

Marc Roby: We are resuming our study of theology today by continuing to examine soteriology, the doctrine of salvation. We are currently discussing the doctrine of sanctification and, more particularly, the means of grace. In our last session we started looking at corporate worship and made the point that we must live holy lives and worship with holy reverence or God will not accept our worship. So, Dr. Spencer, how would you like to proceed today?

Dr. Spencer: I want to discuss what has been called *the regulative principle* regarding worship. That phrase simply refers to the principle that regulates, or governs, our worship. The principle was developed as a generalization of the second commandment.

Marc Roby: And that commandment is found in Exodus 20:4-6 and says, “You shall not make for yourself an idol in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below. You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God, punishing the children for the sin of the fathers to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me, but showing love to a thousand generations of those who love me and keep my commandments.”¹

Dr. Spencer: That is a lengthy answer, which contains the command itself, a threat and a promise. There are differences of opinion about how to apply what is said here, so let’s take some time to look at this commandment. But I want to be very careful. I absolutely do *not* want to unnecessarily bring division to the church, which has, regrettably, been common in the history of discussions about how we should worship.

Marc Roby: To some extent the large number of different Protestant denominations bears witness to how often differences of opinion about worship and church government have divided the church.

Dr. Spencer: That is certainly true, and we aren’t going to discuss church government at all today. But even the differences of opinion about worship have caused numerous divisions. Therefore, my purpose is to look at what the Word of God says and to stick to those things that we can say for certain and to present our listeners with the tools needed to help them evaluate any given situation for themselves in a biblical way.

Worship is extremely important and, as we saw last week, God is not pleased with everything that man calls worship.

Marc Roby: Christ himself spoke about worship that is not pleasing to God. In Matthew 15:7-9 we read that Jesus told some Pharisees and teachers of the law, “You hypocrites! Isaiah was right when he prophesied about you: ‘These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. They worship me in vain; their teachings are but rules taught by men.’”

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Dr. Spencer: And how terrible it would be to worship in vain. Also, Christ clearly said that he was quoting from Isaiah, which is further proof that what we said last week is true; there is no difference between the Old and New Testaments in this regard. God required holiness and proper worship according to *his* rules in the Old Testament times and he still requires holiness and proper worship according to *his* rules today.

As a result, we absolutely do need to be careful how we worship and some divisions among people who claim to follow Christ are necessary; God wants the bride of Christ, which is the church, to be pure, so there are things about which we cannot compromise. But God is not pleased when we introduce *unnecessary* divisions into his church. Psalm 133:1 says, “How good and pleasant it is when brothers live together in unity!”

Marc Roby: And we see the same idea in the New Testament. Paul wrote, in Ephesians 4:2-3, “Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love. Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace.”

Dr. Spencer: There are other New Testament verses we could cite as well. It is clear that God puts a high priority on unity in his church. But the question still stands as to how we are to worship God. For example, we could ask questions like these: Is there a particular order to the worship service prescribed in the Bible? Does the Bible command us to use or not use musical instruments? Must we sing? If we sing, should we only sign psalms? There are many questions like these and I’d like to look at what the Bible says about these things. But in doing so, I’m going to avoid as far as possible being dogmatic. In order to do this, I’d like to begin by looking at an important passage in the book of Romans, specifically, Romans 14:1-4.

Marc Roby: Alright, let me read those verses. Paul wrote, “Accept him whose faith is weak, without passing judgment on disputable matters. One man’s faith allows him to eat everything, but another man, whose faith is weak, eats only vegetables. The man who eats everything must not look down on him who does not, and the man who does not eat everything must not condemn the man who does, for God has accepted him. Who are you to judge someone else’s servant? To his own master he stands or falls. And he will stand, for the Lord is able to make him stand.”

Dr. Spencer: The issue Paul was dealing with in this passage came about because when Christ came in fulfillment of the Old Testament prophecies, the ceremonial law was abrogated, which means to be abolished by someone with the authority necessary to do so.

Marc Roby: Which, in this case, would have to be God himself.

Dr. Spencer: Yes, only God has the necessary authority. The ceremonial law was intended from the very beginning to be temporary. It served the purpose of pointing to the coming Messiah. Remember that the Hebrew word Messiah and the Greek word Christ both mean anointed. And when Christ, the Messiah, came, there was no longer any need for the ceremonial law, it had served its purpose. The one to whom it was pointing had come.

Marc Roby: We read about those changes in the book of Hebrews, especially Chapters Seven through Ten.

Dr. Spencer: Yes, there is a great deal in those chapters, but let me give a *very* short and selective summary of the teaching. The writer sets the stage for the fact that the law has changed in Hebrews 7:11-12, where we read, “If perfection could have been attained through the Levitical priesthood (for on the basis of it the law was given to the people), why was there still need for another priest to come—one in the order of Melchizedek, not in the order of Aaron? For when there is a change of the priesthood, there must also be a change of the law.” When the writer asks the rhetorical question, “why was there still need for another priest to come”, it is obvious in context he is speaking about Jesus Christ. And I need to remind our listeners that Aaron was Moses’ brother, a descendant of Levi, and all of the priests in the Old Testament supposed to be descendants of Aaron.

Marc Roby: But Melchizedek was not a descendant of Aaron, in fact, he wasn’t even a Levite. We are told in Hebrews 7:3 that Melchizedek was “Without father or mother, without genealogy, without beginning of days or end of life, like the Son of God he remains a priest forever.”

Dr. Spencer: Yes, Melchizedek is a very mysterious character in the Old Testament, but the clear point being made in this part of Hebrews is that Jesus Christ is not our great high priest on the basis of his genealogy. We are told in Hebrews 7:16 that Jesus, “has become a priest not on the basis of a regulation as to his ancestry but on the basis of the power of an indestructible life.” And so, when Christ came, there was, as we read, a change in the priesthood. And the writer told us that when there is a change in the priesthood there is also a change in the law. The writer goes on in Hebrews 7:19 to explain that the law made nothing perfect and he tells us in Hebrews 8:7 that this was because God found fault with the people.

Marc Roby: The fault being, simply, that none of the people kept the law.

Dr. Spencer: Exactly. And the writer then quotes from Jeremiah Chapter 31 about the new covenant that God promised to establish. He tells us explicitly in Hebrews 8:13 that the first covenant is now obsolete, in other words, that the new covenant has come. Then, in Hebrews 9:1 we read that “the first covenant had regulations for worship and also an earthly sanctuary.” And, in Verse 9-10 he tells us that “the gifts and sacrifices being offered were not able to clear the conscience of the worshiper. They are only a matter of food and drink and various ceremonial washings—external regulations applying until the time of the new order.”

Marc Roby: And that new order is this new covenant, inaugurated by the sacrifice of Jesus Christ, whom we are told in Hebrews 9:15 is the mediator of this new covenant.

Dr. Spencer: Yes, he is. We are told in 1 Timothy 2:5 that “there is one God and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus”. And in Hebrews 10:1 we read that “The law is only a shadow of the good things that are coming—not the realities themselves. For this reason it can never, by the same sacrifices repeated endlessly year after year, make perfect those who draw near to worship.” I’ll leave it to interested listeners to read over these chapters in Hebrews for themselves with all of this in mind. But the clear message is that the Old Testament ceremonial law, that is the law dealing with food, ceremonial washings, temple sacrifices and so on, was all intended to point forward to Jesus Christ. And when Christ came and performed the one sacrifice by which, we are told in Hebrews 10:14, “he has made perfect forever those who

are being made holy”, the ceremonial law was abrogated. It no longer applies. Jesus’ sacrifice was efficacious and does not need to be repeated.

Marc Roby: But, of course, the moral law, which is contained in the Ten Commandments, has *not* been abrogated, it is still very much in effect.

Dr. Spencer: Yes, it is still in effect because it is based on the very character of God. It tells us what is pleasing to God and what God hates. That cannot change. The ceremonial law, on the other hand, had the purpose of pointing forward to Christ and indicating that forgiveness and salvation are achieved through a sacrifice. And at the time the apostle Paul wrote the book of Romans, the people of God were in a transition period. As the Rev. P.G. Mathew says in his commentary on Romans, “there was no official proclamation on a specific date in history saying that all the ceremonial laws had been abrogated.”²

Marc Roby: Although God had certainly revealed that this change had taken place. For example, he gave the apostle Peter a vision of a sheet containing ceremonially unclean animals and we read in Acts 10:13 that “a voice told him, ‘Get up, Peter. Kill and eat.’” Peter replied, as we read in Verse 14, “Surely not, Lord! ... I have never eaten anything impure or unclean.” And then in Verse 15 we read that “The voice spoke to him a second time, ‘Do not call anything impure that God has made clean.’”

Dr. Spencer: That vision is a clear indication that the ceremonial food laws were no longer in effect; God had made these ceremonially unclean foods clean. But, as Rev. Mathew said, there was no general announcement made on a certain day. It took time for these changes to be known and accepted by all. And during that time there were Jewish converts to Christianity who were confused about whether or not they had to follow the ceremonial laws.

When Paul wrote in Romans 14:2 that “One man’s faith allows him to eat everything, but another man, whose faith is weak, eats only vegetables”, he was referring to the fact that some Jewish Christians were unwilling to eat meat because they couldn’t be certain that meat purchased in the market met the requirements of the Jewish ceremonial law³.

Marc Roby: And that is why Paul went on in Verses 3 and 4 to say, “The man who eats everything must not look down on him who does not, and the man who does not eat everything must not condemn the man who does, for God has accepted him. Who are you to judge someone else’s servant? To his own master he stands or falls. And he will stand, for the Lord is able to make him stand.”

Dr. Spencer: Yes. Paul knew that God had done away with the ceremonial law and that all foods are acceptable. He makes that clear in Verse 14 where he wrote, “As one who is in the Lord Jesus, I am fully convinced that no food is unclean in itself. But if anyone regards something as unclean, then for him it is unclean.”

² P.G. Mathew, *Romans: The Gospel Life* (Volume 2), Grace and Glory Ministries, 2014, pg. 418

³ Ibid

Marc Roby: Paul also wrote in 1 Corinthians 8:13, “Therefore, if what I eat causes my brother to fall into sin, I will never eat meat again, so that I will not cause him to fall.”

Dr. Spencer: And that statement again places a priority on the unity of the body and our obligation to help our brothers, even if they are weaker. If someone thinks it is a sin to eat meat, then it *is* a sin for that person to eat meat. Paul wrote in Romans 14:23 that “the man who has doubts is condemned if he eats, because his eating is not from faith; and everything that does not come from faith is sin.” Therefore, our obligation to help our brother outweighs our freedom to eat meat. We should abstain if it will cause a brother to fall.

Marc Roby: Probably the closest analogy today would be Christians who think it is a sin to drink wine.

Dr. Spencer: I agree, that’s a good analogy. I would say the Bible is clear that drinking wine, or any other alcoholic beverage for that matter, is not a sin so long as you don’t get drunk.⁴ But if I am with someone who thinks it is a sin, I should abstain for the sake of that weaker brother or sister. Now if two Christians disagree about whether drinking wine is a sin or not, that should in no way affect their ability to worship together. That was Paul’s main point in Romans 14:2-3, which you read just a couple of minutes ago. The man who eats everything must not look down on the man who doesn’t, and the man who doesn’t eat everything must not condemn the man who does. As Paul said, “Who are you to judge someone else’s servant? To his own master he stands or falls.”

But we must be careful. This does not apply to things that are crucial to salvation. So, for example, it would be very wrong to say that we can worship together with a Jehovah’s Witness just because they call themselves Christians. Jehovah’s Witnesses deny the Trinity, among other heretical views, and we simply cannot ignore those issues of fundamental importance. They worship a different god, who is no god at all.

Marc Roby: Alright, so I should be able to worship with someone who disagrees with me about whether drinking wine is a sin or not, but not with someone who disagrees about the fundamental nature of God. But we are looking for a general principle of some kind to guide us in worshiping God acceptably. You mentioned the regulative principle at the beginning. Can you state what that principle is?

Dr. Spencer: Yes. It is a generalization that comes directly from the second commandment. And, while the ceremonial law has been abrogated, the Ten Commandments, which give us the moral law, have never been abrogated. In fact, as I noted earlier, they cannot be changed because they are based on the very character of God. But to continue with answering your question, the second commandment says, in part, “You shall not make for yourself an idol in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below.” And from that statement, the reformers drew a general principle.

⁴ e.g., see John Frame, *The Doctrine of the Christian Life*, P&R Publishing Company, 2008, pg. 740

That principle is well stated in the Westminster Confession of Faith. In Chapter 21, which is entitled *Of Religious Worship and the Sabbath Day*, Paragraph 1 says, in part, that “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.”⁵

Marc Roby: That makes good sense, but it also leaves a lot unsaid. For example, nowhere in the Bible are we told exactly what a church service should look like, whether we should sit or stand for various parts of the service and so on.

Dr. Spencer: And that is precisely why we need to discuss these issues. But I wanted to start by laying down the principle of maintaining unity in the church as far as it is possible to do so, which is why we looked at the passage from Romans 14. We will need to keep that principle in mind during our discussion. But we also need to be very serious about how we worship. In his commentary on the Westminster Confession of Faith, R.C. Sproul made some good points.

For example, he wrote that “What we have seen in our culture is an avant-garde revolution of worship motivated by a desire to reach out to a secularized America turned off to ‘churchiness’ and ecclesiastical traditions. There has been an attempt to disguise or mask the gospel, so that people will not think they are in church.”⁶

Marc Roby: It is never a good idea to try and disguise or mask the gospel, which is the power of God unto salvation! But I have certainly visited churches where that appeared to be one of the main objectives.

Dr. Spencer: And so have I. And we must say that the motive may be entirely laudable. We live in a culture that looks down on church very strongly and wanting to reach people in that culture in a way that engages them is not, in and of itself, a bad thing. But we have to be very careful and not think that we know more than God about how to reach people. We are not like a salesman trying to find a good way to pitch a product. We are to be heralds who proclaim the Word of God as a warning and an offer to people. How they respond is out of our control.

Marc Roby: But thankfully, it is not outside of God’s control. He can and will save all those whom he has chosen to save.

Dr. Spencer: Praise God that is true.

Marc Roby: Now that is encouraging. And this looks like a good place to end for today, so let me remind our listeners that they can email their questions and comments to info@whatdoesthewordsay.org. We enjoy hearing from you.

⁵ Westminster Confession of Faith

⁶ R.C. Sproul, *Truths We Confess: A Layman’s Guide to the Westminster Confession of Faith*, Vol. Two, P&R Publishing Co., 2006, pg. 311