The Parts of Biblical Worship (part 1)

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 15 March 2026

Preacher: Jeremy Sarber

[0:00] So, I've attempted to lay a foundation and evidence for the regulative principle of worship.! And as we move into the more practical aspects of worship, I think it's important that we clearly define worship.

Not everything in life or in the life of the church or in the life of the individual Christian is going to be regulated by the regulative principle.
You may remember what Mark Driscoll said. He argued against the regulative principle because it didn't make sense to him that we would follow this regulative principle one hour a week and then follow the normative principle the rest of the week.
He said, why is it that we live by the normative green light principle until we get to church? And then we have to live by the regulative red light principle just for an hour a week as if there's not a blur in between the lines.
We also have other church gatherings, meetings, Wednesday night classes, community groups. Do they count red light, green light? The whole thing gets very confusing. Now, I think I've pretty well established that the church must worship according to the regulative principle despite Mark Driscoll's confusion.
[1:20] But he does raise a good point. What if the church is meeting for, say, a Bible study? What if the women decide to have a craft night?

Or what if the men decide to have a game night with one another? What about Sunday school? I grew up in a church that was very strict about the regulative principle.
If there was not a positive command for something in Scripture, they absolutely refused to do it. Now, on that very basis, they were adamantly opposed to things like Sunday school.
For a long time, they opposed Bible studies, any kind of corporate Bible study. And their rationale was very simple. They do not see these things commanded explicitly in Scripture.
Now, are they applying the regulative principle correctly? More importantly, what about us? Are we following the regulative principle when we meet together for Bible studies or Sunday school?
[2:21] Well, I think it's really important that we carefully distinguish between formal worship and other kinds of gatherings. For example, a church picnic is not the same thing as our corporate worship on Sunday morning.

Now, I don't think anyone would ever suggest that it is wrong for the church to gather for a picnic, to have a meal together, be it inside, outside, or anywhere else. A Sunday school is not the same as corporate worship.
Is there something wrong with an elder from the church teaching the Bible outside of maybe a Sunday morning sermon? Of course not. Is there something wrong with older, mature members of the church teaching children within the church?
While the primary responsibility of teaching children does lie with the parents, Titus 2 instructs the older to teach the younger. Colossians 3 shows that all believers should be teaching and admonishing one another.
Even the Great Commission shows that the entire church should be teaching anyone and everyone all that Christ has commanded. Jesus himself was not a parent, but he taught children.
[3:35] So, is there something wrong with a craft night or a game night? No, but we need to make a clear distinction between formal worship and these other gatherings.

When we read through the book of Ecclesiastes, it's not until we get to chapter 5 that we read the first imperative or the first commandment.
And it says, guard your steps when you go to the house of God. So, notice how a distinction is made between entering into worship, the house of God, and the rest of life.

Downloaded from https://yetanothersermon.host

Of course, there's a sense in which we want to guard our steps all of the time. We want to be careful to conduct our lives and our behaviors in a way that God directs.
However, there is a special emphasis on guarding our steps when we are approaching God for the purpose of worship. We might say it is then that we really need to guard our steps.
[4:39] That's when we need to be the most careful about how we conduct ourselves. And I think we've pretty well established why that is. Formal worship, corporate worship of the church is not the same as the rest of life.

And of course, not all gatherings of the church are the same as corporate worship. Formal worship is very distinct. And this is why, if you've noticed, our worship on Sunday morning has a very clear beginning and end.
You know, we often start with a statement that says something like, now let's go to God in worship. Or we might begin with a prayer to that effect. Sometimes we're encouraged to have a silent minute of prayer as we prepare our hearts for worship.
And you'll notice this always comes after any announcements that need to be made. These announcements are not part of our worship, so we make it a point to create a break between the announcements at the beginning.
And then our worship then follows. And then we always conclude our worship with some kind of benediction or prayer. We simply want to show that our worship has a definite beginning and end because the worship itself is distinct from the rest of life or any other activities of the church.
[6:02] You see, there are times that are uniquely holy. Again, there's a sense in which we can worship God anytime, anywhere. I have a set of books at home called Every Moment Holy, which includes prayers and liturgies for all of life.

You might remember our Sunday school series from last year, I guess it was, on everyday theology. I think I even made the point that you can worship God while you're washing the dishes or washing the windows.
But that particular kind of worship is not the same as the worship we do corporately as the church, particularly on the Lord's Day.
Our corporate worship on Sunday is uniquely holy. You might think of it this way. Do you remember when Moses approached God in the burning bush? In Exodus 3, as Moses came closer to the bush, God said, Take the sandals off your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground.
Well, when the church gathers for formal worship, we are standing on holy ground, if you will. Guard your steps, Solomon says. Take the sandals off your feet, God says.
[7:18] In other words, the gathered church's formal worship is special. It's not like anything else. It's not like any other gathering of the church, which has...

Our formal worship has a definite beginning and end, because we are coming into the special presence of Christ, if you will, and the special presence of Christ is with us.
And it's for this reason that Hebrews 12 says, Let us offer to God acceptable worship with reverence and awe. So now the question becomes, what is acceptable worship?
And to answer this, we have to make yet another distinction, and that distinction is between the parts or the elements and the circumstances of worship. So we'll begin with the parts or elements of worship.
If you will, turn with me to Acts chapter 2. Acts chapter 2. Let's take a look at the very beginning of the church.
[8:30] Now in some sense, the church already existed prior to Acts chapter 2, but that was the church in utero. So this is the church being fully formed, fully born.

And what were they doing? So Peter, he preaches here to thousands on the day of Pentecost. There's an outpouring of God's Spirit. Many people respond positively to what they've heard and what they've seen.
And I'll pick up the story starting with verse 41. So those who received Peter's word were baptized, and there were added that day about 3,000 souls.
And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. And awe came upon every soul, and many wonders and signs were being done through the apostles.

Downloaded from https://yetanothersermon.host

And all who believed were together and had all things in common. And they were selling their possessions and belongings and distributing the proceeds to all as any had need. And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they received their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having favor with all the people.
[9:45] And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved. So this is a really insightful description of the early church.

And no, we don't have any direct positive commands here, but we have teaching through example. And these teachings are presented elsewhere in the New Testament. For apostolic teaching, we could turn to 1 Timothy 2.
Or 1 Corinthians 14. For the sharing or fellowship, we could turn to 1 Corinthians 16. For the breaking of bread, we could turn to 1 Corinthians 11.
And for the prayers, we could turn to 1 Timothy 2. So as we continue through the New Testament, it becomes pretty clear that this particular example is in fact an example of what we ought to be doing.
The only caveat is that I think we should recognize the time and place of this example. This is the beginning of the church under the new covenant.
[10:48] In some respects, the entire book of Acts is sort of a transitional period between the old covenant and the new covenant. So not everything here is going to be directly applicable.

For example, verse 43, many wonders and signs were being done through the apostles. Well, we no longer have apostles doing signs and wonders in the church because that was for a unique time and place, namely the earliest days of the church.
We're also not attending worship in the temple. There is no physical temple. The church body is now the temple of God. So not everything here is going to be applicable to us, but we know that from the rest of the New Testament, just as we know what is applicable from the rest of the New Testament.
And you'll notice here that there are four things described as formal acts of worship. They are very explicitly named as specific parts of worship.
Number one, the apostles' teaching. Number two, the fellowship. Number three, the breaking of bread. And number four, the prayers. Now, pay close attention here.
[12:07] It is not teaching, fellowship, breaking of bread, prayers. It is the teaching, the fellowship, the breaking of bread, the prayers.

The text is actually referring to very specific acts here. In other words, this is not teaching in general or fellowship in general or prayers in general.
These are very specific corporate acts of the church in worship. Now, there's something else here that's pretty easy to miss.
In most popular English translations of the Bible, these four things are grouped into pairs. Two pairs. Look at the commas. Teaching and fellowship are grouped together.
And the breaking of bread and prayers are grouped together. There's no and between fellowship and the breaking of bread. And Sam Waldron offers a helpful illustration.
[13:06] He says, suppose a young person had lunch at someone's house. Later, his mom asked what he had to eat. And he said, we had sandwiches, peanut butter and jelly, bacon, lettuce, and tomato.

You would not mean, and your mother would know that you did not mean, that you had one awful sandwich composed of peanut butter, jelly, bacon, lettuce, and tomato. No, she would assume from the construction of your sentence that you had two kinds of sandwiches.
Well, that's actually how the Greek is constructed here. There are two divisions to the early church's worship. Nick Needham, in his first volume of 2,000 Years of Christ Power, makes a distinction between what he calls service of the Word and service of the upper room.
And here's what he says. An important point is that the service of worship was divided into two distinct parts. That is, in the early church, the first part, known as the service of the Word, singing, reading, sermon, was open to baptized believers, those who were receiving instruction in the Christian faith, and probably those who were curious about Christianity.
The second part, the prayers and the Lord's Supper, was only for those who had been baptized. The rest had to leave. Now, to be clear, Needham is not expounding upon Acts 2.42.

Downloaded from https://yetanothersermon.host

[14:36] He's describing worship in the early church based on some of the historical evidence. But it sounds kind of like what we're reading here in Acts 2.42, especially when we consider that division in the Greek structure of the sentence.

In other words, there are parts of worship that were available to the public, but there were also parts of worship that didn't really need to be. Frankly, our worship is not the same as evangelism. Okay? Worship is intended for those who are reconciled to God, who are members of the body of Christ. So while evangelism can take place in worship, that is not the purpose of worship.
Of course, today, many churches follow what we call a seeker-friendly model. They actually designed their worship services to primarily be about evangelism, appealing to unbelievers.
But this was not the case throughout most of church history. For many parts of the world, for many believers, it wasn't even an option. Persecution had forced them to meet in secret.
[15:53] And there was nothing wrong with that, because worship is one thing, and evangelism is another thing. Worship takes place within the body of Christ, while evangelism, for the most part, takes place away from the body of Christ.

When we're not together, we come together for worship, and then we go out to disciple the nations. But I think there's another potential explanation for these pairs in verse 42.
The first pair, teaching and fellowship, points to the formation of the church, if you will. The apostles' teaching shapes the church doctrinally, while fellowship expresses the shared life among believers created by those truths we have heard and believed.
So teaching forms belief while fellowship expresses their unity. Then the second pair, the breaking of bread and prayers, are acts directed toward God by this unified body, informed by the Word.
Don't worry. None of that will need to be known for the test. But moving on, let's consider these four components of worship in Acts 2.42, beginning with the apostles' teaching.
[17:12] This, of course, is the teaching of God's Word. So, prior to the Reformation, the medieval church largely neglected the apostles' teaching and worship because they largely neglected the authority of Scripture.

But once the Reformation took place, the teaching of God's Word was restored to a central place in worship. In fact, many of the Reformers, they moved the table for the Lord's Supper to the side of the sanctuary and replaced it with a pulpit, front and center of the church.
John Calvin actually put a huge copy of the Bible right here at the focal point of the entire sanctuary. Now, the Catholics argued, that's offensive.
Of course, they believed that Christ was physically present in the elements of the Lord's Supper, the bread, the cup. So, in their minds, the Reformers were demoting Christ to the corner and replacing Him with a book.
Well, why did they do this? Well, for starters, they didn't believe Christ was physically present in the bread and the cup of communion. He was symbolized by the bread and the cup, but He was not physically present in them.
[18:39] But more to the point, they believed in the authority of Scripture. Why should the Bible be the focal point of the church rather than the Lord's Supper?

It's because before the church can even share in the Lord's Supper, we need the Word of God, the authority of Scripture, to direct us. First, it must tell us to share in the Lord's Supper, and then it must tell us how to share in the Lord's Supper.
So, everything we do as a church begins with the authority of Scripture. That's why the Bible was placed front and center. Now, sadly, the apostles' teaching has taken a back seat in many churches.
Visit many evangelical churches today, and you'll find them making an intentional distinction between worship and the preaching.
Worship to them is singing. It's praying. While the sermon, that's something else. And it's for this reason that I even hesitate to use the label worship leader when I'm talking about the man who's leading the first part of our worship, the singing and the praying, because there really shouldn't be a distinction between the preaching and the worship, as though preaching were not part of the worship.
[20:06] We see it here in the early church. We see it throughout church history. We see it through the Protestant Reformation. The preaching is not merely a part of worship, and it's certainly not distinct from worship.

Downloaded from https://yetanothersermon.host

It is central to the church's worship. Here's what Sam Waldron says. Pride of place in this listing of the elements or parts of the church's worship is given to the public ministry of the Word.
Of course, it is clear that the apostles' teaching was not the only thing, but it is equally clear that it was the first thing. The first thing in worship and the first priority in church life is the church's doctrine and teaching.
Nothing else can make up for deficiencies in this area. He goes on to write, Music and singing are important. Let no one misunderstand.
Congregational singing of the Word is an appointed part of worship. The circumstances of our singing must be handled in such a way as to best serve the people of God, serve the people of the church.
[21:15] I'm sorry. It is important how and what we sing, but in this passage, isn't it amazing, given the priorities of today's church, that music and singing are not even mentioned?

This says something very penetrating about the misplaced priorities of today's church. And to this point, I went through the book of Acts once and I counted the number of times we see believers singing, praying, and preaching.
Now, not all of them are in the context of corporate worship, but I think we see them preaching at least 20 or 21 times. We see them praying roughly 20 times, and we see them singing only once. Just once. And that's when Paul and Silas were in prison in Acts chapter 16. And yet, many in today's church want to prioritize singing above preaching, and sometimes even to the neglect of preaching.
If the singing's good, well, let's just keep on singing. We'll worry about the preaching next week. But obviously, preaching should be central to our worship.
[22:26] Well, next, we have the fellowship. Now, interestingly enough, the Greek word that is used here, translated, in most cases, as fellowship, means sharing or having something in common.

It usually means contributing something to someone else. So, let's just notice how this word is used elsewhere in the New Testament. Romans 15.26 says, For Macedonia and Achaia have been pleased to make some contribution for the poor among the saints at Jerusalem.
It's the same word translated there as contribution. In 2 Corinthians 9.13, Paul writes, By their approval of this service, they will glorify God because of your submission that comes from your confession of the gospel of Christ and the generosity of your contribution for them and for all others.
Hebrews 13.16, Do not neglect to do good and to share what you have for such sacrifices are pleasing to God.
There, the word is translated as share. Share. Contribution. This is how the word is most commonly translated. We see it again in Romans 12.13, Galatians 6.6, Philippians 4.15, 1 Timothy 6.18, and also from the same root word we get the word common.
[24:03] Look at verse 44 here. And all who believed were together and had all things in common.
So, it seems very likely that verse 42 is not describing the fellowship of believers in general.

It's actually a bit more tangible than that. This is a very specific act of worship. And what is that specific act? Well, according to John Calvin, it is alms and other duties of brotherly fellowship.
So, for example, financial giving. Sam Waldron says, the sharing or giving of the early Christians is described as laying their gifts at the apostles' feet in a public setting.
See Acts chapter 4. This laying of their gifts at the apostles' feet appears to picture a formal or at least a public setting in which these gifts were brought.
and it is difficult to exclude from such a picture the public worship of the church. Paul tells the church at Corinth, 1 Corinthians 16, Now concerning the collection for the saints, as I directed the churches of Galatia, so you also are to do.
[25:26] On the first day of every week, that is the day of their corporate worship, each of you is to put something aside and store it up as he may prosper so that there will be no collecting when I come.

So here, Paul gives a positive command for the church to give financial offerings on the day of worship. And I believe this is in part because the apostles in the early church treated this sharing or this contributing or this fellowship as part of their worship.
Now, to be clear, this probably does imply more than financial giving. Financial giving is certainly part of it, but it may imply the giving of ourselves to one another in general.

Downloaded from https://yetanothersermon.host

After all, we are to form one unified body, each member using their gifts for the building up of the entire body. So there should be a willingness to give of ourselves completely to one another.
or to put it another way, there should be nothing that interferes with our unity or our fellowship, our sharing, our contributing.
[26:44] Along these lines, in Matthew 5, Jesus said, if you were offering your gift at the altar, an act of worship, and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go.

First, be reconciled to your brother and then come and offer your gift. In short, worship requires giving. The giving of ourselves and the giving of our material goods all for the unity and for the common good of the entire body.
But the specific act of worship named here is likely financial giving. Next, we have the breaking of bread.
Now again, this is a very specific act of worship in the church. It's not breaking of bread. It's the breaking of bread. And I believe the New Testament consistently uses this phrase to describe the Lord's Supper.
On the night that Jesus instituted the Lord's Supper with His disciples, we're told, now as they were eating, Jesus took bread and after blessing it, broke it and gave it to His disciples and said, take, eat, this is my body.
[28:04] In 1 Corinthians chapter 10, Paul describes the Lord's Supper as the bread that we break. And he essentially says the same thing in chapter 11. So, the breaking of bread is not merely an ordinary meal.

Yes, you can break bread in general, but the breaking of bread is not an ordinary meal. Though the early church may have eaten a meal, either before or during the Lord's Supper, but it is referring specifically to the Lord's Supper.
Now, nowhere in the Bible are we told how often to share in the Lord's Supper. Some would argue that we should do it less to avoid it becoming routine or stale in our minds, but the implication of this verse is that it might have been practiced quite often.
It's quite possible that they practiced it every single week. We don't really know for sure, but the way it's listed right alongside the apostles' teaching and fellowship and prayers and that they devoted themselves to these things, that is, they were earnest about them, would suggest that this was a regular, consistent practice.
all of that to say, I don't think we should push for less. If anything, we should want to do it more, but again, there is no biblical rule for how often we do it.
[29:32] I love how Jonathan Edwards described the Lord's Supper. He said, we ought carefully and with the utmost seriousness and consideration attend the sacrament of the Lord's Supper.

This was appointed for this end, to draw forth longings of our souls toward Jesus Christ. Here are the glorious objects of spiritual desire by visible signs represented to our view.
We have Christ evidently set forth crucified. Here we have that spiritual meat and drink represented and offered to excite our hunger and thirst. Here we have all that spiritual feast represented which God has provided for poor souls.
And here we may hope in some measure to have our longing souls satisfied in this world by the gracious communications of the Spirit of God. Well, last but not least we have the prayers.
The prayers. Now in some translations you will not see the definite article the before the word prayers but the definite article is there in the original Greek as the ESV translates it.
[30:43] So again this is not referring to prayer in general this is referring to the prayers specifically in formal worship. In 1 Timothy 2.8 Paul writes I desire then that in every place or in every church the men should pray lifting holy hands.

And he's referring specifically to the prayers in the church's corporate worship. and by the way I would say that Paul's emphasis in that verse is not so much on the fact that men should pray in worship though that is clearly what he says but on the fact that there should be prayers in our worship which may seem obvious to us but there should be prayers in our worship.
The prayers are an integral part of our worship. So these four things the apostles teaching fellowship breaking of bread and prayers serve as a baseline if you will for the various parts of worship.

Downloaded from https://yetanothersermon.host

Of course there are things we haven't touched on yet such as singing such as the public reading of scripture and we really haven't talked about how these things should be done which I know is of particular interest to many people.
We haven't talked about the so-called circumstances of worship but for now with the time remaining I want to briefly address an essential part of worship that isn't quite as tangible as the other parts.
[32:19] So even when we follow the regulative principle of worship doing only what God explicitly commands our worship could still be lacking something vital.

I'll remind you again of what Jesus said in John chapter 4. He said the hour is coming and is now here when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth for the Father is seeking such people to worship him.
God is spirit and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth. I'll also remind you of what he told the Jewish leaders in Matthew 15.
Quoting Isaiah he said this people honors me with their lips but their heart is far from me in vain do they worship me.
Now in their case they had allowed the traditions of men to interfere with true and proper worship. In fact they weren't even keeping all of the commandments of God.
[33:29] But even if we are even if we are worshiping in truth which in many respects is the easy part it's easy to follow the rules right?

My five year old son has gotten into the awful habit of groaning when we tell him to do something that he doesn't really want to do. Now he may go ahead and do it but as he's doing it he loves to let out this and I suppose you can see the problem with that.
According to Christ himself our worship even when it is done in truth according to the word of God is only as good as our hearts. We must worship in truth and in spirit.
Our hearts must not be far from God. Now we have to keep these things in balance and by that I mean both are absolutely necessary. But we don't want to emphasize one part to the neglect of the other.
So for example some churches will utilize lighting and smoke machines and do everything they can to manufacture an environment where people feel something emotionally right?
[34:48] It wasn't too long ago that I read an article from a Christian pastor who had attended a Taylor Swift concert with his daughter. And I was dumbfounded and frankly appalled by what he said.

I'm not sure that I could even bring myself to admit publicly that I had attended a Taylor Swift concert. But this guy went further than that. He described this concert as though it were an intense spiritual experience.
About halfway through the piece you would have thought this guy had climbed to the mountaintop to meet with God himself like Moses. And why was he writing about this? He was at the very least intimating that the church could learn something about worship from a Taylor Swift concert.
concert. So I guess we shouldn't be surprised that the worship of some churches feels more like a Taylor Swift concert than the worship we read about in the early church.
But why would churches do this? Well they'll make all kinds of justifications for it but for many it's about manufacturing the emotional experience.
[36:08] They want people to feel something. And I suppose we should feel something. But is that even what Jesus means when he says we should worship in spirit?

I would argue that it isn't. I believe Jesus is describing really the posture of our hearts. In other words true worship engages the heart.
The heart is sincere. It's reverent. It is humble before God. It's willing. It's cheerful.
It is serious about offering our spiritual sacrifices before God and delights to do so. And we have many passages in the Bible we could turn to to bear this out.
I'll give you a few. Psalm 51 16 for example says for you will not delight in sacrifice or I would give it. You will not be pleased with a burnt offering.
[37:13] The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit, a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise. Hebrews 13 16.

Do not neglect to do good and to share what you have for such sacrifices are pleasing to God. 2 Corinthians 9 7 Each one must give as he has decided in his heart, not reluctantly or under compulsion for God loves a cheerful giver.

Downloaded from https://yetanothersermon.host

Psalm 141 2 Let my prayer be counted as incense before you and the lifting up of my hands as the evening sacrifice. Psalm 27 6 I will offer in his tent sacrifices with shouts of joy I will sing and make melody to the Lord.
And we could certainly go on and on. Yes feelings are inevitably involved but having an emotional experience is not the priority. In fact it's usually the response to true and proper worship with the right heart posture toward God when we come together for worship.
As Sam Waldron says and I'll actually close with this don't let anyone tell you that if you have the divinely appointed parts you don't need the heart.
[38:46] On the other hand don't let anyone tell you that if you have the heart you don't need the parts. We must worship in spirit and in truth.

Let's pray. Dear Lord you are holy and worthy of all our worship. You are the creator of heaven and earth.
You are the giver of every good gift the one true God who deserves our reverence and our praise and our devotion. We thank you for this time we've had together in your word this morning reminding us of the privilege and the responsibility we have as your people to worship you rightly. And as we move from this class into our corporate worship I'd ask that you would prepare our hearts to guard our steps as we come before you. Help us today and every time to worship you in spirit and in truth and may everything we do today bring honor to your name and draw our hearts closer to Christ and we ask these things in Jesus name Amen Amen

Downloaded from https://yetanothersermon.host