

## *An Extenuating Note*

In the evangelical world, touching sacred cows, let alone prodding them with a sharp stick, is a perilous business: Sabbath, Evangelism and Christmas spring to mind. Risking – to put it mildly – the unsympathetic reaction of many of my fellow-believers – though not courting it – in other works I have fully tackled the first two,<sup>1</sup> and, in passing, spoken of the third. I now turn to another untouchable – Public Worship. Actually, it would be more accurate to say that I return to it.<sup>2</sup>

But in tackling this subject there is a far greater risk than a bad press from fellow-believers. In fact, it is the risk every preacher or teacher takes when he speaks or writes on any subject. I have to answer to God – not only for what I teach, but why I teach it; above all, I have to answer for what practical effect for good – if any – Christ’s rebuke has had on me: ‘They preach, but do not practice’ (Matt. 23:3). Scripture is clear:

Physician, heal yourself (Luke 4:23).

If you know these things, blessed are you if you do them (John 13:17).

Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness. For we all stumble in many ways. And if anyone does not stumble in what he says, he is a perfect man (Jas. 3:1-2).

So why do I publish? Am I foolhardy? I hope not! Am I hungry for notoriety? Not at all! Do I think I have reached the standard I proclaim? Without any sense of boasting, any inverted pride or attempt at self-justification – it is with shame I have to acknowledge my shortcomings in this matter of worship.

So why publish?

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<sup>1</sup> See my *Christ; Sabbath Questions; Sabbath Notes; Essential; Relationship; Attracting; To Confront; Dilemma; Evangelicals*.

<sup>2</sup> See my *Performance*.

## *An Extenuating Note*

Because I am convinced that on all the above-mentioned issues most believers have gone badly astray, with serious consequences. I include myself. Misunderstanding the sabbath, for instance, concentrating on a day which, as an old-covenant shadow, was one of the principal old-covenant separating markers for Israel, and Israel only, grievously diverts believers' attention from their present spiritual rest in Christ.<sup>3</sup> And this, despite the fact that Christ has fulfilled the old covenant and rendered it obsolete (Heb. 8:13)! Consequently, instead of basking in the inexpressible joy which is theirs even now in Christ (1 Pet. 1:8), most sabbath-conscientious believers find themselves worrying about what they can do – and, more painfully, what they cannot do – during their waking hours on that day. Indeed, in their many works not a few sabbatarian teachers and writers seem to go out of their way to encourage this anxiety, repeatedly setting out in fine detail the rights and wrongs of sabbath observance, rights and wrongs which, of course, change from generation to generation. I speak from experience.

As for the subject in hand – ‘public worship’ – preoccupation with ‘services’ in the ‘house of God’ has serious detrimental consequences. Here are four of them. *First*, most believers have a very low, diminished view of what ‘worship’ really is. *Secondly*, the *ekklēsia*<sup>4</sup> is debased to accommodate the notion of ‘public worship’, especially – in contemporary churches – in connection with evangelism.<sup>5</sup> *Thirdly*, many believers have a

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<sup>3</sup> The sabbath lasted as long as the old covenant, and no longer; that is, as long as the sacrifices, the priesthood, and all the rest, lasted. All are fulfilled and abolished in Christ, rendered obsolete by him (Rom. 10:4; 2 Cor. 3:6-11; Gal. 3:19,23-25; Eph. 2:14-15; Heb. 7:12,18-19,22; 8:6-13; 9:10; 10:15-18). To sacrifice a bull or goat now would be to insult the blood of Christ; likewise, sabbatarianism belittles the rest he brought. In both cases, it is clinging to shadows when the reality is at hand; something expressly forbidden by the apostle (Col. 2:17).

<sup>4</sup> Although I use the word ‘church’, I increasingly prefer *ekklēsia* in an attempt to distinguish between Christendom and the new covenant.

<sup>5</sup> Look at God’s purpose in forming the *ekklēsia* as set out by Paul in Eph. 3:9-10,21. The apostle is not saying that the church glorifies God

## *An Extenuating Note*

shrunken view of what they are, what they have, and what they ought to be in Christ. *Fourthly*, and above all, Christ himself is reduced.<sup>6</sup>

No mean price tag! As with the physical, even more so with the spiritual: poor diet, poor health.<sup>7</sup>

As with the other issues, I tackle ‘public worship’ because I am driven by Acts 17:11 – as all believers must. We have no choice. Luke, moved by the Spirit to commend the Bereans, surely did so for our emulation:

These [Berean] Jews were more noble than those in Thessalonica; they received the word with all eagerness, examining the Scriptures daily to see if these things were so (Acts 17:11).

It was the same for Israel in the old covenant:

To the law and to the testimony! If they do not speak according to this word, it is because there is no light in them (Isa. 8:20).

And, taking Christ’s words as a command, we know we have to ‘search the Scriptures’ (John 6:39) – and not just for proof texts (*à la* standard Confessions)!

The point I am making is simple in the extreme: virtually all Christians think it right – normal – to meet for ‘worship’, and for the ‘public’ to join in. Indeed, churches bend over backwards to get all and sundry to come to ‘public worship’. Buildings are erected and kitted out, often at great expense, with all the paraphernalia of specialised furniture and apparatus needed to cope with it, run it, and make it a professional performance.

Where’s the Scripture for it?

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by its ‘worship services’, by its evangelistic programmes, but that the *ekklēsia* glorifies God by its *very existence*. That is why, even before the foundation of the world, God planned to form it.

<sup>6</sup> The same goes for the (almost) ubiquitous practice of elevating a man to ‘The Pastor’ (let alone ‘Pope’). See my *Pastor*.

<sup>7</sup> See David Peterson: *Engaging With God: A Biblical Theology of Worship*, IVP Academic, Downers Grove, 1992, pp219-220.

## *An Extenuating Note*

When considering the question of worship, since history (tradition, custom), not Scripture, often sets the agenda, no one should be surprised that evangelicals so often end up in Queer Street on the subject! Nothing illustrates the fact better than the articles entitled ‘Worship’ in *New Dictionary of Theology: Historical and Systematic*, second edition, IVP London, 2016 pp853-863, and *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, IVP, Leicester 2000, pp973-975.<sup>8</sup>

The upshot? History and systems are, no doubt, interesting and have their place, but Scripture – and Scripture alone – must be the foundation and source of all our doctrine and practice. Every believer must have this mindset; always; over everything.

The fact is, in this question of ‘public worship’ we are seeing a re-run of Matthew 15:1-20. As a matter of the utmost urgency – though, ironically, it is 1800 years too late – we need to let Christ’s words have their proper sway over us and our practice:

Why do you break the commandment of God for the sake of your tradition?... In vain do they worship me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men.

In issuing such a damning statement, let it be remembered, Christ was not referring to pagan mumbo-jumbo, mere vain repetition. Not at all! He was addressing the Jews, those who had the word of God, those who professed submission to the word of God, but those who were, in actual practice, subverting the word of God by their tradition, man-made rules, systems of men, and such like.

Ring any bells?

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That is the spirit in which I write, and that is the spirit in which I respectfully ask you, reader, to weigh what follows. If, with an open Bible and an open mind, you are willing to subject the age-

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<sup>8</sup> The former (history and systematic theology) concentrates on tinkering with the techniques of ‘worship’; the latter (biblical theology), with scriptural principles.

## *An Extenuating Note*

old tradition of most believers – their ubiquitous practice – almost certainly your practice – to a serious examination, and you are willing to read on, who knows where such a search might lead? All I ask is that you submit your principles and practice regarding ‘public worship’ to Scripture, and follow that as far as the evidence takes you.

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May I make another personal confession at this point? Those who have read my works, listened to my discourses or watched my videos will know that I myself have been on a learning curve. For many years, I was a Reformed Baptist tinged with what I had come to see during my time among the Brethren. As a settled elder in a Reformed Baptist church, while I was preaching through Hebrews, my Reformed view on the sabbath was shattered. Not only that; other doubts on the Reformed view of the law (which would, in time, germinate with far wider consequences) were sown in my mind. As I was preaching through Galatians, this germination began, and in the course of time the subsequent growing plants lifted the concrete. As I was giving some church history talks on the Puritans, my new understanding was confirmed, and that also led me to see that on other things, too, I had to change. The publication of works such as my *Battle for the Church: 1517-1644*, my *Christ Is All: No Sanctification by the Law*, my *Infant Baptism Tested*, and my *Redemption History Through Covenants* showed that I was no longer a Reformed Baptist. Although, before I published my *Christ Is All*, I had never met the term, I had become what is known as a ‘new-covenant theologian’.<sup>9</sup> In the years that followed, the implications and consequences of the theology of the new covenant have become ever clearer to me, and dominated my work. But I have not come to a halt, content to

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<sup>9</sup> Not that I agree with everything produced by every new-covenant theologian. Indeed, I would rather not be labelled at all. But, alas, note the passive: whether or not I adopt the label, inevitably it will be attached to me – just as the first believers were tagged with ‘Christian’ (Acts 11:26).

## *An Extenuating Note*

regurgitate technical arguments about the law. Far from it! I have caught a glimpse of how the theology of the new covenant plays out, both in individual Christian living and in corporate *ekklēsia* life. The doctrine of the new covenant is not some dusty academic or technical question about a few proof texts on the law; it is radical; it is dynamite. I have been on a learning curve; and I am still on it, as will be obvious to those who read my works. My course may be traced by the aforementioned books, followed by several other titles.<sup>10</sup>

And so to this present title.

I say all that to explain why readers will find Christendom<sup>11</sup> terms cropping up in my earlier works. Even now, I find it almost impossible to shake off such thinking. The accumulated and encrusted weight of 1800 years of Christendom is a formidable drag, and a personal life-time of tradition, much of it steeped in Reformed theology, means that Christendom is now well and truly embedded in my DNA. So much so, I am apprehensive as I see myself stumbling along this pathway. Apprehensive? Why? Because to follow blindly the traditional, the institutional, to stay submerged in the culture of Christendom, is ‘safe’. Breaking free of all that, seeking to rely upon Scripture un-glossed by Confession, trusting in the guidance of the Spirit, is to cast off from the shore of security and ‘launch out into the deep’ (see Luke 5:4, AV). How

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<sup>10</sup> Titles such as *The Pastor: Does He Exist?*; *The Priesthood of All Believers: Slogan or Substance?*; *No Sacerdotalism!: A critique of the laying on of hands in ordination*; *Relationship Evangelism Exposed: A Blight on the Churches and the Ungodly*; *Attracting Unbelievers to Church: Points to Ponder: Letting Loose a Gadfly: Edward Miall Speaks Today*; *Sowed Much, Reaped Little: Why?*; *The Sermon: The Gap between the Claim and the Result*; *Church: Performance or Participation? Learning from the Lockdown*; *Evangelicals Warned: Isaiah 30 Speaks Today*; *A Case of Mistaken Identity: A Critique of Timothy Keller on Regeneration*; and so on.

<sup>11</sup> See my *Pastor*. See the Appendix ‘Christendom’ in my *Relationship*. We may date the start of Christendom with the so-called conversion of Constantine in 321.

## *An Extenuating Note*

dangerous that can be! But, of course, if safety in numbers is the top priority, there is only course open: return to Rome, to Mother Church, and enjoy the so-called infallible guidance of the curia.

‘Mother Church’! Cyprian’s aphorism has come down the centuries: ‘No one can have God for his Father, who does not have the Church for his mother’.<sup>12</sup> Hmm! But herein lies a problem, a big problem – which Church should be our mother? John Calvin, speaking of Rome (‘our adversaries’), was blunt, calling them:

...the [Roman] priesthood, at whose beck and pleasure others ply their enmity against us... The true religion which is delivered in the Scriptures, and which all ought to hold, they readily permit both themselves and others to be ignorant of, to neglect and despise; and they deem it of little moment what each man believes concerning God and Christ, or disbelieves, provided he submits to the judgment of the Church with what they call implicit faith [that is, they accept what the Church tells them]; nor are they greatly concerned though they should see the glory of God dishonoured by open blasphemies, provided not a finger is raised against the primacy of the Apostolic See and the authority of Holy Mother Church.<sup>13</sup>

But in referring to (the Reformed) Church, Calvin was in no doubt:

What God has thus joined, let not man put asunder (Mark 10:9): to those to whom he is a father, the Church must also be a mother... The visible Church,<sup>14</sup> let us learn, from her single title of mother, how useful, nay, how necessary the knowledge of her is, since there is no other means of entering into life unless she conceive us in the womb and give us birth, unless she nourish us at her breasts, and, in short, keep us under her charge and government, until, divested of mortal flesh... For our weakness does not permit us to leave the school until we have spent our whole lives as scholars. Moreover, beyond the pale of the Church no forgiveness of sins, no salvation, can be hoped

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<sup>12</sup> Cyprian (c200-258) was Bishop of Carthage.

<sup>13</sup> Preface to Calvin’s *Institutes*.

<sup>14</sup> A human invention much loved by infant baptisers to try to cope with the disastrous consequences of infant baptism. See my *Infant*.

## *An Extenuating Note*

for... (Isa. 37:32; Joel 2:32; Ezek. 3:9; Ps. 106:4-5). By these words the paternal favour of God and the special evidence of spiritual life are confined to his peculiar people, and hence the abandonment of the Church is always fatal.<sup>15</sup>

Here we have it: according to Calvin, leaving the wrong institutional Church ‘is always fatal’, but joining the right institutional Church is the way to be saved. That is to say, Cyprian, according to Calvin, was right. So now you know – if you take Calvin/Cyprian as your authority. But... before you do, do not fail to ask yourself which institutional Church is the ‘right’ Church. Rome would say Rome, Calvin would have said Geneva, and so on. Again, do not fail to notice that Calvin justified his staggering claim for the Reformed Church by taking God’s word to Israel and applying it directly to the (Reformed) Church. This, of course, stemmed from his presupposition (his theological template) that Israel and the *ekklēsia* were virtually one and the same under one covenant.<sup>16</sup> Which, in its way, sums up the problem with the issue in hand.

Nevertheless, I admit – and empathise with – the sense of apprehension readers will have when faced with the choice between Christendom and Scripture. The former is ‘safe’ and keeps one’s good name among the majority; the latter is ‘risky’, and gets one frowned on – if not worse, far worse.

Even so, I now publish on ‘public worship’. Looking back over the months the work has taken, I can say that, not for the first time, I have come to a better understanding of the subject by trying to write on it. It has been a repeat of my experience as a teacher of Mathematics: I learned far more about my subject by trying to teach it than I ever did by slavishly copying down university lecture notes. Hence writing this book has crystallised

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<sup>15</sup> Calvin: *Institutes* 4.1.1-4. See also Joel R.Beeke: ‘Calvin on Piety’ in Donald K.McKim: *The Cambridge Companion to John Calvin*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2004, p131.

<sup>16</sup> Calvin, soaked in the theology of the Fathers (see my *Infant*), marked out the path which the vast majority have followed. I cannot speak of Calvin’s ‘covenant theology’ because that theology was only invented after his death. See my *Christ*.



## *An Extenuating Note*

things for me. Just as others have found, we teach to learn, we write to discover. It is certainly true of me. It was said (unkindly) of Winston Churchill that he thought with his mouth. I seem to think with my mouth and a pen.

So much for the writing. I now publish the work to offer some help to fellow-strugglers, for I know that others are thinking about all these things, and not a few of them, as I have hinted, are fearful of following the evidence. That there is a cost in doing just that, I cannot deny – nor would I pretend that the road will be sunlit all the way. But in my own experience, though I fall far short, I am convinced that there is great joy, both personally and corporately, in walking with Christ into the sunny uplands of gospel liberty.

Finally, I want to pay tribute to those believers who, by their conversation, writings or discourses have been signposts on the way for me. And not only signposts. As John Bunyan's Pilgrim found, some of them have been invaluable walking companions as we have stumbled on together. I thank them all, and I thank God for them all.

So then, without further ado, *Public Worship: God-Ordained or Man-Invented?*

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A word on how I intend to set about my task. First, I will look at Israel in the old covenant. Then I will look at the *ekklēsia* in the new covenant. In between – and this is vital – I will briefly set out my arguments for the discontinuity of the covenants, old and new.<sup>17</sup> Please do not dismiss this as a waste of time. It underpins everything which follows.

Perhaps an abstract of what is to follow might help:

Israel, in the old covenant, had what might be called 'public worship', and the Septuagint uses various Greek words to describe this activity. Significantly, while the apostolic writers

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<sup>17</sup> See my *Christ* for the full argument.

### *An Extenuating Note*

use these words, they never apply them to Christian assemblies.<sup>18</sup> Despite this lack of scriptural evidence, however, and – even more serious – despite the use the New Testament (new covenant) makes of the Greek words, the majority of Christians today engage in ‘public worship’. Those who attempt to justify it are quite happy to do what the apostolic writers never do, and take those Greek words which were used of Israel in the old covenant and apply them to the *ekklēsia* today. Indeed, many writers and teachers do not start with Scripture but with the English dictionary and Anglo-Saxon! Moreover, their books are full of practical suggestions of ways in which believers can ‘improve’ the techniques of so-called ‘worship’. As I have said, these disastrous moves have far-reaching consequences.

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<sup>18</sup> With one possible exception, which some stretch to make that application. But it needs a very long stretch indeed! I will deal with this.