

The Parts of Biblical Worship (part 2)

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: 22 March 2026

Preacher: Jeremy Sarber

[0:01] So, last time we began to look at the parts or the elements of worship. Acts 2.42 names four of the essential parts, preaching, giving, the Lord's Supper, and prayers.

And this morning we'll spend a little more time on some of these and add some more to the list as we go along. Before we do, though, it might be helpful to address the elephant in the room. Proponents of the normative principle will often accuse proponents of the regulative principle of being inconsistent. For example, where in Scripture do we have a command to follow the regulative principle of worship?

The rule itself is not explicitly commanded in the Bible, at least not in those terms. Nowhere does Christ or one of the apostles say, in worship, you must do only what God commands.

So, does that prove that we should give up on any notion of the regulative principle? And frankly, we don't always do ourselves any favors in this regard.

[1:12] Sometimes we don't frame the regulative principle in quite the right way. For instance, I've heard the principle defined in this way. What is commanded is right, and what is not commanded is wrong.

Now, in the right context, that can be a true statement. But on its own, it does seem inconsistent, because where do we find the commandment for the regulative principle itself?

Well, we should consider that there are two types of commands in Scripture. First, we have explicit commands. This is where the Lord says, do this, or don't do that.

And second, we have implicit commands. Here's what Sam Waldron writes. Those who believe in the regulative principle must also assume it was practiced in scriptural examples of proper worship. For us, then, a scriptural example or precedent of something being practiced as a part of New Testament worship would be sufficient to establish it as a required part of worship.

[2:22] This would constitute for us an implicit command, even though there was no explicit command or imperative in the passage where the example is found.

Apostolic precedent for a part of worship is sufficient to establish something as a part of worship commanded by God. Such an example or precedent would then provide an implied command.

So, let's say we see the apostles approving of something that the church is doing in their worship. The Lord didn't command it.

The apostles didn't command it. But the church is doing it, and the apostles are showing their approval of it. We can infer that that would be a good and right thing to do.

Why? Well, consider paragraph 6 of chapter 1 of our Baptist Confession. It says, The whole counsel of God concerning everything essential for his own glory and man's salvation, faith, and life is either explicitly stated or by necessary inference contained in the Holy Scriptures.

[3:32] And if you were to spend a moment thinking about this, you could probably come up with several examples of things not explicitly commanded in Scripture, but that are clearly implied commandments.

And I'll give you just one example. The Old Testament, namely the Ten Commandments, explicitly commands us to keep one day of the week set apart from the other days.

Remember the Sabbath day to keep it holy, to keep it separate. Now, this was a commandment established at the very beginning of creation.

It was then codified in the abiding moral law of the Ten Commandments. Jesus continued to teach and to uphold it throughout his ministry. However, the commandment said the seventh day is a Sabbath to the Lord your God.

But you and I are not setting apart the seventh day and treating it as holy as we do the first day or Sunday. We set apart the first day of the week. Why is that?

[4:43] Well, if we go searching for an explicit command that says, thou shalt worship on Sunday now, we won't find it. So how can we hold to the regulative principle if we are worshiping on a day that the Bible doesn't explicitly command us to worship on?

Well, we have apostolic example and approval. In Acts 20, the church gathered for worship on the first day of the week.

In 1 Corinthians 16, Paul instructs the church to take up offerings on the first day of the week when they were gathered for corporate worship. In Revelation 1, the apostle John goes as far as to call the first day of the week the Lord's Day.

So we don't have an explicit command to worship on Sunday, but we do have apostolic example and clear approval. In other words, the command is implied, or as the confession says, by necessary inference, it is contained in the Holy Scriptures.

Or as Waldron says, if we find an example of something being done in a meeting with apostolic approval, then it is clearly in compliance with the regulative principle.

[6:03] No explicit command is necessary. Now, having said that, I've had enough conversations with proponents of the normative principle to know what they might say here.

Most would concede that if we have apostolic example and approval, then it must be acceptable. But they might also ask, why stop there?

You've already opened the door for things outside of explicit commands. Again, the normative principle says, anything can be permissible as long as Scripture doesn't expressly forbid it.

So why not incorporate, say, a dramatic skit during our Sunday morning worship? We can have a big production on the stage up here that plays out, maybe a scene from the Bible.

The normative principle says that should be okay. Why would those of us holding to the regulative principle object to that? Well, we certainly don't have an explicit command for that kind of thing.

[7:10] But we don't even have an implicit command. We don't have any examples of the early church doing anything like that. They could have play-acting skits.

These are not modern innovations. They've been around for a long time, even before the time of Christ. So the regulative principle says, no, don't do that. We don't have a command for it, explicit or implicit, anywhere in Scripture.

But the normative principle says, yeah, you can do that. It's not forbidden in Scripture. Now, do you see the difference in how both sides are approaching this?

The regulative principle stops and asks, what does God want me to do here? I really need His approval before I proceed. The normative principle says, well, I'll just keep right on going until God stops me.

We have a very simple rule in our household. The furniture is to be used only as intended. The couch, for instance, is made for sitting, lying.

[8:23] So when I catch one of the kids jumping on the couch, I remind them of this rule. I say, you know you're not supposed to jump on the couch. And then I'll leave the room, and I'll come back, and I'll find them walking across the couch.

And how do they justify themselves? They say, we're not jumping. And at this point, I can just hear the voice of my granddaddy saying, keep it up, and you won't be sitting for a while either.

Let's just set aside the debate over the regulative versus normative principle for a moment.

With something as important as our worship of our holy, almighty God, Scripture, both the Old and New Testaments, give us every reason to approach it with extreme caution.

Our first thought should not be, what will God allow us to do? Our first thought should be, what does God want us to do?

[9:28] And for that, we look to Scripture, both explicit and implicit commands. Yes, what Scripture forbids are important and necessary guardrails for us, but when I'm out driving my car, my goal is not to get as close to the line as possible.

It's to stay in the center of my lane. And when it comes to worship, my concern is not with what I can get away with. It's with what God wants me to do.

So with that, let's pick up where we left off in considering the various parts of worship. And I'll begin with those four parts that we talked about last time, at least three of them this morning, beginning with preaching.

Again, Acts chapter 2 tells us that the early church devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching. Verse 42. And I'll also draw your attention to what 1 Timothy chapter 2 says, where Paul writes, I

desire then that in every place the men should pray, lifting holy hands without anger or quarreling. Likewise also that women should adorn themselves in respectable apparel, with modesty and self-control, not with braided hair and gold or pearls or costly attire, but with what is proper for women who profess godliness with good works.

[10 : 55] Let a woman learn quietly with all submissiveness. I do not permit a woman to teach or to exercise authority over a man. Rather, she is to remain quiet. Now, this might seem like a strange passage to cite when talking about the necessity of preaching in our worship, but you'll notice that Paul is talking about what he wants for believers when they meet together for formal gatherings, namely worship.

And he says, I desire then that in every place or in every church, wherever God's people gather. And what does he desire for them?

Well, setting aside women's apparel, he points to two things, praying and teaching. Evidently, Paul considers these two things absolutely essential, which runs a bit contrary to the way many churches think about prayer and preaching, especially today.

For them, worship is primarily music. It's primarily singing. That's where the real worship happens. Now, they will pray, but you'll notice that oftentimes, in contemporary worship services, the prayers are very quick.

They're kind of like asides, you know, that are somewhat disrupting the worship, and they move on very quickly to the next thing. And preaching is often treated as an afterward.

[12 : 24] In fact, I watched a service online one time where a pastor got up after the singing and claimed that the singing was so good that he didn't feel it was necessary for him to preach at all that morning.

He acted as though the preaching would actually take away from the singing. And for all I know, his preaching would have taken away from the singing. But I thought it was interesting last week because three different individuals came to me and mentioned how some churches begin their worship with a sermon followed by the singing.

And the reason some churches do this is because they view the singing as a response to the word of God that they've heard preached that morning. And I've actually done this myself at my former church.

Now, I'll confess that the first time I did it, my motives were not entirely pure. I did it because half of the church was notoriously late, and I thought it would be a little more awkward for them to walk in during the middle of a sermon.

Maybe next time they wouldn't be late. But what I discovered was that the singing was seemingly richer, more powerful when it followed the sermon.

[13 : 39] And I think that we experience that here to some degree when we sing that final song after the sermon. But why is that? Well, when the truth of Scripture is clearly proclaimed, when God speaks to us through His Word, we are given something substantial to respond to.

We are reminded of God's holiness, His grace, His promises, His works in Christ. And when we hear those amazing, wonderful things, we're quite naturally stirred up to sing God's praises.

God speaks to us through His Word, and we reply in song. Now, doesn't it make sense that our preaching would be central to our worship?

It is through the preaching that we hear from God. Martin Luther said, the highest form of worship is the preaching of God's Word, not in addition to worship.

But the highest form of worship. Someone else has said, worship in the pulpit is exercised by those who know the saving power of Christ and express that power through the spoken word molded by the written revelation of God in the Bible.

[14 : 59] The preacher, in his act of preaching, communicates the Bible, the knowledge he has gained of God, to the hearers. His worship becomes their worship. Preaching is worship.

In his book, Feed My Sheep, Albert Moeller writes, What do we think preaching is but the central act of Christian worship?

As a matter of fact, everything else ought to be built to, everything else ought to build to the preaching of the Word, for that is when the God of whom we have been speaking and singing speaks to us from his eternal and perfect Word.

And this is why Paul tells the young minister, Timothy, this is 1 Timothy 4, 2 Timothy 4, excuse me, I charge you in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead, and

by his appearing and his kingdom, preach the Word.

Be ready in season and out of season. Reprove, rebuke, and exhort with complete patience and teaching. For the time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching, but having itching ears, they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own passions and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander off into myths.

[16 : 25] As for you, always be sober-minded, endure suffering, do the work of an evangelist, fulfill your ministry. In short, preaching is absolutely essential in our worship of God.

To be clear, preaching is not a dramatic skit. It's not a pastor putting on an entertaining show with props and stage antics. It is a man who has devoted himself to the study of God's Word, and he is carefully and faithfully expounding it and proclaiming it to the church body.

Now, before we move on from preaching, let me briefly address the congregation's role in preaching. And I suppose this is why some people do not see preaching as an essential part of worship, because what's the audience doing?

What's the congregation doing? What's their part in this? Well, listen to what the Lord says at the start of Isaiah 66. Thus says the Lord, Heaven is my throne and the earth is my footstool.

What is the house that you would build for me and what is the place of my rest? All these things my hand has made, and so all these things came to be, declares the Lord.

[17 : 46] But this is the one to whom I will look, that is, look favorably. He who is humble and contrite in spirit and trembles at my word.

He who slaughters an ox is like one who kills a man. He who sacrifices a lamb like one who breaks a dog's neck. He who presents a grain offering like one who offers pig's blood.

He who makes a memorial offering of frankincense like one who blesses an idol. First of all, notice the context is the worship of God. And second, notice whom God is pleased with.

The one to whom I will look, he says. Who is that person? The one who is humble and contrite in spirit and trembles at my word. And then he goes on to make it clear that this is more important than offering physical sacrifices.

So the role of the congregation in preaching is to listen. It's to be attentive. To take what is preached, assuming it is of God's word, very seriously.

[18 : 59] And then to be submissive to it. Again, if what is preached is indeed the truth of God.

Next, let's consider our offerings in worship or what Acts 2.42 refers to as the fellowship.

Now, as I pointed out last time, this word in Acts 2.42 can refer generally to fellowship or partnership of some kind. But more commonly in the New Testament, it's translated as contributing or sharing.

Even in the context of Acts 2, the text goes on to say, all who believed were together and had all things in common. Common comes from the same root word as fellowship.

And they were selling their possessions and belongings and distributing the proceeds to all as any had need. Now, we may question whether financial giving is an official part of corporate worship. Is it really an element of corporate worship? I don't know that anyone would dispute that it's good and necessary, but is it really an act of worship?

[20 : 14] Well, Acts 2 would indicate that it is. Right along with the apostles' teaching, the breaking of bread or the Lord's Supper and the prayers, the early church devoted themselves to these specific practices specifically when they gathered together on the Lord's Day.

And you'll remember that Paul tells the church in Corinth on the first day of the week, each of you is to put something aside and store it up as he may prosper. So when the church gathered on the Lord's Day, they were to take up a collection so that, Paul says, there be no collecting when I come. In Acts chapter 4, we're given a bit more insight into the practice of the early church. Starting at verse 32, it says, Now the full number of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one said that any of the things that belonged to him was his own, but they had everything in common.

And with great power, the apostles were giving their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all. There was not a needy person among them, for as many as were owners of lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold and laid it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need.

So notice a few things here. First, this giving was an outpouring of their unity with one another.

They were of one heart and one soul, therefore they had everything or they shared everything in

common.

[22:01] Second, these collections were made right alongside the apostles' preaching. As the apostles were giving their testimony to the resurrection, the people were bringing their financial offerings and laying them at the apostles' feet, it seems to have been a part of their corporate worship, as Acts 2 indicated.

And third, this was evidently done publicly. That's what's implied when it says that the proceeds of what was sold was laid at the apostles' feet. Now soon after, deacons would be appointed to take care of most of this work, but financial giving remained an element of the church's corporate worship.

And if we're familiar with worship in the Old Testament, this really shouldn't come as too much of a surprise. Cain and Abel brought their offerings to God as an act of worship.

After the flood in Genesis 8, Noah made his offerings. In Exodus 23, the Lord says, three times in the year you shall keep a feast to me. None shall appear before me empty-handed.

In other words, when you come for worship, you should have something to give, something to contribute. In Deuteronomy 16, again, we're told, they shall not appear before the Lord empty-handed.

[23:20] Every man shall give as he is able, according to the blessing of the Lord your God that he has given you. Psalm 96.8, ascribe to the Lord the glory, do his name, bring an offering, and come into his courts.

Now, the offerings have certainly changed under the New Covenant, but the New Testament is no less adamant about giving. In fact, it argues that we should be all the more willing to give in light of what Christ has done.

In 2 Corinthians 8, Paul encourages believers to give generously, and notice how he appeals to the gospel when he says, I say this not as a command, but to prove by the earnestness of others that your love is also genuine.

For you know that the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that, for you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you, by his poverty, might become rich.

So, in effect, he says, when we come together to worship the Savior who is rich, yet became poor for us, we should be more than willing to give of our own resources to help one another.

[24:37] But this raises a legitimate and very practical question. If giving is an element of worship, why don't we take up a collection when we worship?

Like many churches, we have collection boxes outside of the sanctuary. We do not pass a plate during worship. Well, should we? I think a reasonable argument can be made that we should.

In fact, I was somewhat surprised to learn in his book, *How Then Should We Worship?* Sam Waldron makes that very case. He says, if giving is an appointed part of corporate worship, then we should not be embarrassed to give it a place of prominence in our worship.

And he even goes as far as to say, if giving is an appointed part of corporate worship, then it is not sufficient to relegate it to an inconspicuous basket that we put our money in before and after our corporate worship.

What if we treated prayer, singing, or preaching in the same way? Now, Waldron admits that he has struggled with this over the years. He says that he once considered it a human tradition to pass the plate during worship and thought that it focused a little too much on what he called filthy lucre to borrow from the King James.

[26:00] Now, I don't believe it is a human tradition exactly. Again, the early church's giving seems to have been done very publicly. However, I am more than willing to balance that with the sensitivity toward those who feel a certain uneasiness about it.

So, in Matthew 6, Jesus taught, Beware of practicing your righteousness before other people in order to be seen by them. When you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing so that your giving may be in secret.

Now, technically, that doesn't mean we can't give publicly. Jesus also taught us to pray in secret.

But clearly, the early church engaged in corporate prayers of the Apostle Paul.

He couldn't write a letter without breaking out into a spontaneous prayer which he intended everyone to read. No, what Jesus was really teaching against is hypocrisy. Doing these things purely for show, not out of sincerity.

Yet, I can understand why people would not feel comfortable giving in public as, you know, maybe a plate is passed around in worship. Even Paul says, each one must give as he has decided in his heart, not reluctantly or under compulsion.

[27 : 28] And I do fear that some might feel pressured to give because of its public nature. And since the Bible does not give us an explicit command to take up collections in a specific way, I believe we have the liberty to determine circumstances of those collections.

and we're going to talk about the circumstances of worship after we finish discussing the various parts or elements of worship. And I think this will make a lot more sense because that's crucial. A lot of the questions we have about worship and how we, why we do things in worship comes down to the circumstances. How do we determine the circumstances or the specific details of the various parts of worship?

Well next, let's consider the prayers. We'll come back to the breaking of bread or the Lord's Supper. Again, 1 Timothy 2.8 says, I desire then that in every place or every church the men should pray lifting holy hands.

And let me back up and read some of the context here. Paul begins the chapter by saying, First of all then, I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for all people, for kings, and all who are in high positions, that we may lead a peaceful and quiet life, godly and dignified in every way.

[28 : 55] This is good and it is pleasing in the sight of God our Savior who desires all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth. So, within the context of formal gatherings, specifically worship, Paul implores men to pray.

And this is specifically males. Now, that's not to say that women can't pray in other settings. It's not even to say that women can't pray in the presence of men. But when the church is gathered for corporate worship, God has given men a position of leadership.

This includes teaching, as Paul goes on to say, as well as evidently leading the prayers. prayers. Now, let me comment briefly on our posture in prayer because Paul mentions lifting up holy hands. Now, I don't think Paul is suggesting that we must lift our hands every time we pray. Clearly, it's permitted if you want to lift your hands when you pray, by all means.

But this is not presented as an imperative and as we move throughout Scripture, we see various people praying in various postures. And I'll give you some examples.

[30 : 15] In Genesis 18, 22, we see Abraham standing to pray. In Luke 18, the tax collector in the temple, he's standing to pray.

In Daniel 6, Daniel prays on his knees. In Acts chapter 20, Paul kneels with the believers to pray. In 2 Samuel 12, David falls to the ground to pray, implying that he was lying prostrate on the ground. In the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus fell on his face to pray. In 1 Kings 8, Solomon lifts his hands to heaven to pray. In 2 Samuel 7, David sat before the Lord to pray.

In Genesis 24, Abraham's servant bows his head. But in John 17, we see Jesus lifting his eyes to pray. So regarding our posture, there's no one right way to pray.

I believe this is a matter that fits well within the realm of Christian liberty. I have known men who just could not bring themselves to stand up when they prayed.

[31 : 30] They always knelt on the floor. I was at a graveside service once. So this was outdoors at a cemetery and the pastor who was officiating, full suit and all, laid prostrate right in the dirt when he prayed.

Some men will fold their hands when they pray. Others will lift their hands when they pray. Some keep their eyes open. Some close their eyes.

Some bow their heads. Others don't. The Bible does not give us an exact prescription for what our posture should be when we pray, at least not our physical posture.

Our hearts are another matter, of course. And I believe that's what Paul is really emphasizing here. Again, he says, I desire then that in every place the men should pray lifting holy hands without anger or quarrel.

Now, this use of the word holy does not mean set apart as it often does. It's being used here in the sense of pure or clean hands.

[32 : 35] So we should not pray with hands that are stained with sin. As Psalm 66 says, if I had cherished iniquity in my heart, the Lord would not have listened.

But truly, God has listened. He has attended to the voice of my prayer. So to be clear, Paul is not suggesting that you must be without sin before you go to God in prayer. Obviously. The psalmist says the Lord would not listen if we had cherished iniquity in our hearts. So Paul is insisting that the men who pray be repentant.

They're still sinners, but they're repentant sinners. And then Paul says that they should pray without anger or quarreling. So the man who prays must be repentant toward God, but he also must be reconciled to or in unity with his brothers in the church.

And maybe that's because he's praying for the entire church, which is to be a unified body when he prays in corporate worship. And I'll point out that Paul does not limit these corporate public prayers to pastors only.

[33 : 53] Evidently, they are exclusive to men, but they're not exclusive to pastors. In his book, *A Better Way*, Michael Horton makes this observation.

One of the most disappointing features of contemporary worship is the absence of prayer. And one suspects that few of the youth in evangelical or mainline churches today even know the Lord's Prayer, which covenant children have prayed and used as a model for their prayers for 2,000 years. If corporate prayer does not play an important part in our worship, it should not be surprising that it is marginalized in the individual lives of Christians.

Kent Hughes writes, Today it is not uncommon for there to be no pastoral, congregational prayer amidst the flow of contemporary worship, with no worship leader opening in prayer, no prayer at the offering, and no pastor praying that God will bless his message.

It seems that prayer is regarded as something that interferes with the movement of worship.

However, the Bible presents prayer as an essential part of our corporate worship.

[35 : 10] In a very real sense, prayer is what brings power to our church. In Acts chapter 4, it was only after corporate prayer that the place in which they were gathered together was shaken, and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and continued to speak the Word of God with boldness.

When Paul writes about our spiritual warfare in Ephesians 6, he says, Take the sword of the Spirit, which is the Word of God, pray at all times in the Spirit, with all prayer and supplication.

to that end, keep alert with all perseverance, making supplication for all the saints, and also for me, that words may be given to me in opening my mouth boldly to proclaim the mystery of the gospel for which I am an ambassador in chains, that I may declare it boldly as I ought to speak.

Now, what exactly should these corporate prayers be? I'll give you a simple list. invocation, that is invoking God's help as we offer adoration of Him, confession of sin, thanksgiving for His provision, petition for needs, intercession for others, illumination for the reading and preaching of God's Word, and then there's a benediction or a word of blessing.

Now, that's not to say every prayer is going to include every item on this list, but it's a summary of the ways that we should be praying every time we meet together for corporate worship.

[36 : 56] Having said that, prayer is not about following a checklist. It's far more important that we prepare our hearts and our minds to pray.

It's far more important that we pray with sincerity. And here's a word of advice from Samuel Miller, the Presbyterian minister of the early 19th century, and I'll close with this.

He said, when the heart is engaged and in proportion, that is deeply and warmly engaged, when the value of spiritual things is cordially felt and the attainment of them earnestly desired, when the soul has a heartache sense of its own unworthiness and a humble, tender confidence in the Savior's love and grace.

In a word, when the whole soul is prepared to flow out in accordance with the language uttered in faith, love, gratitude, and heavenly desire, then and only then, will every petition, word, and tone be in some good degree in happy keeping with the nature and scope of the exercise.

eyes. So next time, what I hope to do is finish considering these various parts of worship, have several more to add to the list, and then we will move in, finally, to the circumstances of worship and discuss how we decide whether or not to have a hymn book, or whether or not to sing a song from the wall above us, or various other details that we often debate and discuss throughout the churches.

[38 : 35] For now, let's close in prayer. Father, you are holy, righteous, and good in all your ways, and we thank you for your word and for the clarity it gives us concerning how you are to be worshiped.

We ask that you would guard our hearts from all pride and maybe carelessness and give us a desire to honor you as you have commanded. help us not to ask what we can get away with, but to seek what pleases you.

May your word shape our worship, our thinking, our lives all together. Prepare us now, even, for the worship to come, that we would hear your voice, respond in faith, and glorify you in all that we do.

And we ask this in Christ's name. Amen. Amen. Amen.