

Orthopraxy – 7

The successor to John Owen, David Clarkson, preached a sermon, *Public Worship to be Preferred Before Private*. In it, he gave twelve reasons why worship in the gathered assembly of God's people was superior to the private devotions of the individual Christian.

1. The Lord is more glorified by public worship than private.
2. There is more of the Lord's presence in public worship than in private.
3. God manifests himself more clearly in public worship than in private.
4. There is more spiritual advantage in the use of public worship.
5. Public worship is more edifying than private.
6. Public worship is a better security against apostasy than private.
7. The Lord works his greatest works in public worship.
8. Public worship is the nearest resemblance of heaven.
9. The most renowned servants of God have preferred public worship before private.
10. Public worship is the best means for procuring the greatest mercies, and preventing and removing the greatest judgments.
11. The precious blood of Christ is most interested in public worship.
12. The promises of God are given more to public worship than to private.

Such an opinion is rare in today's individualistic, anti-authoritarian, anti-establishment thinking. The average Christian has taken in heaps of the thinking of post-modernity, where anything formalised and structured is inauthentic, stultifying, and a masked (or open) attempt by some to control others. Common sentiments include, "I'm spiritual, not religious", "I don't find church beneficial to my personal walk with God" or "I find I need to express my relationship with God in settings bigger than one church."

On the other end of the scale we have Christians trained to think like consumers, and to see the church as a religious service-provider, or an enhancement to their personal quest for religious fulfilment. To the degree that a church meets the Christian's needs, and conveniently slots into his busy life, it is judged to be a good church. Should it fail to do so, any prior mutual commitments can be cancelled, and the relationship terminated as swiftly as one would with any other company or service-provider.

How far removed this is from the view of Scripture, where loving God is never considered as a solely private experience. How strange is this self-centred approach to worship when read in light of verses such as these:

If someone says, "I love God," and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen, how can he love God whom he has not seen? And this commandment we have from Him: that he who loves God must love his brother also. (1 John 5:20-21)

No one has seen God at any time. If we love one another, God abides in us, and His love has been perfected in us. (1 John 4:12)

We were not made to worship God in isolation. At the completion of the perfect creation, the only thing that God regarded to be 'not good' was that idea man should be alone. Companionship and community are part of our design, and no one will come close to the Great Commandment who dismisses the importance of worshipping God as one member of a larger Body.

A man who isolates himself seeks his own desire; He rages against all wise judgment. (Proverbs 18:1)

God does not save us in groups; he saves us individually. Nevertheless, when he does so, he saves us to be part of a group, to be part of a community that will take us to greater heights of knowing and loving God than we could ever achieve on our own. God joins us to the church.

What we are calling *public worship* in this chapter is the life lived in the covenant community of the local church. It involves the acts of song, preaching, and prayer, but it also involves knowing and loving God as we serve each other and make disciples. All of life lived as Christ's body becomes a means, and the occasion, for seeing God's beauty, and returning to him ultimate dependence, ultimate devotion, and ultimate delight. Public worship is both seeing God **with** others, but it is also seeing God **in** others. Further, it is reflecting God **to** others. We experience revelation with and from others, and we become part of it ourselves.

C.S. Lewis wrote that "it is in the process of being worshipped that God communicates his presence to men. It is not of course the only way. But for many people at many times the 'fair beauty of the Lord' is revealed chiefly or only while they worship Him together."

As we live life in the local church, we will have opportunity to commune with God with other believers, and through other believers, in the contexts of worship, fellowship, discipleship, and stewardship. Once again, we will have to apply the postures of humility, seeking, repentance and submission, so that our faith will see God's beauty revealed with and among his people, and in ourselves to others. The same process of communion, conviction, confession, cleansing, conformity to Christ, and communication of Christ will take place in life lived together as a body.

Defining the Church

Indeed, here is where baptism and covenanting come together. In baptism, we are identified as disciples of Jesus Christ, immersed into his death and resurrection, and therefore part of his Body. Through this public identification, we state our participation in the new covenant, and our identification with God's people. Many churches will call on Christians to make a public covenant of commitment, and this is right. David and Jonathan covenanted together (1 Sam 18:1-4), and believers do well to humbly submit to one another in the common pursuit of God.

What should we expect in a biblically-ordered church? What is orthopraxy in the life of the church?

In a church we expect biblically qualified and called leadership, biblically ordered and appropriate worship, healthy fellowship, deliberate discipleship, and faithful stewardship. With each of these, our love for our brothers and sisters must go beyond them into love for God. We seek to commune with God *with* God's people, and *through* God's people.

Biblically Qualified and Called leadership

Not all of us will be called to church leadership, but we should know what it is supposed to be, before we covenant with a local church. The pastoral epistles and related New Testament Scriptures make it very clear what pastors and deacons are to be. If they are not qualified according to I Timothy 3:1-9, Titus 1:6-9, and 1 Peter 5:1-3 then they are not called – at least not at this time. Calling and qualification cannot and must not be separated. When the leadership of a church is unbiblical, little else in the church will be biblical.

If we find a New Testament local church with called and qualified leaders, how should we respond? The postures of humility and submission will submit to them and follow their example where biblical (Heb 13:17, 7). A zealous attitude will show them love and esteem them highly (1 Thes 5:12-13), and see to their physical needs (1 Tim 5:17-18). Sins of grumbling and murmuring will need the posture of repentance.

Most importantly, we should see that God ordains a gracious love between leaders and those they lead, that will benefit both. Churches are not churches without biblically qualified leaders, and leaders are not leaders without those members cheerfully following. Loving God in public worship is impossible without loving leadership, and loving submission.

Biblically Ordered Worship

When God's people gather, they gather firstly to worship. Some insist that God's New Testament people do not assemble to worship, and when they do, it's mainly for mutual encouragement and edification. However, there are several reasons why we can say that the New Testament assumes that the church gathers to worship. One is that the New Testament calls the people of God corporately 'the temple of God' (1 Cor 3:16-17, 1 Peter 2:5, 9, Ephesians 2:19-22). What do you do in a temple? You worship. Christians are living stones which make up that temple. When we gather together, we are the temple that offers up spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God. Another is that Acts 13:2 says this was the activity of the gathered church:

Acts 13:2 While they were worshipping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, "Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them."

The word translated *worshipping*, (or *ministering* in other versions), translates the Greek *leitourgeo*, from where the word *liturgy* is derived. The church gathers to do many things, but the New Testament assumes that it gathers to offer up the sacrifices of thanksgiving and praise (Heb 13:15)

The church's worship is always a response to revelation. Therefore, at the centre of our worship is the Word of God. The Puritans used to say: read the Word, preach the Word, pray the Word, sing the Word and show the Word. We can see these elements explicitly prescribed by the Word of God

We are to read the Word publicly (1 Timothy 4:13, Colossians 4:16). We are to preach the Word publicly (2 Timothy 4:1-2). We are to pray the Word publicly (1 Timothy 2:1-2, 8). We are to sing the Word publicly (Ephesians 5:18-19; Colossians 3:16). We are to show the Word publicly (Luke 22:19, Matthew 28:19-20). To that, some might add the worship of God in giving based on 1 Corinthians 16:1-2. God determines how he is to be worshipped, and he determines it in his Word. God's Word is our worship manual.

Moreover, the way these worship elements are implemented ought to incarnate ordinate love for God. The *kinds* of prayers, songs, sermons, ought to demonstrate that God is our ultimate love, and that he is to be loved with appropriate joy, reverence, and contrition.

Healthy Fellowship

A simple definition of fellowship is to have things in common. The Greek word *koinonia* just means partakers together. It is not a strictly religious word. Stamp collectors have fellowship. What is their fellowship around? Stamps. Bird watchers have fellowship. What is their fellowship? What

do they hold jointly? The watching of birds. When we say Christians have fellowship, what do we mean? We mean Christians hold something in common. What is it that we hold in common? We who have believed the gospel have the greatest possible commonality: Jesus Christ Himself. He is our shared Saviour, Lord, King, Head, Shepherd, Bridegroom, and Inheritance. As Paul puts it in Ephesians 4:5-6, once we are truly converted we have in common “one body and one Spirit, one calling; one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is above all, and through all, and in you all.”

When a people have this much in common, they express that commonality in the kinds of things we see in Acts 2:42-27: meeting together as often as they can, praying together, studying the Word together, meeting practical needs together, enjoying meals together, and living life together. Healthy fellowship exists in a local church when its members see their commonality as greater than their differences, and seek to share Christ with one another. Christ will be uniquely expressed through each of his sheep, so each Christian is an opportunity to see something more of his beauty.

Fellowship is not merely a meal, drinking coffee or tea, or enjoying a picnic. These may be good settings to foster greater ties, but they do not constitute fellowship. Fellowship between Christians already exists. Just like our position in Christ, we must become what we are. We have fellowship; such fellowship must now be realised, expressed, and experienced. It is the responsibility of Christians to intertwine their lives together, discovering from each other aspects of God they could not know on their own. Spiritual insights, wisdom from the Word, and personal testimony all forms part of this. Very importantly, Christians of similar age, gender or vocation, can help one another understand how to love God ultimately with their particular callings. This does not mean the church should break up into cliques and interest-groups. However, it is natural for people with similar backgrounds or experiences to be able to provoke each other to deeper faith, without withholding their uniqueness from the rest of the body.

The Lord's Table is the ultimate expression of our fellowship. This feast of worship, and oath of discipleship, is also a feast of fellowship. Here we symbolise, by eating of one loaf, that we are that one loaf – the body of Christ – and that we have been joined together through the atoning work of Jesus Christ. We partake of a common Saviour, we now share a common status (Gal 3:26-28), and we partake of one another (Rom 12:4-5).

1 Corinthians 10:16-17 ¹⁶ *The cup of blessing which we bless, is it not the communion of the blood of Christ? The bread which we break, is it not the communion of the body of Christ? ¹⁷ For we, though many, are one bread and one body; for we all partake of that one bread.*

Deliberate Discipleship

A disciple loves God ultimately (Mt 10:37, Lk 14:26-33). Every local church is to be concerned with deliberately making disciples. The Great Commission calls for the making of *disciples*, not *decisions* (Mt 28:19-20). Discipleship is the process of making these disciples.

Many things are involved in making disciples. We are to share a clear Gospel with unbelievers. When they profess to believe in Christ, we are to bring them into the local church through baptism and covenant membership, and we are then to teach them the whole counsel of God. This teaching is not merely didactic. It will involve prayer for one another (Col 4:12), personal involvement (1 Thes 2:7-8, 11), setting an example (1 Co 11:1, 1 Ti 4:12, Tis 2:7), instructing and 'truthing' one another (Eph 4:15), apprenticing younger believers (2 Tim 2:2), correcting and rebuking (Gal 6:1-2, Jam 5:19-20, 2 Tim 3:16-17), disciplining when necessary (Mat 18:17-20), being considerate with

our liberty (1 Cor 8:8-13, Rom 14:13, 15, 21) patiently encouraging one another (Heb 12:12) and counselling one another (Rom 15:14). We could put all this under the heading 'ministry'. This is our service to God, by serving others: meeting their needs so that more rebels can become worshippers.

To equip us, God has given each believer spiritual gifts (1 Pe 4:10). These grace-gifts enable believers to build each other up. They enable our one-another service. However, they are energised not when we seek to build ourselves up, but when we seek to love one another.

Faithful Stewardship

Apart from worship, fellowship, and discipleship, a healthy local church practices faithful stewardship. Stewards are managers of another's goods, charged with keeping them or using them for the owner's benefit. God entrusts us with many things. In fact:

“what do you have that you did not receive? Now if you did indeed receive it, why do you boast as if you had not received it?” (1 Corinthians 4:7)

In the local church, we are charged to use all that God entrusts to us for his glory. He entrusts us with salvation itself. He entrusts us with his reputation, to uphold it and spread it. He commits to us his Word, wanting us to use it properly and well for His glory. He entrusts us with the gospel message, expecting us to properly teach and preach it. He entrusts us with the church that his Son died for, expecting us to love it and nourish it and build it. Within the church, he entrusts us with certain gifts, that are not to be used selfishly, but as good stewards of His grace. Our very lives are a stewardship. All our abilities are a stewardship. The time God gives us, with its opportunities, is a stewardship. The resources we have is a stewardship. Our bodies are a stewardship.

Giving of our abilities, finances, and time, is part of worship. In doing so, we are united with the heart of God the Giver, we are freed from the idolatry of covetousness (Col 3:5), and we express sincere love for God and joy in him (2 Cor 8:8, 9:7). When we then use these faithfully and carefully, we commune with God as we come to see how we can depend on him, commit to him, and delight in him.

The church is a means for the world to see God's glory, and for the members to both reveal God (John 13:34) and perceive God in one another. Life in God's covenant community is together communing with God (experiencing and expressing ultimate dependence, devotion, and delight), and experiencing conviction, confession, cleansing, conformity to Christ and more communication of Christ.

Hear again the promise of God's revealed presence to those who embrace the public worship of the church:

No one has seen God at any time. If we love one another, God abides in us, and His love has been perfected in us. (1 John 4:12)

“Practice in Piety

To this point in the discussion, we have been assessing tradition mainly for its doctrinal or theological uses. In the development and transmission of Christian ideas, tradition helps us by providing us with categories, protecting us against error, and giving us a starting point. Tradition is

also related to other aspects of the Christian faith, however:

Not all of Christianity is purely doctrinal. Much of the faith is practical. It revolves around things that we are supposed to do (or, in some cases, to avoid doing). Learning how to do these things is essential to Christian obedience.

Moreover, the core of the faith is neither purely doctrinal nor purely pragmatic, but affective. Christianity requires us to feel certain ways. We are to love the Lord our God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength. We must also love our neighbor as ourselves. We ought to love righteousness and hate evil. We are obligated to rejoice under every circumstance and to give thanks for all things. Learning how to feel rightly is also part of Christian obedience.

Some things cannot be learned simply by reading a book. That is why Minnesota drivers generally do better on ice than Alabama drivers do. It is why the FAA requires private pilots to have 20 hours of flight training with a certified instructor. It is why chemists train in laboratories as well as libraries. We learn skills by practicing them. We learn values by being disciplined. We learn affections partly through exposure, partly through demonstration, and partly through discipline. Reading may help us to acquire these forms of knowledge, but a personal element is also involved. There is no substitute for experience under the supervision of a skilled teacher.

So it is with Christianity. For example, the Bible teaches us that we ought to display reverence toward God. Few of us, however, learn reverent behavior simply by reading theology texts. We discover what reverence looks like by worshipping in the company of reverent people. Reverence is fostered in us as we observe and imitate them, as they encourage us to behave in certain ways, and as they rebuke us for behaving in others.

How do we know what is the proper fear of God? The proper joy of the Lord? The proper love of brother or neighbor? Matters like these are central to the life of faith. They, and not merely doctrine, make up that intangible quality that we call *piety*. They are all aspects of the faith that each generation of believers is supposed to teach the next. None of them can be learned simply as a matter of theology. The acquisition of this knowledge is essential if we are to integrate doctrine correctly into our lives. As Thomas à Kempis says:

What good does it do to speak learnedly about the Trinity if, lacking humility, you displease the Trinity? Indeed it is not learning that makes a man holy and just, but a virtuous life makes him pleasing to God. I would rather feel contrition than know how to define it. For what would it profit us to know the whole Bible by heart and the principles of all the philosophers if we live without grace and the love of God? Vanity of vanities and all is vanity, except to love God and serve Him alone. (*The Imitation of Christ* 1:1).

Knowing the doctrines is not enough, for the simple reason that truth unimplemented is not truth *to us*. Allowing the doctrines to change us is essential. Being altered in our character is a matter of taste, of judgment, and of affection. These qualities are necessary to the correct integration of doctrine. They are in a certain sense anterior to doctrine. They provide the context within which doctrine takes on its right proportions—especially its moral proportions.

These qualities are the most important patrimony that a healthy tradition can bequeath to us. If we lose them, we shall find them very difficult to recover. We may be helped in gaining a sense of their proportions by singing the hymns, praying the prayers, and reading the devotions of the past. Without a living teacher, however, the process of gaining them is agonizing and laborious.

Functioning as a transmitter of values, a tradition is essentially a culture stretched over time.

People who grow to maturity in such a culture receive tremendous benefits. They are given a language of worship and preaching and prayer, they are given an ethic, they are given a set of habits in both mind and heart, and they are given a certain shaping of the affections that will enable them to grasp the significance of the doctrines that they will learn.

Viewed from this perspective, tradition does not add content to doctrine. Rather, it establishes the context within which doctrine takes on its true proportions and is seen in its true importance. The same truths, extracted from their context in a living tradition and re-inserted into a different context, run the risk of being trivialized and debased.