The Parts of Biblical Worship (part 3)

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[0:00] Well, in our study of worship, we left off considering the various parts or elements of worship.

! So far, we've looked at preaching, giving, and prayers.! Next, let's consider the public reading of Scripture. I would argue that the most important reform that came out of the Protestant Reformation was the return to the Bible as our sole authority.
I mentioned how the reformers moved the Lord's table to the side of the sanctuary and put the pulpit front and center. And they did this not because they wanted to diminish the Lord's Supper, not at all, but because the preaching of the Bible must come first.
Why? Well, without the Bible, without God speaking to us, we don't really have the authority to practice the Lord's Supper. We wouldn't know how to practice the Lord's Supper.
And the same is true for all of worship and really all of the Christian life. So we must recognize the authority of Scripture and reflect that in all that we do as a church.
[1:18] And this includes not only preaching, but also the public reading of Scripture. Listen to what the Apostle Paul tells the young minister Timothy in 1 Timothy 4.13.

Actually, I'll jump back and begin reading at verse 11. He says, Now, I want to focus on what he says in verse 13, but I've read the full passage because I want you to see that Paul is addressing Timothy as a pastor.
He is telling Timothy what is required of him as a pastor. And among the responsibilities he mentions here, included in that, is a devotion to the public reading of Scripture.
Now, not all translations of the Bible are equally clear that this is a public reading of Scripture. The King James says, Till I come, give attendance to reading.
Well, that seems to suggest that all Paul really wants Timothy to do is read. This could be private reading. It could be public. It could be reading the Bible. It could be reading something else.
[3:13] It's not very specific. But I think modern translations have the right idea here. Technically, this verse in the Greek does not contain a word for public or for Scripture.

However, there is a definite article before reading. So, the verse could be translated, Devote yourself to the reading. Evidently, Paul does have something very specific in mind here.
In fact, he says, Devote yourself to the reading, to the exhortation, to the teaching. This is kind of what we saw in Acts 2.42.
It wasn't that the church devoted themselves to prayer in general, though they probably did, but they devoted themselves to the prayers. This was true for the apostles' teaching and for the fellowship and for the breaking of bread.
There is a definite article before each of those elements signifying that the text is referring to very specific acts of the church. And we have that here as well regarding the reading.
[4:26] And when we consider the context of this verse, it's pretty clear that Paul has in mind Timothy's public ministry of the Word. The reading is closely connected with the exhortation and the teaching.

Plus, he's telling Timothy how to conduct himself before the church. This is very clearly both a public reading as well as a reading of Scripture. What else was Timothy supposed to read and teach from in the church's corporate worship or in his public ministry, right?
So I think modern translations of the Bible have the right idea by rendering this as the public reading of Scripture. Seems pretty obvious that's what Paul has in mind here.
Even so, it's not always obvious to churches that the reading of Scripture should be an essential part of worship.

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I've been to churches where the only reading of Scripture was done by the pastor as he was making references to various verses in his sermon. In many cases, he did not even begin by reading a passage of the Bible before he started his sermon.
[5:42] He just jumped right into the sermon, and then he sprinkled in some Bible verses as he went. I've listened to sermons where the pastor, I should say, did not even quote the Bible.

He told stories from it. He alluded to it, but he never actually read it. I once had a minister, true story, advise me.
This was when I was first starting in the ministry. He said, never read a Bible passage longer than ten verses at one time in a sermon. He said, people will get distracted, they'll lose interest.
And I told him, that seems absurd to me. The only time the congregation can wholeheartedly trust what I am saying is true is when I'm reading the Bible verbatim.
Anything else I might say requires your careful examination in light of what the Bible says. And that's because God's Word is sufficient, it is certain, it is infallible, but I am not.
[6:51] Yes, a pastor has the responsibility to teach the Bible, but that necessarily includes reading the Bible. And this is for the congregation's sake, if nothing else.

Of course, it's not hard to see a consistent pattern of this throughout the Bible. In both the Old and New Testaments, God's Word was read publicly.
I'll give you some examples. In Deuteronomy 31, Moses commands the law to be read publicly every seven years at the Feast of Booths, so all of Israel, men, women, children, sojourners, may hear and learn.
In Joshua 8, Joshua reads all the words of the law before the entire assembly enters into the promised land.
Or maybe it was right after entering the promised land. In 2 Kings 23, King Josiah gathers the people and reads the book of the covenant, which leads to a national repentance among the people.
[7:55] In Nehemiah 8, Ezra reads the law publicly from morning until midday when the Levites explain it so that the people will understand what's been read.

When Jesus goes to the synagogue in Nazareth, what does he do? Luke 4, As was his custom, he went to the synagogue on the Sabbath day, and he stood up to read.
And the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written, and then he proceeds to read. In Acts 13, on the Sabbath day, Paul and Barnabas, they went into the synagogue and sat down.
After the reading from the law and the prophets, the rulers of the synagogue sent a message to them saying, Brothers, if you have any word of encouragement for the people, say it.
What about Paul's letters to the churches? Peter considered them scripture. He says as much in 2 Peter 3. And in a couple of places, Paul commands that his letters be read publicly in the churches.
[9:07] He says to the Colossians, And when this letter has been read among you, have it also read in the church of the Laodiceans. And see that you also read the letter from Laodicea.

He says to the Thessalonians in 1 Thessalonians 5.27, I put you under oath before the Lord to have this letter read to all the brothers. Then we might consider Revelation 1.3, which says, Blessed is the one who reads aloud the words of this prophecy, and blessed are those who hear.
So the Old Testament sets the precedent for the public reading of Scripture in worship, but the New Testament also carries on this practice. And I think it stands to reason that it would.
After all, what is worship? But hearing from God and responding to Him in praise. Well, speaking of praise, let's move on to the next part, or the next element of worship.
Let's call this one the Amen. This touches on the congregation's response in worship. Of course, singing is going to be part of our response, but there's also the saying of the Amen.
[10:27] Now, you might be thinking, really? Is the saying of Amen really an essential part of worship? Well, I'll show you that it is, but first let me quote from Sam Waldron, who offers some pretty interesting insight on this, something I never thought about.

He says, true worship in the church should be an expression of corporate unity. It is not Pastor Joe doing his thing in the morning worship and Pastor Sam doing his thing in the evening worship, and the only one who gets excited about the worship of God is the preacher and the leader of worship. That ought not to be. When visitors come into worship, they ought to be able to easily see that there is a whole multitude that agrees.

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And listen to this. The rebel should not leave thinking that he has a controversy only with the preacher. He should realize that he has a problem with the whole church.
There should be expressed a corporate unity in the worship of God. Now, what does he mean by that? Well, he means the congregation should respond to the prayers and the preaching and the reading of Scripture in such a way that it makes it very obvious that they agree with what they've heard.
[11:47] So, when an unbeliever comes for a visit and maybe he disagrees with what he's heard, he will know that his disagreement is not only with the church's leadership, but with the entire congregation.

He will know that we stand unified in the truths of God. Waldron goes on to write, Would the unbeliever look at you and say, I don't believe a thing they're saying, but it is clear that they do. He is into this. His whole soul is involved in this matter of worship. Now, you could argue that there are other ways of expressing our unity and our involvement in worship other than shouting, Amen. There's our singing, of course. There's also our general posture, our facial expressions, our attentiveness, and so on. Maybe we nod along. But I don't know that anything is quite as clear as an audible, Amen.
I mean, do you have any questions about what Jim Fisher agrees with? He lets everyone know every time he shouts, Amen. But more importantly, what does the Bible say about this?
[13:07] Is this a biblical element of worship? Well, let me give you a few examples, and we actually have many. Sometimes the Amen followed after curses, or at least warnings of curses.

Sometimes it followed after praises. Sometimes after proclamations of the truth. Sometimes it followed after benedictions. And sometimes it followed after doxologies.
And I'll give you at least one example of each. In Deuteronomy 27, the Levites pronounce covenant curses and all of the people respond each time with Amen.
Now, I won't read it in full, but here's a sample of that. Cursed be the man who makes a carved or cast metal image, an abomination to the Lord, a thing made by the hands of a craftsman, and sets it up in secret.
And all the people shall answer and say, Amen. Cursed be anyone who dishonors his father or his mother, and all the people shall say, Amen.
[14:13] Cursed be anyone who moves his neighbor's landmark, and all the people say, Amen.
And on it goes. In 1 Chronicles 16, we see the congregation responding to praise.

Verse 36 says, Blessed be the Lord, the God of Israel, from everlasting to everlasting. Then all the people said, Amen, and praised the Lord.
In Nehemiah 8, which I referred to earlier, after the law of God is read to the people and expounded upon, all the people answered, Amen, Amen, lifting up their hands, and they bowed their heads and worshiped the Lord.
Of course, Amens were very common after benedictions. Romans 15, 33, for example, says, May the God of peace be with you all.
Amen. Now, Paul may have been writing his own Amen there, but remember that these letters were to be read out loud in the church, and the implication is that the congregation would then respond with their own collective Amen.
[15:23] Lastly, we see that even in heaven, the corporate response is Amen.

This is following a doxology in Revelation 5. I heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and in the sea and all that is in them saying to him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb be blessing and honor and glory and might forever and ever, and the four living creatures said, Amen.
And the elders fell down and worshiped. So, in summary, the Amen was used during Old Testament worship. It's used in heaven in their worship, and it also appears to have been a practice of the apostolic church in the first century.
In fact, let me take you to one more place. This is 1 Corinthians 14, verse 16. Paul says, If you give thanks with your spirit, how can anyone in the position of an outsider say Amen to your thanksgiving when he does not know what you are saying?
So, as Paul lays out some rules for orderly worship, he's explaining that whatever is done, whatever is said, must be intelligible. It must be edifying.

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[16:49] But if, in this case, an outsider comes in, he doesn't have any idea what you're saying because, let's say, you're speaking in tongues, how could he possibly Amen what he's hearing?

You can't affirm or agree with something if you don't understand it. Well, the fact that Paul would so casually refer to someone offering an Amen during worship, even an outsider, would indicate that this was standard practice.
He could mention it in passing without confusing anyone because they were all accustomed to it. And the real irony is that some today might think of people vocalizing their Amens throughout a service as being somewhat disruptive, perhaps even a little on the disorderly side.
Some Christians believe we should sit as still as possible and never say anything out loud, don't make a noise, don't move. But Paul, who is writing to the Corinthian church to bring order to this church, says their current disorder is actually preventing people from offering their Amens.
So clearly, he does not consider the Amen as disruptive or disorderly. As one pastor has said, if you can sit under the faithful preaching of the Word of God and there is never an arising from the heart an Amen to the truth of God's Word, then you are not a Christian.
[18:27] Now that speaks to what we feel. But he goes on to say, Thou shalt not take the name of the Lord thy God in vain. I believe that we can do better.

Don't you want God to be praised? Don't you want people to know that you worship and praise God? Don't you want people to know that you love and believe the truth?
Then, beloved, say the Amen. Amen. Amen. And I'll leave it to that. Next, let's consider the singing in our worship.
And I suppose if any element of worship has created controversy within the church, singing has been it. Should we have musical instruments?
Should we sing hymns or sing Scripture exclusively? Should we have choirs? Can we have a full band? What about traditional hymns versus contemporary music?
[19:26] Over the years, there's been a lot of debate over this subject. Believe it or not, in the latter part of the 17th century, our particular Baptist forefathers debated whether it was appropriate to sing at all in worship.

So, that's probably the place to start. The regulative principle says we need a command to do it, right? So, do we have a biblical command to sing?
And the short answer is yes. In Matthew 26, we see Jesus and his disciples ending the Passover meal and the first Lord's Supper with a song.
They sang a song and went out. 1 Corinthians 4.15, excuse me, 14.15, I will pray with my spirit, but I will pray with my mind also.
I will sing praise with my spirit, but I will sing with my mind also. And in the same chapter, Paul goes on to write, when you come together, each one has a hymn, a lesson, a revelation, a tongue, or an interpretation.
[20:36] Let all things be done for building up. Ephesians 5 says, Do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery, but be filled with the Spirit, addressing one another in psalms, in hymns, in spiritual songs, singing and making melody to the Lord with your heart, giving thanks always and for everything to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Then in Colossians 3, Paul writes, Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs with thankfulness in your hearts to God.
And whatever you do in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through Him. And let's not forget that the book of Revelation shows the saints in heaven singing.
Revelation 5, 9, And they sang a new song, saying, Worthy are you to take the scroll and to open its seals, for you were slain and by your blood you ransomed people for God.
By the way, you might note that they sang a new song. Evidently, they were not bound to singing only recorded scripture. Now today, I don't think anyone would question whether or not we should sing, but let's stop to consider the purpose.
[22:02] Why do we sing? Well, in the passages I've read, there is a clear connection between singing and thanksgiving. We sing because we are thankful.

But we can go even further than that because these passages point to the fact that our singing has actually two audiences. We sing for one another and we sing for God. In Ephesians 5, 19, Paul

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says, we are addressing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs while also singing and making melody to the Lord.
We see something similar in Colossians 3, 16. We are admonishing one another, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs with thankfulness in our hearts to God.
So we are ministering to one another in our singing while directing our praise and our thankfulness to God. Well, in either case, obviously, the words we sing are going to be crucial.
In fact, Colossians says our singing should be from the overflow of the word of Christ dwelling within us. Paul says we should be admonishing one another through our singing in all wisdom.
[23:25] And in Ephesians, he says that we are addressing or teaching one another. So obviously, the words we sing are going to be crucial. They must be true words.

They must be biblical. I don't believe they have to be the word of God verbatim, but the lyrics should be very clearly drawn from the word of God.
This is why at a former church I refused to sing Precious Memories in Worship. It was in our hymn book.
I don't know if you're familiar with that one. But the song was clearly written out of sentimentality, not the truth of Scripture. Precious memories, how they linger, how they ever flood my soul, in the stillness of the midnight, precious, sacred scenes unfold.
I mean, what does that have to do with anything? Mary had a little lamb comes closer to a biblical hymn than that song. And we could certainly put some modern songs under a similar microscope.
[24:35] As a general rule of thumb, if a so-called worship song could be sung to your boyfriend, and if he would have no idea that it was supposed to be about Jesus, then it's probably not suitable for worship.

It simply does not contain enough overt biblical truth to be appropriate for worship. With that said, I do believe variety is good in our singing.
Have you ever wondered why Paul refers to psalms and hymns and spiritual songs? Well, there's a slight distinction to be made between these words. A psalm is a song of praise, typically, I think by definition, played with a stringed instrument.
A hymn is a song with religious content which can be used to praise God, of course, but it's not necessarily written as overt praise. And a song is kind of a generic word.
Any words that can be sung could be a song, which is why Paul very specifically tells us to sing spiritual songs. And then consider again what he says in 1 Corinthians 14.
[25:44] When you come together, each one has a hymn. Now, were they all bringing their favorite hymns? Were they composing their own hymns? I don't really know, but if nothing else, there was some room for variety, he would say.

We just have to remember that whatever we sing must be sung in spirit and in truth. Or, as Paul said, I will sing praise with my spirit, but I will sing with my mind also.
So, of course, worship demands that we sing with sincerity from the heart. And, we must sing according to what we know to be true in Scripture.
Now, what about all of these other questions that people often have regarding singing? What about choirs? What about singing from a hymnal versus singing from a screen? What about musical instruments?
Well, under the regulative principle of worship, how do we determine what is acceptable to God and what's not? Now, I think we can all agree that we must sing because that is the commandment.
[26:59] That is the pattern clearly evident in the New Testament. But, what about the details? So, I've mentioned the distinction between the parts or elements of worship and the circumstances of worship.

And, I think this is as good a place as any to talk about what that difference is. So, the parts or elements of worship are those activities of worship that Scripture commands, either explicitly or implicitly.
the circumstances involve all of those details regarding the elements where we have no clear instructions. For example, we are commanded to worship and we are even taught implicitly that we are to worship on the first day of the week.
But, we are never told what time of day to worship. Should we meet at sunrise? Should we meet at 1030 in the morning? Could we move our worship service to the middle of the afternoon?

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That is what I am calling a circumstance of worship. So, how do we determine the circumstances? Well, let me begin by deferring to the wisdom of our particular Baptist forefathers in the 1689 Baptist Confession.
[28:22] In the first chapter on the Word of God, paragraph six, they write, the whole counsel of God concerning everything essential for his own glory in man's salvation, faith, and life is either explicitly stated or by necessary inference contained in the Holy Scriptures.

Then they go on to say, we recognize that some circumstances concerning the worship of God and government of the church are common to human actions and organizations and are to be ordered by the light of nature and Christian wisdom following the general rules of the Word which must always be observed.
So, first of all, we're told that we have everything we need in the Bible. Some of it is explicit, some of it comes through what they call necessary inference, it's implied.
However, it also says some circumstances concerning the worship of God are to be ordered by the light of nature and Christian wisdom following the general rules of the Word.
So, if the Bible doesn't tell us what time to meet for worship explicitly or implicitly, then we rely on the light of nature, Christian wisdom, and the general rules of the Word.
[29:51] So, first of all, the light of nature. This would be basic human reasoning, if you will. We probably don't want to meet at 3 o'clock in the morning for worship.

Because that's when we're usually asleep, everyone would be too tired, it simply would not work. Well, second, Christian wisdom takes the light of nature one step further by applying reason based on what we know as Christians.
So, the light of nature might tell us that a meeting for worship at 10.30 in the morning is a perfectly reasonable time, but Christian wisdom might add that we should meet again at 5 o'clock in the evening.
Why? Well, because as Christians we understand that Sunday is the Lord's day. Right? It's not the Lord's morning, it's the Lord's day. The fourth commandment tells us to set the day apart, the entire day.
So, why not meet for worship at both the start and the end of the day? Again, this is not a command, but you can understand how Christian wisdom would want to apply it in that way.
[30:59] But light of nature wouldn't necessarily do the same. Now, that might cause someone to ask, well, why don't we just meet for worship all day long then? Right? Well, see rule number one.

The light of nature would tell us that the kids will need a break and some of us will need an afternoon nap. Amen? Amen? And lastly, we consider, most importantly, the general rules of the word.
The circumstances of worship may not be dictated by scripture, but we still have general principles contained in the Bible that we need to consider. Are we doing things decently and in order, as Paul says in 1 Corinthians 14?
Are we edifying the body? Is our worship in reverence and awe of God? Are the circumstances we've chosen really promoting peace and unity in the church, even without clear commands, there's plenty in scripture for us to consider as we're considering circumstances.
So as we're evaluating the circumstances of worship, there may be liberty, there may be some practical flexibility, but at the same time, we must remain faithful and consistent with the Bible.
[32:23] So with that in mind, let's consider some of these questions regarding singing in particular. First, should we have a choir? Some would say the command is to sing, and that is clearly what a choir would be doing.

So could there be anything wrong with it? Well, let's start here. Who does the Bible command to sing? It's the entire church, right?
There's really no distinction. I won't go back through all of the references, but the command is always given to the congregation, the entire congregation. And the examples are always congregational singing throughout the New Testament.
So that's our baseline. That's where we start. If we are to evaluate the use of choirs, we start with the fundamental guideline that the Bible requires all of the congregations to sing.
So the first question we should ask is, do choirs disrupt that? Do they discourage congregational singing? Well, I don't know that I have a definitive answer to that.

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[33:25] But at the very least, we should have reason to pause and really think it through, really consider it. If we go back in church history prior to the Reformation, congregational singing had stopped entirely.

Most of worship had become a spectator event. The choir sang as the people passively watched and listened. Now that's not to say choirs are wrong. That's not proof of anything.
But we certainly want to be careful about embracing circumstances of worship that have even the potential to hinder the biblically prescribed elements of worship.
Right? Perhaps you've noticed that whenever we have a choir sing for us, the men will introduce a new song from time to time or the kids will sing for us at Christmas time.
We always do that outside of the formal worship time. And I believe there's wisdom in that. Maybe that seems overly cautious.
[34:28] But if we've learned nothing else from this study of worship, I hope that it's that we should be very cautious when it comes to our worship of God. God has always been very serious about how people worship Him.

And again, our first thought should not be let's do it until God stops us. Our first thought should always be what does God want?
What does He want us to do? And if there's any question in our mind, wisdom would dictate that we pause and we consider it seriously before moving ahead.
What about hymnals versus screens? Or could we just memorize the songs? That's an option.
What direction does the Bible give us?
You know, I once visited a church that used hymnals, but the hymnals had no musical notes, no annotations whatsoever. They had determined that written music was a modern innovation that wasn't biblical.
[35:33] And if you're wondering how they managed to sing the melodies, well, they only chose songs that they could sing to the tune of Amazing Grace. Every single song they sang was to the tune of Amazing Grace.

And I'll go out on a limb here. This is an assumption, of course, but I'll say that if somebody had suggested to them, well, you're not using notes anyway, let's just put the words up on a screen, I think they would have objected to that.
You see, when we're considering the circumstances of worship, we have to distinguish, first of all, personal preference, opinions, traditions, from biblical guidelines.
There are no guidelines in Scripture that suggest that we can't have music notes. What we do know from the Bible is that the words we sing must be right.
I believe a strong case could be made that some melodies are more appropriate than others, but singing from a book or from a screen, for that, we have a lot of practical concerns, but not necessarily biblical commandments one way or the other.
[36:49] For instance, is it helpful to have notes in front of us as we sing? Probably so, for many of us anyway. But what if we want to sing a song that isn't in our hymnals? What then?

Well, that makes a screen very practical so we can put the words up. In short, the circumstances of worship are not always a matter of right versus wrong.
We like to take it in that direction sometimes, but that's not always the case. Sometimes there is no wrong. Yet, sometimes we need to ask ourselves, is this really best?
It's like Paul in 1 Corinthians 10 when he said, all things are lawful, but not all things are helpful. All things are lawful, but not all things build up.
This is where Christian wisdom applies. And perhaps that's never more true than when we consider our use of musical instruments, which can be a very controversial subject.
[37:50] But looking at the time, let's come back to that next week as we finish up this series on worship. We'll consider the other parts and hopefully wrap up this series.

Let's pray. Heavenly Father, we thank you for this time together considering your word. We thank you for the privilege through your son, the Lord Jesus Christ, and through your spirit that we can come into your presence and we can worship your great name.
We thank you that you've given us direction, but we also ask that you would provide us wisdom, not every subject in life or within the church is always cut and dry, Lord, and we certainly need your help.

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So I pray that you would grant us that wisdom as we go along. Help us to see what is right and true according to your word and maybe what is just a matter of strong preference or taste and help us to distinguish between the two and help us to always be in loving unity with one another as we try to make these determinations whenever they arise.
Lord, we thank you this morning. We ask that you would be with us as we continue into our hour of worship here shortly. We pray this in Christ's name. Amen. Amen.

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