

DAILY ORAL THEOLOGY

Principles of Worship

When it comes down to worship, every believer has an opinion. The question is, however, does the opinion of the believer matter when it boils down to how God is to be worshiped? Two principles weigh in on this matter: the regulative principle of worship and the normative principle of worship. What does the Word of God have to say about worship?

Psalms 115 puts it all into perspective. The one-only true and living God, the God of sacred Scripture, is not the idol of stone, wood or metal that the world holds dear. The psalmist says, “Those who make them become like them, so do all who trust in them” (Ps. 115:8). You have heard the phrase: “You are what you eat.” In some sense, you become what you worship, and those who bow the knee to vanity become mute, deaf, and motionless (4–7).

The worship of the Holy God is serious holy business. The Lord is a consuming fire (Deut. 4:24) and jealous for His people to glorify Him and to enjoy Him forever (Shorter Catechism 1). The Old Testament practice was highly regulated and for good reason. The Master Architect of the tabernacle and the temple, as well as through the Son the church today, demands that He be worshiped according to His Word. Hence, the regulative principle essentially means that God sets the bounds and lays out the basic patterns for worship. True believers are to do what God commands, since ultimately He is the one who alone can determine how He is to be worshiped. Moreover, how can the clay begin to tell the potter what is to be formed?

The normative principle would say that if the Scriptures do not forbid a thing, then it is permissible to use that thing in worship. For example, there is no biblical prohibition regarding liturgical pantomime, so one could put on the white face and attempt to act out something worshipful. The bigger issue, however, is that since Christ has fulfilled the office of High Priest (making former priests no longer necessary), worship is now vertical and dialogical, that is, God speaks and His people respond to Him. With the normative principle, the danger is that worship can become too easily horizontal with church members performing for church members under the guise of sincere worship.

Offering acceptable worship to God is not negotiable. Believers ought never to presume that because they like something and since it is not expressly forbidden in Scripture that God will like it too. Worship is hard work and requires appropriate preparation as Christians corporately come into the presence of God. The principle concern is that God’s people are not to glorify themselves in their attempts to glorify Him. No, it begins with His glory and it ends with His glory, and those who confess Christ are to exalt the Father and the Son according to Scripture with the help of the Spirit.