Dual Citizens

Worship and Life between the Already and the Not Yet

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Dual Citizens: Worship and Life between the Already and the Not Yet

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This book is dedicated to the members of the Upper Crust Theological Society, in whose company many of these ideas were formulated, destroyed, and then reformulated to be stronger, more biblical, and hopefully more persuasive . . .

. . . and to the faithful readers of my blog *De Regnis Duobus*, for keeping me honest and never letting me get away with a half-baked argument . . .

. . . and to the wonderful families of Exile Presbyterian Church, for faithfully listening to me preach and teach, week in and week out, in one form or another, about the difference between the earthly kingdom of man and the heavenly kingdom of Christ.

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Foreword

John Bunyan wrote his only hymn, "To Be a Pilgrim," from an English prison in 1684, where he was serving a twelve-year sentence for preaching without a license. Reflecting on the words of Hebrews 11:13, which speaks of the saints of old having "confessed that they were strangers and pilgrims on the earth" (NKJV), Bunyan included the hymn in his famous work, *The Pilgrim's Progress*. The text went through some revisions and a wonderful new composition by Ralph Vaughan Williams before being inserted into *The English Hymnal* in 1906, but the original words read:

Who would true valour see,
Let him come hither;
One here will constant be,
Come wind, come weather.
There's no discouragement
Shall make him once relent
His first avowed intent
To be a pilgrim.

Whoso beset him round
With dismal stories

Do but themselves confound;
His strength the more is.
No lion can him fright,
He'll with a giant fight,
He will have a right
To be a pilgrim.

Hobgoblin nor foul fiend
Can daunt his spirit,
He knows he at the end
Shall life inherit.
Then fancies fly away,
He'll fear not what men say,
He'll labor night and day
To be a pilgrim.

The Christian life is a pilgrimage. However, all around us—even in the church—there are myriad attempts to keep people from being pilgrims. The autonomous self of the modern era thought it had arrived; the only thing left was to bring the rest of the world in line, to cause it to see things from the self's sovereign perch. Perfection of humanity through progress—whether through reason, science, technology, politics, or morality and religion—was the order of the day. Instead of pilgrims, we supposedly were masters of all we survey.

In reaction against the violent arrogance of this Enlightenment outlook, many people today take cover in a false humility that revels in the journey rather than the destination. Instead of masters or pilgrims, they are tourists, craving new experiences but always living on the surface and never diving into the depths. They rarely stay anywhere for long, since there are so many things to do, to see, to experience, and to join.

It is easy to be a master, especially if you are a privileged member of a privileged culture. It is also easy to be a tourist, sauntering from booth to booth at Vanity Fair without any particular destination in mind. However, to be like Abram, called out of his moon-worshiping family in Ur, or like Peter, called to

drop his nets and follow Jesus even to Calvary, is the most difficult vocation to embrace. In fact, it is impossible. As Abram, Peter, and all believers ever since have come to realize, becoming a Christian pilgrim is a gift of grace.

Everything about this journey to Zion seems odd, surprising, and counterintuitive. Abram knew that God's promise contradicted the facts of his own experience. Assuming that glory rather than the cross was awaiting him, Peter did not understand the point of his Master's journey from Galilee to Jerusalem until after he denied Jesus three times and was nevertheless restored by the victorious Savior after His resurrection.

Judging by the winding and often daunting path of Pilgrim in Bunyan's celebrated book, the Christian pilgrimage is not easy. Often, Pilgrim meets his greatest obstacles not in the form of obvious giants who block his path to the Celestial City, but in the subtler form of distractions and distortions of the faith that promise to make the trek easier.

Drawing on the deep wellsprings of biblical theology, Jason Stellman explores the Christian pilgrimage with extraordinary insight, humor, and relevance to our contemporary context. Exegeting our popular culture as well as Scripture along the way, he draws us beyond the familiar clichés and exposes us to the strange new world that is dawning in Jesus Christ. Refreshingly, he does not call us deeper within ourselves or offer jeremiads on the moral condition of our secularized culture, but attends closely to the persuasiveness of the Christian story to narrate our lives in this present age. Going beyond Bunyan's image of a lonely pilgrim, Stellman points us to the communion of saints below and the "cloud of witnesses" who cheer us on from the heavenly stands.

I do not know of a book quite like this one. It is a devotional theology of the Christian life that is far richer than the standard fare on offer in the "spirituality" and "Christian disciplines" sections of Christian bookstores. Yet it is also a down-to-earth account of how the gospel and its public ministry of Word and sacrament provide the right coordinates for our pilgrimage at a time when we are easily drawn off course by the winds of fashion and consumer tastes. After reading this book, you will doubtless be provoked, as I was, not only to ponder our precarious location at the intersection of "this present evil age" and "the age to come," but to praise the God who leads us by his Word and Spirit as we

journey on. Digesting this book will lead you to sing with greater gusto those closing words of another hymn: "Solid joys and lasting treasures, none but Zion's children know."[1]

—*Michael Horton*
Escondido, California
October 2008

Note

1 From the hymn "Glorious Things of Thee Are Spoken," by John Newton, 1779.

Preface

This project began to take shape while I was a student at Westminster Seminary California, although in those days it was little more than a nagging thought about how an issue as misunderstood and arcane as eschatology could bear directly on so many aspects of the Christian life. Princeton theologian Geerhardus Vos famously said that "eschatology precedes soteriology," but I would go so far as to say that eschatology (looking at the present from the standpoint of the future) precedes *everything*. Stepping back from the trees and beholding the forest, or looking at our own lives as parts of God's story (rather than the other way around), enables us to gain a perspective on our trials and triumphs that is truly theo- rather than egocentric, God-centered instead of me-centered. To put it simply, when we put on our "new covenant glasses" and look around, everything appears much more vibrant and much less static than it does when we treat the Bible like a systematic theology text.

The central thesis of this book is that the new covenant situates us in a tension between "the already" on the one hand and the "not yet" on the other. For God's people under the old covenant before the coming of Christ, most of God's promises fell into the category of "not yet," or as yet unfulfilled. The expectation of Israel was that the long-awaited Messiah would come and immediately fulfill all of the remaining Old Testament prophecies, thereby replacing the "not yet" of future expectation with the "already" of present enjoyment of the divine promises.

What God's people did not expect, however, was a Messiah who would inaugurate a kingdom in His first advent while waiting to fully consummate it until His second coming, leaving His people to live in the gap between the partial and complete fulfillment of His promises. God's delay in ushering in the kingdom in its glorious and final form means that we live in the intersection of the present and the future as exiles and pilgrims in the divinely ordained overlap of the ages. And as should be expected, this biblical motif shapes our identity at every turn. Therefore, both worship and life, our activities in the sacred and secular realms, should reflect the sense of homesickness and longing that all sojourners feel.

Before we jump in, I would like to "connect the dots" in order to show, as clearly as possible, how each chapter traces the book's central theme. I begin by arguing that this book's subtitle is not a typo, and that "worship" and "life" are indeed to be distinguished under the new covenant (Introduction). The rest of the book is divided up accordingly, with Part One focusing on Christian worship and Part Two on the Christian life.

First, the *church's worship* must be seen through the lens of the new covenant in that it involves the gathering together of "a peculiar people" to do something quite countercultural: to reenact and renew God's gracious covenant (chapter 1). This worship is not tied to a specific set of cultural trends or forms (whether those of today's youth or those of sixteenth-century Geneva), but reflects the oddity and otherworldliness of the band of resident aliens that is the new covenant church (chapters 2 and 3). When we, as a tribe of pilgrims, behold God's redemptive story from the vantage point of heaven, it becomes clear that the victory for which we long is largely a future promise, with the present being characterized by struggle, temptation, and a status of "underdogs" (chapter 4). This all necessarily informs how we view the Sabbath, the one day in seven given over to worship (chapter 5): do we American Christians obey the fourth commandment by worshiping on the Lord's Day primarily to recapture the former glory of the United States, or do we withdraw from cultural activity on Sunday in order to demonstrate to the culture that, on this day at least, our heavenly citizenship eclipses our identities as citizens of the civil kingdom of man? If our heavenly citizenship transcends even the most powerful earthly allegiances, we can free ourselves from the insistence of many that an earthly nation-state (even

the United States) carries redemptive significance (chapter 6). God has only one "nation," and that is the church. And if the church holds such a crucial place in the new covenant, then it follows that she should play a significant role in shaping the piety of her members (chapter 7).

Second, the *Christian's life* is also shaped by the already/not yet tension of the new covenant. Consumed as we are with the details of our individual lives, we need to step back and consider our stories in the light of the divine drama that God is directing on a cosmic scale (chapter 8). Seeing ourselves in light of God's yet-unfulfilled promises should cause us to recognize immediately that our heavenly citizenship makes the trifles of Egypt, after which the world chases, utterly unworthy of our ultimate affection (chapter 9). What is worthy of our affection, however, is that heavenly treasure God has laid in store for us, having hardwired a longing for eternity into our hearts (chapter 10). Our dual citizenship, then, allows us to wait eagerly for eternal glory while seeing the temporal blessings of earth as gifts of God not to be feared but enjoyed in their proper place and context (chapter 11). Jesus' gift of the Spirit brings the future into the present, which in turn helps the believer live out his heavenly identity amid the challenges of the here and now (chapter 12). One of the ways believers manifest their growth under the new covenant is by an increasing willingness to sacrifice their rights, which is not only Christlike but, strange though it sounds, boastworthy (chapter 13). Finally, this dual citizenship that we believers enjoy causes us to groan for glory, a groaning that is both soothed and intensified by the indwelling Spirit, who functions as an engagement ring assuring us of the future consummation of our union with our glorified Bridegroom (chapter 14).

I should point out at the beginning of this study that the reader will come across many references to "American Christians" or "the American church." As an American, I am obviously more aware of the challenges facing churches in the United States than I am of those faced elsewhere. That being said, I do hope this book will be helpful and encouraging to readers from other countries as well (whether your struggles are identical to ours or not).

I would like to thank my wonderful wife, Alida, not only for her constant encouragement to me in pursuing this project and bringing it to completion, but also for her willingness to sacrifice time with me during the many hours I sat

staring blankly at the computer while working on this book. She is a true blessing and support, as well as a great friend. I am extremely grateful to my mom and dad (himself a writer) for their consistent care and support over the years. Thanks as well to Michael Horton for his encouragement, advice, and his foreword, as well as to the faculty of Westminster Seminary California for instilling in me a passion for the riches of the Reformed tradition. I am thankful to Greg Bailey and the entire staff at Reformation Trust for their professionalism, encouragement, and willingness to take a risk on a project by a yet-to-be-published author. I am extremely grateful to Tom Wenger, Aaron Denlinger, Ryan Glomsrud, and Mike Brown for our countless hours of conversation and debate that helped shape my thinking on these issues. Every bit as influential were the years I spent as a missionary in Hungary with Armando Garcia, Greg Opean, and Sam Khoury, who not only learned with me, but also taught me, what it means to live a life characterized by clinging to the grace of God. Their influence on me and on this book is unmistakable. My hat's off to John Terranova for being the most consistent amillennialist I have ever met. And lastly, many thanks to Christian Kingery, my best friend and "partner in crime," for enjoying with me the "already" and lamenting with me the "not yet."

—Jason J. Stellman
Woodinville, Washington
October 2008

Introduction

Worship and Life:
Tearing Asunder What God Hath Joined Together

Since the cultural revolution of the 1960s, the more socially "enlightened" among us have expressed deep concerns about the dividedness of the world and those living in it. Whether heard in John Lennon's appeal to "Come Together," Rodney King's question, "Can't we all just get along?" or Bono's longing for the "Kingdom Come, when all the colors will bleed into one," in the opinion of many, the more distinctions we make, the more divided and alienated we become.

While Christians would certainly agree that many divisions have been unnecessary and wrong (such as racial divisions), some distinctions must be maintained. The proper question, then, is not whether we should make distinctions in life or abandon them, but which distinctions are legitimate and which are not? By all accounts, this is a much more difficult issue to tackle, causing us at times to wish the issue were as simple as getting along or giving peace a chance.

In the realm of Christian theology and practice, there is an age-old

distinction that seems to have fallen on hard times of late—one alluded to in the subtitle of this book. "Worship" and "life" traditionally have been understood as important but distinct facets of our religion. But as with so many other issues, the separation between worship and life is being questioned with increasing frequency and zeal today, the desire being to conflate these two elements into one all-embracing category. What the saints do corporately on the Lord's Day, according to this notion, is no more or less important than what we do individually in our private lives. Characteristic of this position is Reformed theologian John Frame, who insists that "there is no real difference between worship and the rest of life . . . [for] it is very difficult, in general, to separate 'life' from 'worship' in a biblical framework."[1]

My goal in this introduction is to argue the contrary—that the Scriptures maintain this distinction, which many consider unbiblical at best and dangerous at worst. In a word, this introduction is little more than a justification of this book's subtitle. This is not intended as permission for you to skip ahead to the good stuff to come, however. Indeed, the "biblical framework" I hope to provide here is crucial to what follows, and therefore I would ask you to stay tuned as I seek to prepare the soil into which the seeds of *Dual Citizens* will be sown.

Cult and Culture

What is the relationship between cult[2] and culture, the church and the world? This question has puzzled the people of God for centuries and has been answered in a variety of ways. At one end of the spectrum are the Amish, who have renounced "the world" and its principles, values, and zippers (these folks prefer a purer alternative—namely *buttons*—for their clothing). At the opposite end are those in more liberal churches, who understand the gospel message largely in terms of social and political ideology. The *real* work of the kingdom, they argue, is to feed the hungry and clothe the naked, and the neglect of these all-important duties is a tacit withdrawal from culture that renders the church irrelevant and her teachings of "no earthly good." In this second scenario, cult and culture are joined in blissful matrimony, while in the first scenario they have suffered a bitter divorce.

But chances are that most of us fall somewhere in between these two extremes, desiring some sort of biblical balance between Christianity and culture without allowing one to swallow the other. Do the Scriptures address this issue? If so, do both Testaments present exactly the same emphasis? And if the Old Testament differs from the New, what are the factors that make the difference?

The Edenic Covenant

The condition in which man found himself in Eden before his fall into sin has been described, most notably by theologians such as Geerhardus Vos and Meredith G. Kline, as a "holy theocracy." *Theocracy* is a term with which few in the present day are familiar, yet a precise definition of it is crucial to my overall position. For this reason, I will seek to unpack it in some detail.

Before sin entered into the Genesis narrative, there was no sharp division between sacred and secular activity, but all aspects of man's life—whether tending the garden or communing with his Creator—were considered holy. At this time, God ruled over His covenant community and governed all His people's affairs. There is more to a theocracy than this, however, for as the careful reader will have noticed, God reigns over us today as well. But as we read the opening chapters of Genesis, we see that God ruled over His people in a unique way. He did not merely exercise a spiritual rule in their hearts, but as Kline has correctly pointed out, His rule included an "external realm" with a "geopolitical dimension."[3] This means that God's reign over pre-fallen man was a dominion that included a *domain*, a rule that included a *realm*—namely the garden of Eden. It was there in the garden that God's presence was enthroned and His "palace-sanctuary" was established. Hence, in the pre-fall arrangement between the Creator and His creatures, we are given our first glimpse at what a holy theocracy looks like: *an arrangement in which God provides for His covenant people a distinct land in which they are to serve Him as His loyal subjects*.

What does this have to do with the relationship of the sacred and the secular? In a word, it has *everything* to do with it. This will become clear as we note some of the practical implications of the Edenic theocracy. As I mentioned above, in such a theocratic context there is no distinct category designated "culture," but

all of life is subsumed under the umbrella of God's universal kingdom. In this arrangement, cult and culture, church and world, temple and palace, are one. This does not mean that religious activity swallowed secular activity (like with the Amish), and neither does it mean that social concerns eclipsed sacred ones (like with liberal Protestants). Rather, both were seen as legitimate expressions of kingdom activity. Thus, in the worship of his Creator, in his exercise of dominion over creation, and in his care for the garden, man expressed his identity as image-bearer of God (Gen. 1:26–28; Ps. 8:5–8). Man's successful completion of these tasks would have concluded his probation with the reward of eternal life and the confirmed status of *non posse pecarre* ("unable to sin").

But we all know the story; the part about "living happily ever after" is absent from the narrative (at least for the time being). Adam and Eve rebelled against their Creator's authority and ate the forbidden fruit, and because of their fall God pronounced on man the curse-sanction He had threatened (Gen. 3:16–19; cf. Rom. 5:12ff). But the promise of redemption from the law's curse was given in Genesis 3:15 even as God cursed the serpent: "I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and her offspring; he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel." What was happening here? Was God speaking out of both sides of His mouth, pronouncing both law and gospel, judgment and salvation? In a sense, yes. By coupling His common curse with common grace (which becomes explicit in Genesis 4, as I will demonstrate), the Lord was postponing divine judgment in order to allow His promise of salvation to come to fruition. Thus, a stage was erected on which the divine drama could be performed, and "common grace was introduced to act as a rein to hold in check the curse on mankind, and to make possible an interim historical environment as the theater for a program of redemption."[4]

One significant result of this arrangement was that a new set of distinctions arose in God's dealings with His people after the fall. Once man declared his rebellious sovereignty, his kingdom became distinct from God's kingdom, causing an unnatural separation between cult and culture. Man was expelled from "the holy land" and consigned to exile east of Eden, sweating for his bread and longing for the day when the Seed of the woman would assure him that "to

him who overcomes I will give to eat from the tree of life, which is in the midst of the Paradise of God" (Rev. 2:7b, NKJV). In a word, the people of God were looking for the restoration of the theocracy that, because of their sin, had been prematurely cut short.

The Abrahamic Covenant[5]

The two rival "seeds" of Genesis 3:15 continued to coexist on the stage that common grace had provided for them until the institution of the Mosaic covenant on Mount Sinai.[6] In the Abrahamic covenant, for example, the patriarch was chosen from among the sinful members of the human race and made the father of a distinct people (Gen. 17:1–14). But it is the nature of Abraham's distinctiveness that is important for our discussion—as we will demonstrate, it was not *cultural* but *cultic*. In other words, the covenant God made with him contained no instructions governing his activity in the everyday common-grace realm, but he was to continue to participate in culture as he had done before—conducting business transactions (Gen. 23:16), settling land and property disputes (Gen. 21:22ff; 26:26ff), and showing appropriate deference to earthly kings (Gen. 20:17). The patriarchs (Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob) and their descendants, in other words, were called to coexist peacefully in the land God had promised them, waiting in hope and journeying in faith until Yahweh would drive out the Canaanites forever (Heb. 11:8–22). The situation of the patriarchs before the giving of the law, therefore, can be characterized as *pilgrim politics*, a term that highlights their status not as a triumphant theocratic army but as "resident aliens" and "tolerated sojourners" whose inheritance was not yet a reality.[7]

Though God's people under the Abrahamic covenant were culturally similar to the inhabitants of Canaan, it was there, in the cultural realm, that the similarity ceased. It was specifically in the cultic sphere that Abraham's particularity was displayed. This is seen most strikingly in the fact that the sacrament of the Abrahamic covenant—circumcision—was a bloody rite foreshadowing the sacrificial redemptive work of his true Seed (Gen. 17:9–14; Rom. 2:28–29; Col. 2:11). Kline writes, "Tolerated pilgrims, not triumphant possessors—such is the life of the nontheocratic community of faith, waiting while the kingdom is withheld."[8]

The patriarchal community, therefore, was culturally common but religiously distinct. But all of this was about to change.

The Mosaic Covenant

When God made His covenant with Israel through Moses after the exodus from Egypt, a change occurred with respect to the status of His people. Though the Mosaic covenant was inaugurated in conjunction with the Abrahamic covenant (Ex. 3:6–8), it occasioned a significant shift in both the identity of God's people and the nature of His dealings with them. As the Israelites prepared to enter Canaan, they ceased to be a pilgrim people and became a theocratic army that was commissioned to storm the land and exterminate or enslave its inhabitants in the name of Yahweh. The distinctiveness and particularity that the Abrahamic covenant had provided for God's people in the cultic realm now was extended to the cultural realm as well.[9] God's people were a holy theocracy once again, and because of their all-encompassing distinctiveness, they were forbidden from engaging in cultural, common-grace activities with the inhabitants of Canaan or entering into treaties with other nations (Ex. 23:20–33; cf. Josh. 9:1–15).

Thus, under the Mosaic economy, the people of Israel found themselves in a situation similar to that of Adam in the garden—God's kingdom, of which they were subjects, now had an earthly realm and a geopolitical dimension, within which no divergence from Yahweh's kingdom ethic was tolerated. Like Adam but unlike the patriarchs, the people of Israel under the Mosaic covenant were both cultically *and* culturally distinct from all other nations on the earth.[10]

At this point, a qualification must be made that is crucial to my argument: the strictness and rigidity shown in Israel's utter withdrawal from pagan culture only applied to *those living within the bounds of the land of Canaan*. When the Israelites had to deal with those who lived or came from outside its borders, things remained as they always had been under the Abrahamic arrangement. This is demonstrated by the fact that Solomon engaged in friendly dealings with delegates from Tyre (1 Kings 5:1ff) and with the queen of Sheba (1 Kings 10:1ff) without any hint that he was compromising or doing anything wrong. What was

going on here? Did Solomon not realize that these were heathen rulers? How could he interact with them so easily?

Another striking example of this seemingly glaring double standard is found in Jeremiah 29:4–7:

> "Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, to all the exiles whom I have sent into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon: 'Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat their produce. Take wives and have sons and daughters; take wives for your sons, and give your daughters in marriage, that they may bear sons and daughters; multiply there, and do not decrease. But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare.'"

This passage appears even more contradictory than Solomon's dealings with pagan emissaries. After specifically instructing His people to completely withdraw from the religious and secular life of those outside His covenant (Ex. 23:20–33), God now seems to have had a change of heart, commanding His people to assimilate themselves to the heathen culture of Babylon.

The situation becomes even more confusing when we read Ezra 9:1–3, 10–12:

> After these things had been done, the officials approached me and said, "The people of Israel and the priests and the Levites have not separated themselves from the peoples of the lands with their abominations . . . For they have taken some of their daughters to be wives for themselves and for their sons, so that the holy race has mixed itself with the peoples of the lands" . . . As soon as I heard this, I tore my garment and my cloak and pulled hair from my head and beard and sat appalled . . . [saying,] "And now, O our God, what shall we say after this? For we have forsaken your commandments, which you commanded by your servants the prophets, saying, 'The land that you are entering, to take possession of it, is a land impure with the impurity of the peoples of the lands,

> with their abominations that have filled it from end to end with their uncleanness. Therefore do not give your daughters to their sons, neither take their daughters for your sons, and never seek their peace or prosperity, that you may be strong and eat the good of the land and leave it for an inheritance to your children forever.'"

At first glance, it appears that God's standard for His people was in a constant state of flux. First He told the people to withdraw completely from any dealings with non-Israelite pagans, then He told them to go ahead and intermingle with them, then He rebuked them for their intermingling. Was God being duplicitous here, arbitrarily changing His mind with respect to His will for Israel? It certainly appears so.

But we must remember the crucial qualification that was made above: when God's people are a holy theocracy (and *only* then), they are commanded to withdraw from pagan religion *and* pagan culture, but when they are exiles and pilgrims, they are called to separate themselves only religiously, not culturally. And what determines whether God's people are a theocracy or a band of pilgrims? The answer is simple: *a distinct land*. A theocracy, as I pointed out above, always has a geographical element to it.

So during the period between the losing of Eden and the gaining of Canaan, God's covenant people were pilgrims without a homeland. As resident aliens in the land that would be theirs afterward, they were culturally similar to the inhabitants of the land while remaining religiously separate from them. But under the Mosaic covenant, the Israelites became a theocracy once again, and as such they were commissioned to drive out the Canaanites and maintain complete purity and separation within their borders. Having taken possession of Canaan, God's covenant community was no longer able to be religiously particular but culturally indistinct. The Israelites were now "a peculiar people" in the most exhaustive and universal sense of the term, for their peculiarity extended to both spheres—cult and culture.

But how does this apply to Jeremiah 29 and Ezra 9? We must remember that the passage in Jeremiah states explicitly that God was instructing His people how to live *while they were in exile in Babylon*. As this passage explains, when outside

the borders of the theocratic domain, the Israelites returned to the pilgrim ethic that characterized the patriarchs before the institution of the Mosaic covenant. Alongside their pagan neighbors, they engaged in such common cultural activities as building houses, planting gardens, taking wives, and producing offspring, all the while praying for the welfare of Babylon. In exile, Israel's particularity was once again solely cultic, which explains why Daniel agreed to advise his pagan rulers (Dan. 2:16) but refused to defile himself religiously by eating Nebuchadnezzar's delicacies or worshiping Darius (Dan. 1:8; 5:17; 6:13). As during the period between the Abrahamic and Mosaic covenants, Israel was religiously particular but culturally indistinct.

But as we would expect, this arrangement expired when the people of Israel returned to their land from exile. This explains why, in the passage from Ezra 9, the people were rebuked for engaging in some of the very cultural activities that Jeremiah 29:4–7 prescribed. This was not "schizo-ethics," however much it might appear so. As mentioned above, in order for a theocracy to exist, there must be a distinct geographical realm. Within this land, God's people are cultically and culturally distinct, but without it their distinctiveness is strictly cultic.

The New Covenant

Hebrews 8:13 tells us that the Mosaic covenant has expired, being replaced by the new covenant. In the light of this shift in redemptive history, how do cult and culture interact today? It is precisely here that, as far as we are concerned, the theological rubber meets the practical road. All that has been said up to this point will now begin to inform our understanding of exactly how, in our own day and age, the spheres of cult and culture, or "worship and life," relate to one another.

As would be expected given the connection between theocracy and land highlighted above, the people of God under the new covenant are in a situation more like that of the patriarchs under the Abrahamic covenant than that of Israel under the Mosaic covenant. We are not a triumphant theocratic nation dwelling in an earthly holy land, but a band of dispossessed pilgrims whose true country—of which Eden and Canaan were types and shadows—is not to be found "under the sun" but beyond it, in heaven itself (1 Peter 2:11; Phil. 3:20).

But the similarity of our contemporary situation to that of the journeying patriarchs extends beyond the mere absence of a piece of earthly real estate to call our own. Because of the theocracy/land connection, the church's lack of a distinct country means that *we exist in a cultural realm that is distinct from that of the cultic*. We are, like the patriarchs, religiously particular but culturally indistinct. For the new covenant church, cult is distinct from culture, church is distinct from world, and the sacred is distinct from the secular.

An important qualification must be made at this point to avoid confusion. The cultural realm within which the church dwells, while common and non-Christian, is nonetheless legitimate. This means that those of you who, after grasping the distinctions I have been making, were thinking about ceasing to pay your taxes can think again. "Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's," Jesus said in Luke 20:25, "and to God the things that are God's." How could the holy Son of God demand that His people pay tribute to so unholy an empire as Rome? How could Paul tell the Roman believers to subject themselves to the governing authorities when those authorities insisted that "*Caesar* is lord" (13:1, emphasis added)? How could Peter demand that his readers submit themselves to "every human institution," particularly when many of those institutions, and the humans who instituted them, were hostile to Christ and His gospel (1 Peter 2:13–18; cf. 1 Tim. 2:1–4)? The answer is that in a non-theocratic context such as our own, culture has its own legitimacy apart from cult.

So to bring it closer to home, Christians today are not only to pay their taxes but are to obey all of the laws that the civil magistrate sets forth, whether they are found in the Bible or not (provided they do not entail breaking one of God's commands). Civil institutions that existed in New Testament times, such as marriage (1 Cor. 7:27), parenthood (Col. 3:20–21), slavery (1 Cor. 7:21), and government (Rom. 13:1ff), were considered legitimate expressions of the kingdom of man, and participation in them was not ruled out by one's membership in the kingdom of Christ.

However, though membership in the body of Christ did not alter the *fact* that believers in the early church participated in these things, it most certainly altered the *way* in which they participated in them. This is why Paul gives so much instruction to Christian husbands, wives, parents, children, rulers, slaves,

and masters. New converts to Christianity were able to continue in their lawful occupations, but they were to do so to glorify and be seen by God, not men (Col. 3:18–4:1).

A further example of this new covenant principle is seen in 1 Corinthians 5:9–11. In his instruction concerning the purity of the church in Corinth, the apostle urges withdrawal from all sexually immoral people. He quickly qualifies this command, however, by saying, "Not at all meaning the sexually immoral of this world . . . since then you would need to go out of the world" (v. 10). It was from those who committed sexual immorality while naming the name of Christ that the apostle commanded the Corinthians' separation (v. 11; cf. 2 Cor. 6:14–18). Though the implications of this passage are manifold, one of the most clear is that a legitimate distinction exists between the church and the world that never would have been tolerated during the Mosaic theocracy (Deut. 22:13–21).

Citizens of Two Kingdoms

The Bible teaches that during those periods throughout redemptive history when God's people have had their own distinct land, such as Eden or Canaan (periods we have called "theocracies"), all activity—whether religious or cultural—was considered holy. But in non-theocratic contexts, where God's people were pilgrims without an earthly land (such as the patriarchs, Israel and Judah in exile, and the new covenant church), the religious sphere is distinct from the cultural sphere. The new covenant has no geographical limitations, but is universal in scope, extending to all, Jew or Greek, who call on the name of the Lord (Eph. 2:11–22; Gal. 3:26–29). New covenant believers, therefore, are citizens of two kingdoms: the kingdom of God and the kingdom of man. The former—which Martin Luther called "the kingdom of God's right hand"—exists to further Christ's redemptive purposes by means of Word and sacrament, while the latter—"the kingdom of God's left hand"—furthers common grace by means of legitimate cultural institutions such as the state and its use of the sword. Therefore, distinguishing between "worship" and "life" is not a putting asunder of what God has joined together, but is a necessary consequence of careful Bible study and a crucial element of what I call pilgrim theology.

Let the reader always remember, however, that being a pilgrim means more than just being homeless. There is a final destination, an eternal city, a true theocracy that awaits all who have been baptized into Christ Jesus. In this heavenly abode, there will be no serpents to distrust or Canaanites to dispel, for "No longer will there be anything accursed, but the throne of God and of the Lamb will be in it, and his servants will worship him. They will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads. And night will be no more. They will need no light of lamp or sun, for the Lord God will be their light, and they will reign forever and ever" (Rev. 22:3–5).

Do you long for this "building of God, a house not made with hands" (2 Cor. 5:1), compared to which the sufferings of this present time appear as mere trifles unworthy of mention? I hope that you do, for this is what it means to be a pilgrim.

Notes

1 John M. Frame, "Some Questions About the Regulative Principle." *Westminster Theological Journal*, 54:2 (Fall 1992), 362–363.

2 I am using the word *cult* differently here than the way it is used in the common vernacular. I do not mean a pseudo-Christian sect such as Mormonism, but the religious realm as distinct from the secular realm.

3 Meredith G. Kline, *Kingdom Prologue: Genesis Foundations for a Covenantal Worldview* (Overland Park, Kan.: Two Age Press, 2000), 49.

4 Kline, *Kingdom Prologue*, 155. When he speaks of "common grace," Kline is referring to the goodness of God that was extended to all people after the fall as a means of keeping man's sin in check and maintaining a relatively peaceful and just society. The purpose of God's common grace is to provide a stage on which the story of redemption can be told. Kline continues: "The restraining hand of God's common grace would temper the common curse until redemptive history had run its full course and the appointed hour of the final *parousia* had come."

5 I am thankful to David VanDrunen for his insights into this matter.

6 A word is in order concerning the Noahic covenant. While God's salvation of Noah and his family was an expression of the covenant of grace hinted at in Genesis 3:15, the covenant made with Noah in Genesis 9:1–17 was a common-grace covenant governing all people irrespective of their individual status before God. This is seen in the fact that the blessings promised were common (seedtime and harvest, etc.), the covenant sign—the rainbow—was visible to all, and God expressly stated that the covenant was between Him and "every living creature" on the earth. Thus, like Adam, Noah was a kind of father of the human race who was given a cultural mandate similar to that which Adam was given in Genesis 1:26–28.

7 Kline, *Kingdom Prologue*, 357–358.

8 Ibid.

9 "The union of the religious lordship and the national kingship in the one Person of Jehovah involved that among Israel civil and religious life were inextricably interwoven. If the union had happened to exist in any other person but God, a division of these two spheres of relationship might have been conceivable. The bond to God is so one and indivisible that no separation of the one from the other can be conceived . . . For our system of political government such an interrelation would, of course, [be seen as] *a serious, intolerable defect*. Not so among Israel." (Geerhardus Vos, *Biblical Theology* [Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1975], 125, emphasis added.)

10 This principle helps explain the difficulty we often experience in understanding God's command for Israel to exterminate the Canaanites. God's holy nation was acting as a theocratic army, an agent of divine judgment on the wicked inhabitants of the land. As such, the Israelites were discharging their God-ordained task, one that was unique in the history of redemption. Old Testament accounts such as these are not intended to give universal divine approval to the idea of holy war, but must be read with careful attention to their covenantal and redemptive-historical contexts. With this in mind, Kline writes: "Such was the mandate of the intrusion ethic of holy war which obtained when the covenant community, by the Lord's ordaining, became a theocratic institution." (*Kingdom Prologue*, 358.)

Part One

CHRISTIAN WORSHIP FOR DUAL CITIZENS

Chapter

Corporate Worship: Covenantal Assembly of a Peculiar People

"The Beatles are more popular than Jesus." Such was John Lennon's evaluation of the phenomenon of Beatlemania in the mid-1960s. What is even more interesting than Lennon's observation, however, is the response that many Americans gave to such a bold claim: We rose up in righteous indignation, piled our Beatles albums in the streets, and burned them (steamrollers also became involved). It was as if Americans were responding collectively as a culture by exclaiming, "How *dare* you tell us that Jesus isn't popular!"

As many pastors undoubtedly would testify, there is a mounting pressure from the pew for church leaders to craft worship experiences that spiritually reinforce man's carnal obsession with popularity, fame, and movements of mass appeal. For this reason, the American church has great difficulty getting excited about any program for spiritual growth that does not appear attractive, appealing, and (dare I say?) *sexy*. It seems that the primary goal of many churches today is to not appear irrelevant, weak, or foolish in the eyes of the world.

Yet, in speaking of Jesus' appearance, Isaiah writes, "He had no form or majesty that we should look at him, and no beauty that we should desire him" (53:2b). And as C. H. Spurgeon noted, the apostle Paul determined "only to know Jesus Christ, and him crucified, and just to set him forth in his own natural beauties unadorned." He lamented, "Alas for that wisdom which conceals the wisdom of God, it is the most guilty form of folly."[1] It seems, however, that the constant demand on the part of many believers today for a new and exciting spiritual diet plan is a symptom of just such folly.

What is remarkable about Paul's determination to "know nothing among [the Corinthians] except Jesus Christ and him crucified" (1 Cor. 2:2) is that the apostle not only insisted on preaching the cross exclusively, he insisted on being consistent when he did so. "But how," we may ask, "can a cross-focused, Christ-centered ministry be inconsistent with itself?" According to 1 Corinthians, when the "foolish" and "weak" message of the gospel (1:27) is presented in the impressive garb of worldly wisdom and earthly strength, the cross is "emptied of its power" (1:17). In other words, the cross is eclipsed not only when the wrong message is preached, but when the right one is preached in the wrong manner, adorned by whatever powerful signs or worldly wisdom Jews and Greeks demand.

It is not that power or wisdom are necessarily wrong, of course. But when we refuse to allow the cross to define these things for us (which it inevitably does in a way that is antithetical to the world's notion of them), then whatever the result may be, it is not Christianity. Our definition of power or wisdom, therefore, must not be borrowed directly from the lexicon of this age, for when we allow the culture to determine what is impressive or relevant, we subtly undermine with our methods what we proclaim in our message. So while unbelievers may enjoy plenty of what Cornelius Van Til dubbed "borrowed capital" from the Christian faith, it is the borrowed liability that we saints receive on loan from the world that concerned Paul.

My aim in this chapter, therefore, is to call into question the American church's desire to avoid the obscurity and lack of popular appeal with which Jesus Himself was seemingly plagued. In place of the flashy, high-octane worship experience, I will commend faithful attendance on the simple means of

grace that Christ has instituted for His people's growth, unremarkable though they may be.

Programs Are Fine, But Whose?

The first questions pastors often hear from visitors to their churches concern programs: "Do you have a young married couples ministry? How about an alcoholics' recovery program? What activities does your youth ministry offer? And do you have anything for my green-eyed, left-handed pre-teen daughter who loves ferrets and plays the oboe?" The assumption seems to be that since the church is primarily a means for social interaction, it should provide "Christian" versions of whatever club or subculture we feel drawn to, no matter how narrow or age-specific. Likewise, Christian consumers never tire of searching for new and exciting methods to try to attain intimacy with God (a demand that Christian marketers are happy to supply).

But when the evangelical church focuses on methods and programs to try to meet these demands for intimacy with others and with God, it far too often mimics the world—and that mimicry can spill over into the area where the church's distinctiveness is to be most evident: corporate worship. The church forgets that God Himself has prescribed a simple, straightforward, and easy-to-follow program for the growth of the church and the edification of believers: the preaching of the Word and the administration of the sacraments of baptism and the Lord's Supper.

Though this sounds far too simple for our frantic, high-tech, postmodern culture, the Christians in the early church focused almost exclusively on these simple means of grace, trusting God to add to their number as he saw fit:

> And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. And awe came upon every soul, and many wonders and signs were being done through the apostles. And all who believed were together and had all things in common. And they were selling their possessions and belongings and distributing the proceeds to all, as any had need. And day by day, attending the temple

> together and breaking bread in their homes, they received their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved. (Acts 2:42–47)

"But that was *then*," one may object, "and this is now. It's the twenty-first century, so we can't be expected to sit for thirty minutes and listen to a sermon." As offended as "postmoderns" or "emergents" may be at the idea, people today are pretty much the same as they've always been, and despite our iPhones and Xboxes, we are no more bored with God's prescribed means of grace than were the Israelites who demanded golden calves and mighty kings so they could be just like all the other nations (Ex. 32:1; 1 Sam. 8:4–5). One can almost hear the Jews complaining: "Come on, Samuel! The whole 'being ruled by judges' thing is *so* 'second millennium BC.' How about something a little more relevant?"

At the root of Western culture's constant demand for new and improved worship experiences is not our unique inability to sit still for sixty minutes, but our fear of not being in control (can this point really be denied by people who can play video games for hours on end or never miss an episode of *American Idol*?). Unlike "first-person shooter" games and surfing the Internet, corporate worship is an activity in which we are neither the initiators nor the primary actors. Instead, God addresses us with His gracious summons, undresses us with His holy law, and then redresses us in the righteous robes of His Son Jesus Christ. The entire affair culminates with a meal at His table of grace, where we are fed and nourished for our continued pilgrimage to glory. While God's people do participate with responses of prayer and praise, these are just that—*responses* to God's divine initiative rather than our own efforts to conjure up some feeling or experience to confirm what we already knew before we arrived.

In fact, Paul's entire argument in Romans 10:5–9, 13–15a, 17 hinges on this very point.[2] The apostle argues:

> For Moses writes about the righteousness that is based on the law, that the person who does the commandments shall live by them. But the

> righteousness based on faith says, "Do not say in your heart, 'Who will ascend into heaven?'" (that is, to bring Christ down) or "'Who will descend into the abyss?'" (that is, to bring Christ up from the dead). But what does it say? "The word is near you, in your mouth and in your heart" (that is, the word of faith that we proclaim); because, if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved . . . For "everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved."
>
> How then will they call on him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone preaching? And how are they to preach unless they are sent? . . . So faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ.

The message of the law ("Do this and live," v. 5) comes with its own method of attaining what is promised (scaling the heights or plumbing the depths in order to lay hold of Christ and appropriate Him to one's life, vv. 6–7). But the message of the gospel is concerned not with seeking but receiving. In other words, there is a divine harmony between the message of the gospel (grace) and the method of its communication (preaching). Just as *faith* is the sole instrument of justification rather than *works*, so ears are organs of *reception* rather than *attainment* (meaning you can't do much with your ears at all except passively receive what is spoken). Michael Horton writes:

> There is a correlation . . . between faith, hope, and a promised announced (hearing) on the one hand, and vision, sight, and a reality fully experienced on the other. Those who demand the vision of God here and now will be particularly susceptible to idolatry, whereas they would likely not be as inclined to it if they were patient in waiting for the salvation that they have in Christ as it is mediated through the broken and not-so-spectacular vessels of human messengers and the most common elements of water, bread, and wine.[3]

If the gospel were about capturing Christ by conquest, then you would need arms and legs for the task. But if the gospel is about receiving salvation as a gift attained by the conquest of another, then ears are the perfect organs of reception for "hearing . . . the Word of Christ" (v. 17).

Preaching and the sacraments, therefore, are important because they are God's commanded means, not because they were what Jesus', Paul's, or John Calvin's culture preferred. In fact, the men and women of first-century Palestine and sixteenth-century Geneva were far more impressed by signs, wonders, and ritualistic displays of piety than they were with the simple and unadorned message of the gospel. Culture, then, is never to be the determining factor in a church's worship, even if that culture prefers the right things (which is rare, but still possible). If Calvin was correct in his estimation of the human heart as an "idol factory," then we must conclude that God's setting of the church's agenda is His way of saving us from our own clever, idolatrous methods and self-appointed religious peddlers who try to foster on us the latest religious fad or spiritual diet plan.

A Word-and-sacrament ministry may not sound as exciting as the latest Christian program to blow through the church, but unlike these trends and novelties, a ministry that focuses on the ordinary means of grace will create and nurture a Christian faith that will sustain church members over the long haul—not just through happy times of blessing, but through difficult times of trial, sickness, and doubt. The foolishness of God is truly wiser than the wisdom of men.

Covenant and Sacrifice

Worship, therefore, is at the heart of the church's existence (Ps. 96:7–9). But what exactly does this mean? In the opinion of many church leaders, worship is simply "singing about God"—a kind of warm-up before the sermon starts (giving late-comers a chance to find a seat). But this sentiment expresses a very anemic view of this glorious activity. In both Hebrew and Greek, the word *worship* literally means "to bow down," and it is commonly used to describe the corporate gathering of God's people (John 4:19–24). Worship, therefore, is not restricted to singing, but encompasses *all* that the gathered church does between the call to worship and the benediction.

For many believers, the first questions that arise in discussions about worship concern style: "What kind of music does your church have? Do you sing old hymns or contemporary praise songs?" But this is to put the cart before the horse, for the style of a church's worship is (knowingly or not) largely determined by its ideas about the nature of that worship and about the God who is its focus. In other words, before we can answer the question about what worship looks like, we must discover what worship is.

The two most important concepts for understanding what worship entails are *covenant* and *sacrifice*. Though Christianity is often described as "a personal relationship with Jesus," there is much more to it than that. True, God's relationship with His people is personal, but a more biblical description of this relationship would be that it is *covenantal* (Gen. 17:1ff). In other words, God never deals with us merely as individuals, but always in the context of a covenant or formal arrangement that He has made with us collectively (this difference can be illustrated by comparing marriage, which is a formal relationship not meant to be broken, with two lovers simply "shacking up," which is far less binding).

Throughout the Bible, God continually calls His people to renew their covenantal relations with Him, and this is done through sacrifice. In 1 Kings 3:15 we read, "And Solomon awoke, and . . . he came to Jerusalem and stood before the ark of the covenant of the Lord, and offered up burnt offerings and peace offerings, and made a feast for all his servants." Asaph the psalmist writes in Psalm 50:3–6: "Our God comes; he does not keep silence; before him is a devouring fire, around him a mighty tempest. He calls to the heavens above and to the earth, that he may judge his people: 'Gather to me my faithful ones, *who made a covenant with me by sacrifice!'* The heavens declare his righteousness, for God himself is judge!" (emphasis added).

Although animal sacrifices have been abolished under the new covenant, sacrifice remains an important concept. Paul writes, "I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship" (Rom. 12:1). As the rest of the chapter makes plain, the context of this oft-quoted exhortation is the corporate worship of God's people.

The concepts of covenant and sacrifice, therefore, lie at the core of biblical worship. Leviticus 1:1–9 perfectly illustrates this:[4]

> The LORD called Moses and spoke to him from the tent of meeting, saying, "Speak to the people of Israel and say to them, When any one of you brings an offering to the LORD, you shall bring your offering of livestock from the herd or from the flock.
>
> "If his offering is a burnt offering from the herd, he shall offer a male without blemish. He shall bring it to the entrance of the tent of meeting, that he may be accepted before the LORD. He shall lay his hand on the head of the burnt offering, and it shall be accepted for him to make atonement for him. Then he shall kill the bull before the LORD, and Aaron's sons the priests shall bring the blood and throw the blood against the sides of the altar that is at the entrance of the tent of meeting. Then he shall flay the burnt offering and cut it into pieces, and the sons of Aaron the priest shall put fire on the altar and arrange wood on the fire. And Aaron's sons the priests shall arrange the pieces, the head, and the fat, on the wood that is on the fire on the altar; but its entrails and its legs he shall wash with water. And the priest shall burn all of it on the altar, as a burnt offering, a food offering with a pleasing aroma to the LORD."

In this passage, we see the various elements of a covenant renewal ceremony. There is: (1) *A Call to Worship*: God invites the worshiper to draw near with an offering from his herd (vv. 1–2). (2) *Confession and Cleansing*: the worshiper places his hands on the offering's head, symbolically transferring his guilt to the animal. The sacrifice is then slain and its blood is sprinkled on the altar as an atonement for the worshiper's sin (vv. 3–5). (3) *Consecration*: the slain animal is cut up and arranged in such a way as to be a fitting burnt offering to God (vv. 6–8). (4) *Communion*: the smoke of the slain and flayed animal, representing the worshiper, ascends into God's presence, where it becomes a "food offering with a pleasing aroma to the LORD," a communion meal (v. 9). (5) *Commission*: once the sacrifice has been made, God sends the worshiper out renewed and empowered for service in His kingdom (Num. 6:22–27).

How does this apply to our worship today? If we believe that worship is covenant renewal by means of sacrifice (and since God has nowhere changed this Old Testament model, it stands to reason that this is how the early Jewish Christians would have understood it), then the various elements of our worship service should follow this pattern. First, we are *called* to worship; then we *confess* our sin and are *cleansed* by the blood of Christ; after this, we are *consecrated* by the "sword of the Spirit," the preaching of the Word of God; following this is the celebration of *Communion*, or the Lord's Supper; and the service culminates with God's *commission* to us, pronounced in the minister's benediction.

All churches have a "liturgy" (a word that comes from the Greek term that means "religious service"). The real question, then, is not, "Is your church *liturgical?"* but, "Is your church's liturgy *biblical?"*

So contrary to the "learning about God and singing about God" model of public worship that dominates the current evangelical scene, Scripture teaches that corporate worship is primarily a meeting of Christians with their covenant God for the purpose of reenacting and renewing the gracious covenant He has made with us. Further, it is *this* principle, and not a church's preference for a particular generation's liturgical forms (whether ancient or modern), that should determine what this covenantal assembly looks like each Lord's Day.

The Ordinary Means of Grace

Having seen what worship is (covenant renewal by means of sacrifice), we can now devote some attention to what it looks like. By approaching the matter in this way, I hope to avoid the debate over "traditional" versus "contemporary" worship, for a church service's look and feel should be determined by more than a preference for one culture's forms over another's. In other words, it is just as wrong to base our churches' practices on what John Knox did in 1560s Scotland as it is to adhere to what John Wimber's Vineyard was doing in 1980s Anaheim.

That being said, we must also remember that musical styles are by no means neutral, but reveal many of the biases and assumptions of the cultures from which they emerge. For this reason, it is preferable that a church's songs be

selected from a broad database that includes the best lyrics and melodies the Christian church has produced throughout her rich history. Some of the tunes may be eighteen hundred years old while others may have been composed this millennium, but all should be sung to a musical style that is beautiful, tasteful, and reverent.

To follow the example of many of today's churches and sing only the praise choruses that have been written during the past thirty years (or so) would be to rob ourselves of the vast storehouse of beauty that the psalms and hymns of the Christian church provide. Additionally, many of these newer songs seem to focus primarily on individual triumph and personal intimacy with Jesus, while neglecting such grand biblical themes as God's power in creation, His wisdom in providence, and His grace in redemption. In order to sing of such glorious themes, we need to turn to the psalms of David, the hymns of men like Isaac Watts and Charles Wesley, and to some of the more theologically sound composers of our own day. Remember: "chronological snobbery" is always wrong, regardless of which culture we prefer (our own or that of three hundred years ago). To guard against this, we should sing what is biblical, beautiful, and true, regardless of its copyright date.

However, the heart of worship is not the music. As noted above, God's program for the church centers on the preaching of the Word and the administration of the sacraments.

Though all believers "are bound to read [the Word of God] apart by themselves" for their personal edification (Westminster Larger Catechism, Question 156), something unique happens when that Word is preached by a duly ordained minister:

> **Question:** By whom is the Word of God to be preached?
>
> **Answer:** The Word of God is to be preached only by such as are sufficiently gifted, and also duly approved and called to that office.
>
> **Question:** How is the Word of God to be preached by those that are called thereunto?

> **Answer:** They that are called to labor in the ministry of the Word, are to preach sound doctrine, diligently, in season and out of season; plainly, not in the enticing words of man's wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit, and of power; faithfully, making known the whole counsel of God; wisely, applying themselves to the necessities and capacities of the hearers; zealously, with fervent love to God and the souls of his people; sincerely, aiming at his glory, and their conversion, edification, and salvation.
>
> **Question:** What is required of those that hear the Word preached?
>
> **Answer:** It is required of those that hear the Word preached, that they attend upon it with diligence, preparation, and prayer; examine what they hear by the Scriptures; receive the truth with faith, love, meekness, and readiness of mind, as the Word of God; meditate, and confer of it; hide it in their hearts, and bring forth the fruit of it in their lives. (WLC, 158–160)

In fact, Paul insists that when the saints hear Christ *preached*, they are actually hearing Christ *Himself* preaching (Rom. 10:14, NASB; Eph. 2:17), a point made powerfully in the Second Helvetic Confession, which states that "the preaching of the Word of God is the Word of God." Personal "quiet time," therefore, can never replace the regular hearing of the gospel preached in the context of the local church, for it is here that God addresses His people in a unique and powerful way.

Through the sacraments of baptism and Communion, God initiates us into His holy family and feeds us with Jesus' body and blood. Though we cannot hope to fully grasp exactly *how* common elements such as water, bread, and wine can nurture spiritual qualities such as faith, hope, and love, we believe that the Holy Spirit mysteriously—yet *really*—accomplishes just this. As Calvin remarked concerning the Lord's Supper, "I would rather experience this than understand it."

One of the biggest stumbling blocks for American Christianity is the fact that God blesses these simple means of grace to the building up of His church

not because of the power of the means (*ex opere operato*) or because of the winsome or witty personality of the man who administers them or the piety of the one who receives them (*ex opere operantis*), but simply because He has promised to do so. Not even the pastor's own godliness can ensure divine blessing, just as the lack thereof cannot preclude it. In a culture obsessed with "success" (which is usually determined by counting nickels and noses), the ministry of a faithful pastor to his little flock often appears weak and paltry when compared with the glossy professionalism of the megachurch down the street. But when we filter our ideas about success through the lens of the cross, all equating of success with popular acclaim immediately disappears. Jesus' "success" was measured by His faithfulness to His Father's errand, as is that of the church He founded and sent, even as He Himself was sent (John 20:21).

Holy Embarrassment

Paul had an odd way of motivating people, especially his young protégé, Timothy. Only a handful of verses into his second letter to Timothy, the apostle urged his student not to be "ashamed of the testimony about our Lord, nor of me his prisoner" (2 Tim. 1:8). Although begging his followers not to cringe at his apparent weakness is hardly an inspiring method for a leader to "turn the world upside-down," yet this was but an echo of Jesus' own words, which so often focused on dissuading His disciples from denying that they knew Him (Matt. 10:32–33; 26:34; Mark 8:38). Apparently, there was something so *embarrassing* about being a Christian in those days that such explicit and pointed warnings were warranted.

The fact that many professing Christians in our day lack this timidity may not be due to their simply being bolder in their witness and devotion to Christ than His original followers were. Instead, our contemporary unfamiliarity with the temptation to deny Christ may stem from our unfamiliarity with the cross that He carried. If the church's stated aim is to present herself as being so attractive and beneficial to the City of Man that unbelievers simply cannot help but jump on the holy bandwagon, not only should we remove the "I" (irresistible

grace) from Calvinism's well-known acrostic (and the "T" [total depravity] for that matter), but we should be tempted to be ashamed of the meager ministry and methods of the church. After all, what good are Word, water, bread, and wine for attaining such lofty goals as cultural transformation or the wooing of the young and attractive?

But the apostle's own antidote to the temptation to be ashamed of his ministry was no this-worldly promise of glory or earthly influence. Rather, he writes in verse 12, "I am not ashamed, for I know whom I have believed, and I am convinced that he is able to guard until that Day what has been entrusted to me." In other words, the church and its members must not seek the world's approval by providing programs that pander to people's need to feel popular and appreciated. The "more relevant than thou" approach to ministry may fill churches, but often at the expense of the cross and all its glorious foolishness and shame.

Weakness Is Still Sufficient

Lennon may have been right; maybe the Beatles *were* more popular than Jesus. And indeed, the earthly vindication of Lennon's boast was seen in the fact that, just after his shooting, his vigil gathered a lot more mourners than a measly 120 (Acts 1:15). But the triumphalistic need to deliver a smug "I told you so" to our detractors can never provide the church with a rationale for a ministry based on the ordinary means of grace. For that, we must remember that, humanly speaking, the One whom we follow was killed precisely because He *refused* to provide for the church the earthly glory, power, and transformation that His earthly kinsmen demanded.

If the weakness of the cross was sufficient for Christ in this age, and if "the servant is not greater than his Master," then is not our stumbling at its foolishness simply a subtle admission that the cross was fine for Jesus to die on, but not us?

Notes

1 C. H. Spurgeon, "The Man of One Subject" (Sermon on 1 Cor. 2:2), *The Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit* (London: Passmore & Alabaster, 1876), XXI: 640-641.
2 See Michael Horton, *A Better Way: Rediscovering the Drama of God-Centered Worship* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2002), 34–43.
3 Ibid., 37.
4 See Jeff Meyers, *The Lord's Service: The Grace of Covenant Renewal Worship* (Moscow, Idaho: Canon Press, 2003), 55–72 for a fuller description of covenant renewal worship.