

## Which Regulative Principle? A Response to Steve Schlissel and Brian Schwertley

By the Rev. Peter J. Wallace

In his occasional papers, known as *Messiah's Mandate*, Steve Schlissel has recently challenged the Regulative Principle of Worship (namely that, in worship, we must not do anything except that which God has commanded). More precisely, Schlissel has challenged a particular version of the Regulative Principle--that held by Brian Schwertley and those who believe that the Regulative Principle prohibits instruments and hymns in public worship. I would suggest that while Schlissel's challenge should provide significant problems for Schwertley, it does not cause the least trouble for a redemptive-historical understanding of the Regulative Principle.

I would suggest that a redemptive-historical understanding of the Regulative Principle leads us to see that temple worship was the basic model for early Christian worship--not merely the daily ritual in the temple, but especially the covenant renewals that had been described in Scripture. The influence of the synagogue was significant, but only reinforced the temple pattern because the synagogue was not itself viewed as worship, but rather was designed to prepare God's people for temple worship.

This redemptive-historical understanding of the Regulative Principle will probably not satisfy most Covenanters, but I believe that it accounts for the biblical material far better than either Schlissel or Schwertley--*and* remains solidly within the Reformed confessional tradition. The Westminster Confession of Faith (1646) distinguishes between the institution of worship and the circumstances of worship:

...But the acceptable way of worshiping the true God is instituted by himself, and so limited by his own revealed will, that he may not be worshiped according to the imaginations and devices of men, or the suggestions of Satan, under any visible representation, or any other way not prescribed in the Holy Scripture. (21.1)

The reading of the Scriptures with godly fear, the sound preaching and conscionable hearing of the Word, in obedience unto God, with understanding, faith, and reverence, singing of psalms with grace in the heart; as also, the due administration and worthy receiving of the sacraments instituted by Christ, are all parts of the ordinary religious worship of God: beside religious oaths, vows, solemn fastings, and thanksgivings upon special occasions, which are, in their several times and seasons, to be used in an holy and religious manner. (21.5)

...There are some circumstances concerning the worship of God, and government of the church, common to human actions and societies, which are to be ordered by the light of nature, and Christian prudence, according to the general rules of the Word, which are always to be observed. (1.6)

In the same way the Second Helvetic Confession (1566) teaches that we are to worship in the manner that God himself has appointed, and yet recognizes that there are "things indifferent" with respect to the ceremonies and rites of the church:

...But we teach that God is to be adored and worshiped as he himself has taught us to worship, namely, in spirit and in truth (John 4:23 f.), not with any superstition, but with sincerity, according to his Word; lest at any time he should say to us: Who has required these things from your hands? (Isa. 1:12; Jer. 6:20). For Paul also says: God is not served by human hands, as though he needed anything, etc. (Acts 17:25). (Chapter 5)

...The more the mass of rites is increased in the Church, the more is detracted not only from Christian liberty, but also from Christ, and from faith in him, as long as the people seek those things in ceremonies which they should seek in the only Son of God, Jesus Christ, through faith. Wherefore a few moderate and simple rites, that are not contrary to the Word of God, are sufficient for the godly....

Things Indifferent. But at the same time we admonish men to be on guard lest they reckon among things indifferent what are in fact not indifferent, as some are wont to regard the mass and the use of images in places of worship as things indifferent. "Indifferent," wrote Jerome to Augustine, "is that which is neither good nor bad, so that, whether you do it or not, you are neither just nor unjust." Therefore, when things indifferent are wrested to the confession of faith, they cease to be free; as Paul shows that it is lawful for a man to eat flesh if someone does not remind him that it was offered to idols, for then it is unlawful, because he who eats it seems to approve idolatry by eating it (I Cor. 8:9 ff.; 10:25 ff.). (Chapter 27)

The Belgic Confession (1561) is more succinct:

In the meantime we believe, though it is useful and beneficial that those who are rulers of the Church institute and establish certain ordinances among themselves for maintaining the body of the Church, yet that they ought studiously to take care that they do not depart from those things which Christ, our only Master, has instituted. And therefore we reject all human inventions, and all laws which man would introduce into the worship of God, thereby to bind and compel the conscience in any manner whatever. Therefore we admit only of that which tends to nourish and preserve concord and unity, and to keep all men in obedience to God. For this purpose, excommunication or church discipline is requisite, with all that pertains to it, according to the Word of God. (Chapter 32)

The Reformed tradition speaks with one voice that worship is to be conducted according to the Word of God, and that no mere human invention may be introduced into the worship of God. Nonetheless, the Reformed tradition is equally clear that the circumstances/ceremonies of worship include things "indifferent" which may be ordered as the church sees fit. Wisely, they refrained from attempting to be exhaustive, but satisfied themselves with setting forth those general principles that could be clearly demonstrated from Scripture.

Much of the discussion of the Regulative Principle of Worship today has lost its connection with the Reformation's understanding of worship. The sixteenth century Reformers were attempting to fend off two different liturgical heresies: the Roman Catholics--who argued for worship based on human tradition; and the Anabaptist--who argued for worship based solely on the explicit command of the New Testament. The Reformed insisted that a truly biblical understanding of worship demanded a more nuanced biblical argument including an understanding of the whole scope of biblical teaching.

In the end, I am somewhat sympathetic to Schlissel's concerns--and I agree that historic uses of the RPW have often torn verses out of context and missed the redemptive historical flow of Scripture. But Schlissel's dependence upon the synagogue vitiates his Informed Principle of Worship for the simple reason that the synagogue did not worship! And while Brian Schwertley may reject Schlissel's whole argument, he ends up making the same basic error that Schlissel does--namely, confusing the Sabbath assemblies of the synagogue with biblical worship.

## **1. The Informed Principle of Worship and the Synagogue**

Schlissel sets forth what he called the "Informed Principle of Worship" as follows:

**"Major premise:** There are no inscripturated commands concerning the elements, order or performers required for lawful synagogue worship services, and no full, explicitly normative examples of such prior to the appearance of the institution.

**Minor premise:** Jesus, the perfectly righteous one, regularly--religiously--participated in synagogue worship, which had been pretty well codified before His incarnation.

**Conclusion:** Therefore, the rule of righteousness in worship cannot be: if God has not commanded it, it is forbidden."

This argument is perfectly sound--IF synagogue "worship" is properly considered to be the equivalent either of temple worship or of Christian worship. But this is not the case. I would contend that a careful study of the ancient sources reveals that the synagogue was to the temple what Sunday school is to our worship today. Prior to the destruction of the temple, it was the original "Sabbath School."

Recent scholarship reveals that the earliest synagogues did not meet for worship, which should not surprise us because according to the Scriptures true worship could only occur in the temple (or more precisely, in the place that God chose). Indeed, the language of worship was only applied to the synagogue after the destruction in the temple in 70 AD. Older scholars such as Alfred Edersheim and H. H. Rowley tended to conceive of the synagogue in terms of worship--leading even the finest exponent of Reformed worship, Hughes Oliphant Old, to say that "synagogue worship" was the model for early Christian worship (Old, p43). Schwertley's attempt to establish the existence of Old Testament synagogues based upon Psalm 74:8 and Acts 15:21 may be true (although the "meeting places of God" in Psalm 74:8 are obscure), but it still does not prove that the synogogue engaged in worship.

Most of the references to the synagogue before the destruction of the Temple speak in terms of the study of Scripture. Indeed, Philo and Josephus referred to the synagogues as schools (Rowley, p229), and many of the synagogues of the second and third centuries before Christ appear to have been little more than community centers in which Jews-like other groups within the Greco-Roman world-formed associations for mutual benefit and encouragement (Fine, 1997, p62). Indeed Fine points out that the only references to the synagogue as a place of prayer come from Egypt until after the destruction of the temple. In fact, the few references that we have to these synagogues indicates that their services were closer to the modern prayer meeting or bible study than anything that a Jew would mistake for worship.

The book of Acts never describes the synagogue meeting as worship, but merely identifies certain persons as those who "worshipped God" (Acts 16:14, 18:7). The term is better translated "God-fearers." The word here is *sebwo*--which has more of a reference to piety than formal worship (*proskuneo*--which is generally used when the NT wishes to refer to temple worship). For instance, John 4 regularly uses the word *proskuneo* in Jesus' discussion with the Samaritan woman (along with the worship that is given to Jesus during his ministry--which is entirely appropriate since he is the new temple), whereas Acts uses *sebwo* to refer to God-fearing Gentiles. Indeed the problem with God-fearers is that they are not able to worship God in the full sense because they are not circumcised. They cannot participate in temple worship. In other words, before the coming of Christ *sebwo* could only become *proskuneo* through the prescribed means of circumcision. The New Testament frequently uses *proskuneo* to refer to temple worship and *latreuo* to refer to the disposition or action of worship and service that exists within the faithful (though it can also be intimately connected to the idea of temple worship--cf. Heb. 9:1, 14; 10:2; Acts 24:14; Rev. 7:15, etc.). The famous passage in Romans 12:1-2, for instance, uses the term *latreia* when it says: "present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God, which is your reasonable service." The idea here is that because of the work of Christ (Romans 1-11), the disposition of the true worshiper of God must be "transformed by the renewing of your mind" according to the heavenly

pattern. Or to put it in terms of worship, your latreuw is the daily disposition or action that results from participation in the heavenly proskunew. The fact that the English language uses one word to describe these three *very* different Greek words is not helpful! It has led to the modern American error that thinks of all of life as one undifferentiated mode of worship.

The synagogue in the time of Christ does not seem to have fallen into this error! They understood that whatever they did in the synagogue was fundamentally dependent upon the temple. The synagogue was designed to train the Jews to avoid the mistakes of their fathers. Indeed, it was designed to prepare the people of Israel for temple worship. The synagogue was a school for understanding the Law with all of its sacrifices, feasts, and purity rituals. Therefore the synagogue was definitely *not* a place where worship took place. It was (at least in theory) under the authority of the temple, because the copies of the Law used in the synagogues had to be approved by the temple officials--which demonstrates the connection between the two institutions.

But *after* the destruction of the temple, the rabbis began to think of the synagogue as the temporary replacement for the temple: "Synagogues are holy because they share in the sanctity of the temple" (cited in Fine, 1997, p26). Indeed, the synagogue-which may have used portions of the temple liturgy as a teaching tool-now began to think of its meetings as real worship. As Fine puts it, "Prayer modeled on the Temple liturgy was an essential factor in the sanctification of the synagogue from the late first century to the early third century CE" (p27). But Fine also points out that no evidence can be found that anyone considered the synagogue meetings to be "worship" prior to the destruction of the temple.

Hence it becomes clear that only *after* the destruction of the temple did the synagogue service begin to be called "worship" (and they did start calling it proskunew). The sacrifices could not be performed in the synagogue, but everything else remained. Prior to AD 70 it is quite likely that some of these elements had existed in the synagogue (since one of the purposes of the synagogue was to train people for temple worship), but there is *no evidence* for anything beyond teaching and some public prayer in the synagogue. The elaborate liturgies of the synagogue plainly emerged after the destruction of the temple.

Of course, this all fits with the centrality of the temple in Old Testament worship. God had specified that his people should worship only in the place that he chose (Deuteronomy 12). Therefore it is actually false to say that Jesus regularly worshiped in the synagogue-because no one *worshiped* in the synagogue! The synagogue was designed to train people how to worship-it was the Sabbath school of the Jews. Jesus regularly *attended* the synagogue because it was a place of instruction and teaching-and the purpose of his early ministry was to preach the kingdom of God (cf. Luke 4).

Jesus himself did not conceive of the synagogue as "worship." Remember Jesus' conversation with the Samaritan woman in John 4:20-21: "Our fathers worshiped on this mountain; and you say that in Jerusalem is the place where one ought to worship. Jesus said to her, Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when you shall neither on this mountain, nor in Jerusalem, worship the Father." Jesus here makes it clear that until he establishes the new temple, Jerusalem is still the true place of worship. Jesus does not think of the synagogue as worship, otherwise he could have told the woman that the synagogue was also an acceptable place of worship. The reason why Jesus and the Samaritan woman do not consider the synagogue to be a place of worship is because they both understood that true worship requires a sacrifice.

Therefore Schlissel's claim to have defeated the Regulative Principle falls to the ground because neither Jesus nor the Jews considered themselves to be "worshiping" in the synagogue. His "Informed Principle of Worship" is based upon a misunderstanding of the synagogue, a misunderstanding shared by Schwertley. The result is that neither of them seems to understand the biblical pattern of worship.

The biblical pattern of worship is revealed in several places, most clearly in 2 Chronicles 5-7. A comparison with the synagogue worship that existed in the second century AD is instructive:

### **Temple Worship (2 Chron. 5-7)**

Assembling for Worship

Burnt Offerings

Enter God's Presence

Psalm of Praise

Word of God read and preached

Prayer of the Covenant Community

Fire consumes the sacrifices/glory fills the temple

Psalm of Praise

Peace Offerings

Benediction

### **Synagogue Worship Post AD 70**

Assembling for Worship

Psalms

Prayer of the Covenant Community

Benediction (if a priest was present)

Word of God read and preached

Psalms

Closing Prayer

Since the temple no longer stood, the rabbis developed liturgies for the synagogue that would prepare the people for the day when the temple would be rebuilt. The Jewish liturgical calendar soon included special services for all of the feast days, now that the temple was no longer available. Alfred Edersheim, whom Schlissel cites frequently--points out that every synagogue service called the people of God to remember Jerusalem and to pray for (and toward) God's temple (as Solomon had commanded--2 Chron. 6). Included in the regular instruction of the synagogue was an explanation of the meaning of the sacrifices (and remember that all of these quotes come from after the destruction of the temple):

"And Moses ben Nachmann: 'I gave the soul for you on the altar, that the soul of the animal should be an atonement for the soul of the man.' These quotations might be almost indefinitely multiplied. Another phase of Scriptural truth appears in such Rabbinical statements as that by the imposition of hands: 'The offerer, as it were, puts away his sins from himself, and transfers them upon the living animal'; and that, 'as often as any one sins with his soul, whether from hate or malice, he puts away his sin from himself, and places it upon the head of his sacrifice, and it is an atonement for him.' Hence, also, the principal laid down by Abarbanel, that, 'after the prayer of confession (connected with the imposition of hands) the sins of the children of Israel lay on the sacrifice (of the Day of Atonement).'" [ccel.org/e/edersheim/temple]

As Edersheim concludes: "In view of all this, the deep-felt want so often expressed by the Synagogue is most touching. In the liturgy for the Day of Atonement we read: 'While the altar and the sanctuary were still in their places, we were atoned for by the goats, designated by lot. But now for our guilt, if Jehovah be pleased to destroy us, He takes from our hand neither burnt-offering nor sacrifice.'" [ccel.org/e/edersheim/temple]

Of course these sacrifices could not be offered in the synagogue. They describe temple worship. The whole point of the synagogue was to teach the people the meaning of temple worship, so that they would be prepared when God restored the temple in Jerusalem.

There is a clear implication of this: if the synagogue did not conduct "worship services" prior to 70 AD, then early Christian worship could not have been based upon synagogue worship! This is not to

say that the synagogue had no influence on Christian worship and polity. The evidence seems rather clear that the structure of the Jewish communities played a significant role in the shaping of early Christian communities, and the daily teaching of the apostles probably was structured in a similar fashion to the daily teaching in the synagogue; but the pattern of worship of the early church does not match the pattern of the synagogue because the church had an altar (Heb 13:10)! There is no evidence for a physical altar in the early church because they understood that it was the heavenly altar in which they partook. Schlissel cites this very text without realizing the implications. If the early church had a spiritual altar, then they saw themselves as partaking of the heavenly worship in the heavenly temple. This is something the synagogue would never have said! The church partook of the sacrifice of Jesus Christ every Sunday through the breaking of bread (1 Cor. 10:14-18). The apostolic practice of weekly (or in some cases daily) communion reflects their understanding of Christian worship as heavenly temple worship.

Schlissel appeals to James 2:2 as evidence that the early church considered itself to be a synagogue. But it is hardly surprising that the early Christians considered their assembly (sunagwgh) in the same language that the Old Testament used to refer to the assembly of Israel (Numbers 16:3 etc.). Besides, the term itself does not specify a worship service, but either a place of assembly or the congregation of those who have assembled. His claim that the synagogue was the model for Christian worship is only supported by those who read later Jewish practices back into the Second Temple period.

It is plain that the synagogue did influence early Christian worship. The style of teaching, the form of prayers, the physical structure of early church buildings, and perhaps even some elements of early church polity have their roots in the synagogue. But there are also significant influences from the temple—most notably in the pattern of worship (see below), the addition of the table and the baptistry (both features of the temple), and in the understanding that the people of God entered into the Holy of Holies in this place. In the Old Testament sacramental worship and teaching were physically divided, coming together only three times a year. In the New Testament they come together every week. Perhaps the best way to describe the roots of Christian worship is to say that it merged the teaching of the synagogue with the worship of the temple.

## **2. Deuteronomy 12:32 "Whatever I command you, be careful to observe it; you shall not add to it nor take away from it."**

Schlissel rightly claims that this "regulativist motto" refers exclusively to the coming centralization of worship. But he then slips in an adjective that destroys his whole argument. After citing Deuteronomy 12:5-14, he says: "No reasonable reader could disagree that what we have here is law for *centralized*, sacrificial worship, nor for worship *per se*." Schwertley may disagree with Schlissel's exegesis, but he agrees with this distinction. He claims that "virtually all regulativists recognize that the Christian church was the natural outgrowth of the synagogue, in which the covenant people conducted weekly non-ceremonial public worship."

My question is merely this: what other kind of worship is there besides sacrificial worship? How can a man approach God apart from a sacrifice? (Cf. Hebrews 8-10) God had previously accepted sacrifices from Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in many places. He had previously accepted sacrifices from Melchizedek and Jethro. But now Israel was commanded to bring their sacrifices *only* the place of God's choosing. *All* of worship would be centered there.

There is no biblical distinction between sacrificial worship and "other" worship. The Israelites could only worship God in the temple, the place that God chose. The High Priest could enter the presence of God once a year, and all of Israel entered in him—represented by the stones upon his breast (Ex. 28; Heb. 9:7-8). Solomon understood the centrality of the temple when he asked God to hear the prayers of those who "pray toward this place" (2 Chron. 6:21). Israel's worship was entirely temple-centered. All prayer outside the temple had to be oriented toward the temple (and the Jews took this literally—facing Jerusalem when they prayed—cf. Daniel 6:10). The call for the Israelites to hold "holy

convocations" was a part of the ceremonial ritual of the Law. Leviticus 23:3 identifies the Sabbath as one of the feasts--one of the holy convocations--which include the feasts of Passover, Firstfruits, Weeks, Trumpets, Tabernacles, and the Day of Atonement. Any gathering of Israelites outside of the place that God chose had to be oriented toward that place (cf. Joshua 22:10-32).

This does not mean that the ordinary Israelite could not worship God daily. He did worship God daily--through the priests. They ministered daily at the altar as the representatives of Israel before God. Their prayers toward God's temple could be answered because the priests were offering daily sacrifices. Israel's training of their children in the Torah of God would include the necessity of bringing offerings before the Lord at the altar. The whole of Israel's existence was sanctified by the Holy Place where God dwelt.

Schlissel claims that anyone who thinks that Dt. 12:32 regulates all of worship must bring offerings and sacrifices to Jerusalem. And he is correct. The New Testament insists upon it! But we do not come to the earthly Jerusalem. Rather, we come to the heavenly Jerusalem. And yes, we can only enter this worship through a blood sacrifice--but that sacrifice was offered on our behalf in the death of Jesus Christ. Again, Hebrews 8-10 makes it clear that the Christian can only enter into the Holy of Holies by the blood of the sacrifice.

The importance of having only one place of worship is seen in Solomon prayer in 2 Chronicles 6:18-21:

"But will God indeed dwell with mankind on the earth? Behold, heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain You; how much less this house which I have built. Yet have regard to the prayer of Your servant and to his supplication, O LORD my God, to listen to the cry and to the prayer which Your servant prays before You; that Your eye may be open toward this house day and night, toward the place of which You have said that You would put Your name there, to listen to the prayer which Your servant shall pray toward this place. Listen to the supplications of Your servant and of Your people Israel when they pray toward this place; hear from Your dwelling place, from heaven; hear and forgive."

In Christ, the location of "this place" has changed from the earthly temple to the heavenly temple, but the principle remains intact. God will hear the prayers of his people when they pray toward his holy temple.

The requirement that there be only *one* place of worship has not been lifted. We may *only* worship in one place: that place our Lord called "the Spirit and truth" (John 4:19-21). Why else did he declare himself to be the true temple? (John 2:19). Why else have we become the temple of the Holy Spirit in him? (1 Cor. 3:9-17) We are children of the heavenly Jerusalem, and it is there that we assemble to worship (Gal. 4:26; Heb 12:18-24).

Indeed, it is this understanding of the church as the true temple of the Holy Spirit that undergirds the importance of the "assembling of ourselves together" in Hebrews 10:25. Hebrews 8-10, after all, describes Christ's work in terms of the heavenly temple, and then states in 10:19-25 that we now enter the heavenly temple in him. Just as the priest would wash with water from the bronze basin, and then be sprinkled with the blood of the sacrifice, so also we now draw near to the Holiest place "having our hearts sprinkled from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water" (Heb. 10:19). New Testament worship is still sacrificial worship. New Testament worship still requires that we worship in the *one* place--namely, Jesus Christ and his Church--the true temple. Our assemblies are not merely gatherings for prayer and bible study. Prayer meetings and bible studies are useful things, but taken by themselves, they are not worship (except as piety-sebw). In worship we gather in the heavenly Holy of Holies to meet with our God, to hear his voice and partake of the sacrifice of Jesus Christ.

### 3. Human Traditions or Good and Necessary Consequence?

Schlissel uses two basic arguments to show that human traditions may be acceptable in worship. First, he points out that the Feast of Dedication was added to the Israelite liturgical calendar apart from any commandment of God, and that Jesus himself participated in it (John 10:22). While this may sound the death-knell of "strict regulativism" as Schlissel hopes, it hardly affects those who follow the *biblical* pattern of worship! Indeed, our Confession has no problem with the church declaring "solemn fastings, and thanksgivings upon special occasions, which are, in their several times and seasons, to be used in an holy and religious manner." (21.5) Such feasts do not have the same authority as those that God has commanded (and I do not see any indication in Scripture that Jesus treated them in such a way), but they fit within the example of Purim (Esther 9:26-28--cited by the Confession as the rationale for allowing occasional feasts and fasts). The biblical and confessional regulative principle does not object to special feasts and fasts.

Schwertley also cites the Confession on this point, but refuses to accept the idea that such feasts and fasts could be religiously oriented. Purim is an example of a religious feast. The fact that God is not mentioned should not cause us to forget this (after all, God is not mentioned in any portion of Esther). The Continental Reformed practice of including Christmas and other Christ-centered holidays follows this example rather well (in spite of the fact that the majority of the Westminster Divines did not wish to observe Christmas!).

Schwertley's use of 1 Kings 12:32-13:10 to demonstrate that all man-made holidays are wicked falls to the ground as soon as you remember that Jeroboam was king of Israel. Since Jerusalem was the only place where the people could worship God, Jeroboam decided to institute a new feast at Bethel--including sacrifices and a new priesthood. The idea of having a new feast is actually not condemned. The problem was that Jeroboam created a new place of worship--contrary to what God had told him to do in 1 Kings 11:38! The prophet who came to Jeroboam did not mention the new feast as the ground for condemnation, but rather condemned the altar itself.

Second, Schlissel demonstrates that the priests had added ceremonies to the prescribed feasts, and properly points out that Jesus participated in them. For instance, in John 7:37-39, at the Feast of Tabernacles, Jesus uses the priestly innovation of the "water ceremony" to point to himself as the source of living water. The priests had used the water ceremony as an illustration of the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, and Jesus uses their image to great effect. Likewise, in John 8:12 Jesus uses the language of the "Light of the World"--which was also used in the Feast of Tabernacles as the priests lit large lamps as reminders of the pillar of fire in the wilderness. Of course, the whole Feast of Tabernacles was designed by God to remind Israel about their wanderings in the wilderness, and how he led them by the pillar of fire, and provided water from the rock to quench their thirst. Schlissel points out that Jesus uses these two human innovations in worship to show the Jews that he was the true light and the living water. Finally, Schlissel points out that Jesus used wine in the Lord's Supper--which was not prescribed by God for the Passover meal, but had been prescribed merely by human tradition.

Was Jesus saying by his actions that he approved of these innovations? Of course. Go back to the institution of the Feast of Tabernacles (Lev. 23 and Dt. 16). God had commanded Israel to hold these feasts. He told them what the feasts were supposed to commemorate. But he did NOT tell Israel *everything* that they were supposed to do. The feast was supposed to last for seven days. They were to dwell in booths. They were to offer certain sacrifices. What were they supposed to *do* during the feast? They were to remember the Exodus and the wilderness wanderings. How better to remember those wilderness wanderings than by replaying those events symbolically? God frequently taught his people through signs and symbols--not merely through words. Therefore the symbolic reenactment was equally appropriate with reading or teaching. Therefore Jesus approved of these very useful traditions because they did precisely what God had commanded that the Israelites should do. In other words, these traditions were nothing but good and necessary consequences from what God had commanded them to do.

Indeed, Jesus himself gave us two symbolic actions--two reenactments of things which he himself did--which are to be a part of the regular worship of God until he returns again: baptism and the Lord's Supper. Other symbolic actions could be appropriate in special feasts and fasts (perhaps the Christmas play is not as terrible as some would suggest!). But the New Testament tells us that the ordinary worship of God consists of the apostolic teaching and fellowship, the breaking of bread, and prayers (Acts 2:42).

#### 4. The Pattern of Worship

Since we must worship in the heavenly temple, since we must have a sacrifice in order to come into the presence of God, and since we must only do in worship that which God has commanded, therefore we must seek our pattern of worship from the Word of God. There are only a few worship services described in detail in Scripture (Exodus 19-24; I Chron 15-16; 28-29; 2 Chron 5-7; 29; 35; Neh 8-10), but they all follow a remarkably similar pattern. What is that pattern? 2 Chronicles 5-7 provides perhaps the clearest description:

1. Assembling the people in Zion (2 Chron 5:2-5)
2. Sacrificing the sheep and oxen (2 Chron 5:6)
3. Entering the Most Holy Place (2 Chron 5:7-10)
4. Singing the praise of God (2 Chron 5:11-14)
5. Hearing the Word of God, read and preached (2 Chron 6:1-11)
6. Praying for the covenant community (2 Chron 6:12-42)
7. Fire from heaven (2 Chron 7:1-2)
8. Singing praise in response to the fire from heaven (2 Chron 7:3)
9. Sacrificing the peace offerings/covenant meal (2 Chron 7:4-9)
10. Benediction (not stated, but possibly from Numbers 6:24-27)

This is essentially the order of worship that the church has used throughout her history. Justin Martyr described a similar order in the second century-and Augustine followed the same pattern in fifth century North Africa. The Reformers followed this model in the sixteenth century. It remained essentially intact until the 17-18th centuries. Interestingly, it is also the pattern of worship in Revelation:

1. **Assembling for Worship (Rev. 4:1-11)**--John is called to witness the worship of the heavenly hosts
2. **The Sin Offering (Rev. 5:1-7)**--John weeps because no one is worthy to open the scroll. Only the Lamb of God who was slain is worthy to proclaim the purposes of God for his people. John is assured that Jesus has triumphed!
3. **Enter God's Presence (Rev. 5:6-7)**--Because Jesus has taken the scroll, we may now stand before God with hope.
4. **Psalm of Praise (Rev. 5:8-14)**--The response to what Jesus has done!
5. **The Word of God read and preached,**
6. **The Prayer of the Covenant Community,**
7. **Fire consuming the sacrifices/glory filling the temple, and**
8. **The Psalm of Praise,**

Each of the "sevens" follows the basic pattern of 5-8.

Rev. 6:1-8:5--*The Seven Seals proclaim the Word of God*

7:9-8:4 reports the praises and prayers of the saints

8:5 reports the fire from heaven in reply

Rev. 8:6-11:19--*The Seven Trumpets proclaim the Word of God*

11:15-18 reports the prayers of the saints

11:19--says that the temple of God was opened in heaven, bringing lightning and

thunder upon the earth

Rev. 12:1-15:8--*The Seven Signs proclaim the Word of God*

15:2-4 reports the song of Moses--the prayer of the saints

15:5-8 reports that the glory of the Lord so filled the heavenly temple that no one was able to enter the temple until the plagues were done

Rev. 16:1-21--*The Seven Bowls proclaim the Word of God*

16:17-18--fire comes from heaven. The silence of the people of God here is striking--but understandable since no one can enter the temple right now (recall 15:8). God's

wrath is so fierce that even the islands and mountains flee at the fierceness of his wrath! (15:19-20) These are the plagues of Egypt, but much worse!

Rev. 17:1-19:5--*The Fall of Babylon proclaims the Word of God*

19:1-5 reports the praises of the saints for such a great salvation

9. **The Peace Offering**--Rev. 19:6-10 and 17-21 record the two invitations to the two Suppers--the Wedding Supper of the Lamb (for the saints) and the "great supper of God" (for the vultures). One is a supper of blessing; the other is a supper of cursing.

10. **Benediction**--Rev. 20 offers the curse upon the devil and those who follow him, while Rev. 21-22 offers the blessing upon Christ's people.

In the heavenly worship John enters worship only because of what Jesus has done (chs 1-3). The sacrifice is the sacrifice of Jesus Christ on the cross (chs 4-5). The sermon is what God accomplishes in redemptive history in between Jesus' first coming and his second coming. (chs 6-19). The prayers are the prayers of the saints throughout history (chs 6-19). The covenant meal occurs when Christ returns (ch 19). The benediction is the blessedness of eternal life in Christ (chs 21-22).

In other words, the book of Revelation portrays us as living in the midst of the heavenly worship. The heavenly worship service began when Jesus (the great High Priest) entered the Holy of Holies, and will not end until the final Judgment, when we will enter the blessedness of eternal life in Christ. This is why Jesus said at the Last Supper: "This is my blood of the covenant, which is shed for many. Assuredly, I say to you, I will no longer drink of the fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new in the kingdom of God" (Mark 14:24-26). Jesus will not drink the cup again until the Wedding Supper of the Lamb because that is the conclusion of the heavenly worship.

I have called this the biblical pattern of worship because it is not a set liturgy nor even an "order of worship." Rather it is a pattern. For instance the worship in Exodus 19-24 has no psalmody because it came before the time of David. Nonetheless the basic contours remain identical in all biblical worship:

Assembling for Worship

Entering the Presence of God through the Sacrifice

Hearing the Word of God

Prayer of the Covenant Community

Covenant Meal

Psalms and Hymns fit at various points throughout the pattern. In 2 Chronicles 5-7 there are two psalms of praise. In Revelation 4-5 there are hymns of praise before the sacrifice. Hence there is considerable flexibility built into the pattern. I have found it interesting that virtually all of Christian worship from the 1<sup>st</sup> through the 17<sup>th</sup> centuries follows this pattern (with the exception of the medieval loss of the sermon and the reformation's loss of weekly communion-which really should also be blamed on the medieval tendency to restrict communion to the priests). Both in the patristic

and reformation eras there was a self-conscious understanding that the heavenly worship was the model upon which all earthly worship must be based.

## 5. Lessons for Our Worship Today

Therefore, just as the Old Testament worship pointed forward toward this heavenly worship, so also our worship each Lord's Day partakes of this heavenly worship. In our worship, we are reminded of the sacrifice of Jesus Christ, because we cannot enter worship except through His blood. But in our worship we truly enter the heavenly Holy of Holies because we come in His name (and how could anyone refrain from bursting forth into songs of praise for this!!!).

In our worship we hear the Word of God read and preached. We are reminded of how God has been faithful to his promises throughout redemptive history, and we are called to persevere in faith to the end because God has promised that he will bring this work to completion in the Day of Christ.

In our worship our prayers ascend to the heavenly throne as we ask God to continue to be faithful to his promises. We bring our praises and intercessions before God because he receives them as sweet incense before his throne. And, indeed, he answers them by sending fire on the earth (recall Rev. 8:5). The fire of his Spirit brings blessing to his people and judgment to his enemies through the prayers of the saints.

In our worship we partake of the sacrifice of Jesus Christ through the Lord's Supper. In it we remember our Lord's death until he comes. Hence there are two parts: we remember what he has done on the cross, and we anticipate the Wedding Supper of the Lamb. As Paul puts it, in partaking of the bread and the cup, we participate in his body and blood that were sacrificed for us. The Lord's Supper, therefore, is a peace offering in which we share in the altar (1 Cor. 10:14-18). The regulative principle--properly understood--requires at least weekly communion.

In our worship, finally, we receive God's blessing. When the benediction is spoken we are to remember that God has promised to grant his blessing of eternal life in Christ. The blessing that we hear from the minister is nothing less than God's blessing.

We then may go back into the world for the next week remembering that even as we live in the midst of this crooked and perverse generation, we are also partakers of the heavenly worship whose true home is found before the throne of God. This is why Paul can say: "Therefore, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God" (1 Cor. 10:31). All of life is an act of worship because all of history participates in the heavenly worship. And as Revelation reminds us, it either leads to blessing and joy or to cursing and destruction. It is either the worship of the Lamb or the worship of the beast. "Amen. Even so, come, Lord Jesus!" (Rev. 22:20)

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