

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. At the end of our session last week we were discussing music in worship and I had a question I wanted to ask. So, Dr. Spencer, may I begin today with that question?

Dr. Spencer: By all means, please do.

Marc Roby: Alright. There are a number of reformed churches that only sing psalms set to music because they object to singing anything that doesn't come directly from the Bible. What does the regulative principle say about that?

Dr. Spencer: Well, first let me say that this clearly falls into the category of things that should not prevent us from being able to worship with someone. So, for example, if I was visiting a church that had this practice it would not be a concern for me. But, with that said, I don't think it is biblical.

In Ephesians 5:19-20 the apostle Paul tells us, "Speak to one another with psalms, hymns and spiritual songs. Sing and make music in your heart to the Lord, always giving thanks to God the Father for everything, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ."¹ Now why would Paul list psalms, hymns and spiritual songs as separate entities if our worship should only include singing psalms?

Marc Roby: Yes, that's a good question. And he also wrote in Colossians 3:16, "Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom, and as you sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God."

Dr. Spencer: Which shows us, incidentally, that the apostle assumed singing was a normal part of worship. But it also again lists psalms, hymns and spiritual songs as separate elements. Note also that it is in the context of letting the Word dwell in us richly. There is something wonderful about music that often allows us to remember lyrics to songs more readily than prose.

Marc Roby: That can be a bad thing too. There are certainly lyrics in my head that I wish I could remove.

Dr. Spencer: And in mine too. We all know the effect of commercial jingles used to sell one thing or another.

Marc Roby: Oh please, don't sing any of them!

Dr. Spencer: Don't worry, I wouldn't do that to people. They can be very hard to put out of your mind. But that is exactly the point in terms of the good use of music in worship. Nevertheless,

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the issue has, regrettably, been the cause of church splits and vigorous debates and no less a theologian than the outstanding 20th-century theologian John Murray, whom we have approvingly quoted many times, argued in favor of singing only psalms.² Far be it from me to correct Professor Murray, but I must respectfully disagree on this point while pointing out, yet again, that this is not an issue about which we should be dogmatic.

Marc Roby: We should, however, be extremely careful. As you just noted, music does have a powerful influence.

Dr. Spencer: Yes, we should be *extremely* careful in the hymns and/or choruses we allow in our churches and the best ones usually have a great deal of Scripture in them, either in direct quotation or with minor modifications to fit the music. The lyrics are extremely important.

Marc Roby: And many modern choruses are deficient in their theology.

Dr. Spencer: Absolutely. There are a few, which I won't name, that have wonderful music but absolutely terrible, unbiblical lyrics. We should not allow those to be sung in our churches.

Marc Roby: Now, that brings up a related question. What about musical instruments? There are churches that don't allow musical instruments of any type and others that only use an organ or piano, but won't allow, for example, a guitar.

Dr. Spencer: My answer here is almost identical to the last question. First, it is not an issue about which I would be dogmatic nor is it an issue that would prevent me from worshiping with someone from one of these churches. But I don't think such a position can be supported biblically.

John Frame points out that "Some Reformed people have argued, for example, that the new covenant excludes the use of orchestras and choirs because these were aspects of temple worship, and that form of worship is completely abrogated."³

Marc Roby: That's an interesting argument. And we have discussed the fact that the ceremonial law has indeed been abrogated because it was intended to point forward to Jesus Christ.

Dr. Spencer: And so, for example, we don't do animal sacrifices anymore. But Frame correctly notes that the Bible never says that all elements of temple worship have been abrogated. That is an unwarranted conclusion not supported by the Bible.

And if you allow any instruments, it seems impossible to me to somehow argue that only an organ or piano should be used. You don't see either of these instruments mentioned in the Bible, because they didn't exist yet. But you do see, for example, cymbals, lyres, tambourines and trumpets. Therefore, I don't see how you can say that a guitar, or wind instrument or even drums are somehow prohibited.

² John Frame, *The Doctrine of the Christian Life*, P&R Publishing Company, 2008, pg. 476, plus <https://www.reformedworship.org/article/march-1987/we-used-sing-only-psalms-what-happened>

³ Frame, op. cit., pg. 475

Marc Roby: Although, as you said last week, the purpose of the instrumental accompaniment is to help people worship as they sing songs that have theologically sound lyrics.

Dr. Spencer: And that *is* the main point. The instruments and the music they make should never be the focus. And the style of music must be appropriate to worship. Even though I realize that there may be a lot of different personal views on that topic, I can't imagine worshipping to some types of music, and I'm not just referring to modern music. There are types of classical music which would make it almost impossible for me to worship. We must remember that music has a very powerful influence on human emotions. Both the lyrics *and* the music itself.

Marc Roby: Yes, that is very true.

Dr. Spencer: John Calvin himself, in his monumental work the *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, wrote that "if singing is tempered to a gravity befitting the presence of God and angels, it both gives dignity and grace to sacred actions, and has a very powerful tendency to stir up the mind to true zeal and ardor in prayer. We must, however, carefully beware, lest our ears be more intent on the music than our minds on the spiritual meaning of the words."⁴

Marc Roby: Yes, I think that can be a very great danger, and perhaps even more so for those of us who enjoy music for its own sake. It is easy to let yourself be focused on the music and not on the meaning of the lyrics.

Dr. Spencer: I agree completely. And yet singing can also be one of the most wonderful parts of worship. I have had occasions when the whole congregation is singing where I have felt myself lifted up to heaven itself – to be surrounded by the saints singing of God's glory and his works can be wonderful. But we must be careful with anything that can have such a powerful influence.

There is a famous quote that has been attributed to various people, including Plato and Herbert Hoover, but no matter who said it, or repeated it, it has an element of truth. The quote is, "Let me write the songs of a nation and I care not who makes its laws."

Marc Roby: Well, that maybe overstates things a bit, but it makes the same point in a powerful way.

Dr. Spencer: And so, to conclude this discussion, we could go on about all sorts of specifics. I have heard people claim for example that syncopated rhythms or minor keys are of the devil. I think any blanket statement like that is almost certainly wrong, but we should be sensitive and careful. We must ask one simple question with regard to anything we are going to sing in a worship service, "Does this music help people worship God with reverence and awe?" If the answer to that question is not an unqualified "yes", then we shouldn't use that song. R.C. Sproul makes a great point about enthusiastic worship in his commentary on the Westminster Confession of Faith.

Marc Roby: What point is that?

⁴ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Translated by Ford Lewis Battles, Westminster John Knox Press, 1960, pg. 590 (III.20.32)

Dr. Spencer: In discussing the modern evangelical desire to make their worship services attractive to modern people, he notes that “the minute we pander to the ‘audience’ rather than to God, we are in serious trouble. I don’t want to be cynical or harsh, but the Old Testament worship service where the people were the most enthusiastic and energetic consisted of the singing of praise songs by an overflow congregation, while dancing around a golden calf (Ex. 32:17-19).”⁵

Marc Roby: Well, he may not have wanted to be cynical or harsh, but that *is* a fairly harsh, although accurate, statement. He was, of course, referring to the time when Moses was up on Mount Sinai for forty days and nights⁶ and, as a result of his being gone so long, the people became impatient and had Aaron make an idol, which was a golden calf.

Dr. Spencer: It was a horrible episode in the history of the Jewish exodus. But Sproul’s point is a good one. Just because people are enthusiastic in their worship, it doesn’t mean that their worship is good and acceptable to God. In fact, it may be a contra-indication. In Deuteronomy 12:4 Moses told the people, “You must not worship the Lord your God in their way”, speaking, of course, about the surrounding peoples. And we would be well advised to take his instruction to heart. We dare not model our worship services on the secular world around us.

Marc Roby: And so, I assume, you would not think that smoke and light shows are an appropriate part of worship music either.

Dr. Spencer: You assume correctly. And there is another particularly striking example of enthusiastic worship that was completely unacceptable to God in the Old Testament. And this example comes from the life of David, the king whom we are told in 1 Samuel 13:14 was a man after God’s own heart.

Marc Roby: I assume you are talking about the first time David tried to move the ark of the covenant to Jerusalem?

Dr. Spencer: That is exactly what I’m referring to. The ark of the covenant was the most holy item in the Jewish nation. It was over the ark that God met with the high priest on the day of atonement, Yom Kippur. The ark had been captured by the Philistines, but God cursed them by toppling their idol, Dagon in his temple and by afflicting the people with tumors. As a result, they sent the ark back to the Israelites on a new cart. The ark then stayed in the house of Abinadab in the town of Kiriath Jearim, about 8 or 9 miles west of Jerusalem, for 20 years.⁷

Marc Roby: And then David, after becoming king and setting up residence in Jerusalem, decided to move the ark to Jerusalem.

Dr. Spencer: Which was a fine thing for him to do. There was nothing wrong with his motive. And we are told in 2 Samuel 6:2-3 that David, “and all his men set out from Baalah of Judah to

⁵ R.C. Sproul, *Truths We Confess: A Layman’s Guide to the Westminster Confession of Faith*, P&R Publishing Co., 2006, Vol. 2, pg. 311

⁶ Exodus 24:18

⁷ 1 Samuel 7:1-2

bring up from there the ark of God, which is called by the Name, the name of the LORD Almighty, who is enthroned between the cherubim that are on the ark. They set the ark of God on a new cart and brought it from the house of Abinadab, which was on the hill. Uzzah and Ahio, sons of Abinadab, were guiding the new cart”.

Marc Roby: And we read in Verse 5 that “David and the whole house of Israel were celebrating with all their might before the LORD, with songs and with harps, lyres, tambourines, sistrums and cymbals.”

Dr. Spencer: But even though they were celebrating with all their might, they had failed miserably. And, as a result, when the oxen pulling the cart stumbled and Uzzah reached out to stop the ark from sliding off of the cart, we are told in 2 Samuel 6:7 that “The LORD’s anger burned against Uzzah because of his irreverent act; therefore God struck him down and he died there beside the ark of God.”

Marc Roby: That punishment often strikes people as way too severe for the crime.

Dr. Spencer: In fact, many people don’t see that there was *any* crime. And yet, king David should have known better than to follow the Philistine’s example of moving the ark on a new cart. We are told in Exodus 25:14 and Numbers 7:9 that the ark was to be carried by Kohathites, who were Levites, not put on a cart. And, in Numbers 4:15 we are told that if they touch the ark, they will die. Now David, as king, was to have a copy of the law and was to read it and know it. So the fault here was primarily his, although the priests should also have known.

Marc Roby: Uzzah certainly paid a very high price for not following God’s instructions for moving the ark.

Dr. Spencer: And my point simply is that our main goal should not be producing enthusiastic worship. Our goal should always be to glorify God, which we can only do by obeying his law. And he is very serious about it, so we should be as well. Music is one area in which the modern church often fails. It has become entertainment, not worship.

Marc Roby: We are warned in Hebrews 12:28-29, “Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, let us be thankful, and so worship God acceptably with reverence and awe, for our ‘God is a consuming fire.’”

Dr. Spencer: And notice that those verses give us the reason we should be so careful. We are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken! It is the eternal kingdom of God. It is heaven. Therefore, we should be extremely thankful. God has redeemed us from slavery to the tyranny of sin and Satan and our worship should reflect a humble thankfulness for all that God has done.

Marc Roby: And that is also what we see in the Old Testament. The exodus of the Jewish people from slavery in Egypt is the Old Testament type that foreshadowed Christ’s redemption of his people. And when God sent Moses to speak to Pharaoh, we are told in Exodus 7:16 that God commanded Moses to tell Pharaoh, “The LORD, the God of the Hebrews, has sent me to say to you: Let my people go, so that they may worship me in the desert.”

Dr. Spencer: That is a great point. The primary duty of man is to glorify God and, as I noted last time, to glorify God is essentially synonymous with worshiping him. He has done great things for us and we should be extremely grateful.

Marc Roby: In fact, our worshiping God by proclaiming his Word, giving thanks for all that he has done and singing his praises is a form of sacrifice, not unlike the sacrifices made in the Old Testament. We are told in Hebrews 13:15-16 that “Through Jesus, therefore, let us continually offer to God a sacrifice of praise—the fruit of lips that confess his name. And do not forget to do good and to share with others, for with such sacrifices God is pleased.”

Dr. Spencer: There is a continuity between worship under the old covenant and the new covenant. We spoke about the new covenant, of which Jesus Christ is the mediator, a couple of weeks ago in Session 213. The form of worship has changed, with the most obvious changes being that we no longer make animal sacrifices and we no longer need a priest as a mediator, because Christ has made the one sacrifice that is truly effectual and he is our high priest and mediator. But we still glorify God and are strengthened in our faith through worship.

And, although we have been discussing worship in the narrow sense of corporate worship, which is typically done on Sundays in church, it is also appropriate to note that all of life is a sacrifice of sorts. Paul wrote in Romans 12:1, “Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God’s mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God—this is your spiritual act of worship.”

Marc Roby: And the reason that verse starts with the word therefore is that Paul is making a transition here. In the first eleven chapters of Romans, Paul has been spelling out the doctrines of the Christian faith and now he starts the practical section, which explains how we should live in response.

Dr. Spencer: And I’d like to close our discussion of worship as a means of grace by speaking about worship briefly in this broader sense. The Rev. P.G. Mathew, in his commentary on Romans 12:1, points out that the word, “‘Therefore’ points back to the first eleven chapters of this epistle, especially Romans 3:21-26, which speaks of our redemption and justification through faith on the basis of the atonement of Jesus Christ. ... As an ambassador of Christ, Paul is telling us how then we should live in this present evil age. God himself is exhorting us through the apostle to live holy lives in response to his glorious, gracious salvation.”⁸

That is, ultimately, the whole purpose of the Christian life. We glorify, or we could say, worship God by living holy lives in response to his wonderful gift of salvation. We deserve hell, but he has given us heaven.

Marc Roby: And if that doesn’t cause someone to worship, I don’t know what can. So let me close by reminding our listeners that they can email their questions and comments to info@whatdoesthewordsay.org. We love hearing from you.

⁸ P.G. Mathew, *Romans: The Gospel Life* (Volume 2), Grace and Glory Ministries, 2014, pg. 266