

## **Worship and the Chief End of Man**

by Ra McLaughlin

### ***Soli Deo Gloria***

The tendency in modern worship discussions has been to focus on *soli Deo gloria*. This is one of the “solas” of the Reformation, being the doctrine that everything we do should ultimately be done for the glory of God alone. We should all affirm this doctrine, but we should also be careful to note that it speaks about our ultimate purposes and motivations, and not about our immediate purposes and motivations.

Nevertheless, in light of this Reformation ideal, many conservatives have tended to take the general position that worship is for God and not for us. I agree with *soli Deo gloria*, understood with respect to our ultimate motives and goals, but I think it is a mistake to believe that in order to bring glory to God alone, worship must focus on God alone. Worship is a means, and it must have not only ultimate goals but immediate goals. Its immediate goals must serve its ultimate goals, but its immediate goals need not resemble its ultimate goals in order to do this. Just as we can glorify God in life by being good children and parents, we can glorify God in worship even when we’re not singing songs about how wonderful he is.

### **The Chief End of Man**

Moreover, *soli Deo gloria* is not a comprehensive statement on the ultimate goals of the Christian life or of worship. After all, as the Westminster Shorter Catechism puts it, “The chief end of man is to glorify God and enjoy him forever” (WSC 1). This statement does not contradict *soli Deo gloria*. *Soli Deo gloria* speaks of who gets the glory, but it does not restrict our ultimate goal to this one idea. The Shorter Catechism speaks of our ultimate goal as twofold: rendering glory to God, and enjoying God.

So, if our worship services are geared toward glorifying *only God*, then we’re in line with *soli Deo gloria* and the chief end of man. But if simultaneously they are *only geared* toward glorifying God, they may be in line with *soli Deo gloria*, but they are butting heads with the chief end of man.

Now, this is not to say that so long as we have the ultimate goal of enjoying God we are justified in failing to glorify him. On the contrary, the

Westminster Shorter Catechism intends that God be glorified in part through our enjoyment of him, and in part through other means.

Let me make three brief points on this issue: First, all life is rightly directed toward the ultimate goal of glorifying God, but that doesn't mean that every non-ultimate goal has to be to glorify God. God is glorified whenever his will is obeyed and his purposes fulfilled. And there are many means to this end, a great number of which are perfectly valid in Christian worship, including some that focus on man rather than on God.

Second, as the Westminster Shorter Catechism points out, God is glorified through man's life. That means you can't ignore man when you try to glorify God. You've got to work man into the equation. For example, if man is going to glorify God by being thankful, man has to have something to be thankful for. There has to be something "for man" before man can render thanks to God. And there has to be some focus on what man gets from God in order for the thanks to make sense in the context of worship.

For instance, the psalmists didn't just say, "Thank you, thank you, thank you! You deserve our praise!" Rather, they regularly told God why they were thankful, and this included a focus on themselves. They also complained to God in worship, lamented in worship, petitioned in worship, and did many other things that commonly get labeled "man-centered" in modern worship debates. Of course, no one says the psalmists were man-centered; but they often say that we are man-centered when we say and do these same kinds of things.

Third, to focus on man in worship is not to give glory to man. It is not a violation of *solī Deo gloria* to focus on persons other than God, even in worship. Biblical writers often focused on the human condition, on proverbial wisdom, on their personal problems, on enemies, on problems in churches, on sending thanks to friends, and on many other things that did not directly cast the spotlight on God. They did not, by these means, glorify man. Even in worship biblical authors (e.g., the psalmists) often focused on man, but the ultimate glory still belonged to God.

Now, in all fairness, most conservative Christians don't believe that worship is just for God, even if they think they believe this. For instance, they believe things like "One argument for God-centered worship is that it is spiritually fulfilling" and "God-centered worship is a means of grace." Now, if worship is all about God, then these arguments are irrelevant. If it is all about God, then it doesn't matter how — or even *if* — man is affected by it. But if these things do matter, then worship is also "for us."

Here's a problem this creates: Even if we really don't believe that every aspect of worship must always focus on God, we still think we believe it. And because we think we believe it, we make decisions about what we should and

shouldn't do in worship based on how God-centered these things are. As a result, we wrongly exclude certain types of activities, music, and even people.

### **The Regulative Principle**

Let me give you an example: It is sometimes argued that we should not cater to children's needs in a worship service because worship is for God, not for us, and what God wants is mature worship. The Bible certainly teaches that our goal is maturity, and that worship ought to share in this goal. If the Bible condemns immaturity, then so should our worship. The regulative principle is often invoked at this point, particularly to point out that there isn't any children's worship in Scripture.

But worship is not just for God; it is also for the church. And our children are part of the church. If they are to gain enjoyment from worship, worship must cater to them to some degree. It must be understandable to them. Worship that is over their heads is not true worship for them. The worship service ought to be a place where everyone can truly worship. But as it is, in most Reformed churches the worship service is where children observe how they will worship when they get older, and learn the patterns they will use in worship when they mature. These are good things, but they do not in and of themselves constitute worship.

So, how do we resolve the tension between what the regulative principle seems to imply and what children seem to require if they are to worship authentically as children? The most common answer these days seems to be that the regulative principle wins. After all, despite the fact that many of our churches are packed with children, nearly all our worship is geared toward adults. Yes, some churches send off the children to children's church — a practice I endorse when it is voluntary. Others do a children's sermon here and there. But by and large our sermons and songs and sacraments are understandable primarily to adults.

I think a better solution is to reevaluate our understanding of the regulative principle on these matters. The regulative principle does not legitimate worship simply by example, but also by teaching. If Scripture teaches or implies that we should sing children's songs in worship, then the regulative principle affirms children's songs in worship by "good and necessary" deduction (WCF 1.6). So, the tension is not between the regulative principle and other thoughts about the Bible's teachings. Rather, it is internal to the regulative principle itself. Specifically, we have to balance Scripture's teachings about the chief end of man, and the implication of those teachings, against Scripture's examples of worship.

Moreover, there are a number of songs in Scripture that look remarkably like children's ditties. Psalms 133, 134, and 150 come readily to mind, and 136

would work extremely well for children if done antiphonally (which some scholars believe to have been its original format). So, by some measure, Scripture actually provides examples of children's songs, so that we are further compelled to sing them.

Then there's the teaching of Jesus that we should not hinder the children who are coming to him (Matt. 19:14 // Mark 10:14 // Luke 18:16). Rather, we should receive them in his name (Matt. 18:2-5 // Mark 9:36-37; Luke 9:47-48). So, what are we doing when we teach them to mimic our behavior rather than to worship authentically now? Are we not "hindering" them from coming to Jesus? We are essentially doing the same thing the disciples did when they tried to keep the children away from Jesus. We are telling them not to worship the Lord now, but to wait until they are mature so that they can worship like us when they get older. The disciples thought the children would annoy Jesus, that it was not appropriate for them to come to him as they were. But our Lord rebuked that perspective.

Jesus does not want children to be little adults; he wants children to be children. Even our Lord was not born as an adult in a baby's body. There is nothing wrong with being a child, and there is nothing wrong with having a child's mind, and there is nothing wrong with worshiping God "as you are" — even if what you are is a child.

So, the proper thing to do with children in worship services is not to ignore them in favor of glorifying God. That's a false dichotomy. Since the chief end of man is the chief end of all mankind including children, we have to account for the children somehow. We have to find ways to ensure that their inclusion in the worship service is as participants and not as auditors. We have to acknowledge that childhood is the path to maturity, and that it is good and appropriate for children to be children. God did not design them to jump straight to maturity.

## Relevance

But children are just one example of ways in which we hinder our worship through careless use of the regulative principle and *solī Deo gloria*. We also do it when we fail to sing laments (most of the Psalms are laments!), crying out to God in ways that emphasize the human condition. We do it when we only sing songs that talk about how wonderful God is. We do it when we do not provide a place for nursing mothers to sit and hear the sermon. We do it when we do not accommodate those with disabilities. We do it when we fail to adapt a worship service to respond to a present crisis. We do it when we use the same emotional or theological structure for our worship service every week (look at all the different structures and forms in Scripture!). We do it whenever we worship in such a way that we do not pay attention to the needs of the people in the pew next to us. We do it whenever we do not enjoy our worship.

Remember, the goal is to glorify God and to enjoy him — but don't get *too* hung up on the concept of *enjoyment* as an immediate goal. Remember, that is the chief end, but not every means to that end is enjoyable. When people are mourning, we are to mourn with them (Rom. 12:15). That's not a violation of the chief end of man; it is a means to it. There are things we truly should mourn, from the refusal of the world to repent at our preaching (cf. Matt. 23:37; Rom. 9:2), to the death of a friend (cf. John 11:35), to smallest consequence of sin. And by mourning when it is appropriate, we move toward joy. Just as wounds are not best treated by ignoring them, sorrow is not best cured by ignoring it, or by pretended joy. Jesus endured the cross in order to obtain the joy set before him (Heb. 12:2). In the same way, we must endure many things in this life in order to reach our chief end of enjoying God. And our worship should help us navigate that path.

In short, our worship must be relevant to our lives. We cannot truly enjoy God unless we interact with him and with each other in every way Scripture teaches us to interact. Our worship should reflect that. But it cannot reflect that if it doesn't pay attention to us, and comprehend our circumstances, and apply God's word to our lives, both corporate and individually.

Paul said that the golden rule — love your neighbor as yourself — summarizes the whole law (Rom. 13:10). Does that sound man-centered? It's not. Rather, it is profoundly God-centered. Why? Because it is what God commanded, and it is what God did, and it can only be done by those who love God, and it is the natural inclination of the heart that is committed to God. If we are to be like him, we must love our neighbors, and to do that we must focus on humanity. Do we do this to the exclusion of all else? Of course not. The point is simply that we need to improve our understanding of godly worship, and to act in accordance with what we understand. Specifically, in order to act in accordance with traditional Reformed theology such as the *solī Deo gloria*, the Westminster Standards and the regulative principle, we have to rethink our worship so that we pay attention to and even focus on the people that God loves.