

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. We are examining the principle that governs corporate worship, which is called the regulative principle. We ended last week by giving a simple example of how we are to determine those circumstances of worship that are not clearly spelled out in Scripture. So, Dr. Spencer, how would you like to proceed today?

Dr. Spencer: I want to move on to look at more significant and potentially controversial aspects of worship. But I must again remind our listeners that our goal is to provide guidance as to how Christians can resolve these issues for themselves biblically. And we want to avoid being dogmatic unless the Scriptures demand doing so.

Marc Roby: Very well. Perhaps I should begin by reading the regulative principle again.

Dr. Spencer: That would be a good start.

Marc Roby: We find the regulative principle in Chapter 21 of the Westminster Confession of Faith, 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: Last week we gave the somewhat trivial example of how to biblically determine the time at which we should hold Sunday worship services. It is safe to say that different churches may reasonably pick different times without in any way violating the regulative principle. There are also other issues that may seem obvious, but which have historically caused problems.

Marc Roby: Can you give us an example?

Dr. Spencer: Yes. The Roman Catholic Church at the time of the reformation performed its masses in Latin, which was a language the vast majority of the people couldn't understand. And, while I don't want to get into the reasons behind their use of Latin, let me simply say that this was a clear violation of the biblical principles regarding worship.

Marc Roby: Now, can you back that statement up with Scripture?

Dr. Spencer: Absolutely. One of the places where the New Testament gives us some clear guidance about worship is in 1 Corinthians 14. In Verse 4, Paul wrote that “He who speaks in a tongue edifies himself, but he who prophesies edifies the church.”¹

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Marc Roby: Now, the whole issue of speaking in tongues is, in itself, controversial.

Dr. Spencer: It is, and I don't intend to address that issue today. But whatever we take it to mean, Paul's point in the verse, when you look at in context, is that it is better to speak in a way that edifies, or builds up, the church. When he speaks about prophecy here, we shouldn't think of that just in terms of predicting the future, which is a common misconception.

Marc Roby: Yes, even if we look at the Old Testament prophets, predicting the future was a very small part of what they did. The one thing that really stands out is that they told the people the very Word of God. They often prefaced statements with, "The Lord says ..." and then gave the people the words that God had revealed to them.

Dr. Spencer: And the same is true today in a sense. Whenever someone reads and properly interprets and applies the Word of God, they are prophesying in the sense Paul meant here. And, of course, we get the Word of God from the Bible. So, when Paul said that "he who prophesies edifies the church", he was primarily speaking about the preaching of the Word of God.

The Greek word translated as "edifies" in this verse is interesting. It is οἰκοδομέω (oikodomeō) and it comes from the Greek word for house or dwelling and originally meant to build a house or some other structure, like a temple or a pyramid. But even prior to the time of the New Testament it also had a figurative use in terms of building a life.²

Marc Roby: The English Standard Version of the Bible translates the last part of 1 Corinthians 14:4 as, "the one who prophesies builds up the church", which is a more literal rendering according to what you're saying.

Dr. Spencer: Well, it is more literal in terms of how people often understand the word edify. But the word edify actually does mean to build up, although most people think of it in terms of instruction, especially moral instruction. In fact, the word edify has the same basic root as the word edifice, which is a large building or structure of some sort. So, moral instruction is helping someone build a proper life. It is all the same basic idea.

And, getting back to Paul's statement, when you look at the whole argument in 1 Corinthians 14, his main point is that the primary purpose of a church service is to build up, or edify, believers so that they can live the Christian life.

Marc Roby: That seems a bit strange though. God commands us to worship him and it would seem that the purpose of worship must be related to God, not the worshipers themselves.

Dr. Spencer: Ah, you raise a very good point. We have been talking about worship for a few weeks, but we have not defined what it is. It turns out that it is a bit difficult to define and there are many books that discuss worship without ever explicitly defining it. Wayne Grudem says that "*Worship is the activity of glorifying God in his presence with our voices and hearts.*"³

² G. Friedrich, (Trans. By G. Bromley), *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, Vol. V, Eerdmans, 1967, pp 137-138

³ W. Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, Inter-Varsity Press, 1994, pg. 1003

Marc Roby: I think that definition needs some fleshing out. First, what it means to glorify God needs definition, and second, someone might object by pointing out that we are in God's presence at every moment of every day.

Dr. Spencer: It turns in fact out that glorifying God and worshiping God are almost synonymous, so in a sense, Grudem has come very close to violating a cardinal rule for giving a definition; which is that you should never use the word itself in its definition! But even though he comes close to violating the rule, I think his definition is not unreasonable.

We've discussed what it means to glorify God several times before. Jesus told us in John 17:4 that he brought God glory by his perfect obedience, so we glorify God in the same way. When we live lives that are obedient to God's revealed will, we glorify him. Now that does *not* mean that we somehow increase God's glory, that would be impossible. It simply means that we do a better job of *reflecting* his glory to the rest of his creation.

Marc Roby: Which goes along with the fact that human beings are the only creatures made in God's image.

Dr. Spencer: Yes it does. There is sense, of course, in which *all* of creation declares the glory of God as we are told in Psalm 19, but there is also a sense in which man is unique in his ability to do so because, as you pointed out, we alone are made in God's image.

But getting back to the idea that we glorify God by our obedience, worship is one of the activities that God has commanded and so it pleases him when we worship in obedience to his command. Therefore, worship does glorify God. And, when Grudem says we do this in God's presence, he is referring to the fact that we are self-consciously gathering together *for the specific purpose* of coming to God in worship, which is different than being in his presence when we are focused on other activities.

Marc Roby: Perhaps we could say that worship is a time to be singularly focused on our main purpose in life, which is to glorify God.

Dr. Spencer: That would be one way of putting it, which is, I think, completely compatible with Grudem's definition. James Boice has an interesting discussion in which he goes through the origins of the English words worship and glorify. He says that "Linguistically speaking, worship of God is the same thing as praising God or glorifying his name."⁴ He concludes by saying, "We worship God, just as we glorify God, when we acknowledge his perfections."⁵

I think we can put this together with your suggestion and say that worship could be defined as an activity focused on proclaiming, praising and giving thanks to God for his perfections.

Marc Roby: Which is consistent with, for example, the definition given by Webster's, which is that worship is "to honor or show reverence for as a divine being or supernatural power".⁶

⁴ J. Boice, *Foundations of the Christian Faith*, Revised in One Volume, InterVarsity Press, 1986, pg. 599

⁵ *Ibid*, pg. 600

⁶ <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/worship>

Dr. Spencer: That is consistent, yes. And getting back to your point that it seems strange that 1 Corinthians 14 emphasizes edifying the church, I think it does all make sense when you put it together. If we worship by proclaiming, praising and giving thanks for God's perfections, those activities will also serve to build us up in our faith and give us greater strength and ability to live out the Christian life, which then serves to glorify God further through the lives of the members of the church. We are warned in Hebrews 10:25, "Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching."

Marc Roby: Therefore, we can clearly conclude that our meeting together serves the purpose of providing encouragement, which we all need in order to overcome Satan, sin and the world and live what the Puritans used to call an overcoming Christian life.

Dr. Spencer: That is clearly true. And that is really the main purpose of worship. It isn't about candles and rituals and incantations, especially not in some language that the people can't understand. And that is why I said the Roman Catholic Church's use of Latin at the time of the reformation was unbiblical. The people cannot be built up in their faith if they don't even understand what is being said.

Marc Roby: Yes, that is certainly true. But, then again, the Roman Catholic Church's emphasis was not on personal holiness and working out your faith in daily living. They taught that people are saved through the sacraments administered by the church.

Dr. Spencer: Yes, they did, and they still do. But I don't want to pursue that topic any further at this time. My point for now is simply that the main purpose of a church service, or I should say, a worship service, is to glorify God, which it does both directly and by building up the members of the church, which occurs through our proclaiming, praising and giving thanks for God's perfections.

Marc Roby: Which typically involves singing, prayers, reading of the Word of God and preaching or teaching.

Dr. Spencer: That's right. We see this clearly as Paul goes on in 1 Corinthians 14. In Verse 26 we read, "What then, brothers? When you come together, each one has a hymn, a lesson, a revelation, a tongue, or an interpretation. Let all things be done for building up." And he closes his discussion of worship, in 1 Corinthians 14:40, by writing, "But all things should be done decently and in order."

Now, when he says that "each one" should have these things to contribute, he is *not* saying that you shouldn't have pastors and teachers in charge and doing most of the teaching and preaching, that would contradict what he says elsewhere.

Marc Roby: For example, in Ephesians 4:11-13 Paul wrote, in speaking about Christ, that "It was he who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers, to prepare God's people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ."

Dr. Spencer: And, as always, we need to interpret the verse in 1 Corinthians 14:40 in a way that is consistent with all of the Bible's teaching, including the passage you just read. In this case, the solution is quite simple. Even though a typical worship service will involve teaching and/or preaching by designated pastors and teachers, there can also be forums where rank and file Christians contribute. There is no contradiction. But in all cases, the objective is to proclaim, praise and give thanks for God's perfections, which both directly glorifies him and builds up the members of the congregation to go out and do a better job of glorifying God in their daily lives.

Marc Roby: Very well, it seems that we have now seen some rather clear direction on what a worship service should contain. Do you want to say more about the regulative principle and how it is properly used in putting together the detailed circumstances of a worship service?

Dr. Spencer: Absolutely. There are many other aspects of a worship service that need to be decided and which, from time to time, have caused divisions. For example, let's discuss how the minister is to be dressed.

Marc Roby: Well, there is obviously a very wide difference of opinion on that question. Roman Catholic priests and some others still wear vestments, which are special clothing used only for ministering in the church. But I've also seen pastors preaching in T-shirts and jeans.

Dr. Spencer: Yes, in fact, a T-shirt and jeans is probably more common than vestments today. And just to make our own bias clear, I will tell our listeners that in our church, whoever is preaching or teaching on a Sunday morning will be wearing a suit and tie.

Marc Roby: Although there are occasional exceptions to that rule. For example, if preaching at a summer retreat outdoors on a hot day.

Dr. Spencer: True. But getting back to the regulative principle. There is no verse in the New Testament that tells you how a minister should dress. The Old Testament priests obviously had very specific clothing that God commanded them to wear, but it is clear by the absence of the Temple services that similar vestments were not used in Christian services in the New Testament age.

Marc Roby: Although that doesn't imply that such vestments are wrong.

Dr. Spencer: No, that would be going too far. The general reasons usually given for wearing vestments are that they identify the priest or minister as an ordained official of the church, they lend sobriety and seriousness to the service – in other words – they are a reminder that the service is something special, and they reduce the possibility of having people's attention drawn to the way the minister is dressed.

Marc Roby: In other words, to take attention *away* from the minister.

Dr. Spencer: Exactly, they are meant to help the listeners focus their attention on Christ, not the tie or shirt the minister is wearing. And I agree that is an important consideration. I don't think a minister should wear flashy clothing or filthy casual clothing. His clothing should not draw attention to him in any way. It should be staid and conservative and not draw attention. I think that is the important thing biblically. Whatever clothing the minister has on should help people to focus on Christ and the Word that is being preached. It should not draw attention to the minister

himself. But, at the same time, it should set a serious tone for the worship service. We are coming into the presence of the Almighty God, not sharing a cup of coffee with a friend. That is why I think wearing a suit is the right thing to do. But it is not something about which I would be dogmatic, and the specific style of dress necessary to not draw attention to the minister and to set a serious tone will obviously differ from culture to culture.

Marc Roby: Alright, we've now seen a few examples of applying the regulative principle that deal with circumstances having nothing directly to do with the *content* of a worship service. We've discussed the time of worship, the language used and the clothing worn by the minister. But what about the actual content of a service?

Dr. Spencer: Well, as we just saw from 1 Corinthians 14, there should certainly be singing of hymns and teaching. And that obviously leads to questions about what kinds of things may be sung and what kinds of things may be taught.

Marc Roby: Yes, singing plays a very significant role in most modern worship. In fact, it is often called the "worship" portion of the service, as if listening to the preached word were not also a time of worship.

Dr. Spencer: And the music is also frequently an elaborate performance. So, let's talk about this for a moment. You and I have both played guitar in church on different occasions, and years ago I remember attending a workshop for worship bands put on by the Maranatha Sings group. At one point someone asked the guitarist what he thought was the proper place for little frills and solos in the midst of a song and I thought his answer was very good. He first properly distinguished between a Christian concert and a worship service and, with regard to the worship service, he correctly noted that the purpose of the band is to help people worship, not to draw attention to the band.

Marc Roby: And, of course, you can draw attention to the band either by being bad, or by being too good – if you know what I mean.

Dr. Spencer: I do know what you mean, and I'm confident our listeners do too. And this guitarist said something that has stuck with me. He said something like this, "You need to remember that God himself gave you the gift. I don't care how amazing your little riff is, I guarantee he's not impressed."

Marc Roby: Ooh – that puts you in your place, doesn't it?

Dr. Spencer: As well it should. The music should never be about the music, it is about worshiping God. A worship service is not a concert. The lyrics should be theologically correct and the music should assist people in worshiping through song. If the music itself becomes the focus, there is a serious problem.

Marc Roby: Okay, I have another question regarding the singing that I'd like to get your response to, but I think it will have to wait until next week. For now, let me now remind our listeners that they can email their questions and comments to info@whatdoesthewordsay.org, and we will do our best to answer.