



## The Covenant of Grace and Public Worship

**Scripture: *Leviticus 10:1-11, Malachi 1***  
**Confessions: *Heidelberg Catechism QA 96***

In the last chapter, we learned how the covenant of grace concretely impacts the way we view our children. We also learned that it affects the way we raise our children. For instance, we saw that it is our children's place in the covenant of grace that leads us to insist that they always have a place with us in public worship. As soon as they are able, we want them to be with us meeting with our covenant God in worship.

Worship is what we are focussing on in this final chapter. What difference does a Reformed doctrine of the covenant of grace make when it comes to our worship? We are going to see that it makes **a lot** of difference. It is what explains why our worship services are so different from other church groups around us, even those who might hold to the doctrines of grace like we do.

Sometimes the differences between us and others are chalked up to mere differences in taste. One church has a more "contemporary" worship style, and another church has a more "traditional" worship style. It is similar to the way that you like rice, whereas I like potatoes. Or you say 'tomahto', and I say 'tomayto'. So for some it becomes just a matter of preference. We are told that it is merely a subjective thing. If that is true, then it really makes no difference. We are all worshipping God, and we all do it in equally legitimate ways. But is this really true? Can we just worship God however we want and then defend ourselves by saying it is just a matter of preference?

If you are paying attention, you will invariably hear about all kinds of things going on in worship services around us. There are the churches that incorporate yoga into their service. There are those who have puppet shows or stage performances including dancers or musicians. There was a Christian Reformed church in Calgary some years ago that made the news when their pastor started preaching a series of sermons on the TV show 'the Simpsons.' For some Sundays they would sit and watch an episode of 'the Simpsons' and then the pastor would preach his sermon on that, instead of on the Bible. He reasoned that God reveals himself in popular culture too, so why not listen to what God is saying in 'the Simpsons.'<sup>1</sup> Is it really just a matter of preference? You prefer a sermon on the Bible, and I prefer a sermon on 'the Simpsons'? Is that just a different worship style that we are not used to? Or is there something more going on?

There is indeed something more going on — a lot more! It has everything to do with the covenant of grace and how we understand it. In this chapter, we are going to learn how the Bible's doctrine of the covenant of grace makes Reformed worship distinct.

### **The Essence of Reformed Worship**

In the first chapter, one of the first things we learned was that the covenant of grace is essentially the relationship that God has with his people. There is a bond between the LORD and, not only believers, but also believers and their children. This relationship impacts everything in the lives of Christians, including how we worship.

We also saw earlier that the covenant relationship between God and his people is often compared in Scripture to a marriage. If we read books like Ezekiel and Hosea, we see God as a husband complaining about the unfaithfulness of his wife. The marriage relationship was not working the

way that it should. It was an unhealthy relationship — there was dysfunction and brokenness. We expect to see certain things in a healthy marriage relationship. For example, we would expect to see husband and wife communicating with one another; to see them engaging each other in dialogue. In a healthy marriage, one partner does not do all the talking while the other just sits and listens — there should be back and forth.

That was the pattern of Old Testament worship. The Israelites did not invent the tabernacle or temple worship. What was done at the tabernacle (and later the temple) was ordained by God himself. It was revealed in the Law. In the Old Testament, when God's people were faithful and worshipping according to his Word, what was happening at the sanctuary reflected the relationship between God and his people. There was back and forth between God and his people, just as you would expect to see in a properly functioning relationship. God was present at the tabernacle as the people gathered. He was present in a special way to bless his people. The people were there to bring their sacrifices, songs, and prayers. The sacrifices were presented through the mediation of the priests. At certain points in the tabernacle liturgy, the priests represented God and what he was saying and doing. At other points, the priests represented the people and what they were saying and doing. Through it all, there was a back and forth. There was movement in the tabernacle.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, it all pointed ahead to our Saviour Jesus Christ. At the same time, everything said "relationship."

In the New Testament, we no longer have a temple or tabernacle like they did in the Old Testament. Christ is in heaven, in the real holy of holies. The gospel proclaims that he has made the sacrifice for our sin that has turned away the wrath of God and returned his favour. Through Christ's suffering and death on the cross we have reconciliation with the holy God. Therefore, sacrifices for sin are no longer needed and indeed, the whole ceremonial system has been fulfilled. Yet God still calls his people to worship him and he promises to be there to bless them when they gather. This is an important point.

There are those who say that there is nothing really special about believers gathering together for worship. Some say that God is present everywhere, so we do not need to go to church to worship him. God is present in Algonquin Park, so I can take my canoe and go to Algonquin Park on Sunday and worship him there instead. Why not? Here is why not: because God does not promise to bless you with the Word and sacraments in Algonquin Park. He is present there, but in public worship, when God's people gather together around the means of grace, he is present in a special way. In fact, it is so special that the apostle Paul says in 1 Corinthians 3:16-17 that the church (not the building, but the people) is the temple of God. Peter says the same thing in 1 Peter 2:5. The church is a spiritual house, a place for the offering of spiritual sacrifices. The church is the New Testament temple. God promised to be present to bless his people at the Old Testament temple; now he also promises to be present to bless his people at the New Testament temple, when the church is gathered together before him to receive the ministry of the Word and sacraments.

So the Bible teaches that God is present in a special way when his people are gathered together in obedience to his call. That meeting must reflect the relationship that God has with his people. It must reflect the covenant. So there must be a back and forth; there must be two-way communication in the worship service. It cannot be a monologue, with only us speaking to God all the time. Flipping it around, it cannot be God only speaking to us all the time. Our service must reflect a relationship between two parties and a properly functioning relationship is going to have communication, dialogue, back and forth. The essence of Reformed worship is that it reflects the covenant relationship between God and his people.

Moreover, we must always remember that this is not a relationship between equals. God is the one who is infinitely greater in the covenant of grace. God is the one who has graciously initiated this relationship. God is the one who has called us into his presence. God is sovereign and holy. Since all these things are true, we recognize that God alone has the right to determine the terms by which we will have this worship conversation or dialogue. We do not decide what is and is not appropriate. We do not have that prerogative. Because of who God is in relation to us, in the covenant of grace, we must leave it to him to determine what we shall do and what we shall say.

Accordingly, this is what we confess in QA 96 of the Catechism:

Q. *What does God require in the second commandment?*

A. *We are not to make an image of God in any way, nor to worship Him in any other manner than He has commanded in His Word.*

This is about the second Word of the covenant: *“You shall not make for yourself a carved image, or any likeness of anything...”* We confess that we are to worship God in no other way than he has commanded in his Word. We call that **the regulative principle of worship**.<sup>3</sup> It is the application of *Sola Scriptura* (by Scripture alone) to our worship. We do not decide how to worship God on our own. Please note: this is far different from the way many other Christians worship. For most other Christians, the principle is that if the Bible does not forbid it, then you can do it. That is what can lead to some strange worship practices. The Bible does not forbid yoga in the worship service, so you can do it. No, we say, we only worship God as he has commanded. He has not commanded us to do yoga, so we do not do yoga. Or take what I mentioned earlier about ‘the Simpsons.’ The popular approach says, “God does not forbid watching ‘the Simpsons’ on a big screen in church on Sunday morning, so we can do it.” No, we say, we only worship God as he has commanded. We do not add or take away from his commands. He has not commanded us to replace the reading and preaching of Scripture with the watching and preaching of ‘the Simpsons’ so we simply do not do it. The regulative principle of worship is a safeguard against all kinds of deviations and departures.

Our covenant God takes worship very seriously and so should we. We see that powerfully illustrated in this passage from Leviticus 10:

*Now Nadab and Abihu, the sons of Aaron, each took his censer and put fire in it and laid incense on it and offered unauthorized fire before the Lord, which he had not commanded them. <sup>2</sup>And fire came out from before the Lord and consumed them, and they died before the Lord. <sup>3</sup>Then Moses said to Aaron, “This is what the Lord has said: ‘Among those who are near me I will be sanctified, and before all the people I will be glorified.’” And Aaron held his peace.*

Nadab and Abihu offered *“unauthorized fire”* before the LORD. The details of what that involved are not clear. What is clear is that they were attempting to worship God in a way that had not been authorized. Things did not turn out well for Nadab and Abihu. However well-intentioned they may have been, God was not pleased with their worship — quite the opposite! They learned the hard way that the holy covenant God is a consuming fire (Hebrews 12:28-29). They were to worship God only as he commanded and so are we. The Second Commandment is still in force for us today as Christians and we have to honour it. As Christians redeemed by Christ, would we not **want** to honour it? Why would a believer bought with the blood of Christ strike off on his or her own and say, “Forget it, God, I know you loved me so much that you sent your Son to die for my sins, but I want to worship you my way.” Surely that would be absurd. Jesus was clear on this in John 14:15, *“If you love me, you will keep my commandments.”* Those who love Christ and have true faith in him bear the fruits of faith in a life that wants to follow God’s ways, also when it comes to worship.

## **The Elements of Reformed Worship**

That brings us to consider what exactly God has commanded for Christian worship. If he is the lead party in the covenant of grace, what has he laid out as the elements of our meeting with him? It is really quite simple. God has commanded the reading and preaching of Scripture (2 Timothy 4:2). There is prayer (1 Timothy 2:8). There is the giving of Christian alms, the giving of offerings for the needy (Deuteronomy 16:17; 1 Corinthians 16:1-2). There is the singing of psalms and hymns (Ephesians 5:19; Colossians 3:16). There is the administration of the sacraments of baptism and the Lord’s Supper (Matthew 28:19; 1 Corinthians 11:23-26). On some occasions (e.g. profession of faith, ordination/installation of office bearers), there is also the making of vows before the LORD and his people — something found in both the Old and the New Testament (see Lord’s

Day 37 of the Heidelberg Catechism). Those are the divinely commanded elements of worship and we dare not add or subtract from them.

But perhaps this raises some questions in your mind. What about when we worship? Or the musical instruments we use in our worship? There is an important distinction we need to know in order to answer these questions responsibly. We have to distinguish **elements** of worship from **circumstances** of worship. Elements are the things commanded in God's Word: preaching, singing, praying, etc. The regulative principle of worship governs the elements. Circumstances are things surrounding the elements, things that are incidental. For example, we might worship at 9:30 AM and 3:30 PM. God's Word does not command these precise times. In fact, we have the freedom to determine the times at which we will worship on the Lord's Day. Consistories must use wisdom informed by God's Word to decide on these times. Of course, part of wisdom means also taking into account the circumstances of the congregation. The types of musical instruments we use are also not commanded in Scripture. It is not required that we use an organ or a piano, or even any instrument at all. Many of our Brazilian brothers and sisters worship every Sunday without any musical accompaniment and that is acceptable too. The instrument and the choice of instrument are incidental — the musical accompaniment is there to support and enhance the singing. These things are circumstances and therefore not governed by the regulative principle.

Perhaps there are other questions. Maybe someone looks over our typical order of worship and says, "If there are only to be those elements of worship you mentioned, how do you explain things like the Votum, and the Salutation, and the Ten Commandments?" To answer that, have you noticed that all of those elements involve Scripture? They fall under the reading of Scripture. Scripture is used not only at the opening of our worship services, but throughout. In fact, it is another distinctive feature of Reformed worship: the Bible is there, open, and being used from beginning to end. Even in our singing! Most of our singing is done directly from God's Word, from the Psalms and from hymns that are based on Scripture. This is one of the richest parts of our Reformed heritage and it often strikes visitors who have not grown up with it.

So God's position in the covenant of grace impacts our worship because he alone can determine what we do in worship. We have these divinely commanded elements. But how should these elements be structured in the order of worship? That is also where the covenant plays a role.

## **The Structure of Reformed Worship**

If we look at the elements, there is something that points us in the direction we should go here. Some of the elements come from our side. For instance, we pray, we make offerings, we sing. There are other elements that come from God's side. God speaks his Word to us through the reading of Scripture and the preaching. There are a few things that follow from this.

The basic structure of our worship is going to reflect the covenant relationship between God and his people. There are the elements from man's side and from God's side and they should be put together in a way that reflects a covenant dialogue. There should be a back and forth between God and his people through the course of a service. That is what we see in a typical Reformed order of worship. We see this pattern: God speaks, his people respond. So, for example, there should be a call to worship at the beginning — that is God speaking. His people respond with the votum from Psalm 124:8. Then God speaks the words of greeting and blessing in the salutation. Then we respond with a song of praise. On it goes through the course of the entire service, back and forth.

What about the beginning and end of the service? How should that be done? If our worship is connected to the covenant of grace, and if God is the one who has the first word in the covenant of grace, would it not make sense that he must have the first word in the service? God initiates the covenant of grace. He has the first word there. That is why Reformed worship services should begin with a call to worship. The service does not begin with the handshake. It does not begin with the votum. Our meeting with God begins when he says it does, with his Word. Likewise, it ends with his Word. Our covenant God sends us away with his blessing in the benediction. He has the first word in our worship and he has the last word.

He is also at the center of the service with the ministry of the Word and sacraments. Again, that reflects his exalted position in the covenant of grace. When you look around, it often seems that people think that the center of worship is us and what we are doing for God in this hour of meeting with him. I once watched a service which began with 45 minutes of singing and then the music leader said, "Now that the worship is over, we'll listen to a message from Pastor Dave." That gives the impression that the real center of the service is us and our singing. That is **not** the biblical approach to worship. At the center of the service is God and what he is doing. That is why in a Reformed worship service, the preaching of God's Word and the administration of the sacraments are always in the center. This is the high point, the climax of Reformed worship. It is God bringing his Word to us through one of his servants to create and nourish faith. It is God bringing the sacraments to us through one of his servants to strengthen our faith. These things are in the center, because God is in the center of the covenant of grace.

Intimately related to that is the place of Christ as the Mediator of the covenant of grace. We can only expect to come into God's presence through the mediation of Christ. In ourselves we have no right to approach the holy God. After all, we are great sinners. He is holy and by ourselves we are not. If we were to come as we are, we would die. Yet we have Christ and he makes all the difference. Through Christ's blood we are washed and cleaned up, not only for salvation, but also for worship and entrance into the presence of our great God. At the center of our worship, then, is a ministry of Word and sacrament which points to this Saviour. Every week God's people have to be reoriented to Jesus Christ and that is what has to happen at the center of a biblical worship service. This Jesus-centered focus is why preaching and the sacraments are in the limelight of a Reformed worship service. These things point to him. You see, it is not about us, but about him.

## **The Style of Reformed Worship**

Seeing God as having the prime place in the covenant of grace is also going to dramatically impact and distinguish the style of Reformed worship. By "style," I mean things like our attitude towards worship, our dress and deportment, our church architecture, the way our music is played and sung, and so on. These are not trivial or indifferent matters. How we come into God's presence and how we conduct ourselves in God's presence matters tremendously.

We can learn that from Malachi 1, especially these words from verses 6-8:

*<sup>6</sup>"A son honors his father, and a servant his master. If then I am a father, where is my honor? And if I am a master, where is my fear? says the Lord of hosts to you, O priests, who despise my name. But you say, 'How have we despised your name?' <sup>7</sup>By offering polluted food upon my altar. But you say, 'How have we polluted you?' By saying that the Lord's table may be despised. <sup>8</sup>When you offer blind animals in sacrifice, is that not evil? And when you offer those that are lame or sick, is that not evil? Present that to your governor; will he accept you or show you favor? says the Lord of hosts.*

In many of the books of the prophets we find God pressing a covenant lawsuit against his people. He has this relationship with them and they have violated the relationship. They have not believed the Lord and followed him and so he goes after them with his prophets and confronts them with their covenant breaking. In Malachi 1, he speaks about their worship. On a superficial level, it looked like the people were worshipping God faithfully, as he commanded. However, God saw what was really happening.

What was really happening was that the people were bringing sacrifices that were second-rate and thinking that God would not notice. After all, other people did not notice. So, for example, verse 8 says that the people were bringing blind animals for sacrifices. It would not be obvious to anyone else that the animal was blind. Yet God's law had expressly commanded that only the best sacrifices be brought to him (e.g. Leviticus 22:22). God wanted only the best and healthiest animals. Yet here the Israelites were trying to cut corners, offering God the weak and sick animals, thinking he would not notice. He noticed. Then he says in verse 8, "*Try and do that with a human*

ruler. *Bring your human ruler your weak and sick animals as a gift; try bringing him your second or third best. See if **he** would accept that!*"

That teaches us an important principle about worship. Since God is exalted, because he has the number one place in the covenant relationship, because he is our God, we want to bring him only our absolute best. He is worthy of that. That applies to external things like how we dress when we come to church. Do we really believe that we are meeting in a special way with the most exalted King in the universe? Then that should be reflected in the way we dress. We do not want to draw up a dress code for the church, and we should not be looking at others. Each of us should ourselves be conscientious about this. Should we not offer **our very best** as we meet with the King of kings? That applies to everything. It applies also to our singing, to the playing of musical accompaniment, to the preparation of sermons, to the way we treat our church building, our attention to the sermon — in everything we want to offer our covenant God the absolute best when we worship. He deserves it. He is worthy of it.

Yet let us be clear: it is not just about the external things. The external things are not even the most important thing. The most important thing is what is going on in your heart, your attitude as you approach the Holy One of Israel. The first and foremost thing he desires is your heart, a heart that loves him and wants to glorify him. When our hearts have been made alive by the grace of God, when we see how much we have been loved by this exalted God, when we see what a treasure the covenant relationship is, that is inevitably going to have an impact on how we come to meet with this covenant God. That will shape our attitude: do we come into God's presence because we have to, or because we really want to?

To say it as clearly as possible: the style of our worship is going to reflect our understanding of whom this God is who has covenanted with us. Is he high and exalted, a majestic and transcendent God? Or do we think of him as a distant observer and not really present in our services? Or worse, do we think of him as a low-brow god who will always just take what he can get from us, even if it is second or third-best? Basically, do we accept and believe what God's Word says about himself and let that impact the manner and style of our meeting with him?

As we conclude, let us appreciate again the riches that we have as Reformed churches. We have a rich heritage of applying God's Word to worship, taking *Sola Scriptura* seriously also when we meet with God on Sunday. We do that because we take God seriously as our covenant God. He has approached us and called us his own. He says, "*I am your God and you are my people.*" When he says, "*I am your God,*" he means "I am number one for you. I have priority in this relationship; I alone determine how you will worship me." Since we are united to Christ, since his Spirit animates our hearts, we respond to these claims with eager and willing affirmation. Reformed believers have always acknowledged these truths and we should continue doing so. Other churches might offer a better worship "experience." Their music might be able to supply warm emotional moments. However, the Bible does not put these things in the center — the Bible does not put you in the center — and so neither should we. If we follow the Bible, the center of Christian worship will be a pulpit, not a stage. Just as in the covenant, God stands central, God's Word stands central, and the gospel of Jesus Christ stands central. That is what makes Reformed worship distinctly different.

### **Questions for Reflection and Discussion**

1. How does the singing of psalms reinforce the covenantal character of Reformed worship?
2. In the Old Testament, the prophets sometimes challenged God's covenant people by means of object lessons. For example, in Ezekiel 12, the prophet's actions symbolized Judah's captivity. How would you respond to those who argue that these object lessons justify the use of similar object lessons in public worship today?
3. Should there be any place for artistic creativity in Reformed covenantal worship? Why or why not?

4. What sorts of allowances can or should be made for making Reformed worship understandable or accessible to visitors who might not share our background? For example, would it be acceptable for the minister to explain briefly why we read the Ten Commandments each Sunday morning?
5. If we can watch a service online from the comfort of our own home, why should we bother to make the effort to travel to a public worship service in a church building? Does it really matter whether we are there in person?

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### Endnotes:

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<sup>1</sup> See my article, "The Gospel According to Bart Simpson?" in *Clarion* 50.5 (March 2, 2001), 109-110.

<sup>2</sup> This is explained in more detail by G. Van Dooren in, *The Beauty of Reformed Liturgy* (Winnipeg: Premier Publishing, 1980), 16-20.

<sup>3</sup> The regulative principle is also found in articles 7 and 32 of the Belgic Confession. See my *The Whole Manner of Worship: Worship and the Sufficiency of Scripture in Belgic Confession Article 7* (Edmonton: Still Waters Revival Books, 1997).