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# Facing New Paradigms In Worship: Learning New Lessons From Old Masters

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IN THE NOT TOO distant past, worship was sometimes referred to as the missing jewel of the evangelical church.<sup>1</sup> However true this may once have been, during the past few decades an incredible renewal of interest in the topic has taken hold of the church so that this jewel is missing no longer. In many settings, church life has been transformed by the writing of worship songs and books, the offering of worship seminars, the development and implementation of new liturgies (or non-liturgical forms that often become as regula-

tive as written liturgies are), and the establishment of worship committees and worship teams in local congregations. Even so, it may still be questioned whether the new emphasis on worship places the jewel in the appropriate setting that will enhance its brilliance and allow it to sparkle to the greatest effect, or whether it allows the jewel to remain sullied, or even forces it into a new setting where it does not fit very well.

It appears that the new focus on worship is but part of a paradigm shift in church life that has brought about changes on many levels. Even though we cannot focus on all of the changes in church life that are taking place today, we do want to consider the motivations that lie behind our new interest in worship. Why are people so interested in worship today? What moves them to attend worship seminars and buy books on the subject? Is this simply the latest fad to hit the church or is God moving in some new way? Could it

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1 A. W. Tozer, *Worship: The Missing Jewel of the Evangelical Church* (Harrisburg, PA: Christian Publications, n.d.), and Ronald Allen and Gordon Borror, *Worship: Rediscovering the Missing Jewel*.

be that we are disappointed by what we have been used to and want to try something new? Do new times require new worship practices just like new wine requires new wineskins?

My concern is that our renewed interest in worship may in some cases lead to a misunderstanding of the true nature of worship as revealed in the Bible and practised throughout church history. Since worship centres on the person of God, we need to evaluate whether our new worship styles are an honest attempt to experience more completely God as creator, redeemer, comforter, and friend, or whether we have adopted them in order to be relevant to the people of our age.

As we consider our approach to worship today, we would do well to examine the way the subject was approached by other believers at different points in history. This gives us an opportunity to learn from their wisdom (and mistakes), and also allows us to see ourselves as an integral part of the church that has been led by God throughout the centuries. Although church history gives us many examples of people and movements that have dealt with worship, this paper will be limited to an examination of the Puritans' approach.

The Puritans are chosen, not because they have the final word on how worship should be understood or performed, but because their wrestling with this issue provides us with some reference points that will enable us to think more clearly about the issues that should influence our current practice. In particular, the questions they asked when they faced a paradigm shift, both in the way worship was conceived and performed and in almost

every aspect of religious life, can instruct us about the kind of questions we should be asking today. Even if we come to different conclusions, their answers may well force us to think a little harder as we seek God's will on the matter. Our starting point will be to provide some background on the Puritan movement.

During the sixteenth century, when Puritanism was developing, the church in England was struggling with the implications of the Reformation and its rejection of many medieval Roman Catholic doctrines and practices. The Puritans were convinced that many in the English church had not gone far enough in their reformation of thought and practice. They viewed with suspicion and rejected many of the practices long associated with the medieval church, not because they were old, but because of the theology that lay behind them and the superstition that was frequently associated with them. The goal of their reformation was not to replace certain old practices with new ones that might be relevant to their time, but with older ones that had been used by the early church and were clearly God-centred and Bible-based. As the biblical basis and God-centredness of worship should be foremost in the minds of those today who are modifying their worship practices, we will begin by examining the Puritan view of biblical authority, as it forms the foundation for all that will follow.

### The Biblical Basis for Worship

As true Christians and the spiritual descendants of the earlier reformers,

the Puritans inherited a high view of Scripture. They accepted the Bible as the authoritative 'rule of faith and life' for all people.<sup>2</sup> They wanted to obey what it said people should do, and refrain from what it prohibited. In this they followed their predecessors. The Puritans, however, differed from those who went before them in that they believed that the Bible prescribed everything that was necessary in life. Whereas the magisterial Reformers left room for *adiaphora*—things that did not matter—the Puritans developed a unique doctrine of biblical warrant which stated that everything in life was to be regulated in accordance with the written word of God. As we will see, their desire to base all of their thoughts and actions upon what they found in the biblical text had wide ramifications that actually led them to reject a number of doctrines and practices that were acceptable to the other reformers. Although this is true about a number of issues, we will examine only its implications for worship.

The magisterial Reformers believed that much of the church's worship had been corrupted by the traditions introduced over the years of Roman supremacy. It was these man-made changes that spurred them on to reforming worship. Even so, they held that many medieval practices could be considered matters of *adiaphora* and did not need to be rejected or even altered as long as believers were edified through them.

The Puritans, however, took a very

different line. Realizing that many of their English compatriots maintained medieval superstitions deep in their hearts, they wished to see a complete reformation of the church in their country, a reformation based on the teachings of the Bible alone that would remove what they believed to be impediments to the true worship of God. For them, *sola scriptura* became the foundation, not only of theology, but also of worship. This emphasis set them apart from the other Reformers.

The central place of the Bible in their theology of worship is plainly seen in the Westminster Confession of Faith.

The acceptable way of worshipping the true God is instituted by himself, and so limited by his own revealed will, that he may not be worshipped 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.<sup>3</sup>

Notice that this statement does not make allowance for any worship practices unless they come from Scripture. According to the Puritans, since God institutes worship in his revealed word, he should not be worshipped by

<sup>2</sup> 'The Confession of Faith,' I: ii, in *Westminster Confession of Faith* (Glasgow: Free Presbyterian Publications, 1985), p. 21.

<sup>3</sup> 'Confession,' XXI: i, in *Westminster Confession*, p. 90. One of the Westminster divines, Jeremiah Burroughs, *Gospel Worship*, ed. Don Kistler (Pittsburgh: Soli Deo Gloria, 1993), p. 13, put it this way in sermon form: 'in God's worship, there must be nothing tendered up to God but what He has commanded. Whatsoever we meddle with in the worship of God must be what we have a warrant for out of the Word of God.'

any method devised by either people or the devil, and he should not be worshipped with the aid of any kind of visible representation of him. The right way of worshipping God is that which he prescribed in Scripture. Any other source that provides ideas about what should be included in worship is rejected. The Puritan view that God has revealed the way he should be worshipped in the Bible, which serves as the only source for truly Christian worship, has become known in many circles as the 'regulative principle'.<sup>4</sup> The Bible regulates what should be included in worship and what should not.

Thus it was that the Puritans, desiring to follow scriptural principle and to rid England of all superstitious Catholic practices, began their attack on those elements they believed did not serve the edification of the church because they were not mentioned in the Bible. These included such things as the vestments worn by clergy, making the sign of the cross when a person was baptized, the use of wedding rings, and kneeling for communion. These were rejected in the main because they were seen to reinforce, in the minds of the common man, ideas that had been invented by the Roman church rather than God. The thoughts of the Puritans about necessary changes, however, did not end with the removal of certain

medieval practices. They desired that every aspect of the worship of God be supported by an explicit statement from Scripture or at least that it could be deduced from what is found there.<sup>5</sup> This led them to search the Bible diligently in order to discover what God had commanded about worship.

From our perspective, the Puritan desire to understand and act upon what Scripture says about worship is the trait that should be emulated by modern worshippers, even if this leads to worship practices that are somewhat different from theirs. They were correct to insist that everything the New Testament texts say regarding worship should be practised in the church during all ages. Even so, it says so little about the nature and content of worship that it is not possible to base all of one's worship practices upon New Testament revelation alone. Even the Puritans added elements to their worship that were not clearly stated in the New Testament text or easily deduced from what was found there. Examples include the preaching of

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4 Although this term is commonly used in a number of Presbyterian and Reformed circles, R. J. Gore Jr., *Covenantal Worship: Reconsidering the Puritan Regulative Principle* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2002), p. 38, claims that he can find no specific reference to the term prior to the twentieth century.

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5 It should be noted that even though the Puritans agreed that the Scriptures revealed God's will for worship, they did not always agree upon which practices had Scriptural warrant. For instance, when Thomas Cartwright expounded the first two chapters of Acts at Cambridge University in 1570, he argued for a Presbyterian church polity based on his belief that the early Church should be the model for the entire church age and that the apostles practised that form of church government. Even though they would have agreed with Cartwright that church practices should have biblical warrant, many Puritans (particularly those belonging to Anglican or Independent circles) rejected his conclusions about church polity.

expository sermons and the wearing of preaching gowns. It thus seems wiser to adopt the practice of the earlier Reformers, who admitted that people should be allowed a certain degree of freedom with regard to worship practices that are not mentioned in the Bible.<sup>6</sup>

No matter what conclusion one reaches concerning the regulative principle, the Puritan desire to base all worship practices upon God's revelation in Scripture should serve as a twofold challenge to the modern church. First, it should compel us to evaluate whether our worship practices were designed to reflect what the Bible says about God's requirements for worship or whether they were adopted for some other reason. The Puritans believed that God expressed his will for the worship of the church in his word. They therefore worked hard to identify and implement it. As we will see below, the Puritans' desire to find scriptural warrant for all of their worship practices led to the inclusion of a number of practices that are missing from many modern worship services. If any of the practices the Puritans identified as elements of worship that were required by God are omitted from our services, we should reexamine both our practices and their reading of the Bible to see where the problem lies. If the problem lies with Puritan interpretation we should ignore them. But if

the problem lies with our practice, we should correct it. This is because the word of God should serve as the primary source for our beliefs and practices.

That we should reexamine the Puritan interpretation of the Bible where their conclusions and practices differ from ours leads us to the second scriptural challenge that they bring us. Though the Puritans were extremely diligent biblical scholars, they sometimes made mistakes with regard to the meaning of God's word, and were, at times, more influenced by their environment and the controversies of their day than they would have cared to admit.<sup>7</sup> That the Puritans did not always come to the correct conclusion with regard to biblical interpretation or practice should not cause us to dismiss all that they said. Rather, it should serve as a warning to us, that, even when we attempt to follow biblical principles, we could be mistaken about the correct way to interpret or apply Scripture. It should therefore cause us to be doubly critical about our own understanding of the Bible and of our reasons for establishing or maintaining the worship styles that we prefer.

## Components of Public Worship

The Puritans' examination of the Bible

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<sup>6</sup> It is strange to find that although the Puritans believed that God regulated worship, they did not believe he regulated other parts of life in the same way. As the New Testament never makes this kind of distinction, it seems a bit inconsistent for them to do so.

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<sup>7</sup> Gore has demonstrated a number of flaws in their approach that led to the regulative principle. See his book *Covenantal Worship*, particularly chapter 6, 'Thy Will be Done', for his explanation of the principle and how it departs from both the biblical and standard Reformed understanding of worship.

enabled them to see that worship covered all of life lived out before the Holy God. But even though they saw all of life as worship, they frequently narrowed the meaning to include the things that were necessary in the public worship of God. The best sources on their thoughts about worship can be found in the Westminster 'Confession of Faith', 'Catechisms', and 'Directory for Publick Worship', and Richard Baxter's *Reformed Liturgy*, along with what is recorded in their printed sermons on the subject.

These works make it clear that the Puritans identified a limited number of essentials they believed were 'all parts of the ordinary religious worship of God'.<sup>8</sup> These include prayer (with thanksgiving, confession, and supplication); the reading, preaching, and hearing of the Scriptures; catechizing; the singing of psalms; the administration and reception of the sacraments (which were limited to baptism and the Lord's Supper); and keeping the Sabbath. On special occasions such duties as performing 'religious oaths and vows, solemn fastings, and thanksgivings' were considered to be in order.<sup>9</sup> Although excluded from most lists, the Larger Catechism adds church government, discipline, and the rejection of all forms of false worship.<sup>10</sup>

Clearly the Puritan understanding of worship encompassed many aspects

of life. The focus of this paper, however, will be narrowed to the aspects they deemed important when believers came together for communal worship. Specifically, this includes prayer, the ministry of the word, the singing of psalms, the administration and reception of the sacraments, and keeping the Sabbath. As their study of the Bible helped them determine that these elements were essential for public worship, we should consider the place given to them in our corporate worship services.

### Prayer

Prayer was considered 'a special part' of the worship of God whether performed privately, within the context of the family, or within the assembled congregation.<sup>11</sup> Puritan prayer was wholly Trinitarian. It was to be made to God the Father who called us to pray to him, offered in the name of Jesus Christ who acts as our mediator so that we can approach the holy Father, and made with the help of the Holy Spirit who knows our weakness and is able to help us when we do not know how to pray as we ought. As an offering up of our desires to God, it included both confession of sins and thankful acknowledgment of God's mercies.<sup>12</sup>

Prayer should not, however, be self-centred. Rather, it focuses on the needs of the whole church of Christ, as well as for government officials, minis-

<sup>8</sup> 'Confession', XXI: v, in *Westminster Confession*, p. 93.

<sup>9</sup> 'Confession', XXI: iii and v, in *Westminster Confession*, pp. 91-4.

<sup>10</sup> 'The Larger Catechism', question 108, in *Westminster Confession*, p. 192.

<sup>11</sup> 'Catechism', question 179, in *Westminster Confession*, p. 268.

<sup>12</sup> 'Catechism', question 178, in *Westminster Confession*, p. 268.

ters of the gospel, and for others both known and unknown. Those who pray should always remember that we are unworthy, by ourselves, to bring our requests before God, and that we need the grace of God which is found in Jesus Christ who personally leads us into the presence of the Father. Thus our prayers not only reveal our needs, they also demonstrate our penitent and thankful hearts, as well as our faith in and love for the God to whose will we submit ourselves. Prayer, to the Puritans, was a serious business, and rightly so, because we are encouraged to pray in the Bible.

Before gathering for worship, Puritan believers were encouraged to prepare themselves by praying individually and as families. When they assembled publicly, immediately after being called to worship, the service would begin with a prayer that reminded them of their unworthiness to draw near to God and of their need for his forgiveness and help so that they would be able to worship him and learn from him. From that point on, public worship was frequently punctuated by prayer.

Prayers were made in confession of sin with the hope that the Lord Jesus Christ would intercede and grant remission, that the Holy Spirit would bring assurance of pardon and reconciliation, and that God's people would put sin to death so that they could live lives that were truly pleasing to God. Prayers were made that the gospel might go forth so that Christ's kingdom could spread to all nations, that churches might be free of spiritual tyrants, and that the church would not be split by schism. Prayers were made for those in political authority (whether kings or lower rulers) that

they would rule in a way that is pleasing to God, for church leaders that they might live holy lives and have powerful ministries, for educational facilities that they might pass on both learning and piety, and for the local city or congregation that they might be blessed by the ministry of the word of God. Even the weather was considered a matter for prayer so that crops would not fail.

Prayer for the ministry of the word of God received special consideration.<sup>13</sup> This was in part because the Puritans were aware that spiritual lethargy often causes people to ignore God's word. They therefore prayed for both the preacher and the congregation that God's word might perform its task in their hearts and lives. Their desire was that the minister could preach and the listener hear God's word aright and then go on to obey his will.

Although they were very clear about the kind of things that should be prayed for during a church service, they did not require set prayers, but rather gave individual ministers freedom in bringing their requests to God. And bring their requests to God the Puritans did. Many Puritan pastors would open a service with a fifteen-minute prayer, conclude the service with a longer prayer, and offer up several more prayers to God in between. According to Davies, 'Some ministers prayed for as long as they preached',

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<sup>13</sup> According to Horton Davies, *The Worship of the American Puritans* (New York: Peter Lang, 1990, reprinted Morgan, PA: Soli Deo Gloria, 1999), p. 146, the Puritans believed that 'Prayer even made the preaching efficacious'.



and they often preached for more than an hour.<sup>14</sup>

With such a prominent place given to it in a service, and the range of topics brought before the Lord, prayer was clearly an important part of Puritan worship. They ardently followed what they understood to be the Bible's directions to pray for everything and everyone. This devotion to prayer in worship presents us with a challenge to consider the place prayer has in our worship today. We need to ask ourselves what it is that we pray for and what kind of time do we set aside to worship God in this manner during our corporate services.

While many churches continue to see prayer as an essential part of a service, others seem to devote very little time to prayer during corporate worship. Could it be that some believers have separated prayer from worship, seeing it as something that should be engaged in at some different time? Is it possible that the fear that worshippers might get bored makes us uneasy about bringing multiple requests before God? Even if we do not follow the Puritans slavishly as to their practice of prayer, we should reconsider our own practice in the light of theirs and in the light of what we find in the Bible.

As we have seen, the Puritan method was simply to follow the pattern that had been set for them in the Bible where worship was filled with prayer. This is seen from the time of the Patriarchs when they called upon the name of the Lord. It was evident

during the wilderness years when Moses and the children of Israel turned to God in prayer. The psalmists further modelled it by producing both praises and laments designed for both individuals and congregations to bring their requests before God. In the early church, prayer was one of the things the believers devoted themselves to in addition to the apostles' teaching, fellowship, and the breaking of bread (Acts 2:42). Filling themselves with God's word and ways, the Puritans fervently engaged in prayer both in private and public worship. As the word of God guided them in this, so it should guide us so that we too can be recognized as people of prayer who know that it is an essential part of worship and who design our services in such a way that all who gather will see its importance and long to respond to God in faith by bringing their requests to him as well.

### The Ministry of the Word

Of the worship elements they discovered in the Bible, the Puritans often considered the reading, hearing, and particularly the preaching of the Bible to be the climax of worship. Through the preaching of God's word, the Spirit was able to minister directly to the people in a number of ways. Through the spoken word, people could be both edified and rebuked. By listening to the exposition of Scripture, they could receive God's grace which brings spiritual healing where necessary, and leads to repentance and salvation. Due to the great spiritual benefits the listeners were expected to receive, preaching was regarded as an act of great seriousness, and it was entered

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14 Davies, *American Puritans*, p. 148.

into by people of great seriousness.

Since the preaching of the word was the power of God unto salvation and one of the greatest and most excellent works belonging to the ministry of the gospel, it was of the utmost importance. Those who performed this task should ensure that they were spiritually able and had spent the necessary time getting to know what God said in his word. In this way, they would be qualified as workmen who would not be ashamed, be assured of their own salvation, and be able to save those who listened to them.<sup>15</sup>

The seriousness and centrality of the act of preaching was felt both by the minister and his congregation. In an age when many people bought and sold their goods during the weekly market day, Sunday — or as they often called it, the Lord's Day — was considered the market day of the soul. The word of God preached on that day was deemed to be the spiritual food that would nourish the soul for the following week. In order to have something spiritual upon which to ruminate, everyone was supposed to work hard to participate in the act of preaching. Every member of the community was expected to recall, recite, and strive to understand and practise what had been preached to them. Doing so would naturally lead people who loved the Lord into the other parts of worship, especially prayer and praise.

As churches today evaluate the paradigms under which they arrange acts of worship, they should attempt to be

as serious as the Puritans in asking about the place of the reading and preaching of the word of God in their services. Even though Paul commanded that Scripture be read publicly (1 Tim. 4:13), many churches give little if any time to Bible reading. Another contemporary problem lies in the way many churches make a clear distinction between the 'worship' and 'teaching' parts of a service.

If we understand worship as a proper response to who God is and what he has done, the hearing of his word read and taught must be considered an essential aspect of worship, as it is the only foundation upon which true worship can be built. Furthermore, as it is the word of God that changes lives so that those in rebellion against God can become worshippers and those who believe in God can grow in their faith, churches should ensure that the saving and sanctifying power of the Bible is released as we worship our Lord. Similarly, we should consider the Puritans' injunction to prepare ourselves adequately for preaching, listening to, and practising what God has revealed in the Bible. In an age that suffers from biblical illiteracy, following in the path of the Puritans may help us overcome spiritual lethargy and lead to healthier congregations through a renewed focus on God's word.

### Singing of Psalms

The Puritan desire that the Bible provide the basis for all worship practices greatly influenced their use of music in a congregational setting, and in a way that will surprise most of us. Their understanding of the Bible led them to

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15 'The Directory for the Publick Worship of God', in *Westminster Confession*, p. 379.

reject the use of all musical instruments for worship. In addition, they rejected the singing of all songs in their church services except for the *a capella* singing of metrical psalms.<sup>16</sup> As this practice may be incomprehensible to many Christians today who virtually equate music and worship, the Puritan practice needs to be explained in more detail.

It is important to understand that the Puritans were neither antagonistic toward music in general nor had they anything against musical instruments. Many of them, in fact, had musical instruments in their homes and learned to play quite well. Puritan poets often allowed their secular poems to be set to music. John Bunyan is even said to have carved a flute out of a chair when he was in jail. They therefore had nothing against music *per se*. Their concern, rather, was the place of music in worship.

The Puritans' distinctive rejection of musical instruments in worship was based upon their reading of the New Testament. As they saw it, since the New Testament never mentions the use of musical instruments to accompany worship, they should not be used during the church age. Their stance was that if God did not specifically

state something should be used, it was to be rejected. Should anyone raise the issue of the use of instruments in the worship of the Old Testament, they would respond that God had permitted this in the earlier period much as he had permitted the Israelites to offer sacrifices. Such acts were permissible under the old covenant, but in the church age were neither necessary nor to be allowed, as they did not receive God's explicit sanction.

Whereas musical instruments were removed from the sphere of worship because they were not mentioned in the New Testament, the singing of psalms was retained as several New Testament passages mention their use in the early church (Eph. 5:18-19; Col. 3:16; Jas. 5:13). Furthermore, they sang psalms in worship because they were the only songs that could be considered inspired. That the Puritans were ardent psalm singers is testified by their frequent updating of collections of metrical psalms. The psalms were so important to them that after the Puritans settled in New England, the first book they published (which happened to be the first book printed in the Americas), was a collection of psalms, *The Bay Psalm Book*.

Many modern Christians would find limiting themselves to the singing of nothing more than metrical psalms extremely difficult.<sup>17</sup> What is not appreciated is that the writing and singing of

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16 A metrical psalm is a psalm that has been translated according to poetic meter so that it can be more easily sung. A metrical version of Psalm 1:1-2 as found in Sternhold and Hopkins' psalter from 1562 is given as an example.

1 The man is blest that hath not lent / to wicked men his ear, / Nor led his life as sinners do, / nor sat in scorner's chair.

2 But in the law of God the Lord / doth set his whole delight, / And in the same doth exercise / himself both day and night.

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17 Many will also find it strange that people would sing psalms that were written to exhort worshippers to use many different instruments in the praise of God and yet reject the use of any instrument except for the human voice.

metrical psalms by the early Reformers and Puritans was a radical step for their age. Before the Reformation, singing in the churches of Europe was restricted mainly to the priest and choir, both of whom sang in Latin. This situation began to change almost immediately in Germany, Switzerland, and France when Luther and the believers who followed Calvin began to write hymns and metrical psalms in the vernacular. Suddenly, voice was given to a congregation that had previously been mute. Praises that had been reserved for a few were returned to the people. Songs that had been heard only in a foreign language could now be understood by and sung by all. For such a change to come upon the church was arguably much more radical than anything produced by the so-called 'worship wars' that have been waged in recent years.

Metrical psalmody served as a new paradigm in church music that played an important role in the development of congregational singing. According to Davies, the Puritans did nothing new in returning praises to the people of God. This was simply a rediscovery of something that had been used in the early church and in Israel. Their originality was seen in their versifying the Psalms in a contemporary poetic form that could be easily memorized and sung by the people of their day. This in turn paved the way for the development of hymns, when Isaac Watts and others paraphrased the Psalms in a manner that made them far easier to memorize and sing.<sup>18</sup>

Coming to grips with the way the Puritans faced their new paradigms in music should challenge modern believers who consider adopting new worship styles or musical instruments. The challenge is not to accept or reject the Puritans' conclusions about the place of music and musical instruments in worship in an uncritical manner. Neither is it to accept modern (or traditional) worship practices uncritically. The challenge is to be willing to ask the difficult questions of whether our decisions for or against a particular musical style, or instrument, or even song, is made because of our biblical understanding of worship, or for other reasons, be they pragmatic, or related to tradition, relevance, fun, or whatever.

Another consideration is whether the music that is presented in church truly enables the whole congregation to participate in the praise of God or whether it reserves praise for a gifted few. Many churches today have, probably inadvertently, returned to a pre-Reformation model of worship which has silenced many in the congregation and restricted praise to the lips of a few leaders. For various reasons, many churchgoers have given up singing and become spectators who stand by and watch those who are able to do a much better job. This sad, and somewhat ironic, state of affairs has come about due to a number of reasons that include the professionalism of a new worship elite, electronic sound systems and acoustical designs that make it impossible for people to hear themselves sing, and the projection of words without musical score for singers to follow. Anything that silences congregations so that they fail to participate in praise,

<sup>18</sup> Horton Davies, *The Worship of the English Puritans* (Morgan, PA: Soli Deo Gloria, 1997), p. 162.

should cause church leaders to reevaluate their custom and follow the lead of the Puritans by returning to the early church practice of having whole congregations express their praise for God together in song and prayer.

### Administration and Reception of the Sacraments

From the beginning of the Reformation, Protestant believers have almost universally accepted that, contrary to the teaching of the medieval Roman Catholic church, the church should recognize only two sacraments or ordinances—Baptism and the Lord's Supper. As followers of this tradition, the Puritans all agreed that these two sacraments should be practised as part of the worship of the church, and that they should be conducted by a recognized minister of the gospel rather than by just anyone. They also agreed that baptism should be administered in the context of public worship rather than in private.<sup>19</sup>

In keeping with their approach to the Christian life, the Puritans desired that Scripture guide their practice of the sacraments of the Lord's Supper and Baptism. However, in common with several other areas, the Puritan desire that the Bible serve as the only guide for worship acts did not result in uniformity of practice. As is experienced within modern evangelicalism, different groups of Puritans main-

tained somewhat variant customs based upon their own understanding of what the Bible meant, or perhaps based upon traditions they failed to identify as coming from other sources. This is true with regards to their understanding and practice of both baptism and the Lord's Supper.

Like modern believers, the Puritans split on whether baptism should be reserved for believers alone (as the Baptists held) or whether children should be baptized (as supported by the Presbyterians and Independents), and whether the mode should be by immersion or by sprinkling or pouring. Since different Puritan groups held to divergent practices for the same reasons given by Christians today, we will skip over the explanations given for these beliefs. However, we should not ignore their shared belief that baptism was an essential part of their worship of God, and that it should be performed as part of the public celebration of God.

While we have passed over their differences with regard to baptismal practice with scant comment, we will benefit from a somewhat longer discussion about the differences in the way the Puritans celebrated the Lord's Supper. We should begin by stating that they all believed that the Lord's Supper was a means of coming into communion, not only with members of the church, but with their Saviour himself. Furthermore, they were convinced that their practice should be grounded in what was revealed in Scripture. It was at this point that they divided in their practice, sometimes due to different emphases in biblical interpretation and sometimes for other reasons.

An examination of the different ways they celebrated this sacrament

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<sup>19</sup> Davies, *English Puritans*, pp. 220-1, says that while this was originally the case, by the Eighteenth Century the Independents (i.e., Congregationalists) had begun to baptize in homes rather than in the church.

will provide us with a means to examine our own practices. Most Puritans celebrated this sacrament on a monthly basis. Some, however, celebrated it weekly, while others only four times a year.<sup>20</sup> Some congregations would remain seated in their pews while the elements were passed around, while others would sit around a table in order to partake of the elements as did Jesus and his disciples.<sup>21</sup> Some churches would partake of communion during the day time<sup>22</sup> while others would hold the ceremony only 'after Supper' in the evening, as they believed that Christ set this as an example when he partook of the last supper with his disciples. In some churches, both the bread and wine were blessed at the same time, while in others the elements were blessed separately. All churches agreed that those who were ignorant or were living in sin should not be allowed to partake of the sacrament.

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**20** Since 'The Directory for the Publick Worship of God' was written to give guidelines to several different types of churches, it declines to say anything specific about the regularity of the Lord's Supper, except that it 'is frequently to be celebrated; but how often, may be considered and determined by the ministers, and other church-governors of each congregation, as they shall find most convenient for the comfort and edification of the people committed to their charge' (*Westminster Confession*, p. 384).

**21** None would kneel for communion, as they believed it supported the Roman Catholic theology of the Mass in the minds of most people. See Davies, *English Puritans*, p. 204.

**22** The writers of 'The Directory for the Publick Worship of God' suggest that the Lord's Supper should be celebrated 'after the morning sermon' (*Westminster Confession*, p. 384).

Clearly none of us will agree with the Puritan approach to the sacraments on every point, as they did not agree with one another about every point. But again, this should prompt us to think about the biblical meaning of these practices and the symbolism attached to them and how that affects our practice of these ordinances. No one will deny that our Lord commanded these practices. And since Jesus required them, the Puritans were surely correct to consider how they should be celebrated. This should encourage us to evaluate the way we participate in the sacraments so that they add to our worship of God and do not become a supplemental add on that we maintain due to tradition or for some other reason.

### Keeping the Sabbath

In their desire to obey the Bible, as they understood it, the Puritans were willing to change their way of living and the way things were done in the church. This characteristic can be clearly seen in their approach to Sabbath keeping. Not only did they desire to set the day aside for the worship of God to a greater extent than did their neighbors, they were also more serious about their use of the day than were the Continental Reformers. As a result, they developed a way of keeping the Lord's Day that set it apart from the other six days of the week by the nature of the work that was allowed. Although normal activities were to be suspended, it was not a day of rest in the sense of requiring inactivity, but as being set aside for rigorous spiritual exercise. Their approach to the day exerted such an influence on the way

people thought about the Sabbath, that many people in England and other parts of the world still follow their pattern down to the present day. According to Packer,

The Puritans created the English Christian Sunday—that is, the conception and observance of the first day of the week as one on which both business and organised recreations should be in abeyance, and the whole time left free for worship, fellowship and ‘good works’.<sup>23</sup>

How did they do this? As usual, they did it by attempting to understand God’s word and apply it to their own lives. They began with an examination of the Fourth Commandment. From their perspective, God’s commandment to remember the Sabbath and keep it holy was binding upon all people for two simple reasons. First, God’s rest on the seventh day after the six days of creation, and proclamation that it was holy, meant that God had intended that, not just Jews, but everyone should rest on that day. Their understanding that the Sabbath law is eternally binding can be seen in the statement recorded in the Westminster ‘Confession of Faith’.

As it is of the law of nature, that, in general, a due proportion of time be set apart for the worship of God; so, in his word, by a positive, moral, and perpetual commandment, binding all men in all ages, he hath particularly appointed one day in seven for a sabbath, to be kept holy unto him: which, from the beginning of the world to the resurrec-

tion of Christ, was the last day of the week; and, from the resurrection of Christ, was changed into the first day of the week, which in Scripture is called the Lord’s Day, and is to be continued to the end of the world, as the Christian Sabbath.<sup>24</sup>

God, so they believed, had built a Sabbath rest into the very fabric of creation. It was his will that everyone, Jew or Gentile, Christian or not, should ‘rest’ on that day. Furthermore, they were convinced that since it was a creation ordinance, it was eternally in effect.

A second reason they found for keeping the Sabbath is its place in the Ten Commandments. As they considered the Decalogue to be a delineation of God’s eternal moral law, they again concluded that the Sabbath was incumbent upon all people. Its close connection with the first three commands indicated to them that its central focus was on the worship of God. Since the day was to be set aside for worship, other activities should be left aside. Again, the Confession of Faith states the common understanding.

This sabbath is then kept holy unto the Lord, when men, after a due preparing of their hearts, and ordering of their common affairs before-hand, do not only observe an holy rest all the day from their own works, words, and thoughts about their worldly employments and recreations; but also are taken up the whole time in the publick and

23 Packer, *Among God’s Giants*, p. 311.

24 ‘Confession’ Chapter XXI, VII, in *Westminster Confession*, p. 95.

private exercises of his worship, and in the duties of necessity and mercy.<sup>25</sup>

It has already been stated that the Puritans did not view the Lord's Day as a day of rest in the sense of a day of inactivity. In fact, they believed that it was a sin to waste time on any day, and even more so on the Sabbath.<sup>26</sup> Even though they desired that people would rest from their normal business and worldly talk and activities, they replaced this with an immense amount of spiritual activity. According to the 'Directory for the Publick Worship of God,' individuals and families should prepare themselves for worshipping God by praying for themselves and for their minister. In addition, they should meet together with other believers to worship the Lord, spend time reading, meditating on, or repeating the contents of the sermon (especially within families), catechizing the members of the family,<sup>27</sup> praying, singing psalms, visiting the sick, coming to the aid of the poor, and practising the 'duties of piety, charity, and mercy'.<sup>28</sup>

Many modern Christians will con-

clude that this approach to keeping the Sabbath would greatly impact their Sunday lifestyles, and indeed it would. But the Puritans never considered this lifestyle to be drudgery. Rather, they believed it was a duty before God that should be accepted with delight. And what could cause more joy than worshipping the Lord? What could be more freeing than doing those things that are pleasing to him? What could be better than doing that for which God created us?

Even if we do not fully agree with the Puritans' understanding of a Christian Sabbath, they still give us ample reason to reconsider our use of Sunday. Their conclusions about how the Lord's Day should be used were based upon principles they derived from their study of the Bible. Their determination to refrain from certain activities on the Lord's Day was similarly based upon their understanding of Scripture. Following their lead, we need to consider what influences our decisions about how to spend that day. Are we guided more by the world or God's word? If we take the position that all days are alike, we then need to ask when we will work on developing our spiritual lives and when we will schedule the acts of piety, charity, and mercy that the Puritans believed were a fundamental part of the Christian lifestyle. Were they correct in their understanding of Scripture with regard to the Sabbath and a Christian lifestyle? If not, why not? If so, how should that influence our actions today? If we desire to worship God in a way that pleases him, it is essential that we consider why we do or do not do certain things on Sunday.

25 'Confession' Chapter XXI, VIII, in *Westminster Confession*, pp. 95-6.

26 Packer, *Among God's Giants*, p. 317, quotes John Dod and Robert Cleaver, *A Plaine and Familiar Exposition of the Ten Commandments* (London: 1628), p. 143, as saying, 'Idleness is a sinne every day: but much more on the Lord's Day.'

27 The Puritans included household servants as members of the family who should receive spiritual instruction and who should be freed from work in order to take part fully in the worship of God.

28 'Directory,' in *Westminster Confession*, p. 386.



## Conclusion

We began by looking at the new emphasis placed on worship in the church in recent years, an emphasis that should give us reason to rejoice, as churches seek to relate to God in an intimate and personal way. This desire to meet with God has led to the development of new paradigms of worship, and, in some cases, the resurrection of old forms. That people should want to worship in a fresh way is understandable and desirable. But as we have seen in our analysis of Puritan worship, any changes we make should come, not as a reaction against an old form simply because it is old, but only after spending time and effort thinking about the biblical and theological aspects of worship. Worship is, after all, a spiritual activity that focuses on a spiritual being — the Triune God who has revealed himself in the Bible. It is also an activity that can be rightly performed only by people whose hearts have been spiritually awakened.

As the Puritans insisted, our worship must be based upon what is taught in the Bible. Whether or not they were correct to insist that nothing should be added to worship that is not specifically mentioned in Scripture, the Puritans were surely correct to search God's word in order to ensure that they performed everything that is prescribed there. While the Bible does not instruct us as to the proper method with regard to all the details of wor-

ship, it does lay the foundation upon which the structure should be built, a foundation that the Puritans discerned was made up of prayer, the ministry of the word, the singing of psalms, the administration and reception of the sacraments, and keeping the Sabbath. From their perspective, any worship designed without taking this biblical foundation into account, will be a memorial to man's ingenuity, something the Puritans would have proclaimed carnal, not worthy of God's great glory.

What is needed in the modern church is for people to reevaluate their worship in the light of Scripture and the historical precedence of the church. The guideposts set out by the Puritans as they identified the basic biblical elements of worship, should serve as route markers for us to follow as we think through the many possible ways to worship our Lord. And even if we do not agree with them on every detail, we will find that the Puritans will make excellent guides as we search for the treasure of worship today. If worship is the missing jewel of the evangelical church, we had better rediscover it, polish it up, and make sure that it is mounted in the best setting possible, for as one of the Puritans rightly stated, 'worship is the nearest resemblance of heaven'.<sup>29</sup>

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29 David Clarkson, *Works*, III (Edinburgh: James Nichol, 1865), p. 194.