

X. Christ's Church in Biblical Perspective
The Ekklesia—Seven Distinctives
“#6: Reformed Worship and Vibrant Community”

John 4

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In this study we will be looking at a sixth distinctive of a Gospel healthy church. The sixth distinctive of a Gospel healthy church is reformed worship and vibrant community. The community of believers are vibrant in their relationship with each other but their focused commitment to bring before the Lord worship that is acceptable to Him. What does that worship to Him look like and why would I identify it as reformed worship? I would like to start by looking at Revelation 19 where I will be setting up a couple of cues.

I want to make a point here before we get into this that delight is related to doxology and worship is foundational. Principally people get this when they think about how we were made to worship God and sustained to worship God but how is this practically? There are two things I want you to think about here. One is elders calling for God-centered worship as a priority and then God's people prioritizing worship in their everyday life God-centered worship. In this study we'll look at what God-centered worship looks like and what separates this God-centered worship from any other kind of worship.

I want to give you a practical reason why this is. If you take the law of God which is God's directive as to how we love Him with all our heart, soul and mind, in the first four commandments. Then there is the transitional commandment which is to honor your father and mother which brings us into a right relationship with authority structures with the most foundational being the family. Then you move into how we love our neighbor as ourselves which have to do with commandments six through ten.

The first four commandments all deal with worship. The first commandment is you shall have no other gods before Me and that's called idolatry. We get the word idolatry from the word latria and it means the work of worship. Idolatry is directing worship in the wrong objective, to the wrong focus. So based on the first commandment we are learning that idolatry is foundational to every sin. If you were raised in a good Presbyterian Church and taught the catechism and you were asked what sin was you would say sin is any want of conformity unto, or transgression of, the law of God. That is you either transgress the law of God or have fallen short of embracing the law of God in thought, word or deed. There can be sins of omission and sins of commission.

So why do you step over the law of God? It is because something is more important than God. At the root of all idolatry is self-worship and because we worship our self we then make our own gods to worship instead of surrendering to the God of glory who alone is to be worshipped. It easy to do that even as a believer. The second commandment tells us not to make for ourselves any graven images. Why would we do this? We would do it for worship. If I don't worship God from my imagination how do I worship God? We worship God as He has revealed in His Word to worship Him. We go to His Word to find out how to worship and exalt God.

The third commandment tells us not to take the name of the Lord God in vain. This means you take the name of the Lord God in sacred purpose. God has given us His name that we might worship and praise Him. Worship while it can and should be given at all times has a

foundational commitment that is so sacred where we will always set aside the day of worship. Now it is the first day of the week to commemorate the resurrection of Christ. Previously the Sabbath was the seventh day but remember the Second Adam rose from the grave on the third day which became known as the Lord's Day and that was on the first day of the week. Christ, the Second Adam, who came to redeem us, established the Lord's Day. The first Adam also worshipped on his first full day even though the Lord had rested on the seventh but Adam's day of worship happened on his first full day which was the first day of the week for him.

We *begin* life for God with worship. If I want to serve God this week and say to God 'I don't want to sin' I know I'm not going to make through the week without sinning, not on this side of glory and I will never be sinless but I do want to sin less. If sin is fundamentally idolatry then what does it do for me to come before the Lord on the first day and at least set the thermostat for my life of God-centered worship that can then carry into life? Romans 12:1 says *[1] 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.* Life worship flows from gathered worship. It sets the thermostat for a God-centered life instead of a self-centered life.

I absolutely believe that when people get saved they start to want to worship. I am convinced that when people desire to worship their saved life will take on dimensions they have never yet known. It is foundational and it permeates and penetrates all of life. God-centered worship is not what we normally want to do before we are saved for that has to be put into our heart when we're converted. That happened to me. I used to spend the summers at my grandparents' house and I used to make sure I never packed any clothing I thought was church worthy so that when Sunday came and my grandfather was ready to go to church I would say 'I'm sorry I don't have anything to wear.' I would try anything I could to get out of worship or preaching. I didn't want to hear any of it.

Then I get converted and the following Sunday I am looking in the paper for any good preachers in town. My dad even says to me 'What happened to you?' I told him 'I think I got saved.' Now worship was crucial and important to me in my life. What changed? Did the worship service get more 'Harry friendly'? No, what changed was me. Worship was now desired in my life and it became the delight of my life. This is very practically foundational.

Now what kind of worship? Some think if they just show up on the Lord's Day and go through the motions then God will be pretty grateful for that. That's not worship. Worship is a gathered act. Worship that is vertically oriented has a horizontal dynamic where we are speaking to one another in psalms, hymns and spiritual songs while we make melody in our heart to God. It is something that is happening in us, coming out of us vertically while encouraging and stimulating those around us. I sing really loud when I worship and I know that those around me who like to sing will sing louder just to cover me up. See how I can stimulate those around me with songs, hymns and spiritual songs. It has a blessing in it.

So what does this look like? I want to show you an event up in heaven from Revelation 19. Every time we get a good glimpse into heaven from the Bible whether it's from the Old Testament or the New Testament they are worshipping. You are not going to be able to stay in bed, not in eternity and hopefully you won't want to. I'm sure you won't want to. When we see them worshipping it's not all about the worshiper. What kind of worship is it to be in heaven? Here is our clue and it is why reformed worship is important.

Revelation 19:9-10 says *[9] And the angel said to me, "Write this: Blessed are those who are invited to the marriage supper of the Lamb." And he said to me, "These are the true words of God." [10] Then I fell down at his feet to worship him (an angel), but he said to me, "You*

*must not do that! I am a fellow servant with you and your brothers who hold to the testimony of Jesus. **Worship God.***” For the testimony of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy.

What are we to do? We are to worship God as it is simply stated here. Worship is God-centered. The Spirit of prophecy is referring to the work of the Holy Spirit giving you God’s Word spoken forth. God’s Word spoken forth brings you to Jesus and Jesus brings you to worship God. This is what He is telling us from this text. Now let’s look at Revelation 22.

Revelation 22:8–9 says [8] *I, John, am the one who heard and saw these things. And when I heard and saw them, I fell down to worship at the feet of the angel who showed them to me, [9] but he said to me, “You must not do that! I am a fellow servant with you and your brothers the prophets, and with those who keep the words of this book. **Worship God.**”*

John just did that a few chapters before and here he is worshipping the angel again. I just love the honesty of the Bible. If you were John would you have recorded this if it happened again? If I were him I wouldn’t have recorded the first one, much less the second one. Now I can understand why this happens. I do not have to tell you to worship for you are going to worship. I don’t even have to tell you to pray because you will pray. I have been with an atheist when they have hit their thumb with a hammer and they pray. It’s not a good prayer but they pray. The question is not whether you pray but do you pray rightly, consistently and Biblically? The same thing is true about worship.

You go to a football game and you will hear adoration flowing. I’m not putting down a good athlete for it is a great thing to do but I’m telling you that you will worship. The question then becomes who are you going to worship? I am appreciative of John for the Spirit of God being honest that not only did he worship wrongly but he did it twice and he had to be corrected. I worship wrongly and I need to be corrected. Because I love Jesus I want to be corrected. John is appreciative of it just by the fact that he records it for us. So I am encouraged that John got it wrong but we are forgiven and renewed.

Even when we get it wrong we have an opportunity to get it right by not doing it wrong for worship is sacred. The angel says ‘you must not...do that!’ It’s the same phrase used when Jesus told Nicodemus ‘you must be...born again.’ Don’t make any peace treaties with false worship. Now let’s look at John 4. I’m trying to lay the ground work for why this is so important. I will be referring to just a couple of passages of Scripture to do this.

In John 4 Jesus is dealing with the woman at the well. She asks Jesus a question about worship after He had confronted her in her sin of sexual immorality. It is a question about worship that divided the Samaritans and the Jews. John 4:19–24 says [19] *The woman said to him, “Sir, I perceive that you are a prophet. [20] Our fathers worshiped on this mountain, but you say that in Jerusalem is the place where people ought to worship.” [21] Jesus said to her, “Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem will you worship the Father. [22] You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews. [23] But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father is seeking such people to worship him. [24] God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth.”*

Here the woman is fixed on the location of the worship. Jesus affirms that true worship comes through God’s revealed Word which comes through His people Israel but in the New Covenant as God brings all this to a fulfillment in His Son Jesus at the hour (right time), it’s no longer where because the God whom you would go to meet at the temple in the holy of holies is now going to be dwelling within you. The question about true worship is not where in the New Covenant but how.

Then Jesus makes two comments. The first one is ‘the Father seeks true worshipers.’ Now you have something that the Bible says God seeks. He can raise up worshipers from stones but He is raising you up to worship Him in spirit (that which is made in the image of God, your soul) and in truth. Psalm 103:1 says *[1] Bless the LORD, O my soul, and all that is within me, bless his holy name!* When you die your soul leaves the body and it’s a corpse. That is what makes you, you. Your body came in the image of your parents. That doesn’t come in the image of God because God doesn’t have a body. God is a Spirit. You are to worship Him in spirit and that is another way to say from the heart, from the soul. As the Holy Spirit brings your spirit, your soul to worship the Lord you worship Him in spirit and in truth. That is what marks out true worshipers.

So if there are true worshipers then that means there are false worshipers. God is not seeking false worshipers. He is seeking true worshipers and it is sacred and important. So what does God do with worship that is false? Let’s look at Leviticus 10. I’m only going to use a few verses to establish this but there are many more I could go to for this.

Leviticus 10:1–3 says *[1] Now Nadab and Abihu, the sons of Aaron, each took his censer and put fire in it and laid incense on it and offered unauthorized fire before the LORD, which he had not commanded them. [2] And fire came out from before the LORD and consumed them, and they died before the LORD. [3] Then Moses said to Aaron, “This is what the LORD has said: ‘Among **those who are near me** I will be sanctified, and before all the people I will be glorified.’” And Aaron held his peace.*

Why were Nadab and Abihu the objects of God having brought an end to their life? It was not because they weren’t worshipping. It is because they were worshipping with strange fire. They were bringing to God worship that He had not commanded. Again, in our mind we think He ought to be grateful that we even show up. Why be so particular, God? He is saying those who I have brought into My covenant (those who are near Me) I will be sanctified in worship. Is God patient with us? Oh yes, but here God lays down a marker to tell us His patience with our wrong worship should not be taken as license for careless worship. We ought to want to sanctify the Lord with our worship. That means we bring to God the worship He has commanded.

Therefore we worship in spirit and in truth. Where do we find the command to worship? It is in His Word which is truth. Our spirit is overflowing with joy to know that God has given us in His Word what pleases Him in worship. So we go to His Word to find out what He commands in worship and that is what we want to embrace and engage. We want to engage in those elements of worship that He has commanded. We don’t want to tempt Him with our imaginations in worship or our unauthorized worship.

Worship is authorized and the very first sin after Adam and Eve sinned that is recorded for us is a sin of murder. Where did it begin? It began in a worship service. Abel and Cain brought to the Lord offerings of praise in Genesis 4. Genesis 4:3–5 says *[3] In the course of time Cain brought to the LORD an offering of the fruit of the ground, [4] and Abel also brought of the firstborn of his flock and of their fat portions. And the LORD had regard for Abel and his offering, [5] but for Cain and his offering he had no regard. So Cain was very angry, and his face fell.*

Why did the Lord have no regard for Cain’s offering? Both men brought an offering to God from their vocation. Abel was a tiller of flock and Cain was a tiller of the ground. Abel brought the first of the flock which is the tithe and he brought the fat portions which is the best, the offering. Abel brought the first and the best. Cain only brought an offering, just some of the

ground. He didn't bring the first fruits or that which he prized but that which was left over as his offering to the Lord.

You might be thinking 'that's all Old Testament stuff' but have you read I Corinthians 11? When the church gathered for worship and misused the Lord's Supper. I Corinthians 11:29–32 says [29] *For anyone who eats and drinks without discerning the body eats and drinks judgment on himself.* [30] *That is why many of you are weak and ill, and some have died.* [31] *But if we judged ourselves truly, we would not be judged.* [32] *But when we are judged by the Lord, we are disciplined so that we may not be condemned along with the world.* Because they were using the Lord's Supper in an act of worship wrongly some are sick, weak and have died.

Do you remember Ananias and Sapphira? Acts 5:1–5 says [1] *But a man named Ananias, with his wife Sapphira, sold a piece of property, [2] and with his wife's knowledge he kept back for himself some of the proceeds and brought only a part of it and laid it at the apostles' feet. [3] But Peter said, "Ananias, why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit and to keep back for yourself part of the proceeds of the land? [4] While it remained unsold, did it not remain your own? And after it was sold, was it not at your disposal? Why is it that you have contrived this deed in your heart? You have not lied to man but to God."* [5] *When Ananias heard these words, he fell down and breathed his last. And great fear came upon all who heard of it.* He marked what he brought as a tithe and it wasn't. They lied to the Holy Spirit and he was checked out (died).

It reminds me of the hymn that says 'Lord, let me not outlive my love for You.' I know God is patient in this but you need to ask yourself not whether worship is important to God for we know it is but whether it is important to you. Every week we get together to pray and plan out our worship in this church. How do we plan it? Do we plan it for the unbeliever or for the believer or for God and make it accessible for believers and unbelievers? This is a fine line here but it's a very important line. God-centered worship becomes the very center of reformed worship.

What did reformed worship do? Reformed worship looked at what had happened at the church and worship had become a matter of exalting a priesthood. Worship had become an instrument to control the people, and clouded in superstition, ritualism and sacramentalism as if the sacraments could save/convert you. All of this false worship had been taking place so the reformers began to deal with it. Luther first. Here is the way one of my professors pictured it with Luther. Luther looked at the worship of the Roman church and was aghast at the false worship taking place. So he started picking away at the pot of all the stuff he sensed was wrong with worship. Calvin came along behind Luther and looked at it. Calvin didn't pick away at the pot for he just took the pot of all that was wrong and emptied it out. Then he began to put back into the pot what God said ought to be there. That is the principle of reformed worship.

I just want to give you five things about reformed worship. The first one is a God-centered reformed worship is guided by the regulative principle – meaning God's Word regulates what is in the worship service. There is a reason why every element of worship has a passage of Scripture underneath it in our bulletin here at Briarwood and it's to tell you why we do it. Our first distinctive was we were founded on the Word of God with confessional integrity and the Word of God identify the elements that belong in worship. God has given us all kinds of freedom in that, like the way we arrange it, how much of what and when it happens all of that. He doesn't go into those kinds of details with this but He does give us what pleases Him.

Very specific elements please the Lord in worship. He says ‘Until I come give attention to the public reading of the Scripture and the preaching of the Word of God.’ This is why we read the Scripture and we even stand for the reading of it. He says that when we gather we are to speak to one another in psalms, hymns and spiritual songs. He tells us to greet one another. He tells us to make a common confession of truth when we come together. He says on the first day of the week, the Lord’s Day, to bring with an offering what you have set aside to praise the Lord. We say in our service ‘Let us worship God with His tithes and our offerings.’ That is the worship of God that has been commanded by Him in His Word.

One time we planted a church in Charlotte, North Carolina and the church planter called me one day to tell me how the first service went. He said ‘I decided to tell the people we weren’t going to take up an offering but we put a box in the back if anyone wanted to give and that we weren’t here for their money. What do you think about that pastor?’ I said ‘Not very much. I don’t doubt your motivation and I know what you’re trying to do but you just got more spiritual than God. You have also revealed that you have a wrong view of the offering. The offering never was about getting you money. The offering is about giving God’s people a way to participate in a worship service where what they had purposed and planned to give they could bring as an act of worship.’

One of the greatest moments for me in worship is when we stand after receiving the plates and sing the doxology in praise to God at what the congregation has brought, is brought before God. It is an awesome moment where we are actually saying something before God in what we are doing. From the moment we begin our service to the moment of our benediction what we do in our service is expressly commanded.

There is another principle of worship called the qualitative principle of worship and most evangelical churches embrace this principle. This principle is that you can do anything in worship as long as it is not forbidden in the Word of God. The reformed principle of worship tells us that God tells us how to worship, doesn’t say this but this is a regulated principle that says you can only do in worship what is commanded in the Word of God. So our Lord’s Day stated service of Divine worship on Sunday morning is regulated with the elements of what God has commanded. The question is, does that thrill our soul to know that what we are doing in worship is what God commanded us to do or is it just something that we dismiss? I am not bringing strange fire for I’m bringing authorized worship and this is what He has commanded therefore bless the Lord O my soul.

Secondly, reformed worship is distinctly Trinitarian. Most of the greatest hymns are all Trinitarian and I think there is a reason for that. God has done three great acts – creation, redemption and providence. To understand these three things you have to understand one God who dwells in three Persons. The Father authored creation, salvation and your sustaining hand for in Him you live and move and have your being. Then the Father accomplishes His creation, redemption and providence through His Son. Then the Spirit hovers through and orders all that God created, redeemed and sustained by the power of the Spirit of God. We are Trinitarian.

Jesus said to the woman at the well ‘The Father seeks true worshipers.’ We worship the Father through the Son in the Spirit. This is just the way we pray. Jesus taught us to pray by saying ‘Our Father...’ in My (Jesus) name...praying in the Spirit. Can we talk to Jesus in prayer? Yes. Can we worship Jesus? Yes. Can you talk to the Spirit in prayer? Yes. Can you worship the Spirit? Yes. It is all three Persons but there is a clear Trinitarian framework in worship. Now we who have been made and saved, by the Spirit through the Son give glory to

the Father. So worship returns what has been brought to us in a Trinitarian framework so that we are distinctly Trinitarian.

Thirdly, we saturate worship with the Word of God. In the great English Reformation there were three great Reformers – Cranmer, Ridley and Latimer. These men worked constantly on one of their most important books of the Reformation and that was what was reformed worship and what became known as the Church of England or what we became known as the Anglican Church. So they created what is known as the Book of Common Prayer and they created the 39 Articles. There was a young man who had orders that allowed him to preach in the Anglican Church. He left their and ended up under Calvin and then would come back as a great Reformer himself. This man who was a rising pulpit star is John Knox.

Cranmer sent Knox his edited version of the Book of Common Prayer. Knox basically sent it back and basically said ‘Good try, it’s Word light.’ Then when they all met together Knox said to them ‘You will not have a witness of weightiness for Christ to His glory until the church has weightiness in its worship.’ There has to be gravity in worship and you can’t have gravity without God’s Word.

So the next Lord’s Day when you are called to worship, meditate on the Scripture given and as the Word of pardon is given you will then greet each other. Then we will stand and sing either a psalm, a hymn or a spiritual song from the Word of God given in adoration to God. Then we will pray framed by the Word of God. Then we will sing a doxology that is faithful to the Word of God. Then the reading and the preaching of the Word of God. Lastly, will be a benediction which is a quote from God’s Word and a good word for you when you leave. The service is Word saturated in God-centered worship.

Fourthly, worship is to be participatory. It is to be a verb and it is not a concert. Worship is not a noun declaring an event we are going to. Worship is a verb declaring what we have assembled to do. There are no spectators in worship except One and He is really not spectating. That is God. He is enabling us to worship Him. When we leave a worship service it is not to ask things like ‘how did the choir do, or the preacher or the music director do.’ If we understand worship right you will certainly walk away and pray for those who are called to facilitate it but the question will be ‘how did I do today, did I bless the Lord oh my soul with the elements He had prescribed in the power of the Spirit with all that is in me?’

Fifthly, worship is foundation and functional. It is foundational to the Christian life and it compels us into life and life is worship as you present yourself a living sacrifice of praise to the Lord. There is so much in this and it is so crucial.

It is very heavy on my heart because I don’t think we can have a lifestyle of evangelism and discipleship without the wonder of worship that has the unbelievable mixture of reverence and joy, not joy to the exclusion of reverence and not reverence to the exclusion of joy. I look at the worship is Isaiah 6 and even the doorposts have enough sense to tremble in the presence of God but when we worship our reverence doesn’t lead to morbidity. The joy of the Lord fills our soul. He saved us! Can you believe that? Now He delights in our worship.

I have given you why you need to take worship seriously but I want to reemphasize that God is patient, persistent and is teaching us how to worship. Praise His Name for His kindness and grace but by God’s grace as we learn to worship let’s worship God. When we worship God let’s have a sense of His presence and His majesty. May the joy of our salvation fill our soul. By God’s grace may that overflow when we leave so that God’s people scattered begin to live the God-centered life that was established in the worship when they gathered. Let’s pray.

Prayer:

Father, thank You for the time to be together and the privilege to be in Your Word to deal with this crucial and foundational issue that effects all of our life – how we live it, understand it and view ourselves. God, we don't want to live a life that is by our imagination, we want to live a life to Your praise that is defined by Your Word. If we want to live a life that honors You defined by Your Word then certainly when we assemble we want our worship to be defined by Your Word and we want it to be filled with Your Spirit. O God, grant us Spirit-filled, Christ-exalting, God-glorifying, Word-saturated worship and praise to our God. Lord, I have no authority anywhere else and my authority here is as a servant but I ask You, may we be known as those who worship You with the elements that You have commanded and our soul engaged, in Jesus' Name, Amen.