

Does God Care How We Worship?

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[0 : 0 0] So today we leave our study of Baptist history behind, which is not to say we can't return to it at some point in the future, but we will spend the next several weeks considering the subject of worship. Specifically, we want to consider how the church should worship, that is, in our corporate worship together, and whether or not it matters how we worship.

Now, last Sunday I was talking with Bruce Johnson and told him that we'd begin a new study this week, and I said I would attempt to answer the question, how should the church worship? And he was very quick to reply, in spirit and truth. And while I am more than willing to give him a passing grade for his answer, his answer, though biblically correct, leads to further questions. Namely, what does it mean to worship in spirit and truth? And I will tell you up front that I'm being helped tremendously by two sources in particular. The first is a book called Does God Care How We Worship by Ligon Duncan.

I'd hold it up for you, but it's on my Kindle. And the second is a book by Sam Waldron called How Then Should We Worship? I've read from more than these two, but if you're looking to dig deeper into the subject after all is said and done, I can recommend both of these. So let me begin by reading a paragraph from the 1689 Baptist Confession. This is the first paragraph of the chapter on religious worship and the Sabbath day. Here's what it says. The light of nature demonstrates that there is a God who has lordship and sovereignty over all. He is just and good and does good to everyone.

Therefore, he should be feared, loved, praised, called on, trusted in, and served with all the heart and all the soul and all the strength. But the acceptable way to worship the true God is instituted by him, and it is delimited by his own revealed will. Thus, he may not be worshiped according to human imagination or inventions or the suggestions of Satan, nor through any visible representations, nor in any other way that is not prescribed in the Holy Scriptures. So the confession makes the very simple argument that only God can rightfully determine how he should be worshiped. And I suspect that makes complete sense to most of us. In fact, most of us have probably never considered that it would ever be acceptable for man to decide for himself how God should be worshiped. However, this has not always been the case, and frankly, it isn't always the case today. Many throughout church history have taken it upon themselves to worship God as they see fit, whether Scripture provides any warrant for it or not.

In fact, this is why the chapter of the Baptist Confession begins with the paragraph I just read. The proper worship of God was the primary debate between the Anglicans and the Puritans in the 17th century. So the Anglican Church of England said, and this is a direct quote from their 39 articles, the church hath power to decree rites or ceremonies and authority in controversies of faith, and yet it is not lawful for the church to ordain anything contrary to God's Word written.

[3 : 4 2] Now, when you read that last sentence, you might be tempted to overlook the weight of the first sentence and think, oh, they're not willing to go beyond the scope of Scripture. That's good.

So what objections did the Puritans have to this? Well, the Puritans, in essence, said true worship is only what God commands in the Bible. But that's not what the Anglican Church was saying.

The Church of England said true worship is only what God commands in the Bible, plus anything the Bible doesn't expressly forbid. So they believe the church should worship as God commands, but they also believe they had a right to add to what God commands as long as he doesn't explicitly forbid what they are wanting to add. So if we flip this around, the Puritans said, false worship is anything not commanded by God. And the Anglican said false worship is only what God condemns. Do you hear the difference? Obviously, the particular Baptists of the 17th century, they agreed with the Puritan view on this, and that's why we have this paragraph in our confession. And again, they write, this is part of it, the acceptable way to worship the true God is instituted by him.

And it is delimited by his own revealed will. Thus, he may not be worshiped according to human imagination or inventions or the suggestions of Satan, nor through any visible representations, nor in any way that is not prescribed in the Holy Scriptures. Well, were they right about this?

Several years ago, I followed a website that would share video clips of some of the wildest antics you can imagine from churches all over the country. One video showed a preacher becoming so animated and upset during a sermon, they kicked over the lectern. Another showed a pastor flying onto the stage using some aerial harness. I've seen many examples of churches hosting movie-themed worship services. Star Wars has been a popular choice. But even if we set aside the most outrageous and silly examples, the church has long wrestled with the question, what is the proper way to worship God?

[6 : 16] And I'll give you just a few examples from throughout church history. Now, there are examples I could give from even earlier than this, but let's start in the 8th century when churches began to debate the use of images and icons. Some people believed images such as crucifixions or paintings of Christ were a help to people in worship.

They claimed that it aided in their devotion to Christ. Others, however, argued that images were a violation of the second commandment. They said, you shall not make for yourself a carved image or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above or in the earth beneath.

And so, they said it was idolatry. Even images of Christ were a form of idolatry. By the late Middle Ages, many things were added to worship, many of which were borrowed from worship under the old covenant, such as burning incense. They also incorporated a lot of elaborate ceremonialism, especially during the Lord's Supper.

So, worship became the function of primarily the clergy in the church, while everybody else just sat and watched it happen. They weren't participating in this worship.

And this led to the Protestant Reformers accusing the Catholic Church of obscuring true and proper worship through all of these human innovations. Then, in the 16th century, we see even the Reformers going in separate directions when it comes to worship.

[7 : 52] Martin Luther, for example, he held to what is called the normative principle, and we're going to talk about this more later, which says the church can worship however they want as long as it's not forbidden in Scripture.

But Zwingli, later Calvin and others, they argued for the regulative principle, which says the church can worship only as God commands.

And this debate touched on lots of aspects of worship, including the use of images and vestments, or the clothing that the clergy would wear, music, even the structure of the service.

As we move into the 17th century, the Puritans objected to the use of the Book of Common Prayer in the Church of England. Not only did they object to set liturgies imposed by the governing authorities, essentially, but they also took issue with some very specific practices, such as the sign of the cross in baptism, kneeling during communion.

Of course, the Puritans and later Presbyterians would go on to write the Westminster Confession, which has a nearly identical paragraph in their confession to the one I read from ours.

[9 : 08] As for the Baptists in the later part of the 17th century, hymn singing became very controversial. They all agreed that the church should sing, but the question was, what do we sing?

What's appropriate to sing? You see, the safe bet was to sing from the inspired words of the Psalter. But men like Benjamin Keech, who was an avid hymn writer himself, came along and argued that the Bible does, in fact, instruct us to sing more than the Psalms.

As Paul told the Colossians, let the Word of Christ dwell in you richly, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs. Keech essentially said, of course we should sing more than the Psalms of the Old Testament.

After all, we have a much clearer view of Christ and His finished work. Why shouldn't we write new songs on this side of the cross? The Great Awakening during the 18th century sparked all kinds of debates about the place of emotions in worship, not to mention the proper style of preaching.

Should the preaching be very serious and studious, or should it be dramatic, you know, and stir the emotions of the congregation? In the 19th century, Charles Finney and others, they moved to a more pragmatic approach regarding worship, in which all that really mattered were the results.

[10 : 41] Then in the 20th century, some Protestant churches began kind of reverting back to a more formal liturgy of the past, while even more churches moved into a more contemporary, sometimes even secular, style of worship.

I mean, you can name any element of worship, and chances are people in the church have debated over it, if not split over it at one time or another.

In fact, I tested this theory. I went to Google this week, and I typed, summary of historic church debates over, insert subject here, singing, musical instruments, preaching, praying, clothing, buildings, the color of your Bible.

I'm fairly certain that I ran out of ideas for potential debates long before Google ran out of results for actual debates. Years ago, there was a movement that seemed to get popular for a while that claimed that the Bible doesn't teach a so-called worship service at all.

So services that focus on preaching, making any distinction at all between pastors and other members of the church, having really any kind of formal worship with any set liturgy or structure, dressing up for worship, even having a building for church gatherings.

[12 : 08] According to the purveyors of this movement, this is not true Christianity. The point is, there have always been disputes over what constitutes proper worship, and there will always be disputes.

There will always be new controversies and new ideas about how the church should worship. It seemed like through the late 90s and early 2000s, if you could come up with a clever way to show how the church has been doing it wrong for the last 2,000 years, you had a best-selling book on your hand.

Now, that's anecdotal and probably somewhat exaggerated, but that's how it felt for a while. So how do we discern what's appropriate and what's not?

What does it mean to worship in spirit and truth? And when the next controversy comes along, how will we know what to do? Well, that's what this study is all about.

And today, before I lay out any explicit principles regarding worship, I simply want to prove from Scripture that God does, in fact, care how we worship Him.

[13 : 17] Listen to what Duncan says. The single greatest obstacle to the reform of worship in the evangelical church today is evangelicalism's general belief that New Testament Christians have few or no particular directions about how we are to worship God corporately.

What elements belong in worship? What elements must always be present in well-ordered worship? What things do not belong in worship? A bit later, he writes, evangelicals do think that worship matters, but they also view worship as a means to some other end than that of the glorification and enjoyment of God.

Some view worship as evangelism, thus misunderstanding its goal. Some think that a person's heart, intentions, motives, and sincerity are the only things important in how we worship, thus downplaying the Bible's standards, principles, and rules for worship.

And some view the emotional product of the worship experience as the prime factor in good worship, thus overstressing the subjective and often unwittingly imposing particular cultural opinions about emotional expression on all worshipers.

evangelicals believe these things about worship, but they do not think that there are many biblical principles about how to worship or what we are to do or not do in worship.

[14 : 53] Then Duncan goes on to describe some of the prevailing assumptions about worship within contemporary evangelicalism, and he concludes this section by writing, Not surprisingly, these assumptions help an evangelicalism enveloped in a culture of individualism, relativism, and situationalism remain in its approach to the gathered worship of God's people strong on the individual, weak on the corporate, strong on the subjective, weak on the objective, strong on the heart, weak on the principles.

In other words, if I were to summarize this, many people in the church today believe that worship is in fact important, but they're not overly concerned with what God himself says about worship.

They've essentially separated God's word from worship as though God's word offers no instruction on the matter. Now, anyone who has read the Old Testament knows that God had very specific instructions about how his people worship him.

But the prevailing thought today seems to be that that Christian liberty under the new covenant means that God no longer cares how we worship. There are no rules as long as our motivations are right and maybe we feel something when we worship.

Then again, what did Jesus tell that Samaritan woman in John 4? God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship him in spirit and truth.

[16 : 36] Worshiping God in truth would imply that true worship of him is in fact objective. There is a standard. In other words, there is a right way and there is a wrong way to worship him.

But again, for now, let's just focus on the fact that God does care how we worship him. Now, this is very obvious as we read through the Old Testament, but if you want to go with me, turn in your Bible to Exodus chapter 25.

Exodus 25 comes after God has freed his people from their slavery in Egypt.

And you may remember that God always attached a specific purpose to that freedom. It was never, let my freedom go, or let my people go because freedom is good, or for freedom's sake, or let my people go so they can do whatever they like.

It was always, let my people go that they may hold a feast to me in the wilderness. In other words, let my people go that they may worship me.

[17 : 50] By the way, this is true whenever God saves a person. The Lord never says, I saved you, now you're free to do whatever you like. No, it's always, I saved you, now you're free to worship me.

Read Romans 6. It's, Christ redeems slaves of sin to become slaves of righteousness. Paul says, thanks be to God that you who were once slaves of sin have become obedient from the heart to the standard of teaching to which you were committed.

And having been set free from sin have become slaves of righteousness. So, once the Israelites are freed from their slavery, God begins establishing how they will worship him.

And this begins with the construction of the tabernacle. The Lord said to Moses, speak to the people of Israel that they take for me a contribution.

From every man whose heart moves him, you shall receive the contribution for me. Skipping down to verse 8. And let them make me a sanctuary that I may dwell in their midst, exactly as I show you concerning the pattern of the tabernacle and of all its furniture.

[19 : 06] So shall you make it. So, let's start by highlighting the obvious here. God did not give his people freedom to worship however they like.

He gives them very specific instructions. And those instructions are actually laid out over the next 15 chapters or so. Even here in the passage we've just read, we see that God addresses three aspects of worship, the standard, the motivation, and the goal.

So, first of all, God requires that those who worship him be willing to worship him. Verse 2, from every man whose heart moves him, you shall receive the contribution for me.

God has never wanted his people to merely go through the motions of worship. He wants our hearts. So, that's the motivation behind our worship. And this is important to remember once we come to the standard or the instructions for worship.

Even more than duty, it should be our pleasure to worship God and to worship him as he directs.

[20 : 19] Second, the goal of worship is to commune with God. Verse 8, let them make me a sanctuary that I may dwell in their midst. So, unlike the dead idols of paganism, we have a living God who wants to be with us and we with him.

And third, we have the standard. Verse 9, exactly as I show you concerning the pattern or the plan of the tabernacle and all its furniture, so you shall make it.

Now, God would certainly use the resources and the skills and the craftsmanship of the people, but he would not permit them to build this tabernacle however they wanted.

He had a very specific design for it. And for its use once it was complete. But this is where many people will argue that God was strict about worship in the Old Testament under the law of Moses, yet things are different now under the new covenant.

For some, if we're being candid, this argument stems from an ignorance of Scripture. But for others, the argument is that tabernacle worship had a very unique place and time that Christ fulfilled the types and shadows of tabernacle worship and that while tabernacle worship contains good principles for us to follow, we're not held to the same standards, almost as though God no longer gives positive commands regarding how we should worship Him.

[22 : 00] Is that true? Well, Christ has fulfilled the types and shadows of Old Covenant worship. The book of Hebrews shows us that Christ was the fulfillment of the tabernacle's structure and purpose.

But was tabernacle worship the only time that God gave His people a standard for worship? If you will, jump back to the book of Genesis.

Turn to Genesis chapter 4. Here we read about Cain and Abel who were of only the second generation after God's creation of the very first man and woman.

So this is very early in history and it is well before God gave His people the ceremonial laws through Moses. And let's look at what happens.

Now Adam knew Eve, his wife, and she conceived and bore Cain, saying, I have gotten a man with the help of the Lord. And again she bore his brother Abel.

[23 : 08] Now Abel was a keeper of sheep and Cain a worker of the ground. In the course of time, Cain brought to the Lord an offering of the fruit of the ground and Abel also brought of the firstborn of his flock and of their fat portions.

And the Lord had regard for Abel and his offering, but for Cain and his offering he had no regard. So Cain was very angry and his face fell.

So these brothers, they are bringing offerings to God as a form of worship, but as we're told, the Lord had regard for Abel and his offering, but for Cain and his offering he had no regard.

Now some have speculated that God was displeased with Cain because of what he offered. Perhaps he failed to give his first fruits, but the greater issue seems to be his heart.

Obviously he quickly becomes angry and he soon murders his brother, which certainly suggests a hardness of heart. The book of Hebrews tells us that by faith Abel offered to God a more acceptable sacrifice than Cain, which would suggest that maybe Cain's offering was not made by faith.

[24 : 25] Then both the Apostle John and Jude in the New Testament, they speak of Cain's works as evil and other ungodly people as walking in the way of Cain. So I believe it's fair to say his motivation for worship fell short of what God wanted, if not the standard of his worship or the way he worshiped.

Regardless, here we have, at nearly the beginning of the Bible, again, long before the law of Moses, an example of men worshiping God and more to the point, God either accepting or rejecting that worship.

Now we might ask how were Cain and Abel to know God's standards for true worship if they didn't yet have his instructions like the ones that were given to Israel through Moses? Frankly, we don't know.

Maybe the Lord did give them explicit instructions that aren't recorded for us in Scripture, but at the very least, they knew the seriousness of sin. They knew that sacrifice was necessary for covering our shame.

You remember God sacrificed an animal to cover Adam and Eve, and they knew the promise of the coming Redeemer. Genesis 3.15. Regardless, God clearly had a standard for worship, and he holds them accountable for it.

[25 : 56] And here's the point I want to make. It's not as though the only time God had a standard for worship was between the time of Moses and the time of Christ.

So, we might think of worship, we might think of it similar to the way we think about marriage. And what do I mean by that? Well, you know the creation story.

God made Adam and Eve, and at the end of Genesis 2, he says, therefore, a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh.

That's God's standard for marriage. One man, one woman joined in covenantal union for all of life, right? But then, sinful humanity quickly twists and distorts God's standard for marriage.

Men marry multiple women, men leave their wives, men sleep with concubines, there's homosexuality. So, when God gives his law through Moses, he addresses all of these issues, of course.

[27 : 04] He puts explicit restraints on people regarding marriage. Well, during the ministry of Christ, the Pharisees approach Jesus and they ask about divorce.

Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any cause? Now, the answer may seem obvious to us, and I believe it is, but the Pharisees are primarily thinking about something said in Deuteronomy 24, and that's when the law permitted men to legally divorce their wives, though, if you read it carefully, it actually regulated the practice to prevent further injustice.

So, anyway, how does Jesus respond to the Pharisees? He said, have you not read that he who created them from the beginning made them male and female, and said, therefore, a man shall leave his father and mother, and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh?

So, they are no longer two but one flesh. What, therefore, God has joined together, let not man separate. And then he goes on to say, because of your hardness of heart, Moses allowed you to divorce your wives, but from the beginning it was not so.

So, you see, God had a standard or a moral law for marriage from the very beginning. God it's not as though he waited until he watched men divorcing their wives and marrying multiple women and so on before he decided, you know, maybe I should make a few rules to govern this.

[28 : 47] The same was true for the entirety of the Ten Commandments. Exodus 20, when the Ten Commandments were given, was not the moment when God decided it was wrong to worship false gods or to worship idols or to disregard the Sabbath or to murder people.

These things were always wrong. These laws were built into creation itself. They are reflections of God's own character. So, they were a standard, if you will, before the law of Moses and they remain a standard to this day.

This is true for marriage. marriage. It's true for the Sabbath. It's true for all of the Ten Commandments and it's true for worship. God held Cain accountable for his unacceptable worship long before Moses because he already had a standard for true and proper worship.

So, we really can't argue that God cared about precise worship only between the time of Moses and the time of Christ when the ceremonial law was in force.

The story of Cain and Abel shows us that he cared before the law of Moses. He had a standard before the law of Moses. Now, if you will, turn over to Exodus 20 and let's consider what God says about worship in the Ten Commandments.

[30 : 22] Specifically, let's look at the first two of the Ten Commandments. And God spoke all these words saying, I am the Lord your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery.

You shall have no other gods before me. You shall not make for yourself a carved image or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above or that is in the earth beneath or that is in the water under the earth.

You shall not bow down to them or serve them. For I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me, but showing steadfast love to thousands of those who love me and keep my commandments.

So, these commandments effectively accomplish two things. First, they teach us something about God. They teach us something about his character and his nature. And second, they teach us how we should think about God and how we are to worship him.

So, with the first commandment, we learn that there is only one God. And subsequently, we are forbidden from diverting our attention away from this one God.

[31 : 47] We are not permitted here to inject our own creativity into worship. If it violates God's design, there is one God and this one God has the authority to prescribe true and proper worship, and we as his creatures do not have the authority to turn worship into whatever we want.

You shall have no other gods before me, he says. It's me. It's my way. And with the second commandment, this is all made even clearer.

You shall not make for yourself a carved image of any likeness of anything that is in heaven above or the earth beneath or that is in the water under the earth.

Now, to be clear, this would include not only images of false gods, which is the first thing we think about, but images of God himself. In Deuteronomy 4, we read, watch yourselves very carefully, since you saw no form on the day that the Lord spoke to you at Horeb out of the midst of the fire, beware lest you act corruptly by making a carved image for yourselves.

They had not seen God. So, practically speaking, they couldn't create an image of him anyhow. But more to the point, God is telling them not to exceed what he reveals.

[33 : 19] While God has given us creativity, and he does allow certain liberties, especially under the new covenant, he still sets boundaries. And what is the boundary line?

Well, it's what he reveals to us. It's what he explicitly shows us. So, in the case of carved images, God tells the Israelites not to make them.

He did not reveal his appearance to them, and he does not want them to take it upon themselves, no matter how sincere their motives, to attempt to create any likeness of him.

So, once again, here in the moral law, not the ceremonial law, this is not tabernacle worship exclusively, God has a standard for worship, which stems from the character of God himself.

And because it stems from the character of our eternal God, it's a standard that predates the ceremonial law, and it is binding even after Christ fulfills the ceremonial law.

[34 : 26] This is why John, in the New Testament, concludes his epistle with that simple, yet somewhat abrupt, almost seemingly out-of-place statement where he just concludes the letter with little children, keep yourselves from idols.

The end. Well, our eternal God is the only true and living God, and he is a jealous God.

So, any form of idolatry, it was wrong before the tabernacle, and it is wrong after the tabernacle. evil. And even in the case of people creating images of God, supposedly for the purpose of worshipping God, God says, this is evil.

Why? Well, it takes what is holy and treats it as common. He didn't reveal his appearance, according to Deuteronomy 4, and if he doesn't reveal it, be it his form, or his will, or his commands, or his standards for worship, and we do it anyhow, well, what are we really doing?

In effect, we are saying that what God has revealed is insufficient, and we are taking it upon ourselves to complete what he supposedly left undone.

[35 : 52] In the case of images made of God, the idol maker is saying, you know, God chose not to reveal his form to us, but I don't think that's good.

We really need to see him. So, I will presume to know how to capture his likeness with nothing more than wood or stone. You see how presumptuous that is?

And what's God's response to that? In Deuteronomy 4, he says, for the Lord your God is a consuming fire, a jealous God. God. He then threatens to destroy anyone who angers him by making a carved image.

Of course, an idol's primary purpose is for its use in worship, right? So, all of these biblical prohibitions against idolatry relate directly to the subject of worship, specifically how God wants us to worship.

worship. Now, someone might argue, I don't think a Star Wars-themed worship service is the same as idol worship.

[37 : 03] And arguably, it's not the same. But what if we evaluate both by what God has revealed, first, about himself, and second, about how he wants us to worship him?

And at the same time, what if we evaluate both while bearing in mind that God very clearly cares a great deal about how we worship him?

In other words, worship is not a trivial matter to him. And I hope to continue bearing this out over the next several weeks. We haven't even really gotten into the New Testament yet.

But for now, let's pray. Our holy God, no creature can improve upon your glory.

And you've not left us to guess who you are. You have spoken. You have revealed yourself. You have commanded us to worship you in spirit and in truth.

[38 : 09] So teach us by your spirit to tremble at your word and to delight in your ways, what you have revealed. Purify our motives that we would worship willingly and joyfully, not to be seen by men, not to satisfy our own preferences, but to honor you.

And as we continue this study, help us so that our worship as a church would be pleasing in your sight through Jesus Christ. And we ask these things in his name.

Amen. Amen. Amen.■■■■ Thank you.