is to be silenced.

Let me now tell you the conclusions to which I was driven: First of all, the tremendous changes that I examined and studied were not a result of a diligent study

of Scripture. When I went back to the Reformers I found that their arguments were biblical, textual, cogent and persuasive. When I went back to the General Assembly minutes and asked for the reasons for the changes away from those things—I didn't find any such thing. When I studied the material presented to the various General Assemblies in the early part of this century, I found nothing to even compare with the testimony of the fathers. What I found was a kind of atomistic appeal to this text or that—not unlike the kind of arguments we are hearing today in defense of women in office and liturgical dancing.

Secondly, I saw and noted at once that there was a momentous shift in the argumentative basis. It was a shift away from the old foundation which said—as our catechisms and our confession say to this day—there's no room in the worship of God for anything not commanded. That's what our confessional statements say—that's what our catechism says. This was replaced, in various ways, by a new argument. Instead of saying we must worship God in a certain way because he has commanded us to do so, the argument was that we may worship in this new way because he has not forbidden it.

It gives me no joy to say it, but what passes for adherence to the regulative principle today in most Reformed churches is, in my opinion, just exactly that shift. And I want to illustrate this for you by quoting from a recent article in a church paper defending the celebration of Christmas. Please listen carefully:

*“No one would argue with the fact that the Bible records the major historical events surrounding the birth of Jesus.... Yet, where in the Bible does God command that we celebrate the birth of his Son on the 25th of December...? It must be acknowledged that these are human customs that do not find their authority in Scripture. Yes, we must preach on the birth of Christ, but God no more commands that we do so on December 25 than he does on June 30. I challenge anyone to find the practice of Christmas celebration mentioned anywhere in Scripture. You simply will not find it....*

*“...has God commanded the celebration of Christmas...? No! Then why do we find Christmas celebrations in Reformed churches that profess to do only what God has commanded? These are important question that we must ask and to which we must give answer....*

*“historically, many godly Reformed Christians have refused to celebrate Christmas. Calvin and other Reformed leaders would not participate in the observance of holidays instituted by the Roman Catholic Church which were not authorized by the Scripture itself. One source which I have says that Christmas was instituted in 345 A.D. by Pope Liberius. Another*

*source...states that the earliest recorded celebration...was in 336 A.D. Most sources agree that Christmas was a church adaptation of a pagan holiday that was celebrated at the end of the year during the time of the Roman Empire. The celebration of Christmas was not a commandment instituted by the apostles through divine authorization. The very word 'Christmas'... means 'Mass of Christ.'— Christmas is a Roman Catholic holiday. There can be no quibble about that. Then, why are Reformed Christians celebrating a Roman Catholic holiday which is not commanded in the Bible?*

*“When challenged about the legitimacy of celebrating Christmas, all too often the reaction that people have is to go into a rage of sentimentalism and emotionalism which is not befitting of mature Christians. Let us be clear on this. Culture does not dictate our practices. Tradition is not the Lord of our life. Roman Catholicism is bound by tradition...but Protestants have made the Word of God our supreme authority....If there is any defense for the celebration of Christmas, Easter, or any other church holiday, it must be found in the Scriptures. Angry appeals that ‘we have always done it that way’ or ‘I enjoy my holidays’ evidences a culture worship and/or a self-center worship that does not exalt the Lordship of Christ and his Word. ‘To the Scriptures let us go’ must always be our standard and our motto.*

*“In most of our churches, there would be a small-scale war started if Christmas was not observed some year. Yet, sadly enough, many of those who would start a war to preserve Christmas would not bat an eyelash about missing worship services on the Lord’s Day. Recognize that God commands us to celebrate each Lord’s Day in worship. Christmas is but a human holiday. What is more important, God’s commanded holy day that comes once each week or man’s ordained holiday that comes once a year?”*

Now folks, I’ve quoted all of that from an article in a Reformed church paper. You can imagine how thrilled I was to read that far in the article. To put it mildly—I was ecstatic! But then I read the next page. And I’m sorry to say my encouragement rapidly faded away, and I want you to listen to why it did:

*“...while the Scriptures do not command the celebration of Christmas, I believe because of the teaching of Scripture that we may legitimately celebrate Christmas if we choose to do so. We may do this without violating our confession or the Bible.”*

Did you notice the subtle shift? Instead of remaining true to the concern to do only what God has commanded, the writer, at this point, has moved from “must”

to “may.” We may do this, he says, without violating our confession. Now listen as he attempts to prove it:

*“I find warrant in Scripture for accepting the celebration of man ordained feasts established to commemorate divine acts of deliverance...For example, in the Book of Esther, the wicked Haman sought to destroy the Jewish nation. His rage centered upon a stubborn little Jew named Mordecai who would not bow in respect to Haman...You probably all know the beautiful story of how God used Queen Esther to deliver her people from death. My purpose is not to explore the details of this deliverance, but only to focus on the recorded celebration of this event.*

*“In Esther 9:16-32, the customs surrounding the Jewish Feast of Purim are mentioned. Because God delivered the Jews from the wicked Haman, the Jews instituted the Feast of Purim. It was a time of feasting and joy when presents were given and gifts were bestowed upon the poor (vs. 22), very much like our Christmas celebration. Note the fact that this feast was ordained by Mordecai (vss. 20-22), and it was confirmed as a Jewish celebration by Queen Esther (vss. 29-32). God did not ordain or command this feast. Yet, God did not condemn this humanly instituted celebration. It apparently is recorded in Scripture...[shall I repeat that]...It apparently is recorded in Scripture with divine approval!*

*“Similarly, in I Maccabees...[note that the writer even goes outside the Canon of inspired scripture to find support for non-commanded worship], the establishment of the Jewish Feast of Hanukkah is recorded. This is also known among Jews as the Feast of Lights or the Feast of Dedication. This celebration commemorated the deliverance of the Jews from the wicked King Antiochus IV who attempted to impose pagan customs upon them.”*

Now let me just stop there. Because it’s right here that we need to exercise discernment. And let me do it by simply stating the fact that I am quite willing for you—in your own home—to do whatever you want to on the 25th of December. But neither the Pope of Rome, or an ecumenical council, or the General Assembly of the OPC, or anybody else but King Jesus has a right to fix an annually-celebrated day and impose it on the churches. And the fact that the Jews did something in the time of the captivity is no proof at all that it has God’s approval. Now let me quote him once more, and then I’m finished:

*“The conclusion that I would draw at this juncture is this: while the Scriptures do not command the celebration of Christmas, they do command us not to condemn, forbid, or disparage the celebration of humanly instituted*

*festivals done in commemoration of a divine act of deliverance...I firmly believe that we fully, legitimately, and biblically may enter into the joy, excitement, and happiness of celebrating a man-made holiday which is not a God-ordained holy day...An applicable biblical principle is found in Romans 14:5-6, 'One man esteemeth one day above another; another esteemeth every day alike. Let every man be fully persuaded in his own mind....'*"

I'm not going to quote this article any further. It is true that there is an applicable principle in Romans 14. But what is the applicable principle? The applicable principle is that the individual believer—who is identified in Romans 14 as “weak”—is not to be harassed, or even disciplined by the Church, if he clings to something like that because of his past conditioning. That’s what was happening in the Roman Church. But when the Church—the Bride of Christ—seizes the headship from her husband and starts legislating what all the people of God in the congregation are to do, let me show you what Paul says about it. Galatians 4:9-11:

*“...now after you have know God, or rather are known by God, how is it that you turn again to the weak and beggarly elements, to which you desire again to be in bondage? You observe days and months and seasons and years. I am afraid for you lest I have labored for you in vain.”*

And the “you” in the passage just quoted is plural. John Calvin says the Apostle here refers to: *“...the Jewish Sabbath, new moons, and other festivals were earnestly pressed by the false apostles, because they had been appointed by the law.”*

Now that’s true. These ‘Judaizers’ wanted to force the New Testament Church to observe the Jewish Sabbaths, new moons, and other festivals—Passover, Feast of Tabernacles, and the like—because they were, once upon a time, ordained by God Almighty himself through his servant Moses. And Paul says, “No, no. I’m afraid of you, that I have labored in vain.”

Now listen to Calvin:

*“They consider holidays, not less than the false apostles did, to be part of the worship of God.... [and therefore are] equally censurable with the false apostles...with this additional aggravation, that, while the former proposed to keep those days which had been appointed by the law of God, the latter enjoin days, rashly stamped with their own seal, to be observed as most holy.”*

It would be bad enough, in other words, if you had people demanding that we celebrate the Jewish feasts of Tabernacles, Pentecost, and the Passover. But at

least, those days were once ordained by God. This cannot be said of Christmas, Good Friday, or Easter—or any of the other days that now saturate the Christian Church in America today—none of which were divinely commanded.

My third conclusion is this: the result of this shift has been calamitous. Can you imagine what it was like when Reformed churches all over the world were in unity in what they sang? It was that way not so long ago. During my ministry in New Zealand an old couple came out by KLM to visit their children. On the journey the man contracted cholera in Bahrain and died soon after arriving in New Zealand. This event reverberated around the world. The head of KLM came all the way out to our little church there in Silverstream, New Zealand, because this was such a calamitous thing. And at the funeral there we had people who couldn't speak a word of English; and other people there who couldn't speak a word of Dutch. Well, do you want to know something? All we had to do was to go back and dig out some of the old psalms—same psalm, same music, the words in Dutch, and the words in English were even parallel verse by verse. And so we sang the same Psalm together—and it was glorious.

There was a time when Reformed people all over the world had unity in their song book because it was the Book of Psalms. Do you think there is any unity today? There isn't even unity in the OPC. Some people will not use the new Trinity hymnal. And there are some who feel the same about the new Christian Reformed hymnal too. But even the old hymn books of two different Reformed denominations are not the same—they don't have the same stuff in them at all. That is an enormous loss.

I remember one time in New Zealand when an old couple came out to New Zealand and the husband had not been very well, but they thought it was time to see their children. But while they were there the problem he had flared up and the doctor said, "You're never going to go home. You're going to die here." One of the great blessings of my life was ministering to that man. I could hardly speak Dutch, and he could hardly speak English; but I could read a Dutch Bible with parallel English, and I could talk to him and I could hear what he said—and I could get the gist of it. And one of the things that I learned was that this man, when he was child in Holland, every week had to learn a new psalm. And now it was time to die out there in New Zealand. He had what Martin Luther called, "My little Bible"—and he had it inside of him. And it was a tremendous thing to witness and see.

Finally, and this is my last point: I came to see how easy it is to deform the Church, and how hard it is to recover. Oh, it is so easy...all you have to do is have a popular pastor who has a few innovative ideas, and you can corrupt worship all

over the place. Put a cross up once in the front of the building, and then try to take it down—just try it. Just try.... It’s easy to put it up—it’s extremely hard to take it down.

Well folks, I came to the conclusion that this whole shift was totally erroneous and destructive of the Church of God, thirty years ago. And I was grabbed by those words of my forefathers who said: We are not to comply with the defections of the times. And we are not to give ourselves up to a detestable neutrality in the cause of God. My wife stood with me in that, and it has sometimes been a difficult road. But thank God, now I begin to see the signs of change.

If I wanted to give a lecture like this some 30 years ago, and had announced a meeting, there wouldn’t be anybody there. Nobody. It was like talking to a stone wall 30 years ago. Nowadays, I live in a little hamlet there in Iowa. The phone rings: and some young pastor, or some young ruling elder—somewhere across the US or Canada—calls to talk about reforming worship. That’s going on today. God is working; and I’m encouraged by what I see—especially in the younger generation. I’ve just about given up on the older generation. It’s the younger generation that has an open mind and heart to the truth of the fathers of the Reformed Faith.

What does God require in the second commandment? [Heidelberg Catechism, Q. 96]

*That we in no wise make any image of God, nor worship him in **any** other way than he has commanded....*

Do you really think that that is adhered to today? Do you really? I don’t.

Westminster Shorter Catechism [Q. 50]:

*What is required in the second commandment?*

*The second commandment requireth the receiving, observing, and keeping pure and entire, all such religious worship and ordinances as God hath appointed....*

And what does it forbid? [Q. 51]: *...the worshiping of God by images, or **any** other way not appointed in his Word.*

I think these little words such as “any” and “all” have been ‘sandpapered’ into oblivion in the most of our present day ‘Reformed’ Churches.

The Westminster Confession of Faith says:

*...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.*

I think the Reformers were right, and that we've been wrong. We need to admit it, confess it, and get back to Reformation principles and Reformation practice. In one of these lectures I will try to show you from the Scripture itself, that this 'regulative principle' is biblical. And it will be my prayer that you too will find yourself driven back to the historic stand of our fathers—not only in word, but also in deed.

## LECTURE NO. 2

Worship Seminar - May 12-14, 1995  
First Orthodox Presbyterian Church - San Francisco  
Rev. G.I. Williamson

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### **The Contrast Between The Present And The Past In Worship**

Now I want to draw a contrast between the past and the present in Reformed worship.

I'm sure that everyone here is aware of the tremendous changes taking place right now in the great Christian Reformed Church in the United States and Canada. And I'm sure many of you are aware also of some of the issues which have divided the denomination, and concerned our own church, very deeply—such as whether or not women may be pastors, elders, and deacons; and whether or not it is right for the Church to tolerate homosexual orientation. These are certainly very important issues, but it is my contention that the most important matter has received very little attention. I refer to the radical changes which have taken place in the Christian Reformed Church in its corporate worship.

So I want to begin by reminding you of the stand taken by the Reforming fathers of the CRC. I'm going to quote from the *Church Order Commentary*, written in 1941, by Idzerd Van Delen and Martin Monsma, citing what they say about Article 67 as it stood in the Church Order of this denomination at that time. Here is the way that Church Order article read:

*“The Churches shall observe, in addition to the Sunday, also Christmas, Good Friday, Easter, Ascension Day, Pentecost, the Day of Prayer, the National Thanksgiving Day, and Old and New Year’s Day.”*

Commenting first on “The original position of the Reformed Churches regarding special days” they write as follows:

*“During the early days of the Reformation some Reformed localities observed only Sunday. All special days sanctioned and revered by Rome were set aside. Zwingli and Calvin both encouraged the rejection of all ecclesiastical festive days. In Geneva all special days were discontinued as soon as the Reformation took a firm hold in that city. Already before the arrival of Calvin in Geneva this had been accomplished under the leadership of*

*Farel and Viret. But Calvin agreed heartily. And Knox, the Reformer of Scotland, shared these same convictions, he being a disciple of Calvin in Geneva. Consequently the Scottish Churches also banned the Roman sacred days. These eminent Reformers took this stand for the following reasons: [I'm quoting Van Delen and Monsma] (1) The festival days are not ordained by God but are a human invention; (2) they minimize Sunday, the God-ordained weekly day of rest; (3) they lead to paganistic celebrations and promote licentiousness. In view of the present day celebrations of days as Christmas and Easter by the general public and many believers it must be said that the contentions of the Reformers as to this last point were certainly correct. Present day celebrations of these days is more pagan than Christian. Neither can it be denied that the observance of these days is but an invention of man....”*

Then they go on to say this:

“Consulting the present article we find that it prescribes the observation of several special or festival days. How is this to be explained?

Here is their answer:

*“The government of Holland was loath to set all the Christian festivals aside inasmuch as many of the people delighted in these days....Rather than see these days given over to the danger of abuse and frivolity, the Churches accommodated themselves to circumstances and began to celebrate these days after a fashion. Thus the Synod of Dordt, 1578, Article 75, declared in substance that it would be desirable to celebrate Sunday only according to God’s ordinance. But, inasmuch as Christmas Day and the day following upon Christmas, as well as the days following upon Easter and Pentecost and in some places also New Years Day, and Ascension Day were legal holidays by authority of the government, the Ministers should preach appropriately on these days...At the same time the Synod urged that the Churches should work toward the setting aside of all festive-days...We note [they say] that the early Reformed Synods yielded increasingly to pressure from without regarding the observation of ‘Christian festivals.’ The government of the Netherlands made something like legal holidays out of these festivals, and so the Churches, although not favoring the observation of these days, for practical reasons ruled as they did...”*

Now Monsma and Van Dellen were honest men. They did not try to hide the contradiction between the original stand of the Calvinistic Reformers and the earlier Reformed Synods, and the practices that were later accepted. But it is also

clear from this commentary that these two authors themselves were quite willing to condone this expedient solution. On the one hand they quite properly observed that:

*“The Sabbath (Day of Rest) should be kept, not as a matter of good policy merely, as Roman Catholics, Lutherans, and the majority of present day Protestants seem to hold, but by com-mandment of God. We hold that the whole decalogue, that all the Ten Commandments are still in force.... We maintain that one day out of every seven, according to a definite cycle of days, must be set aside for the service of and devotion to God. That is the abiding principle. And this abiding principle is not Jewish but universal. God hallowed the Sabbath day unto himself even before sin entered the world.”*

They also issue a warning, and I quote:

*“We should guard against Roman and Lutheran practices which border on things superstitious.”*

And yet, after all that, they were still willing to say that:

*“Watch hour services for New Year’s eve and sunrise services on Easter morning are indeed harmless in themselves, although they may foster reliance on external things.”*

On the one hand they could say, and I quote again:

*“It is a fact well known to Church historians that as spiritual life begins to wane, formalistic and extraordinary observances begin to increase.”*

And yet, on the other hand, they still attempt to justify the very thing that their own stated principle calls in question.

It is my contention that the great Reformers were right in their view of these so-called feast days. It is also noteworthy, in my opinion, that Van Dellen and Mon-sma faithfully represent these great Reformers and the early Synods. It is also significant that they admit that the change came by way of concession, and not by way of adherence to principle. It’s not my purpose to malign the men that made these concessions. No doubt they were under great pressure to accommodate. But I believe that therein lies the root of a lot that is happening today. Because ‘all’ didn’t mean all anymore and ‘any’ didn’t mean any anymore. The principle was no longer truly honored.

So now let me give you a few examples of what is going on in the Christian Reformed Church today:

The first example is something I witnessed myself, a decade ago, in a CRC church here in Iowa. It was on the 25th of December, but it happened to be a Lord's Day as well. There was no sermon. The sanctuary, as they called it, was full of banners and symbols. I don't know how many people invented their symbol for that service. The whole service consisted of a choir cantata, as they called it. And at the end, there was a candlelight service. The persons at the end of each aisle were asked to pass along the candles, and then the people were invited to come forward and light their little candle off of the pastor's big one. After the service I asked the pastor how he could reconcile that with Belgic Confession, Article 32; and Heidelberg Catechism, [Answer] 96, and he just got angry.

The second example is taken from a recent issue of a publication called Reformed Worship, published by the CRC, with the stated purpose being "to give practical assistance to worship leaders of the Christian Reformed Church and other Reformed/Presbyterian churches in planning, structuring, and conducting worship."

In an article entitled "Beyond Trumpets and Lilies" Edith Bajema writes, and I quote:

*"For years Protestant churches observed the Easter cycle during the span of one week, beginning on Palm Sunday with a sermon on Jesus' triumphal entry and followed by a service on Good Friday. The observance with a service on Easter morning in which the congregation sang all the great resurrection hymns. Trumpets rang out, lilies flooded the pulpit and the narthex, and choirs sang Easter choral arrangements and cantatas. Then it was over. The following Sunday the lilies were gone, the trumpet players had returned to the pew, and the minister preached on Paul's shipwreck at Malta or Abraham's sacrifice of Isaac. Today things are changing. Many congregations are starting to observe the forty days of Lent. Worship committees begin to speak of the Great Fifty Days from Easter to Pentecost. If you add that up, that's ninety days—three full months devoted to the Easter cycle."*

From the same issue I quote from an article called "Dirt at the Foot of the Cross" by Debra Levey Larson and Linda Vredeveld:

*"During the 1990 Lenten season at Hessel Park church in Champaign, Illinois, a local artist, Linda Vredeveld, demonstrated that liturgical art can be*

*as unassuming as a pile of dirt at the foot of a cross. She chose common materials such as dirt, light cloth, and twigs and gave them new meaning in the worship setting....The first Sunday in Lent the congregation was greeted with the a symmetrical, box-like cross colored with charcoal dust and about a three-gallon-sized pile of black dirt in the middle of the cement floor. The cross was easy enough to understand. It had a contemplative quality, making a quiet statement that hinted at the confession and reflection we would take part in during the weeks ahead. The dirt, however, posed a bit of a mystery. Was it a pile of sin? [The Pastor] started people thinking about the dirt by explaining that he wasn't going to talk about it a lot. He just wanted people to look at it and meditate on it. And they did....On the second Sunday the dirt was gone. It had been replaced with broken branches woven into a giant circle on the floor....The third Sunday in Lent the Scripture passage and sermon dealt with the story of the woman at the well. Vredevelde added ripples of light blue cloth to the center of the "crown of thorns," transforming it into a simple, visual image of a well....The fourth Sunday...the pile of dirt was back—this time on the communion table—with a large candle rising out of it. In the service and sermon that morning, we heard references to light coming out darkness and to the mud Jesus used to open the blind man's eyes....On the fifth Sunday, the broken branches from the ice storm were delicately balanced in the shape of a campfire..."*

I'm not going to read any further. It went on like that week after week. The whole thing was invented by the mind of some lady in the church and it was central in the worship service. But we should not be too hard on her—she was just building on the humanly devised special days that were already tolerated historically.

A third example is taken from an article entitled "Symbols we have Seen on high" by Brad and Helen Breems of another CRC:

*"Convinced of the importance of symbols in worship, the worship committee of Coquiltam (B.C.) Christian Reformed Church planned a mobile that would enhance worship during a four-week series on the incarnation. Because the committee wanted to involve as many members as possible, they made the mobile large: approximately twenty feet wide and ten feet tall. Suspended from a thirty-foot sail pole on the ceiling of the church, the mobile was equipped with a pulley for lowering it to floor level. The symbols were designed from colorful pieces of felt. On each of the four Sundays the mobile was lowered to floor level. Then members of the congregation, representative of all age groups, explained the significance of eight new symbols and hung them on the mobile. When the symbols were in place, the mo-*

*bible was raised again to its full height. After four weeks, thirty-two symbols circled gracefully above the congregation, catching every-one's attention...inviting contemplation on the richness and profundity of God's work throughout salvation history...."*

I've got more, but I'm not going to read that either. See what's going on? It's chaos. Every man does what is right in his own eyes—and now every woman also, I guess. And the worship of the Church becomes whatever anyone chooses to make it.

And now contrast that with the official confessional documents of the Christian Reformed Church. (Belgic Confession, Art. 7):

*"...the entire manner of service which God requires of us is described in it [the holy Scriptures] at great length, no one—even an apostle or an angel from heaven, as Paul says—ought to teach other than what the holy Scriptures have already taught us. For since it is forbidden to add or subtract from the Word of God...we must not consider human writings—no matter how holy their authors may have been—equal to the divine writings; nor may we put custom, nor the majority, nor age, nor the passage of time or person, nor councils, decrees, or official decisions above the truth of God, for truth is above everything else. For all human beings are liars by nature and more vain than vanity itself. Therefore we reject with all our hearts everything that does not agree with this infallible rule..."*

As for the rulers of the Church, Article 32 says:

*"...they ought always to guard against deviating from what Christ our only Master has ordained for us. Therefore, we reject all human innovations and all laws imposed on us, in our worship of God..."*

When you come into a Christian Reformed Church today you're almost certain to have things imposed on you which are forbidden by the official creed of the Church.

Well, I'm sure you see the contrast. But I think you can also see that the seeds of these things were already planted when they began to compromise the regulative principle of worship. And it's my conviction that we have a key to an understanding of it all in Paul's letter to the Romans, Chapter One. If you have your Bible you might like to open it to Chapter One of the Book of Romans. Because we are told in the Book of Romans, Chapter One, that there was a time when these people knew God and then they began not to like knowing God. Verse 21:

*“...because, although they knew God, they did not glorify him as God, nor were thankful, but became futile in their thoughts and their foolish hearts were darkened.”*

Everything else in that chapter—and it’s an horrendous chapter (I mean it describes horrendous things)—stems from that simple beginning. They didn’t want to glorify God anymore. They did not want to be bound by Almighty God to worship him only as he commands and thus give him all the glory. And so, their minds became futile, *“their foolish hearts were darkened, professing themselves to be wise, they became fools...”* And the avalanche of wickedness followed.

Today—when we read Romans chapter 1—it almost sounds like a description of what’s happened in our country—and it is. But if you happen to think that gays and lesbians are the epitome of the vile and wicked, I’ve got news for you. They are not, in and of themselves alone, the epitome of the vile and wicked. They are the result of the epitome of the vile and wicked.

You’ve heard, haven’t you, of the modernist fundamentalist controversy that took place back in the ’30s? Well, that’s when it happened, friends. My parents and grandparents knew the true God. A lot of parents and grandparents in this country knew God. But they didn’t like knowing him. They didn’t want to be bound any longer to such a holy, majestic and all-demanding God. So they began giving him up. I can remember all kinds of places in Iowa when I was little boy, Sunday night in the churches—the Methodist, the Presbyterian, the Baptist—the lights were on Sunday night. They’re as dark as a tomb now. People got tired of God. They threw away his holy Sabbath. And if you believe, as I do, that the Ten Commandments are ordered according to their importance, then sexual immorality is quite a ways down the list from spiritual and religious apostasy. It’s the grandchildren of those people that threw away the true God that are now dying of AIDS in San Francisco. And it’s a direct result of that apostasy from the true God.

That is really the vile thing. And when it happened a lot of people didn’t see it. The world didn’t fall apart. The sky didn’t fall in. But there were a few who did realize what was coming.

I think these words written around 1923. They were written by Dr. Prof. J. Gresham Machen, who said that people were already—at that time—living on “the moral momentum of [their] ancestors.” Listen to what he said—and I quote:

*“Now that men no longer believe that there is a law of God—now that men no longer believe in obligatory morality—now that the moral law has been abandoned—what is to be put in its place in order that an ordinarily decent*

*human life may be preserved on the earth? It cannot be said that the answers proposed...are...satisfactory....It is impossible to keep back the raging seas of human passion with the flimsy mud embankment of an appeal either to self-interest, or to what Walter Lippman calls 'disinterestedness.' Those raging seas can only be checked by the solid masonry of the law of God."*

What he was saying, in other words, was this: you get away from God, you throw God out, you throw away his Sabbath, you stop worshiping him with reverence and awe—and you're going to have all these other horrible things—the “raging sea of iniquity” that we now see around us.

So the great change was first of all vertical. It took place in that generation back there in the early part of this century in this country—in the churches that once had the historic Reformed faith and a pure worship. It was thrown away—and then came the tidal wave, horizontally, of moral disintegration and destruction. And I say to you, there is no more fundamental cause of it than the defilement of the worship of God.

*“O miserable, blind, and ignorant man!” says John Knox “...why do you neglect the good works of God to invent good works of your own making, thinking to please God....Through the vain conceit of man—used in these words “good zeal and intention”—have all the abuses now ruling the church of God risen, so that the saying of the Prophets spoken to the people of Israel are complete this day in the church of Christ,... ‘Where are your gods which you have made? Let them arise and deliver you in the time of your trouble.’” (Vol. 3, pp. 516-518)*

*“All worshiping, honoring, or service invented by the brain of man in the religion of God, with-out his own express commandment is idolatry!...” (From “a Vindication of the Doctrine that the Mass is Idolatry.” John Knox works, Vol. 3, p. 34)*

Knox was blunt. He says the stuff that's going on today in the Christian Reformed Church, is idolatry. Yes, that's right—idolatry!

*“Disobedience to God's voice is not only when man does wickedly, contrary to the precepts of God” says John Knox, “but also when of good zeal, or good intent, as we commonly speak, man does anything to the honor or service of God not commanded by the express Word of God...that is the principal Idolatry: when our own inventions we defend to be righteous in the sight of God, because we think them good, laudable, and pleasant....*

*No! the contrary is commanded by God, saying, ‘Unto my Word shall ye add nothing; nothing shall ye diminish therefrom, that ye might observe the precepts of your Lord God.’” (Ibid., p. 38)*

*“It profits nothing to say the Kirk has power to set up, devise, or invent honoring of God....This is the continual crying of the Papists....Are you better heard with God than Samuel was? he prayed for King Saul, and that most fervently, and yet obtained not his petition....And it is said to Jeremiah, ‘Pray thou not for this people, for my heart is not towards it; no, though Moses and Elijah should pray for them, yet would I not hear them, for they love to go wrong, and do not abstain from iniquity.’” (Ibid., p. 59)*

That’s the testimony of John Knox, folks. Hear him again:

*“In religion there is no median: either it is the religion of God, and that in everything that is done it must have the assurance of his own Word, and then is his majesty truly honored, or else it is the religion of the Devil, which is when men will erect and set up to God such religion as pleases them...”*

*“I say that your conversion unto God and unfeigned repentance requires two things. First, that the religion and true honoring of God may be at once brought to that purity which his Word requires. Secondly, that order may be taken, so far as lies in you, that the same religion which God approves may be kept inviolable among you forever...”*

Here, then—in my own words—are the principles for which the great Reformers contended:

1. The honor and glory of God must always come first if we want to have true religion. Nothing else, not even the welfare of man or the salvation of God’s elect is of equal importance.
2. True worship can only be known by divine revelation. If God hasn’t told us to do it—we are not supposed to do it. We must be satisfied with what he tells us. True worship is defined in the canonical Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments. There is no need—or legitimate place—for anything else, because the Word of God is sufficient.
3. Man, acting on his own, is wholly incapable of adding anything of value to it because he—being born in sin, and wholly corrupt—does not want to know God as he really is, much less to adore him and give him thanks.

4. Those who are truly converted do have a God-given inclination and desire to render true worship to God. Yet because of their remaining sinfulness—(“O wretched man that I am,” says Paul)—they are not capable of doing this without a special supernatural enablement that comes from God by his Word and Spirit. Such was granted only to the authors of Scripture.
5. True worship, alas, is largely lacking today, even in Reformed churches—even as it was in the time of John Calvin.

And here—in conclusion—I want to mention just one of the things that has been lost in most of the modern day Reformed churches. I refer to the singing of the inspired Psalms in worship. It is my conviction that nothing has revealed more clearly the natural enmity in the heart of man against the true and living God than the treatment his inspired Book of Psalms has received in the modern Church. Go back to some of the great Reformers and the early fathers of the Christian Church, and you find an attitude toward the inspired Psalm book tragically lacking today.

Augustine:

*“The Donatists reproach us with our grave chanting of the divine songs of the prophets in our churches, while they inflame their passions in their rev-els by singing psalms of human composition....”*

Athanasius:

*“I believe that a man can find nothing more glorious than these Psalms; for they embrace the whole life of man, the affections of his mind, and the emotions of his soul. To praise and glorify God he can select a Psalm suited to every occasion, and thus will find that they were written for him.”*

John Calvin:

*“I have been accustomed to call this book... ‘An Anatomy of all the Parts of the Soul;’ for there is not an emotion of which any one can be conscious that is not here represented as in a mirror...The other parts of Scripture contain the commandments which God enjoined his servants to announce to us. But here the prophets themselves, seeing they are exhibited to us as speaking to God, and laying open all their inmost thoughts and affec-tions...It is certainly a rare and singular advantage, when all lurking plac-es are discovered, and the heart is brought into the light, purged from that most baneful infection, hypocrisy. In short, as calling upon God is one of the principal means of securing our safety, and as a better and more unerr-*

ing rule for guiding us in this exercise cannot be found elsewhere than in the Psalms, it follows, that in proportion to the proficiency which a man shall have attained in understanding them, will be his knowledge of the most important part of celestial doctrine...It is by perusing these inspired compositions, that men will be most effectually awakened to a sense of their maladies, and, at the same time, instructed in seeking remedies for their cure. In a word, whatever may serve to encourage us when we are about to pray to God, is taught us in this book.” (Calvin’s Preface to his Commentaries on the Psalms, p. xxxvii)

And once again:

“...there is also here prescribed to us an infallible rule for directing us with respect to the right manner of offering to God the sacrifice of praise, which he declares to be most precious in his sight, and of the sweetest odour. There is no book in which there is to be found more express and magnificent commendations, both of the unparalleled liberality of God towards his Church, and of all his works; there is no other book in which there is recorded so many deliverances, nor one in which the evidences and experiences of the fatherly providence and solicitude which God exercises towards us, are celebrated with such splendour of diction, and yet with the strictest adherence to truth; in short there is no other book in which we are more perfectly taught the right manner of praising God, or in which we are more powerfully stirred up to the performance of this religious exercise....here there is nothing wanting which relates to the knowledge of eternal salvation.” (Calvin’s Preface to his Commentaries on the Psalms, pp. xxxviii & xxxix)

And finally one more quotation—this time from John Knox:

“...there are no songs more meet [fitting] than the Psalms of the prophet David, which the holy Ghost has framed...”

Were these men mistaken? I don’t think so. I think it is the modern Church which is mistaken because it has clamored for something better than God’s perfect Book of Praise.

## LECTURE NO. 3

Worship Seminar - May 12-14, 1995  
First Orthodox Presbyterian Church - San Francisco  
Rev. G.I. Williamson

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### The Regulative Principle of Worship

The question is, how are we to worship God? And I've long believed that the answer is already clearly implied in one of the most basic things we confess, which is this: the Bible is the infallible and only rule of our faith and practice. What I want to do right now, therefore, is to demonstrate (1) that the Bible does teach the historic regulative principle of worship as it is expressed in our Confession, and our two catechisms; and then (2) to discuss, briefly, what that principle meant in Reformed churches in times past, and ought to mean today. (You might like to have your Bibles handy because I'll be referring to texts all over the place).

#### THE OLD TESTAMENT

[1] We begin, then, with the Old Testament. And we begin with the first recorded instance of worship, in Genesis 4. And I read from verses 3 to 7:

*“And in the process of time it came to pass that Cain brought an offering of the fruit of the ground to the Lord. Abel also brought of the firstlings of his flock and of their fat. And the Lord respected Abel and his offering, but he did not respect Cain and his offering. And Cain was very angry, and his countenance fell. So the Lord said to Cain, ‘Why are you angry? And why has your countenance fallen? If you do well, will you not be accepted? And if you do not do well, sin lies at the door. And its desire is for you, but you should rule over it.’”*

A lot of commentaries say the problem here was merely *subjective*. There was a wrong attitude—a lack of faith in the heart of Cain. Well, that is undoubtedly true, but it is only half of the truth—because there was also an *objective* offense. The Lord had respect to Abel and his offering; but he did not respect Cain or his offering. That is why the Book of Hebrews emphasizes the objective aspect when it says, *“by faith, Abel offered up a more excellent sacrifice.”* (Heb. 11:4)

So it is a very big mistake to throw the emphasis entirely upon the subjective. The fact is that Abel paid attention to the instruction of his parents, and I believe they instructed him fundamentally in what we have in the first three chapters of

the Bible: the creation, the fall, and the problem of bridging the gap that now existed between fallen man and God; and that he took to heart the fact that God covered the nakedness of Adam and Eve with the skins of sacrificed animals. Cain, on the other hand, did not take account of these things. And even if you take the view that a special revelation was given to Abel about how he should approach God, it really makes no difference in the end, because God had made it clear to Cain what was—and what was not—acceptable. And the reason why he was rejected and became reprobate was that he was not willing to submit himself wholeheartedly and totally to the prescribed way of approach to the living God. And that is the regulative principle, right there.

[2] The second example is found in the Book of Exodus, chapter 20, verses 4 to 6—the well-known second commandment:

*“You shall not make for yourself any 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 nor 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 generations of those who hate Me, but showing mercy to thousands, to those who love Me and keep My commandments.”*

As Calvin said:

*“...although Moses only speaks of idolatry [here], yet there is no doubt that by synecdoche, as in all the rest of the Law, he condemns all fictitious services which men in their ingenuity have invented.”*

In other words, he takes the primary species of the violation of this principle from the ancient world and uses that as a concrete vehicle to express the great principle: what God has not prescribed is therefore forbidden.

[3] The third example is found in the legislation recorded in the Book of Exodus. It would be hard to think of a way to give greater weight to the principle that we call the regulative principle of worship than we find in this account of the prescribed preparation, construction and use of the Tabernacle in the wilderness. Did not God say to Moses, “*See that you make them* [and the “them” refers to all the articles and aspects of the tabernacle system]...*See that you make them according to the pattern shown to you on the mountain.*” (Ex. 25:40) It is true, of course, that God made use of men in the construction of the Tabernacle. But it is not true, as is commonly assumed—and I have heard over and over again—that the Tabernacle was a product of the mere natural, creative and artistic impulse of the people of

God used to construct it. No doubt these men did have some natural creative talent. But that was not enough. The Bible is very clear about that. The things that went into the Tabernacle were produced—as the Bible itself has been produced—by special divine revelation and inspiration! Exodus 31:2-11 clearly shows this.

*“See, I have chosen Bezaleel son of Uri, the son of Hur, of the tribe of Judah, and I have filled him with the Spirit of God, with skill, ability and knowledge in all kinds of crafts...And I have appointed Aholiab son of Ahisamach, of the tribe of Dan, to help him. Also I have given skill to all the craftsmen to make everything I have commanded...They are to make them just as I commanded you.”*

How remote this is from the argument so often heard today, to the effect that art work by people in the church is justified (and sanctified!) by the “art work” in the Tabernacle. The truth is that there was no “art work” in the Tabernacle, unless by “art work” we mean the uniquely inspired and infallible kind, and that kind of art is no longer given.

What we’ve said about the Tabernacle is equally true of the more elaborate Temple. Nothing was left to man’s innovation. I Chron. 28:11:

*“David gave Solomon his son the pattern of the porch of the temple, its buildings, its storehouses, its upper rooms, its inner rooms, and the room of the mercy seat, and the plan of all that he had by the Spirit...[And to his son he said] all this...have I been made to understand in writing from the hand of the Lord, even all the works of this pattern.” [Vs. 19]*

Now why was this so important? Why did everything have to conform precisely to the pattern revealed first to Moses, and then more elaborately to David? The reason is self-evident, is it not? God is to be worshipped only as he has commanded.

[4] Consider also Leviticus, chapter 10, where we read that the two sons of Aaron, Nadab and Abihu, were destroyed. Verse 2 says:

*“...fire went out from the Lord and devoured them.”*

Why did this happen? The same passage says it happened because they:

*“...offered strange fire before the Lord, which he had not commanded.” (Vs. 1)*

It does not say that they lacked sincerity. It does not say that they were devoid of good intentions. It does not even say that this happened to them because they did

something God had expressly forbidden. No, what it says is that they did this without first making sure it was something God had commanded.

[5] Another example is found in Numbers, chapter 16, verses 8-10, and on down through that whole chapter. Moses and Aaron were appointed by the Lord to mediate between God and his people. But Korah, and those who followed him, didn't like this exclusive arrangement. They wanted to break out of this narrow idea that there's only one right way, namely, the way God set things up, so they rebelled against this restriction. The well-known result demonstrates, however, that this was exceedingly offensive to Jehovah.

All the way through the Old Testament we find abundant proof of the magnitude of this evil. Whenever men are not satisfied to worship God in the way he appoints, God always made it perfectly clear that he was greatly displeased.

[6] Take King Saul for a sixth example. He was not authorized by God to partake in the priestly office (I Sam. 13:11ff). But because of the pressure of circumstances (my Old Testament professor used this as a spur to us—he said, “Preachers, don't be late for appointments.” Then he told us this story about Saul). The pressure of circumstances resulted in this: Saul—and I quote —“*felt compelled to offer the burnt offering...*” because Samuel was late. It may well be, for all we know, that he acted with what he considered the best of intentions. But we also know that God found it offensive. Samuel, the prophet, said he “*acted foolishly*” because he did not limit himself to what God had authorized. And it was because of this that God removed the kingdom from Saul, and gave it to David (vs. 14). Does this not make it perfectly clear that this principle holds a place of highest importance with God?

[7] Consider also the historical incident involving a man by the name of Uzzah. When David first attempted to bring the long-neglected ark to Jerusalem, the oxen suddenly stumbled. At that moment Uzzah reached out his hand to steady the ark, and the Scripture says, and I quote from 2 Samuel 6:7, “*God struck him down there for his irreverence.*” David was indignant about this at first. He didn't understand it at the time. And we may not even find the explanation appealing, but it is clearly stated in Scripture: Uzzah died because, as David explained later (I Chron. 15:13) “*we did not inquire about how to do it in the prescribed way.*” It took David a while to wake up to that fact; but then he said—Ah, now I see it. We didn't observe the regulative principle—even in moving the ark. But how different it was when “*the Levites carried the ark of God...as Moses commanded in accordance with the word of the Lord.*” (I Chron. 15:14) Is not the case that we clearly see in this account another proof of God's adherence to what we call “the regulative principle of worship”?

[8] And consider King Jeroboam. When he became king he wanted to consolidate his hold on the ten tribes that rebelled against the house of David. In order to do this he (and I quote) “*appointed*” or “*instituted*” a kind of worship which was (and I quote again) “*of his own choosing.*” (I Kings 12:32-33) For this reason a man of God from Judah was sent to denounce this unauthorized worship. And that’s not all; because Jeroboam, from that time forward, was always spoken of as the one who made Israel sin—corporately. (I Kings 15:30) It’s no exaggeration, then, to say that this act of innovation was the source out of which came Israel’s ultimate downfall. The worship which had been appointed by the Lord (Jehovah) God was replaced by a new form of worship—not commanded by him, and therefore, accursed.

[9] Recall also the sin of King Uzziah. (II Chron. 26:16):

*“...he entered the temple of the Lord to burn incense on the altar...”*

The high priest courageously intervened to oppose that act of unauthorized worship. And he was vindicated by the intervention of God, for the king was instantly smitten with leprosy as a sign of God’s judgment. Again, it is clear that what is not authorized by God’s commandment is an abomination to him.

[10] And then there is King Ahaz. (II Chron. 28:2):

[he] “*burned sacrifices in the Valley of Ben Hinnom and sacrificed his sons in the fire, following the detestable ways of the nations.*”

The prophet Jeremiah, commenting on this (Jer. 7:31):

*“...they...built the high places of Topheth in the Valley of Ben Hinnom to burn their sons and daughters in the fire...”*

And now, the bottom line, folks—listen, as God says—through his prophet, that this was:

*“...something I did not command nor did it enter my mind.”*

How could God make it any clearer? Worship that he has not commanded or authorized is therefore forbidden.

It is my contention, therefore, that this is the uniform principle taught in the Old Testament:

*“Do not add to what I command you and do not subtract from it, but keep the commands of the Lord your God that I give you.” (Deut. 4:2)*

Now, of course, there is a sense in which this principle applies to all of life. But does it not, with special intensity, apply to the most awesome event in human life which is the worship of the true and living God?

## THE NEW TESTAMENT

And now what about the New Testament. Does it teach the same principle with the same rigor as the Old? I believe it does.

[1] Jesus himself spoke in this manner concerning Jewish traditionalism: You scribes and Pharisees, he says, have (and I quote) *“a fine way of setting aside the commands of God in order to observe your own traditions.”* ([Mark] 7:9) Because of this fact our Lord went on to say this about their worship:

*“These people honor Me with their lips, but their hearts are far from Me. They worship Me in vain: their teachings are but rules taught by men.”* (Mark 7:6-7 [quoted from Jer. 29:13])

No doubt this offended them. But that’s not what matters. What matters is that God was offended. And according to Jesus the cause of the offense was two-fold: (1) setting aside what God had commanded, and (2) diligently observing what was not commanded by God, but only by man-made traditions. And my dear friends, the Church of Christ is full of the very same thing today—chock-a-block full.

[2] Or consider Christ and the Samaritan woman. No one ever expounded the regulative principle with more force and clarity than Jesus did in his meeting with her. As Calvin points out, our Lord

*“...divides the subject [that came up in that conversation] into two parts. First, he condemns the forms of worshiping God which the Samaritans used as superstitious and as false, and declares that the acceptable and lawful form was with the Jews.”*

Well, you know that passage:

*“...he puts the reason for the difference that the Jews received assurance from the Word of God about his worship, whereas the Samaritans had no certainly from God’s lips. Secondly, he declares that the ceremonies observed by the Jews hitherto would soon be ended.”*

Concerning the first point, our Lord said, “*you Samaritans worship what you do not know.*” Calvin drew this conclusion:

*“...all so-called good intentions are struck by this thunderbolt, which tells us that men can do nothing but err when they are guided by their own opinion without the Word or command of God.”*

He then goes on in dealing with the second point to say:

*“...we differ from the fathers only in the outward form because in their worship of God they were bound to ceremonies which were abolished by the coming of Christ.”*

So, if we ask what it means to worship God “in spirit and in truth” this is Calvin’s answer:

*“...it is to remove the coverings of the ancient ceremonies and retain simply what is spiritual in the worship...”*

But the trouble is that:

*“...since men are flesh...they delight in what corresponds to their natures. That is why they invent many things in the worship of God...[when] they should consider that they are dealing with God, who no more agrees with the flesh than fire does with water.”*

To worship God in spirit and in truth, then, is to worship God in the way that he commands—now that the Messiah has come and fulfilled all the promises of that ceremonial law. And “it is simply unbearable,” says Calvin, “that the rule laid down by Christ should be violated.” Those who want to worship the true God, acceptably, must (that is the word Jesus used—must) worship him in spirit and in truth. Any other way is useless.

[3] The third New Testament example is found in what is called *the Great Commission*. Matt. 28:18-20:

*“All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples... baptizing them...and teaching them to observe [or obey] everything I have commanded you.”*

It is my conviction that this is exactly what the apostles did: they taught what Christ had commanded —not what he had commanded plus their own inventions.

Knowing that all authority belonged to him, they knew there was no place for their own inventions. In the words of Calvin again, quote:

*“...he sends away the Apostles with this reservation, that they shall not bring forward their own inventions, but shall purely and faithfully deliver...what he has entrusted to them.”*

[4] The fourth example is Paul’s view of Scripture. He writes to Timothy, the young pastor:

*“All scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work.”* (2 Tim. 3:16-17)

It is not my contention that the Apostle is thinking in a narrow way only about worship. But surely it is self-evident that this statement does have a tremendous application in the sphere of worship; namely, that worship which is not clearly and fully revealed by God is no legitimate part of his worship at all.

[5] The fifth example is Paul’s rebuke of the Galatians.

In Galatians 4:9-11 the Apostle writes: *“...now that you have come to know God, or rather to be known by God, how is it that you turn back again to the weak and worthless elemental things, to which you desire to be enslaved all over again? You observe days and months and seasons and years. I fear for you, that perhaps I have labored over you in vain.”*

The people to whom Paul wrote this letter were probably observing special days and seasons appointed by God in the Old Testament in such passages as Exodus 23:14-17; 34:18, and the like. But if that is the case, it only makes the force of the Apostle’s words all the stronger when applied to special days that God never did command. When Christ came the Old Testament ceremonial system of worship was superseded. Included in this category of the obsolete were the annual sacred days, and even the Jewish sabbaths. For the Galatians to go on celebrating those days was to act as if they were still waiting for the Messiah to come. And the application is self-evident. If the Apostle found it necessary to speak this way to people who observed days which had once been commanded by God, what would he say to people today who observe special holy days that God never even mentioned in his Word, let alone commanded?

At this point we need to take note of what Paul says about this problem in Romans 14. Here the Apostle instructed the strong to be patient with the weak, be-

cause the weak did not yet understand the liberty they had in Christ. The truth is that they were no longer under any obligation at all to observe even the special days that God had once appointed. And, by the way, they weren't obligated either to observe some of the clean and unclean rules about food. But the problem was that some members of the Church in Rome did not yet understand these things. As long as it was only a particular member of the congregation that had this problem of weakness, Paul was willing to patiently bear with that person. He was willing to have the Church tolerate membership for a person who felt constrained, by a misinformed conscience, to observe those days.

In Galatians 4, however, the Apostle had a different concern. (And we always need to compare Scripture with Scripture. As John Murray used to say, "the difference between truth and error is not the Grand Canyon, it's a razor's edge.") In Galatians 4 the Apostle is speaking of something done by the Church, as a corporate body. This is very clear from the plural pronouns. The Galatian church had yielded to the demands of the weak by instituting an observance of these days in a corporate manner. And when this was imposed upon the Church body the Apostle was quite uncompromising in his opposition. The reason being, that it is wrong for the Church to impose, as a part of its corporate worship, anything that Christ has not commanded.

It's one thing, in other words, to tolerate weakness in the individual believer. We all must do that—with love and patience. But it is another thing when the errant view of the weaker brother is imposed on the whole congregation. That is what Paul opposed in Galatia. And it is exactly what we see all over the Protestant church today—and in most would-be Reformed churches as well. The observance of special days is imposed on the people of God even though they are not divinely commanded!

[6] The sixth example is Paul's warning to the Colossians. Chapter 2:

*"Let no one act as your judge in regard to food or drink or in respect to a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath" (Vs. 16).*

Paul warned them not to be defrauded by those who sought to induce them to delight *"in self-abasement and the worship of angels."* he said: *"These things have, to be sure, the appearance of wisdom in self-made religion"* and then, in verse 23 he says, *"but they are of no value."* "For," as Jesus once said, *"what is highly esteemed among men is an abomination in the sight of God"* (Luke 16:15).

[7] The seventh example is the Book of Hebrews. The whole Book of Hebrews is, in a real sense, an extended application of the regulative principle of worship. It

argues that the whole system of worship commanded by God in the time of Moses is now obsolete because of the coming of Christ, the fulfiller of it. And what do we have in its place? The answer is, we have the real thing. Not the old “copies” of heavenly things, but “*the heavenly things themselves*” (9:23). Whereas the people of God in the time of Moses came to an earthly mountain (12:18), we “*come to Mount Zion...the city of the living God...the heavenly Jerusalem*” (12:23). The Church today, in other words, is supposed to live in the realm of heavenly reality, and no longer in the realm of shadowy representational symbolism.

What would you think of a mother who neglected her infant children to go up in the attic and play hour after hour with the dolls of her childhood? Yet that’s exactly what we see in many once-great Reformed denominations. They go back to the “*weak and beggarly*” elements of ceremonial and symbolic worship. As believers under the New Covenant, we are supposed to worship in the realm of Spirit and Truth—not in the realm of the material and representational, as our Old Testament brothers and sisters did.

Many Reformed churches today are clamoring for a return to ceremonial worship. They call it a liturgical revival. And it leads straight back to the Eastern Orthodox Church or the Church of Rome, and there are people traveling that path in an amazing number. I could at least respect them if they were really consistent. If you want to restore the ceremonial worship God commanded then you will need to get busy: You need a choir made up of men from the tribe of Levi; you need an orchestra that has all the instruments—not a piano, they didn’t have pianos (they were never commanded)—but all those instruments that are specified there; and I believe it would lead logically to a demand for the rebuilding of the Jerusalem Temple; and if they were willing to be consistent enough to do that, I could have some respect for them.

But, of course, the truth is that these “*weak and beggarly*” elements of Old Testament ceremonial worship have no legitimate place in the New Covenant Church. We do not need choirs, orchestras, purple robes, candles, incense, dancing or dramatic performance. Why? Because these shadowy representations only get in the way of reality; which is, the privilege of going each Lord’s Day—in the Spirit like John—in the faithful observance of the commanded exercises of God’s instituted worship, right into the heavenly places, and the presence of Jesus.

When my Scottish forefathers met out in an open field, with nothing over their heads but the heavens, and nothing to stir them up but the faithful preaching of the Word of God and the administration of the sacraments, and they were hushed in silence and stillness, with tears streaming down their faces through the operation of the holy Spirit convicting them of their sin and their need of the Savior—you saw

something of the simplicity and beauty of spiritual worship, which is almost forgotten in our day.

What then should be our attitude in the face of the awesome privilege that is our's under the New Covenant? Are we at liberty to do as we please to fashion our own style of worship, whereas the people of God in Old Testament times had to be sure that they worshipped God only as he commanded? No, I tell you the truth lies in the opposite direction. We, above all, should abhor and shun all human innovations. Is this not what underlies the following warning?

*“See to it that you do not refuse him who speaks. If they did not escape when they refused him who warned them on earth, how much less will we, if we turn away from him who warns us from heaven...Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, let us be thankful, and so worship God acceptably with reverence and awe, for ‘our God is a consuming fire’” (Heb 12:25, 28-29, NIV)*

If we dare to invent our own way of worship, when God has told us from heaven what he requires, our sin will be much greater than that of the Israelites of old. The way of worship under the New Covenant has been instituted by Jesus. How audacious, then, and daring for any of us to presume to change or add anything to what he has commanded.

## LECTURE NO. 4

Worship Seminar - May 12-14, 1995  
First Orthodox Presbyterian Church - San Francisco  
Rev. G.I. Williamson

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### **Arguments *Against* Arguments *For* The Status Quo**

What I want to do in this lecture is to deal with some of the arguments which have been used to justify the tremendous changes which have taken place in the worship of most Reformed churches.

You are undoubtedly aware of the fact that Reformed churches—for quite a considerable period of time—sang almost nothing but the psalms in their worship. I therefore want to begin my consideration of arguments for the status quo with one of the most plausible—and therefore one of the most effective arguments—for the improvement of the Psalter. And that is:

#### 1. The Argument from the history of Redemption.

I want to put it in the words of those who have strongly believed it, so I'm quoting from the Orthodox Presbyterian Church's "Committee on Song in Public Worship" which was submitted to the 14th General Assembly. This is what they said:

*"Our worship is nothing else than our response to divine revelation. That is the very essence of Christian worship. How clear it is that New Testament worship must be in response not only to God's revelation in the Old Testament but also to his fuller revelation in the New Testament. The saints in the New Testament worshiped God thus—and in particular did they worship him thus in song...The content of song, then, like the content of our prayer, need not be restricted to the very words of Scripture..."*

The argument, then, basically is that new revelation from God requires—or at least allows for—new expression in song to God. And since the birth, life, death and resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ has now taken place, it follows that there ought to be (or, at least, that it is allowable that there be) new songs in addition to the book of Psalms that God has provided in the Bible.

It is my contention that this argument fails for a number of reasons: the first of which is that this is simply not in accordance with the facts that are in the Bible itself in the history of salvation. Take, for instance, the Old Testament ceremony or

ordinance of circumcision. New eras of revelation, such as that which took place at Mt. Sinai, brought a large amount of additional ceremonial requirement, but circumcision did not give way to a new ordinance. It is true, of course, that there *was* a change from circumcision to baptism when God gave his final revelation in the person and work of Jesus. Baptism, in effect, replaced circumcision; and the Passover was transformed into the New Covenant sacrament of the Lord's Supper.

But, it is interesting to note that there were some things that were not changed when this took place. Think, for example, of the institution of the Lord's Supper. Paul, the Apostle, tells us that he delivered to us exactly what he received (1 Cor. 11:23). He doesn't say he only delivered part of what he received. And what was true of him was undoubtedly true of the other apostles as well. It is interesting to note, therefore, that on the same night when Jesus found it necessary to make a momentous change in the ordinance of the Passover, he did not make any change at all in the content of praise. As far as I have been able to discover there is virtually unanimous agreement that the hymn mentioned in Matthew 26:30—the hymn that Jesus sang with his disciples at the time of the institution of the Lord's Supper—was the Hallel. But why, we may ask, did our Lord Jesus choose the Hallel from the Book of Psalms in the Bible? Why didn't he write something newer and better? He gave us a newer and better sacrament, why didn't he give us a newer and better song? The usual argument is that the Old Testament psalms aren't good enough for this dispensation and that we need new songs to celebrate the things which have happened since those old songs were written. But why, if this is true, did not our Lord himself produce it? Why did he sing from the Old Testament Scriptures? My answer is he did not do it because he found the inspired psalter completely sufficient. I will go even further. He knew that even he could not write anything better. Does that amaze you? Does that sound like an exaggeration? Well then, stop and consider what Peter says in chapter 1, verse 11, of his first epistle—for he tells us that it was *“the Spirit of Christ”* that spoke through the Old Testament writers. And that means that the pre-incarnate Savior himself was the primary author of the psalms. He is the one who inspired the minds of those writers. And so, in the ultimate sense, it wasn't merely David or Asaph who wrote the great psalms of the Bible. No, my friends, our Lord Jesus Christ himself was the ultimate author.

But even if we were to grant, for argument's sake, that there was need for newer and better songs but that Jesus didn't have time to tend to this matter—didn't have the time to remedy the deficiency alleged in the psalter—the argument still doesn't stand. It doesn't stand for one simple reason: if it was true, the first people to realize the deficiency would have been the apostles. And more than that, they had the ability—being inspired men—to supply what was lacking on an equal qualitative level with the Old Testament authors. I, for one, would be every bit as willing to

sing a psalm written by the Apostle Paul, as one written by David. Yet it is all too apparent that the apostles of Christ gave no indication whatsoever that they were aware of any deficiency in the inspired Psalter.

There are some, of course, who argue that they did recognize the deficiency and that they, or others in that time, did provide inspired songs—or at least acceptable songs. That is why it is now common to read—in commentaries—of the existence of hymns, and fragments of hymns, in New Testament Scripture. We very frequently read, for example, of the “songs” of Mary, Simeon, and Anna. Prominent New Testament scholars also assure us that we have fragments of hymns in such places as I Timothy 3:16, or I Corinthians 13. And I want to say that there was a time when I myself accepted this kind of argument. I did so for one simple reason: everybody seemed to believe it. On more careful study, however, I have come to doubt it completely. And I will tell you why.

Even the so-called songs of Mary, Simeon, and Anna, are not identified in the Bible itself as songs. In the original text we read that Mary “*said*”—not that Mary “sang.” And the same is true of Simeon and Anna. Mary said “*My soul doth magnify the Lord...*” and so on.

And that is not all. Because one of the things that I have learned from my historical research on this subject is the lack of support for this common assumption. I know beyond all doubt that the apostles of the Lord Jesus Christ wrote things because I have them here in the Bible. What the inspired apostles wrote was carefully preserved from the beginning by the apostolic churches. How, then, can I possibly believe that the same churches had these supposedly wonderful songs required by an era of new revelation, and then didn’t cherish them enough to preserve them as they did the other apostolic writings? It is not just inspired writings of the apostles which have been preserved either. No, we also have the writings of the early church fathers. I have a whole shelf full of them in my study. But where are all the new psalms and hymns and spiritual songs that should have been written by them, and preserved lovingly by the churches, according to this common assumption? I have searched the writings preserved from antiquity and have been unable to locate even one such hymn from the apostolic period, or the period immediately following it.

I therefore conclude that the early churches—unlike our modern churches—consistently followed the example of Jesus. They not only replaced the Passover with the Lord’s Supper, as he did, but also sang, as he did, from the inspired psalter. It was not until considerably later in history that the churches began to prefer things of their own making to things ordained and instituted by God himself. But now let us turn to:

## 2. The Argument From Analogy

If I can use my own words when I preach, or when I pray, then why can't I use my own words—or the words of others written today—when I come to sing God's praises?

Again let me say that there was a time when I accepted this argument because everybody else seemed to accept it. But as soon as I began to examine it carefully and think about it in a serious way, I could see that this argument—like the first—really does not have merit. It does not have merit because it proves too much and leads to absurd conclusions.

Yes, it is true that I can preach using my own words. Indeed, there is no other way that I could preach. I could read someone else's sermon without using my own words even one time. But the moment that *I* preach I will have to use my own vocabulary—my own way of expressing what I find to be taught in the Scripture. And I believe I am commanded to do this. I can even say, “woe be to me if I don't do it!” And the argument is that if *I* can do this, then I—and you—can do the same thing when it comes to singing.

And it's the same with prayer. When *I* pray I use my own words. My spiritual ancestors were, in fact, strongly opposed to the Anglican prayer book being imposed upon them so that they had to read those prayers. I believe as they did that you can't really pray in the way God commands you to pray if you just read out of a book. So here again the argument is that the same holds true of singing. If *I* can pray in my own words, then I can sing in my own words too.

But the trouble is that this breaks down to absurdity and contradiction. Can everyone preach because everyone is commanded to sing? We all know this is not the case. Can everyone lead in public prayer? Of course not. And how, we may ask, is it possible for a whole congregation to sing together at the same time without having in front of them words that are written so they can all sing together? That's not true of prayer—it's not true of preaching. I can pray without a written text in front of me. I can preach from notes or even without any notes at all. But there's no congregation that ever existed that could sing together harmoniously without a written text (*or* memorized text) containing every word that's going to be sung. So they're not really alike.

And one of the ways in which this argument is exposed as erroneous is simply to note what the Bible says about the various elements of worship. When it comes to preaching the Bible it has three entire books largely devoted to setting forth the qualifications for those who are permitted to do this: I and II Timothy and Titus.

These three books of the Bible tell us what is required of those who would preach. But how many books are there in the Bible to tell us who is qualified to sing? The answer is zero—because we are all commanded to do it together.

One half of the human race (the female half) is automatically excluded from the pulpit—at least it still is in the OPC and some other faithful denominations. But even out of the other half (the male half) of the human race there are only some who meet the requisite qualifications. But this is not true of singing. All of God’s people are privileged to sing his praise.

And what about prayer? Paul says:

*“I exhort first of all that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and giving of thanks be made for all men, for kings and all who are in authority, that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and reverence. For this is good and acceptable in the sight of God our Savior...”*

But then, on the other hand, he says—and I quote:

*“...we do not know what we should pray for as we ought, but the Spirit himself makes intercession for us with groanings which cannot be uttered. Now he who searches the hearts knows what the mind of the Spirit is, because he makes intercession for the saints according to the will of God.”*

So we are commanded to pray for all sorts of people living today. For that reason alone no prayer book will ever work for any length of time. It would soon be outdated. We should never be foolish enough to imagine that our ignorance of what we should pray will be taken care of by some book. No, it’s the holy Spirit that enables us—the holy Spirit alone—and God has promised the holy Spirit as our helper. It’s when he comes and searches our hearts and enables us to groan with ardent desire that we will be able to pray according to his will. There is, in other words, a direct promise from God for help in formulating our prayers. There is nothing of the kind anywhere in God’s Word when it comes to singing.

Let me also say at this point that I am very disappointed with the teaching of some of our present day Reformed theologians—men who are saying very different things than the great men who once taught at Westminster. Professor Poythress, for example, has put forth what he calls “*the didaskalia-position.*” This is how he describes it in contrast with what I am presenting. Quote:

*“One basic difference between the exclusive-psalmody position and the didaskalia position is this: The exclusive-psalmody position tends to see*

*‘singing’ as a separate ‘element’ of worship alongside prayer and preaching.”*

I point out that it is also stated in our Westminster Confession (21:5) that it is a distinct element of worship. I go on quoting:

*“The didaskalia-position sees singing as another means, alongside poetic speech and prose speech, of praying, praising, confessing, teaching, preaching, admonishing, etc. In this latter case, singing does not...need a separate justification at all. It is justified simply by the fact that praying, praising, confessing, teaching, etc, are justified....We regard teaching-by-singing and teaching-in-the-narrow-sense as simply two forms of teaching, each particularly effective in meeting certain needs and expressing certain aspects of Christian doctrine. We challenge the exclusive psalmist position to prove from Scripture, rather than assume, that teaching-by-singing and proclaiming are ‘two separate elements of worship.’ To us they appear little more ‘separate’ than preaching to a visible audience versus preaching over the radio.”*

Friends, I would call this ‘argument by way of demolition!’ Demolish the categories that ordinary people easily recognize as real, and valid, by way of sophisticated and ingenious argument. I do not find this convincing in any way. It reminds me of the warning issued by “the Council on Biblical Manhood and Womanhood” [in] 1978 which spoke of:

*“The increasing prevalence and acceptance of hermeneutical oddities to reinterpret apparently plain meanings of Biblical texts [by which] the clarity of Scripture is jeopardized and the accessibility of its meaning to ordinary people is withdrawn into the restricted realm of technical ingenuity.”*

As Michael Bushell has said, in his tremendous book called *The Songs of Zion*:

*“...we freely grant that singing, preaching, prayer, and teaching all have certain aspects in common. Singing, preaching, and prayer all to varying extents manifest teaching functions. We also grant that they are different ways or means of applying the Word of God to given situations. But this observation does not in itself settle the question of whether or not singing is a distinct or separate element of worship.... Prayer, singing, and preaching may at times have certain aspects or functions in common, such as teaching or praise, but they are nonetheless distinguishable from one another and separately commanded in Scripture. The obligation to pray is not fulfilled by singing, even if singing has much in common with prayer, and the obli-*

*gation to sing praise to God is not fulfilled by praying or preaching. We do not claim that these are three independent elements of worship, but we do claim that they are separately commanded and that because they are distinguishable from one another, they are distinct elements of worship. We therefore claim that a specific scriptural warrant as to content is demanded for each.”*

I predict that this argument—ingenious though it may seem—will result in further deformation of worship in Reformed churches. But we go on to a third argument:

3. If I can only sing from the inspired book of Psalms  
I'm denied the privilege and joy of using the name of Jesus.

Many people consider this to be a powerful argument. At one time it impressed me too. I now realize that this was primarily due to my own lack of knowledge of the Psalter. What it really implies is a deficiency in the Psalter. It implies that the inspired Book of Psalms does not measure up to what God wants for his people—that we need something else that is better—and that he wants us to have something else. But it is my contention that there never has been, is not today, and will not be before the Second Advent, anything better than the inspired Psalms.

*“I have been accustomed to call this book I think not inappropriately, ‘An Anatomy of all the Parts of the Soul;’” said John Calvin. “In short, as calling upon God is one of the principal means of securing our safety, and as a better and more unerring rule for guiding us in this exercise cannot be found elsewhere than in The Psalms, it follows, that in proportion to the proficiency which a man shall have attained in understanding them, will be his knowledge of the most important part of celestial doctrine....It is by perusing these inspired compositions, that men will be most effectually awakened to a sense of their maladies, and, at the same time, instructed in seeking remedies for their cure...There is no other book in which there to be found more express and magnificent commendations, both of the unparalleled liberality of God towards his Church, and of all his works; there is no other book in which there is recorded so many deliverances, nor one in which the evidences and experiences of the fatherly providence and solicitude which God exercises towards us, are celebrated with such splendour of diction, and yet with the strictest adherence to truth; in short there is no other book in which we are more perfectly taught the right manner of praising God, or in which we are more powerfully stirred up to the performance of this religious exercise....here there is nothing wanting which relates to the knowledge of eternal salvation.” (Calvin’s Preface to his Commentaries on the Psalms, pp. xxxviii & xxxix)*

“...after we have sought on every side, searching here and there, we shall find no songs better and more suitable for our purpose than the Psalms of David, dictated to him and made for him by the holy Spirit.” (Opera, Vol. VI, pp. 171-172)

The Scottish Reformer, John Knox, says the same thing:

“...there are no songs more meet (appropriate or suitable) than the Psalms of the prophet David, which the holy Ghost has framed to the same use, and commended to the Church as containing the effect of the whole Scriptures, that thereby our hearts might be more lively touched...” (John Knox works, Vol. 4, pp. 164-166)

I used to think that there were only a few Messianic psalms in the Psalter. I now realize that there is a true sense in which the whole Psalter is Messianic. That’s the really glorious thing about singing the psalms of the Bible. We not only sing with the Church through the ages, but we sing with the Lord Jesus Christ himself.

Our Lord was truly human and because this is true the Bible tells us that he shared in our trials and temptations. He was also divine, and that too is part of the mystery of the Psalter. And then there’s the fact that these two natures are joined together in one person. Our wonderful Lord is both God and man, in two distinct natures, and one person forever—the only mediator for God’s people. And right there is the ultimate mystery of the Psalter. I speak of something you will find in the Psalms and you do not find it in the hymns. What I refer to is this: if you sing the Psalms with understanding of what you’re singing you’re going to wonder many times how can you possibly say these things. There are words that express that which is only appropriate for the holy and divine; and there are words that can only be appropriate for the vile and sinful.

How can you sing this:

*Reproached of men, by all despised;  
A worm and not a man am I;  
All they that see me laugh in scorn;  
They shake their heads and taunting cry,...* (Psalm 22)

Ask someone who has suffered reproach because of union with—and faithfulness to—Christ and he will tell you.

How can I sing this?

*In my distress my foes came on;  
The Lord was my security;  
He brought me forth and gave me room,  
Because he took delight in me.*

*According to my righteousness  
I am rewarded by the Lord;  
According as my hands are clean,  
He gives to me a just reward. (Psalm 18)*

How can I sing *that*—vile sinners that I am—how can you? Well, you can sing it because you are in union with Jesus Christ and because his righteousness has been imputed to you. And in his righteousness, and by the cleansing work of his Spirit, you can even say, “*I am rewarded by the Lord according to my righteousness.*” But now:

4. The fourth argument that I want to consider is the argument based upon our imperfect practice.

This argument is often used against those of us who believe we should only sing the inspired psalms in worship. The argument is that our metrical versions are really not the inspired psalms anyway, but only man-made hymns loosely based on the psalms.

And, to be sure, there is an element of truth in this objection. But I can also say that I have objection to the NIV for the same reason—and a few of the other modern translations. In not a few places they are little more than a paraphrase of the original. Yet, in spite of the serious flaws in the NIV, I would still maintain that there is a world of difference between the NIV and any other book ever written by uninspired men. No translation of the Bible is perfect—some are better than others. That’s also true of the metrical psalms—some are better than others. And some have been done with such consummate skill that they rival the best translations.

There are some who argue that the only way to sing the psalms is to sing them in Hebrew and to chant them. I don’t believe that does justice to the poetic idiom of our language and culture. And if the Church would only devote about half as much energy to improving the metrical psalm versions we have—as it has devoted to the uninspired hymns of men—we would soon have a vastly improved psalter.

The moderator of this Seminar mentioned the fact that I worked on the Committee that prepared the *The Book of Psalms for Singing*. We only scratched the sur-

face. But we work hard and went back to the Hebrew to make these poetic translations more accurate—especially in the use of the divine names and theological terms. So I know there is a world of work waiting for the Church of Christ when it has a revived interest in this subject.

And now a final argument:

5. The Church of Christ, it is argued, has a greater measure of freedom under the New Covenant.

Well, there is certainly a sense in which that is true. For, as the Westminster Confession of Faith says:

*“...under the new testament, the liberty of Christians is further enlarged, in their freedom from the yoke of the ceremonial law, to which the Jewish church was subjected; and in greater boldness of access to the throne of grace, and in fuller communications of the free Spirit of God, than believers under the law did ordinarily partake of” (20:1b).*

There is a vast difference, in other words, between the manner in which God dealt with the people of God before the coming of Christ, and the way that he deals with us now. Galatians 4:1-11 deals with this very difference when it likens the Church of the old Covenant to an underage person. That’s the analogy.

My children, when they were little, were subjected to the same moral standards that I am in the Bible but they were subjected in a different way. We had a list of rules we put up, and they had to obey those rules. They didn’t fully recognize and understand the significance of some of them but they learned, in time, what they meant. And now that they are married housewives and mothers, they still live by the same principles.

Let me give you an analogy. I used to be a jazz musician and one of my role models in those days was Benny Goodman, the great clarinet player. All his life, Benny Goodman took clarinet lessons. Can you imagine that? He was always working on the basics—the fingering, the scales, and all that. And then he would get up and play ‘ad lib’ solos that were absolutely amazing—a lot like Mozart if you analyzed them. The reason was that his freedom—his apparent freedom—was an expression of his mastery of the laws of music.

And that’s the way it is in the Christian Church: never are you so free as when you have fully internalized the bedrock absolutes of God’s Word. That’s what the great Reformers of the 16th century did. They cleared a mountain of rubbish out of

the Church and they replaced it with the simple spiritual worship commanded by God.

*“Let us now see” says Calvin, “what is meant by the due worship of God. Its chief foundation is to acknowledge him to be, as he is...Next after this comes self-abasement...[And then he says] Nor from the beginning was there any other method of worshipping God, the only difference being, that this spiritual truth, which with us is naked and simple, was under the former dispensation wrapt up in figures...” (p. 127)*

Well, we’re not free then to add anything to—or subtract anything from—what God has commanded. We should learn to speak about the worship of our Church the way Paul did when he said:

*“...I received of the Lord that which I also delivered unto you...”*

It is therefore my contention that it is high time for Reformed theologians, pastors, and elders to stop trying to think up arguments to justify the status quo, and get back to simple honesty so that we can really mean it when we say with the Belgic Confession:

*“...we reject all human inventions, and all laws which man would introduce into the worship of God, thereby to bind and compel the conscience in any manner whatever” (Article 32)*

When we can say that without equivocation—and stop pretending to hold the historic regulative *principle* when our *practice* is a thousand miles away from that of our Reforming fathers—we will begin to see another great revival and reformation in the Christian Church.

It is my prayer that this simplicity and beauty of spiritual worship will once again become the hallmark of the Reformed churches.

## LECTURE NO. 5

Worship Seminar - May 12-14, 1995  
First Orthodox Presbyterian Church - San Francisco

Rev. G.I. Williamson

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### **Reformed Worship And The System Of Doctrine**

In conclusion today, I want to speak about reformed worship and the system of doctrine. We who are office bearers in the Orthodox Presbyterian Church have subscribed to the system of doctrine taught in holy Scripture, and defined in our confessional documents.

I remind you again of the fact that Calvin stands out among the Reformers because he put first the mode in which God is duly worshipped; and second, the source from which salvation is to be obtained. The really remarkable thing about this great reformer is the fact that he was never one-sided. He always looked at particular concerns in the light of the whole counsel of God. And so, what I am saying is that when Calvin spoke of reformation in worship as the number one need of the Church, he wasn't thinking of this in isolation. He was rather thinking of it as the focal point—you might call it the source as well as the culmination of the whole spectrum of the task of the Reformation. These two things, he said—worship, and then the doctrine of salvation:

*“...not only occupy the principal place, but comprehend under them all the other parts, and consequently the whole substance of Christianity...”*

The fact that Calvin put worship first, in other words, does not mean that he was any less concerned than the other Reformers about other things that needed correction. It was John Calvin, you remember, who wrote the greatest work of systematic theology which has ever been written to this day—*The Institutes of the Christian Religion*. No, the difference between Calvin and the other Reformers was not that he was *less concerned*, but that he was *more consistent*; because of following out the demands of the Word of God for reformation in all aspects of the Church's life. There were those in Calvin's day who argued that it would be much wiser to deal with less controversial matters first. And I can certainly understand why they took that view. We can *talk* all we want to about Reformation, but we will not really *have* reformation in the Church if we can go on living with the corrupted worship that we find in most churches today who still profess adherence to the great Reformed Catechisms and Confessions.

It was Calvin, in other words, who saw the inter-relatedness of worship and reformed doctrine. To understand the one in a true and saving way is to see at once that it must affect the other. You can't possibly understand, believe, and submit yourself to the truth about the way of salvation without at the same time coming to see the necessity for reformation in worship.

Following, then, this great reformer, I will now endeavor to show just a few of the ways in which these things are interrelated:

A. How, for example, could anyone rightly understand the Scriptural doctrine of God and then go on worshipping as many do today?

And here I want to quote the words of another eminent theologian—one of the greatest that America has ever produced—Professor Benjamin Breckinridge Warfield of old Princeton.

*“...with all his emphasis on the sovereignty of God,” says Warfield, “Calvin throws an even stronger emphasis on his love: and his doctrine of God is preeminent among the doctrines of God given expression in the Reformation age in the commanding place it gives to the Divine Fatherhood...”*

*It was precisely because Calvin conceived of God not only as Lord, but also as Father, and gave him not merely his obedience but his love, that he burned with such jealousy for his honor. Everything that tended to rob God of the honor which was due him was accordingly peculiarly abhorrent to him. We cannot feel surprised, therefore, that he devotes so large a portion of his discussion of the doctrine of God to repelling that invasion of the divine rights which was wrought by giving the worship due to him alone to others, and particularly to idols, the work of man's own hand. His soul was filled with the vision of the majesty of a God who will not give his glory to another, and his heart aflame with the sense of the Fatherly love he was receiving from this great God, the Lord of heaven and earth, he turned with passionate hatred from the idolatrous rites into which the worship of the old Church had so largely degenerated, and felt nothing so pressing his duty as to trace out the fallacies in the subtle pleas by which men sought to justify them to themselves.*

*“As a practical man, with his mind on the practical religious needs of the time, this “brutal stupidity” of men, desiring visible figures of God—who is an invisible Spirit—corrupting the divine glory by fabricating for themselves gods out of wood, or stone, or gold, or silver, or any other dead stuff, seemed to him to call for rebuke as little else could.... So deeply rooted is*

*the jealousy for the divine honor given expression in this principle not only in Calvin's thought, but in that of the whole tendency of thought which he represents, that it may well be looked upon as a determinative trait of the Reformed attitude—which has therefore been described as characterized by a determined protest against all that is pagan in life and worship. Certainly the zeal of Calvin burned warmly against the dishonor he felt was done to God by the methods of worshiping him prevalent in the old Church....*

*“It is, of course, not idolatry in general, but the idolatry of the Church of Rome that Calvin has his eye particularly upon, as became him as a practical man, absorbed in the real problems of his time. He therefore particularly animadvert upon the more refined forms of idolatry, ruthlessly reducing them to the same level in principle with the grossest. God does not compare idols with idols, he says, as if one were better and another worse: he repudiates all without exception—all images, pictures, or any other kind of tokens by which superstitious people have imagined he could be brought near to them...for the “mind of man,” he says, “is, if I may be allowed the expression, a perpetual factory of idols.” (I. xi. 8) Thus he...proclaims as his governing principle (I. xi. 4, med.) that “all modes of worship which men excogitate from themselves are detestable.”*

*“He does not content himself, however, with proclaiming and establishing this principle. He follows the argument for the use of images in worship into its details and refutes it item by item. To the plea that ‘images are the books of the illiterate’ and by banishing them he is depriving the people of their best means of instruction, he replies that no doubt they do teach something, but what they teach is falsehood: God is not as they represent him (§§ 5-7). To the caveat that no one worships the idols, but the deity through the idols, that they are never called ‘gods’ and that what is offered them is *douleia*; not *latreia*—he replies that all this is distinction without difference; the Jews in their idolatry reasoned in a similar manner.... (§§ 9-11) To the reproach that he is exhibiting a fanaticism against the representative arts, he rejoins that such is far from the case; he is only seeking to protect these arts from abusive application to wrong purposes. (§§ 12, 13) And finally to the appeal to the decisions of the Council of Nice of 786-787 favorable to any image-worship, he replies by an exposure of the ‘disgusting insipidities’ and ‘portentous impiety’ of the image-worshipping Fathers at that Council. (§§ 14 sq.) The discussion is then closed (chap. xii), with a chapter in which he urges that God alone is to be worshipped and only in the way of his own appointment; and above all that his glory is not to be given to another. Thus the ever-present danger of idolatry, as evidenced in the gross practices of Rome, is itself invoked to curb speculation on the na-*

ture of the Godhead and to throw men back on the simple and vitalizing revelation of the word of a God like us in that he is a spiritual person, but unlike us in that he is clothed in inconceivable majesty. These two epithets—immensity and spirituality—thus stand out as expressing the fundamental characteristics of the divine essence to Calvin’s thinking: his immensity driving us away in terror from any attempt to measure him by our own senses; his spirituality prohibiting the entertainment of any earthly or carnal speculation concerning him.” (The Works of Benjamin B. Warfield, Vol. 5, pp. 176-179. This is a masterful summary of a large portion of the Institutes of the Christian Religion by a man who truly understood Calvin.)

As the Westminster Shorter Catechism says:

*“The chief end of man is to glorify God and to enjoy him forever.”*

If the Modern Church had a proper understanding of that one statement alone the result would be the instant banishment of much, perhaps even most, of what is now tolerated in its worship services. To put it in the words of John Calvin:

*“having observed that the Word of God is the test...we thence readily infer that the whole form of divine worship in general use in the present day is nothing but mere corruption.... If in what I say I seem to exaggerate, let an examination be made of all the acts by which the generality suppose that they worship God. I dare scarcely except a tenth part as not the random offspring of their own brain...” (pp. 132 - 133)*

B. And what about the doctrine of Christ—the God-man—the promised Messiah, the only Redeemer of God’s people? What does that say about worship?

My contention is that it has a lot to say about worship. As the divine Son of God we know him to be the second person of the divine Trinity. As the lowly son of man we know him to be a human being in absolute uniqueness in the whole history of the world because he was without sin.

Well, then, if ever there was a man competent to invent all sorts of things to include in the worship of God it surely would have been the Lord Jesus Christ. But what do we see? From beginning to end in the earthly career of our Savior we see someone who was always bound by the authority of Scripture. Never deviated from saying, *“It is written...”* or *“...you do err not knowing the Scriptures.”* That was the bottom line in everything he did. And while it is certainly true that he was willing to go right against the traditions of men, not once did he go against that which is written in the Scriptures.

And what did he say to his apostles? he said, “*All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age.*” If you understand what Jesus was saying you will realize that you don’t have to add the word “only”—*that* sense or meaning is already in it. The apostles were not allowed to take anything away from, or add anything to, that which Christ had commanded.

So you can see why Calvin, when he saw the professed servants of Christ inventing their own way of worship, was filled with indignation. And then:

### C. What about the doctrine of man?

As you know, Calvin’s Institutes begins with the statement that true and substantial wisdom consists of two parts: First, you need to know the true God as he really is, and then you need to know yourself as you really are. And you’ll never know one without the other—it’s quite impossible. And if you do know the true and living God as he really is, and yourself to be what you really are as defined by God Almighty in his Word, the last thing you could possibly imagine would be that you are qualified in any way, at any point, to improve upon the ordinances of the Christian religion revealed and commanded by God.

Now it is true, of course, that you and I as regenerate, believing people, are new creatures in Christ; and “*behold, old things are passed away, and all things are become new...*”—in principle. But am I any better than the Apostle Paul who said, “*Oh wretched man that I am...the things I would not do I still do, and the things I would do [that I know are right], I fail to do...O wretched man... Who is to deliver me from this body of [this sin and] death?*” If Paul would say that of himself, am I going to speak differently? Am I going to declare myself qualified to add to the worship of God something of value? The Westminster Confession of Faith says:

*“we [by nature] are utterly indisposed, disabled, and made opposite to all good, and wholly inclined to all evil...”*

It also says that:

*“[t]his corruption of nature, during this life, doth remain in those that are regenerated...”*

You know it, and I know it, because it’s right there inside of us. How in the world, then, could we ever imagine that such unworthy beings as we are—subjects of

King Jesus—could invent anything that would be worthy of his great and holy name?

D. And what about the doctrine of justification by faith. What does that have to say about worship?

It has a lot to say. Because it says there's nothing in me by nature—absolutely nothing—for the sake of which God accepts me. In and of myself I am nothing but sinful filth—vile and abhorrent in the sight of the holy God. Therefore my ground of hope of acceptance with God is altogether and totally the righteousness of Jesus Christ imputed to me and received by faith alone.

Yes, and even though I am justified by faith, and have a new nature, the number one thing that I learn about myself—and as the Heidelberg Catechism so wisely teaches—the one thing that is learned more and more every day of my Christian pilgrimage is precisely that I am an altogether unworthy sinner. So I say the doctrine of justification itself demands whole-hearted submission to the historic, reformed regulative principle of worship. When we understand that doctrine, we're going to see that we are utterly and completely unworthy, and completely unable to originate anything toward the worship of this awesome God who has saved us. Rather are we going to want to be sure—absolutely sure—that we only return to God (as Calvin kept saying) what we have first received from him.

E. And what about the doctrine of Scripture?

We believe the 39 books of the Old Testament, and the 27 books of the New, are verily the inspired and inerrant Word of the living God. And because they are, and because that is all that he has given to us, we believe that they are entirely sufficient. We do not need anything outside of Scripture to tell us what God requires us to believe, or what he wants us to do. Putting it in the words of our fathers "*The Bible is the only and the infallible rule of our faith and practice.*" And right there, you can see that there's no room for innovation—there's no *need* for it, and there's no *room* for it, because the Bible is sufficient.

The great Belgic Confession says:

*"We believe that this holy Scripture contains the will of God completely and that everything one must believe to be saved is sufficiently taught therein"* (Article 7).

It also says:

*“...the entire manner of worship which God requires of us is described in it at great length, [so that] no one—even an apostle or an angel from heaven,...[can] teach [any] other than what the holy Scriptures have already taught us. For since it is forbidden to add or subtract from the Word of God, this plainly demonstrates that the teaching is perfect and complete in all respects.”* (Article 7)

It follows, then, that (and I quote from Article 32):

*“...those who govern the churches...ought always to guard against deviating from what Christ, our only Master, has ordained for us. Therefore, we reject all human innovations...”*

I believe that the reformed fathers meant “all” when they said “all.”

*“...all human innovations and all laws imposed on us, in our worship of God, which bind and force our consciences in any way.”*

F. And that brings me to the doctrine of Christian liberty.

Paul, the Apostle, commanded the Galatians to “*stand fast,...in the liberty by which Christ has made us free*” (Gal. 5:1), and he forbade them to become “*entangled again in a yoke of bondage*” (5:17), that yoke of bondage being the imposition of man-made doctrines or practices. Yet that’s exactly what has happened throughout the length and breadth of the land in much of the Church. All kinds of things have been imposed on the people of God without any warrant whatsoever from Scripture. We are required to listen to solos, and choirs, and organ concerts, and so on, ad nauseam, without any warrant of any kind from Scripture.

Our fathers were very zealous to insist on liberty of conscience. They were not willing to agree that the Church has authority to make laws or doctrines. They said the Church has power that is only ministerial and declarative. You (ad)minister what the King has given you; you declare what he has promulgated—which means that the Church was authorized by God himself to require nothing in doctrine or practice but what is already there in the legislation we have in the Bible. The Westminster Confession of Faith of our church says, and I quote (and it’s a very important and beautiful part of Chapter 21):

*“God alone is Lord of the conscience, and hath left it free from the doctrines and commandments of men, which are, in anything, contrary to his Word; or beside it, if 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: and the requiring of an implicit faith, and an absolute and blind obedience, is to destroy liberty of conscience, and reason also.”*

G. And that brings us to the doctrine of the Church.

The Church is the Bride of Christ. Being the Bride of Christ means the wife of the Second Person of the Godhead. In Ephesians 5, a parallel is drawn between husbands and wives—like you and me—and Christ and the Church. And we are told that wives are to submit in everything to their husbands. And that means that, in like manner, the Church is supposed to submit in all things to her husband—the Lord Jesus.

And yet, what we see today—(and you can’t help but wonder what the connection is between it and the breakdown of marriage, and the family, and the women’s liberation, and all the rest of it)—is the fact that wife (the Church) has been in charge instead of the husband (the Lord Jesus). Our reforming fathers in Scotland separated from the Church of England. The Church of England has always claimed legislative authority for the wife. I quote from Article 34 of the 39 Articles of the Church of England:

*“Every particular or national Church hath authority to ordain, change and abolish, Ceremonies or Rites of the Church ordained only by man’s authority, so that all things be done to edifying.”*

It also says, and I quote:

*Anyone who “...through private judgment, willingly and purposely, doth openly break the Traditions and Ceremonies of the Church [should be rebuked...]”*

Well our fathers said, “No thank you.” The Church is supposed to be in submission to Christ and not in charge in any way.

And it was Calvin (and John Knox) with him, who wanted to root this evil out of the churches. The Belgic Confession, following these great reformers, said—and I quote:

*“...though it is useful and beneficial that those who are rulers of the Church institute and establish certain ordinances among themselves for maintaining the body of the Church, yet that they ought studiously to take care that they do not depart from those things which Christ, our only Mas-*

*ter, has instituted. And therefore we reject all human inventions, and all laws which man would introduce into the worship of God...*"

But now, finally:

h. It's my conviction that the modern Church is in such a state that we should not expect recovery again without a similar Reformation.

I don't think we should pray that God would revive the Church that dishonors him so totally as the modern Church does. We need a reformation—and then a revival.

In Calvin's day, as in our own, attempts are made to dissuade people from talking about this. And, above all, from putting it at the top of the agenda. Thirty of the 42 years of my ministry people have been telling me that I should be quiet about this subject. But I don't believe we're ever going to see an improvement in the state of the Church until we are concerned about the honor and glory of God. I do not believe it. And I don't even pray for it.

*"In worldly matters" said John Calvin, it "may be quite bearable—wherein it is allowable—to yield one to another, and to forgo [sic] one's right for the sake of peace; but it is not altogether the same thing in regard to the spiritual governance of the Church, which ought to be according to the ordinance of the word of God. Herein we are not at liberty to yield up anything to men, nor to turn aside on either hand in their favor... Wherefore, if we do not wish to displease him, we must shut our eyes to the opinion of men.... I do not thus exclude the prudence which is so much needed, to take all appropriate and right means, not falling into extremes either on the one side or upon the other.... But the wisdom of the Spirit, not that of the flesh, must overrule all; and having inquired at the mouth of the Lord, we must ask him to guide and lead us, rather than follow the bent of our own understanding. When we take this method, it will be easy to cut off much occasion of temptation, which might otherwise stop our progress midway."*

It was a great thrill for me a few years ago to stand in the church building where Calvin taught daily for many years. There was a little stool there that he used to sit on when he was too tired to stand. I believe the man burned himself out because he would not keep silent about the honor of his God.

A great preacher of the 20th Century, Dr. Martin Lloyd-Jones had this to say about our day:

*“Much of the trouble in the Church today is due to the fact that we are so subjective—so interested in ourselves, so egocentric. That is the peculiar error of this present century. Having forgotten God, and having become so interested in ourselves, we become miserable and wretched, and spend our time in shallowness and misery” ...[And then he goes on to say]... “we’ve got to get back to putting God first and forgetting ourselves.”*

And finally, I would like to conclude this series with some words of an eminent Christian gentleman from whom I learned many things—including a fervent desire for this reformation. I refer to Professor John Murray of Westminster. Here’s what he wrote:

*“Perhaps there is no more honest feature of members of the Church than the lack of discernment. They can listen to what is good and true, and to what is bad and false, without discrimination. We are to live in a world where the enemy is active, error rampant. We must be endued with a good measure of the critical faculty; and here the elders in tending the flock must cultivate for themselves, and inculcate in the members of the Church, that sensitivity to truth and right so that they and the people will be able to detect the voice of the enemy. Jesus indeed said of his sheep, ‘A stranger they will not follow, for they know not the voice of strangers.’ But this discernment does not operate in a vacuum. And it does not act mechanically. It acts in the context of intelligent apprehension and understanding of the truth. We may not arrogate to ourselves divine prerogatives. But the Lord uses men as his instruments, and we may not abdicate our responsibility, nor our opportunity, simply because the Lord himself is the dispenser of grace.”*

I therefore urge you—especially you men who are pastors and elders—take a stand for the honor of God and the purity of his worship. Be his instruments and be faithful. And may it then please God to grant us a new reformation. Amen.