

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 specifically, the means of grace. In our last session we started looking at corporate worship and made the point that we should not be dogmatic about some issues, but we do, nevertheless, need to be serious about how we worship and there are issues about which we cannot compromise. So, Dr. Spencer, how would you like to proceed today?

Dr. Spencer: I want to begin by taking note of what is most important to God with regard to our worship.

Marc Roby: And what is that?

Dr. Spencer: God desires our hearts. In other words, he desires that we truly see our great sin and rebellion, that we hate it, that we turn to him in true repentance and faith, with great thanksgiving for what he has done in providing a Savior, and with sincere zeal to change and then do what is pleasing in his sight. We are told in 1 Samuel 16:7 that “The LORD does not look at the things man looks at. Man looks at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart.”¹

Marc Roby: That can be a very uncomfortable thought when we honestly examine our own hearts, which, of course, refers to our innermost thoughts, feelings and desires.

Dr. Spencer: It can be very uncomfortable indeed. We don’t even want other *people* to know everything we think, feel, or imagine, let alone the perfectly holy and just Creator, Sustainer and Judge of the universe.

And, of course, if we truly see our own need and the greatness of God’s mercy, then we will *want* to look into his Word and see how to please him with our worship. We will always feel the burden of our own filthiness and unworthiness to worship him and will have great gratitude and joy that he condescends to allow us to worship him. We are not doing God a favor by worshiping him, it is a privilege. The Bible steadfastly condemns formalistic worship that does not come from a converted heart, whether or not that worship outwardly conforms to God’s commands.

King David wrote Psalm 51 after God brought him to full repentance for his horrible sins of adultery with Bathsheba and then having her husband Uriah killed to cover up the adultery. The whole psalm is, in essence, a prayer to God, so David is speaking to the sovereign Lord and, in Psalm 51:16-17, he says, “You do not delight in sacrifice, or I would bring it; you do not take pleasure in burnt offerings. The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.”

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Marc Roby: And saying that God does not delight in people bringing sacrifices and burnt offerings is an interesting statement since God had commanded that they do so.

Dr. Spencer: Which is exactly David's point, and the point I am making. Even if we worship in a way that outwardly conforms to God's commands, it is not pleasing to him unless our hearts are right before him. We must, first and foremost, be sure that we have, as David said, a broken spirit. Which simply means that we have seen our sin and guilt and have repented and turned to Jesus Christ in faith. We see this point made over and over again in the Bible. As just one more example, we can look at the prophet Isaiah.

Marc Roby: Who, we should probably point out, prophesied after the Jewish kingdom ruled by King David had been divided. Isaiah prophesied to the southern kingdom, called Judah, around 700 years before the time of Christ.

Dr. Spencer: And the great 20th-century Old Testament scholar E.J. Young explained the significance of Isaiah's ministry. He pointed out that the name Isaiah means "the Lord is the source of salvation"² and that the time at which he prophesied was "of utmost importance to realize that salvation could not be obtained by reliance upon man but only from God himself. For Israel it was the central or pivotal point of history between Moses and Christ."³

Marc Roby: And, of course, it was Moses whom God used to lead his people out of slavery in Egypt almost 1500 years before Christ. And Christ came himself to free us from our slavery to sin.

Dr. Spencer: Yes, that's a good reminder. It is useful to have a general timeline in mind as we consider these things.

Isaiah prophesied about the Babylonian captivity of the Jewish people, which would begin about 100 years after his prophecy. That captivity essentially brought about the end of the Jewish nation and started the transition to the time of Christ, when salvation was more clearly shown to come by faith to anyone who believes. Salvation comes through the Jewish people, but it is not for Jews alone. As Young puts it, "To explain to the people of God that the old order was passing away and that the new era of universalism was approaching was the task of Isaiah, the prophet."⁴

Marc Roby: Now, given the modern theological climate, we should probably make it perfectly clear that when Young referred to a new era of universalism, he was absolutely *not* referring to the idea that all people will be saved.

Dr. Spencer: No, of course not. He was referring to the fact that salvation is offered to all peoples of the earth, not just the Jews. But getting back to the topic of worship, Isaiah's prophecy starts with God making a legal case, if you will, against his people. And in Isaiah 1:11-15 God is speaking and says, "The multitude of your sacrifices— what are they to me? ... I have more than enough of burnt offerings, of rams and the fat of fattened animals; I have no pleasure in the

² E.J. Young, *The Book of Isaiah*, W.B. Eerdmans Pub., reprinted 1997, Vol. 1, pg. 3

³ *Ibid*, pg. 4

⁴ *Ibid*, pg. 7

blood of bulls and lambs and goats. When you come to appear before me, who has asked this of you, this trampling of my courts? Stop bringing meaningless offerings! Your incense is detestable to me. New Moons, Sabbaths and convocations— I cannot bear your evil assemblies. Your New Moon festivals and your appointed feasts my soul hates. They have become a burden to me; I am weary of bearing them. When you spread out your hands in prayer, I will hide my eyes from you; even if you offer many prayers, I will not listen.”

Marc Roby: That is truly terrifying. God was obviously extremely angry with their so-called worship.

Dr. Spencer: Yes, he was. And certainly at least some, if not most, of that worship was at least correct in its outward form. So, it is clear that God detests so-called worship, even if it outwardly conforms to his law, if the heart of the worshiper is not right. Such worship may make people feel good about themselves, but it is not accepted by God. It is *not* good to worship God from anything other than a perfectly contrite and broken spirit and a sincere repentance and faith.

But we must not drive off into the ditch on the other side of the road either!

Marc Roby: Now, what do you mean by that?

Dr. Spencer: Well, we must not wrongly conclude that if our hearts are right, it doesn't matter how we worship. God is *most* concerned about our hearts, that is true, but he is also concerned about the form of our worship. And as I said, if our hearts are right, we will *want* to know how to worship God properly and, if we don't do so, he will not be pleased with our worship.

Two weeks ago, in Session 212, we looked at 1 Corinthians 11:29-30, where Paul wrote to the church in Corinth about not being careful when taking communion and said, in Verse 30, “That is why many among you are weak and sick, and a number of you have fallen asleep.” He does *not* say, or imply, that these people were not true Christians. It is reasonable to assume that at least some of those who were weak, sick or had died were true believers. But even so, God was not pleased with their worship. Having a converted heart is essential, but it alone is not enough.

Marc Roby: Alright. I think we have made the point quite forcefully that our hearts must be right before God *and* we must worship in a way that is acceptable to him. Are we ready now to move on and discuss in more detail how we do that?

Dr. Spencer: Yes, we are. I want to start looking at the regulative principle that we presented last week.

Marc Roby: Very well. Last week you noted that the regulative principle for guiding worship is well expressed by 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.”

Dr. Spencer: And I want to begin looking at this statement and seeing how to put it into practice. I should note, however, that not all Christians agree with this statement, nor do they all agree

with how to interpret it and put it into practice. So, as I said last time, we are going to avoid being dogmatic when that is not strictly called for by God's Word.

Marc Roby: And we must remember that no confession or creed is infallible. Only the Word of God is infallible.

Dr. Spencer: That is both very true and very important. It is the Word of God alone that has authority to bind our consciences. But, with that caveat, let's look at this statement. It begins by saying that "the acceptable way of worshiping the true God is instituted by himself". That is, I think, absolutely true and biblical and not controversial. We have looked at a number of Scriptures in the past two weeks that show how God finds some so-called worship detestable in his sight. And, as the sovereign Lord of the universe, his judgment is the only one that matters.

Marc Roby: Yes, that is self-evidently true. He is the judge with absolute authority and power.

Dr. Spencer: And the second thing the confession says is that the acceptable way of worshiping God is "so limited by his own revealed will, that he may not be worshiped according to the imaginations and devices of men". This phrase starts to present us with some problems.

Clearly, God's revealed will, which we find in the Bible, limits what we may and may not do. But his revealed will does not spell out for us exactly what an acceptable worship service should look like. So we, as fallible, sinful human beings necessarily *must* decide some things for ourselves. Therefore, when it says that we may not worship according to "the imaginations and devices of men", it cannot be saying that we make no choices whatsoever.

Marc Roby: Yes, that seems obvious. We always have to use our reason to understand and apply the Word of God. It applies to every aspect of life, but it certainly does not mention every possible issue about which we must make decisions.

Dr. Spencer: That's clearly true. John Frame has a good discussion of how to apply the regulative principle in his book *The Doctrine of the Christian Life*.⁵ He points out that there are two popular ways of summarizing the contrasting views about how to apply this principle. One view says that with regard to worship, whatever is not commanded is forbidden. The other view says that whatever is not forbidden is permitted.

Marc Roby: Both of those expressions seem a bit extreme to me. You would, for example, look in vain for a biblical command to open a worship service with a prayer of invocation, but I find it hard to believe that it is forbidden. And you would also look in vain for a biblical statement forbidding a minister to preach while standing on his head, but I hardly think that would be acceptable to God.

Dr. Spencer: I agree with you on both counts and I'm quite sure Frame would as well. He points out that the interpretation of this principle also requires us to look at another section of the confession. In Chapter One of the Westminster Confession of Faith, which is entitled, *Of the Holy Scripture*, Paragraph 6 begins by saying, "The whole counsel of God concerning all things

⁵ John Frame, *The Doctrine of the Christian Life*, P&R Publishing Company, 2008, see Chapter 26

necessary for his own glory, man's salvation, faith and life, is either expressly set down in Scripture, or by good and necessary consequence may be deduced from Scripture”.

Marc Roby: That statement is really just a statement of the reformation principle of Scripture alone being our guide, which in Latin is the well-known phrase, *sola Scriptura*.

Dr. Spencer: Yes, it is. And we briefly mentioned that principle a long time ago in Session 35. In opposition to the Roman Catholic Church's claim that tradition is of equal authority, the reformers very strongly stood on the principle that Scripture alone has authority to bind the conscience of a believer, and *sola Scriptura* simply means, Scripture alone.

But notice in the statement from the confession that it says that whatever we need to know is either expressly set down in Scripture or can be deduced from it. So, the situation is the same as we see in the regulative principle. There is no way to avoid the use of human reason in understanding and applying the Word of God. Paragraph 6 goes on to say that “nothing at any time is to be added [to the Word of God], whether by new revelations of the Spirit, or traditions of men”.

Marc Roby: Which is, obviously, aimed directly at the Roman Catholic Church's use of church tradition as authoritative.

Dr. Spencer: Yes, it is. The paragraph then goes on to say, “Nevertheless, we acknowledge the inward illumination of the Spirit of God to be necessary for the saving understanding of such things as are revealed in the Word”.

Marc Roby: Which follows directly from what Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians 2:14, “The man without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually discerned.”

Dr. Spencer: And that verse is one of the proof texts used by the confession. The paragraph then concludes with what I want to address today. It says, “that 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.”

Notice that it specifically mentions worship and says that there are *circumstances* which must be ordered by, or you could say, determined by, “the light of nature, and Christian prudence, according to the general rules of the Word” of God.

Marc Roby: In other words, we need to think about things, guided by general biblical principles, and then decide for ourselves about some of the circumstances concerning worship.

Dr. Spencer: That's exactly what it means. And then, of course, we have to define what a “circumstance” is. There are, of course, some differences of opinion here, but in general, this includes things like; what time we have a service, whether we begin with an invocation or call to worship, whether we stand when singing, and so on.

The general principle is obvious. There are many circumstances regarding worship that are not specifically spelled out in Scripture, but about which we must come to some decision. We obviously have to have an agreed upon time for meeting for example. The interesting thing is that in order to see how to apply the regulative principle, the reformers had to distinguish between what they called *elements* of worship and the *circumstances* of worship.

Marc Roby: Okay, this is starting to sound like we are getting caught up in very minor details.

Dr. Spencer: I agree that it may appear that way, but hang with me for just a moment. Frame says that “Elements are those aspects of worship that Scripture commands.” While “Circumstances are those things we must do in order to perform the elements.” So, while the language may seem overly specific, it is actually one way of getting at the central issue; which is, that the Bible does not specify every detail that *must* be specified for us to hold a worship service. And so, the real question of importance is; “How do we decide those details that are not specified, what are here called the circumstances, of worship?”

Marc Roby: Alright. And you’ve already pointed out that the confession clearly said these are to be determined by the light of nature, and Christian prudence, according to the general rules of the Word of God.

Dr. Spencer: So, let’s end today by giving one simple, concrete example of how to apply this.

Marc Roby: Okay, please do.

Dr. Spencer: This first example is chosen because I can’t imagine anyone thinking it is controversial, so it might seem trivial, but it does show us how to apply the principle. The example is to answer the question, “What time should we meet for worship on Sunday morning?”

Marc Roby: I’m not sure I agree that isn’t controversial! Some people don’t like early mornings.

Dr. Spencer: That’s certainly true, but I don’t think anyone will think that it is controversial to say that we shouldn’t meet at 2 AM for example. That would simply be disruptive to most people’s sleep patterns and would not be conducive to being able to worship God with our whole heart. Many people would be struggling to simply stay awake. There would also be the issue of noise ordinances in various towns and other practical matters. Therefore, we establish the time of our worship service based on the light of nature – in other words normal human reason, and Christian prudence, according to the general rules of the Word of God. In this case, the Word of God indicates that we shouldn’t call people to worship while they are falling asleep, nor should we ignore the noise ordinances in our communities.

Marc Roby: Alright. I’ll grant you that this example does illustrate the point. And I look forward to getting into meatier examples next time. But let me now remind our listeners that they can email their questions and comments to info@whatdoesthewordsay.org. We enjoy hearing from you.