

The Beauty of Simplicity in Christian Worship

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What is the role of aesthetics in Reformed worship? Much consideration is given, rightly, to the regulative principle of worship (RPW), which is the defining principle of Reformed worship, and its application to particular elements, such as the inclusion or exclusion of instruments. This principle has strong indirect implications for aesthetics, but does it also address aesthetics directly and positively? If a congregation, for example, believes Scripture prescribes the use of instruments, the aesthetic of their service will be substantially different than that of an *a cappella* service, but for such a congregation, is there an aesthetic that further guides their use, such as the particular instruments used and their number? Is there a positive, unifying principle that directly guides the aesthetics of worship, one that transcends particulars and the prescription or proscription of certain elements?

In this paper, I argue that a spirit of simplicity ought to characterize worship, and Reformed worship especially. Such an aesthetic is not merely the accidental consequence of individual proscriptions or prescriptions. Rather, it is a Biblical principle to be pursued for its own sake, which, as I will argue, is a positive imperative for worship. It follows from the transition from the old covenant to the new and the corresponding simplification of ordinances and commandments, which can be extrapolated to a general principle of simplicity for new covenant worship. Furthermore, I will show that such a principle can provide wisdom for many matters of the aesthetic of worship that otherwise may not be clearly discerned. Finally, I will consider applications to contemporary concerns of worship.

The Positive Imperative for Simplicity in Worship

There may not be an express prooftext for simplicity as a principle for worship, but if we consider the contrast between the ordinances and commandments of the old and new covenants, we can observe a general principle of simplification that can be extended to all aspects of

worship. This transition of outward forms of worship, from intricate and ornate to simple, reflects the transition from the types and shadows of worship to its substance, which Christ fulfilled and re-estimated in his earthly ministry and work of redemption (Heb. 10:1). Old covenant worship was replete with extensive outward ceremonial forms, such as washings and sacrifices, which were intended to serve as instructors and guideposts for Israel about the true spiritual nature of worship through Christ, but due to a carnal-minded obsession of the mere outward observance, they had instead become distractions and snares. Once the substance had come, these outward forms were no longer necessary and God's people were freed from stumbling upon them.

We can see this movement from complex to simple between the two covenants, first, if we examine the commands given by their respective mediators. In contrast to the extensive Mosaic laws, and even the more essential Decalogue, Christ taught that the entirety of those laws and the teachings of the prophets rested upon two great commandments: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself" (Matt. 22:37-40). The purpose of this teaching was not to abrogate the moral law of the old covenant; rather, it was to set forth the substance of it more clearly by removing both the accretions of human traditions that had obfuscated it and the numerous old covenant precepts which had preoccupied Israel and distracted it from pursuing true heart worship.

Jesus teaches similarly at the last supper when he gives his disciples a "new commandment," that they love one another, as he has loved them (John 13:34). This commandment is new, but not in the sense that it had never been given by God before to his people; it is in essence the same as the second greatest commandment. Rather, it may be

considered new in that it is, like the second greatest commandment, a reprimating of the second table of the Decalogue and the essence of all the old covenant civil and ethical laws.¹

Second, the simplification of ordinances of the new covenant, in contrast to the old covenant, argue for a general principle of simplicity in worship. In place of the numerous regulations for washings and sacrifices, Christ has given his church only a few ordinances. The simplicity of the sacraments, their remarkable plainness in appearance, and their being few in number, make this contrast especially clear. What other meal could be as simple and plain as that of wine and bread, two forms of sustenance that are often used to represent food and meals generally? Yet, despite their plain appearance, these sacraments are imbued with such symbolic spiritual richness and depth as cannot be fully fathomed in this life. Their plainness helps us see the signified spiritual reality more clearly. John Owen noted this contrast in his argument against the trend toward elaborated outward forms in his day within the Church of England:

It was his will and pleasure that the faith and love of his disciples should, in some few instances, be exercised in a willing, ready subjection to the impositions of his wisdom and authority; and their service herein he doth fully recompense, by rending those his institutions blessedly useful to their spiritual advantage. But he would not burden them with observances, either for nature or number, like or comparable unto them from which he purchased them liberty.²

Preaching under the new covenant is also paradigmatic of the simple style of gospel worship. In arguing for the authority of his ministry, the apostle Paul reminded the church in Corinth that he came proclaiming the gospel not with “lofty speech” or “plausible words of wisdom,” so that their faith might rest in the power of God through the “demonstration of the Spirit” and not the wisdom of men (1 Corinthians 2:1-5). Likewise, the words of sermons are to

¹ John Calvin, “Commentary on the Gospel According to John,” in *Calvin’s Commentaries*, ed. Henry Beveridge, trans. James Anderson et al., 500th anniversary ed., vol. 18 (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2009), 75-76.

² John Owen, “A Discourse Concerning Liturgies,” in *The Works of John Owen*, ed. William H. Goold, vol. 15 (London: Banner of Truth Trust, 1998), 9.

be plain, that even the simplest may understand. Hughes Old's description of Calvin's preaching captures the spirit of the reverent simplicity of preaching:

Calvin seems to have no fear that the Scriptures will be boring or irrelevant unless the preacher spices them up. In fact, Calvin seems to have a horror of decorating the Word of God. Scripture does not need to be painted with artists' colors! So confident is the reformer that God will make his Word alive in the hearts of his people, that Calvin simply explains the text and draws out its implications. The simplicity and directness of his style is based on his confidence that what he is preaching is indeed the Word of God. This simplicity is an expression of reverence.³

The Spiritual Essence of Worship

As noted, the reason for the simplification of the outward forms of worship was to direct the worshiper more clearly to the spiritual realities of worship, which have been made accessible to us through Christ. Jesus said that the Father was seeking worshipers who would worship him, not at a particular place, but in spirit and in truth (John 4:21-24). When we gather on Sunday for worship, we are not merely worshiping with our local body in a particular physical building, but we are gathering with the communion of the saints in heaven and entering, in our spirit, into the holy place made without hands through Christ. Rather than attempting to "bring heaven down" to our physical space, by elaborate ornamentation, we should direct the eyes of our heart and spirit upward toward heaven, where God is and is being worshiped by the heavenly host. John Owen expressed this well:

They who have an access unto the immediate presence of God, and to the throne of grace, enter into heaven itself. And this adds to the glory we treat of. What poor low thoughts have men of God and his ways, who think there lies an acceptable glory and beauty in a little paint and varnish! Heaven itself, the place of God's glorious residence, where he is attended with all his holy angels, is the state of this worship.⁴

³ Hughes Oliphant Old, *Worship: Reformed According to Scripture*, Rev. and expanded ed. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002), 76.

⁴ John Owen, "The Nature and Beauty of Gospel Worship," in *The Works of John Owen*, ed. William H. Goold, vol. 9 (London: Banner of Truth Trust, 1998), 78.

Calvin argues similarly in his commentary on Malachi:

With regard to the *Table*, we stated yesterday, that when God ordered sacrifices to be offered to him, it was the same as though he familiarly dwelt among the Jews, and became as it were their companion. It was the highest honor and an instance of God's ineffable goodness, that he thus condescended, so that the people might know that he was not to be sought afar off. And for this reason the less excusable was their impiety, as they did not consider that sacrifices were celebrated on earth, that their minds might be raised up above the heavens: for it is to this purpose that God descends to us, even to raise us above, as we have elsewhere stated. It was then an extremely base and shameful senselessness and stupidity in the Jews, that they did not consider that God's table was set among them, that they might by faith penetrate into heaven, and know it to be even before their eyes.⁵

Therefore, whatever outward elements of worship remain, they should encourage, and not distract, from true spiritual worship. Ligon Duncan argues similarly, asserting that “the forms in which those elements are performed must not be inimical to the nature or content of the element or draw attention away from the substance and goal of worship, and the circumstances of worship must never overshadow or detract from the elements, but rather discreetly foster the work of the means of grace.”⁶

An objection is anticipated: Cannot ornate outward forms, even equal to or surpassing those of the old covenant, be acceptable, so long as we maintain that these are not obligatory, as they were under the old covenant? While promoting the truth of gospel freedom, this mentality misses a purpose of simplification, which is to purify and reprimand the heart and spiritual substance of worship. If the old covenant outward ceremonial forms were meant to be teachers and shadows of the substance of worship, why should we risk obfuscating the substance again by instating new forms in their place? And if such forms, given even by God in his wisdom, became snares for his people, what hope do we have that manmade forms will not yield the same fruit?

⁵ John Calvin, “Commentaries on the Prophet Malachi,” in *Calvin's Commentaries*, trans. John Owen, vol. 15 (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1981), 506-505.

⁶ J. Ligon Duncan, *Does God Care How We Worship?* (Phillipsburg: P&R Publishing, 2020), 63.

Duncan cautions similarly when explicating Col. 2:16-19: “Paul is simply reminding Christians that they are not under the ceremonial law. And he sees that as vital for right corporate worship among new covenant Christians. His words still speak today to those who long for the elaborate liturgical and symbolical worship of the old covenant. Do not pass by the substance to return to the shadows, he says.”⁷

The Wisdom of Simplicity in Worship

The above reasoning has attempted to argue for a positive imperative for the simplicity in worship, but several other lines of biblical reasoning may also lead us to such a principle, if not by imperative then by wisdom, and will be helpful in considering applications to contemporary worship. These are that (1) simplicity helps to instruct believers in all of life as worship; (2) we should be wary of going beyond the wisdom of God in creating outward forms; (3) simplicity is the model of Christ’s earthly ministry and is befitting of the pilgrim state of the Church on earth.

First, simplicity helps to instruct believers in worshiping God in all of life. Though the primary purpose of gathering on Sunday is to glorify God through worship, a secondary purpose is to instruct believers in how to worship. Therefore, the more closely Sunday worship resembles regular, daily worship, the more applicable the instruction will be. For example, if our buildings are ornate, we risk creating a sense that we can only evoke religious worship in ourselves when we are in such buildings. By having simple worship, simple buildings, simple forms, we are making an intentional statement that such things are not needed to evoke sincere worship. It does not mean that we cannot express ourselves through more elaborate forms of art outside of corporate, Sunday worship. But corporate Sunday worship should be the training ground for “all of life as worship” and thus it should teach us of the essence of worship.

⁷ Duncan, *Does God Care How We Worship?*, 45-46.

Second, we should be wary of going beyond the wisdom of God in our introduction of elements or outward forms of worship. By nature, we do not know how to worship God as we ought. We are prone to introduce elements of worship that are improper, as the history of Israel's worship testifies. God, in his wisdom, has deemed simple and plain symbols to be sufficient for communicating the spiritual realities of his grace. Owen expresses this sentiment well when he says of the institutions of gospel worship that "they were few, for the matter of them, such as he knew had an *aptness to be serviceable unto the significancy* whereunto they were appointed by him, which nothing but infinite wisdom can judge of."⁸ [emphasis original] Furthermore, there is a risk that the elaboration of outward forms will take on symbolic significance to the worshiper, and we should be wary of introducing symbols that God has not sanctioned.

Third, simple and plain worship models the earthly life of Christ and is befitting of the pilgrim state of the church here on earth. Hughes Old notes that this was the conviction of the early Reformer Oecolampadius: "When Scripture does not give specific directions, then we should be guided by scriptural principles. For instance, Oecolampadius taught that Christian worship should be simple and without pompous ritual and sumptuous ceremony, because the manner of life Jesus taught was simple and without pretense."⁹ Later, John Owen expressed the same conviction well:

I know some can see no beauty in the assemblies of the saints, unless there be an outward beauty and splendour in the fabric and building wherein they convene. But that is not at all the thing in question, what some men can see, or cannot see. Christ himself had unto some "no form nor comeliness that he should be desired;" – no more have his saints, his ways, his worship.¹⁰

⁸ Owen, "A Discourse Concerning Liturgies," 9.

⁹ Old, *Worship*, 3.

¹⁰ Owen, "The Nature and Beauty of Gospel Worship," 79.

There is a day when we will see Him in his full glory, but while in this state, our appearance should be unadorned, like Christ's.

Applications

The principle of simplicity has significant practical applications to worship in any Reformed church. Since this principle does not dictate specific proscriptions or prescriptions, wisdom must be used in its application. The reasons given above for this principle can help guide its application. We can consider a few common elements of worship and implications for the principle of simplicity to these elements.

An especially divisive element of worship among Reformed churches, and even evangelical churches generally, is the use of instruments. Reformed churches differ in their interpretation of the biblical prescription or proscription of their use in congregational worship. Often, debates over instruments resolve upon the exhortations in the psalms to praise God with instruments, which to some are clear prooftexts for their use. If instead of focusing solely upon these particular verses, we consider the principle of simplicity, we may yet still arrive at conviction of their proscription, or nearly. Consider the reasoning given above that Sunday worship ought to train the congregation to worship God in all of life. It is clear that the most effectual means of such instruction is to not use instruments – only by mere unaccompanied singing can a believer worship God in song at all times. Even if this does not convince a congregation of their proscription, this principle of simplicity will tend toward less reliance upon them. Perhaps at least some songs will be sung *a cappella*, or care will be given to choose songs with melodies that can still be sung comfortably and naturally without accompaniment. Further, it would seem wise to limit the use of instruments, lest the spiritual substance of singing – which is the singing of the heart in the believer – be lost.

A simple aesthetic of worship also argues for a simple calendar for the church. While some of the continental Reformed churches allowed for the observance of what are known as the five evangelical feast days of the yearly calendar, Reformed teaching has always upheld the simple seven-day week – culminating with the Lord’s Day as the new sabbath – as the preeminent, governing calendar for the new covenant church. This follows from the antithesis described above between the complex, ornate forms of old covenant worship and the simple, plain forms of new covenant worship.

These two examples – instruments and the church calendar – exemplify the influence a principle of simplicity could have on the unity among Reformed churches. Even if churches disagree over the application of the RPW to particulars, by following a principle of simplicity, their worship would still be guided toward a similar aesthetic and spirit. A church that allows for the observance of some calendar days, but that seeks to follow the continental Reformed tradition and keep such a calendar simple, will be much closer in spirit to strict Sabbatarians than Anglicans, Lutherans, or even much of modern evangelicalism.

Last, it should be emphasized that a simple aesthetic of worship is not opposed to beauty, and that achieving a simple aesthetic with a proper concern for beauty requires thoughtfulness and intentionality, just as does an ornate aesthetic. If our interpretation of the RPW prescribes few elements in worship, then naturally our worship will appear simple and plain, but even with fewer and plainer outward forms in worship, many significant, conscious decisions about the aesthetic must still be made. For example, even if we seek to keep the sanctuary simple, many design elements still affect the aesthetic and the conduciveness of worship, from the amount and type of light to the beauty of the patterning of the wood we use for trim or flooring or the pulpit.

Consider also the melodies of psalms and hymns. How do we achieve both simplicity and beauty? In his *Confessions*, Augustine famously expressed his conflicted thoughts over the use of melody in singing the psalms. While he appreciated the beauty of the melody and its assistance in expressing emotions, he was wary of becoming enamored by it and finding comfort in it instead of the words he is praying (and the God who hears them).¹¹ He observed that some churches did not even sing or merely chanted, to avoid this danger. Augustine's wrestling on this point evidences the thoughtfulness and care that is needed in pursuing simplicity while appreciating the place for beauty in worship. We can also note from this that even in Augustine's day, the church was concerned about the simplicity of the form of worship and the danger of outward forms from distracting from the underlying spiritual reality.

Conclusion

For the new covenant church, the shadows and types of old covenant worship, along with their outward ceremonial forms, have been fulfilled and done away with in Christ. In their place, Christ has given us gospel ordinances that are plain and simple to observe, and that, in his wisdom, point more clearly to the spiritual substance of worship. The aesthetic of our worship should be guided by this same spirit of simplicity. Rather than seeking to ornament worship, we ought to seek to further expound and emphasize the beautiful spiritual realities of the ordinary ordinances God has already given us. At the consummation, we will worship God in the fulness of his glory, with all the ornamentation creation can offer, but while we journey here as pilgrims, let our worship reflect our humble state, while we look with the eyes of our spirit to the true heavenly worship of which we already participate.

¹¹ Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. Henry Chadwick, Oxford World's Classics (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 207-208.

Honor Code

I, Benjamin Chidester, have written this paper exclusively for PT520. If this paper, in part or full, was submitted previously in another context, I have received permission from the course professor to use it for this assignment. While I may have received editing or proofreading advice, I made all corrections myself. I have cited each paraphrase, quotation, and borrowed idea that I included in this paper.

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