

Of Religious Worship

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[0 : 0 0] Now, as most of you will be aware, we have been in the morning services looking at some of the biblical bases behind some of the different headings in this section of the Church's Confession of Faith.

And we've come this morning to a chapter, the biblical basis behind chapter 21, or at least the first part of it, since that chapter is entitled of Religious Worship and the Sabbath Day.

Now, that's a potentially huge topic, so we'll be dividing it up into two, and this morning we'll look at the subject of religious worship, and Lord willing, next Lord's Day we'll look at the subject of the Sabbath Day, and how these two, of course, fit together, the one being part of the other, the worship, and the day of rest for worship, and so on.

So, this morning then, we will look at the subject of religious worship, and what the Bible has to say about what it should be, and the content of it, and so on. And we'll take, if we need a text in the word, to hang it on, then we'll take these two verses, 23 and 24, from the chapter we read.

But the hour cometh, and that is, when the true worshippers shall worship the Father in spirit and in truth, for the Father seeketh such to worship him.

[1 : 1 6] God is a spirit, and they that worship him must worship him in spirit and in truth. We might say, well, that tells us, in a nutshell, about the worship of the living God.

But there's quite a bit in this, these two verses, that first of all, Jesus has identified. In those days, as nowadays, there was a huge variety of people's attitudes to spiritual things.

The Samaritans, for example, they worshipped in Mount Gerizim. They worshipped, as far as they understood, the God Jehovah, but they worshipped him more or less as the localized deity, the God of that area, the God of that mountain.

And as Jesus said, you know, you worship, you know not what. You don't really know the Lord as he is. We Jews, we do know who we worship. And yet, even there, clearly when Jesus spoke about the Lord as he was, many of even his fellow Jews didn't fully understand.

Because he goes right in to say, the hour cometh, and now is, when the true worshippers, those who are truly worshipping the true God in the right way, shall worship the Father.

[2 : 2 3] First of all, he identifies part of the nature of the God in the Father. In spirit and in truth, for the Father seeketh such to worship him. God is a spirit.

Third person of the Trinity in there. So you've got the second person of the Trinity pointing to the first and to the third. And you've got all three persons here in these two verses. Now we've already looked in previous chapters, way back at the beginning, near the beginning of the Confession of Faith, at the person of God and the person of the Holy Trinity.

So we don't want to get sidetracked on that. But first of all, we do need to recognise to whom worship must ultimately be given. And I think, well, that's a bit of a no-brainer, isn't it?

Obviously, the worship of God. That's who you worship. But again, what do we call God? Who is the God that we worship? This Samaritan woman thought that her people worshipped God.

The Greeks, no doubt, thought they worshipped their gods. And if they weren't sure that they'd covered all the bases, as Paul found in Acts 17, you know, there was an altar to the unknown God, just in case we've missed anyone out.

[3 : 2 7] All the Egyptians worshipped a hundred different gods. The Hindus to this day are reputed to worship a million different gods. Everybody thinks they are worshipping a light.

But who is it that you worshipped? Jesus has, within these two verses, identified the Father and the Spirit. And he, as the Son, has identified himself as the Messiah.

God the Son, in other words. All three persons of the Trinity are there. Who is worshipped to be offered to? To God alone. And there is but one only, the living and true God.

And they might say, well, yeah, okay, obviously it's God alone. Obviously it's nobody else. But, again, even within the Christian tradition, it is so easy to become sidetracked. In a sort of humility, say, oh, well, I'm not really worthy to worship Jesus directly, or to worship God directly. So this is how you get the ideas. So we'll go through his mother.
[4 : 28] Or we'll go through a different saint. Or we'll go to the angels and hope that they'll bring a message to the Lord. Angels don't act on our behalf. They act on God's behalf. They're not message boys for us.

They're message boys and girls for God. They are the spirits that minister to him, in that sense. Paul warns against this very thing to the Colossians. He says in chapter 2, Let verse 16, Let no man therefore judge you in meat, or in drink, or in respect, on the holy day, or of the new moon, or the Sabbath days, which are a shadow of things to come, but the bodies of Christ. In other words, your worship does not stand or fall on your attitude to these other things. It's not about how you eat, or how you do this ritual, or how you do that, or what days you keep or don't keep.

They're a shadow of the things to come. Let no man beguile you of your reward in a voluntary humility and worshipping of angels. You know, putting yourselves lower down, oh, we're not worthy to come to Christ.

So we'll go lower down, and we'll just worship the messengers instead. Worshipping of angels, intruding into those things which he had not seen, vainly puffed up by his fleshly mind.

[5 : 39] He's just imagining these things, because they haven't seen angels, and if they had seen angels, they wouldn't tell him to worship them, and not holding the head, from which all the body, by joints and bands, having nourishment, ministered and nibbed together, increase it with the increase of God.

The worship of angels is a fallacy, as, you know, we find out at the end of the Bible in Revelation 22, where we read that verses 8 and 9, I, John, saw these things and heard them, and when I heard and seen and fell down to worship before on the feet of the angel which showed me these things, he said to me, see thou do it not?

For I am thy fellow servant of thy brethren and the prophets, and of them which keep the sayings of this book, worship God. And again, you'll think, oh, yeah, okay, well, you don't really need to leave at that point, because we know that we worship God.

Yeah, how easy it is to become this prophet. How easy it is to think, oh, well, you know, of course we're worshipping God. You know, let's just focus on other things. I mean, in other traditions and different branches of organized religion, it's very easy to say, well, you know, think about Jesus, but instead think about the sacred heart of Jesus and just focus on the sacred heart.

Whereas, focus on the cross itself, and if you've got a wee piece of the cross, a wee piece of that wood, oh, well, you can focus on that. The cross was the instrument of execution of our Lord.

[7 : 04] When we talk about the cross, we talk about the act of sacrifice which took place there. It is about Christ who died upon the cross. The actual piece of wood itself is just an instrument of execution and torture.

There is nothing in the physical cross itself worthy of worship. The early Christians would have hated the very, you know, appearance of such a thing. They wouldn't keep little bits on the cross. They wouldn't keep a thorn from the crown of thorns. They would want to chuck it away. This was the instrument of suffering for their beloved Savior. We focus upon Christ because he is God.

I think, yeah, okay, that's fine, but then how should we do it? We know who we should focus on. You focus on the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost. First John tells us, no man has seen God at any time, which is true.

The only begotten Son, which is in the bosom of the Father, he hath revealed him. Now you see, we can say that it's God we're worshipping, and we can still do it quite long.

[8 : 09] Remember in Exodus 32 when Moses goes up the mountain, and he's gone a long time, and so the people say to Aaron, in chapter 32 of Exodus, they up make us gods, which shall go before us.

As for this Moses, the man that brought us up out of the land of Egypt, we want not what is become of him. He's been gone 40 days by now. You know, it's over a month since he went up the mountain, and they haven't seen sight or sound of him since.

Aaron said, And then break off the golden earrings, which are in the ears of your wives, and of your sons, and of your daughters. Bring them unto me. All the people break off the golden earrings from their ears and brought them unto Aaron, and he received them at their hand and fashioned it with a graving tool, after he had made it a molten calf.

And they said, These be thy gods, of Israel, which brought thee up out of the land of Egypt. And when Aaron saw it, he built an altar before it. Aaron made proclamations, and said, Tomorrow is a feast to the Lord.

And they rose up early in the morrow and offered burnt offerings and brought peace offerings, and the people sat down to eat and to drink and rose up to play, to sport, to dance, to covort, in that sense.

[9 : 18] Aaron tried to keep it as a focus on the Lord, but God is not such as can be reproduced with physical things like calves or statues or whatever.

And when it is a false image of God that we have, it becomes a false worship of God. And we have 1 Corinthians chapter 10 makes reference to this incident.

Verses 7 and 8 it says, These things were our examples to the intent we should not lust after evil things as they lusted. Neither be ye idolaters as some of them, as were some of them, as it is written, that people sat down to eat and to drink and rose up to play.

Neither let us commit fornication as some of them committed and fell in one day 3 and 20,000. Now you see how the wrong worship of the wrong kind of focus, even when you say, Oh no, it's God we're worshipping, it's just, it's a golden calf image.

And so when this wrong worship comes in, wrong behaviour comes in with it, lust and fornication and so on, because these were part of the pagan worship, of the pagan gods, people thought, Oh well, this must be how you do it.

[10 : 28] But remember that God was very, very specific when Moses was up the mountain, when he was telling him about the tabernacle, what to make and all the furniture of it and all the instruments and everything, he said, make sure you make everything according to how it's revealed in the holy mountain.

In Acts 17, when Paul is speaking to the Greeks, he says, For as much then as we are the offspring of God, we ought not to think that the Godhead is like unto gold or silver or stone, graven by art and man's device.

How could that which is beyond the heavens and the earth ever be reduced to the focus of a statue or a picture in stained glass or whatever it may be? God warns the people in Deuteronomy.

He says in chapter 4, verse 5, He says, Take ye therefore good heed unto yourselves. For ye saw no similitude on the day that the Lord spake unto you in horror out of the midst of the fire.

He said previously in verse 12, The Lord spake you out of the midst of the fire. You heard the voice and the words. You heard the voice and the words that saw no similitude.

[11 : 39] Only ye heard a voice. Lest ye corrupt yourselves and make you a graven image. The similitude of any figure, the likeness of male or female, the likeness of any beast that is in the earth, the likeness of any wind, flower that fly in the air, the likeness of anything that creepeth on the ground, the likeness of any fish that is in the waters beneath the earth.

Because whatever we try and reduce God to and say, This is what God looks like. Then we diminish him. You cannot portray the vast Godhead that fills the heavens and the earth.

You cannot reduce it to a picture or an image or a statue and say, This is God. This is what we will adore. Now, some branches of the church, of course, they will say that, Yes, well, that was the Old Testament and that was fine enough.

But now, since the incarnation, since Christ has come in the flesh, it would be a denial of the incarnation not to portray God in the flesh.

So in other words, it's okay to make pictures of Jesus and the apostles and so on. The only thing is, we haven't got a clue what Jesus looked like. I have to admit, I always assumed Jesus has a beard, but, you know, we're not told that in the Bible.

[12 : 54] He could be clean, sheared, and bald, for all we know. We do not know because we are not told his physical description in the Bible. We are told what he is like.

We are told what he did. We are told his character. We're told his nature. We're told about the things he suffered and went through, but we're not told, well, he was six feet tall, he had brown eyes, his beard was this long, he had hair down to here, and the colour of his clothes was this.

We're not told any of the physical description. We do not know what Jesus looked like, so the most that people can ever do is paint a picture of a man with a beard and say, yeah, this represents Jesus.

Or paint a picture that this represents the apostle John, this represents the apostle Andrew, this represents the apostle James, and you won't have a clue what these men look like, or what Mary looked like, or what Mary Magdalene, we don't know any of these things.

We know that all of these apostles and these women saints and so on, they serve the Lord faithfully. We believe they are with them in glory now, but they are not to be a focus of our worship, much less is any image of them or even of Christ to be part of our worship to him.

[14:05] You see, even if we could reproduce an exact image of what Jesus looked like and draw the perfect painting or make the perfect statue, say, that's what he looked like, that's him, we can all worship that.

Well, you still can't worship that, really, because even if it was a perfect reproduction of what he looked like, that's only a reproduction of his humanity. And Jesus is holy God and holy man, and although, yes, he is perfectly combined, the two and the one, it's the Godhead that we worship, it's Jesus that is God, the son that we worship, it's not, you know, his physical flesh.

He had physical flesh, but that's not what we adore. We may worship God, we may imagine Christ at the right hand of the Father and so on, but it is only as much as we can imagine.

We cannot produce faithfully any image, even since the time of the incarnation, even since Jesus came in the flesh, we can't say, this is what he looked like, so we can worship that, we can worship him.

No, actually, you can't. Not without disobedience of what God says in his word. Who is to be worshipped? How he is to be worshipped?

[15:22] These are all things that God reveals in his word. It is the living God alone who is to be worshipped. Not angels, not saints, not focused to the side of the cross, the wee bit of the cross, or the sacred heart of Jesus, or the sandals Jesus wore, or Jesus physically looked like.

It is Christ, God, the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost that we are to worship of him alone. And insofar as we are to worship, we might say, well, how are we to worship him?

What should we do with this worship? What should be the content of it? Well, again, we are told, Jesus says, in spirit and in truth, that which the spirit reveals to us, that reverence and that godly fear that the spirit would show to us, but also in the truth of what God has said about himself.

You remember that he is very specific in the Old Testament. He says, in the tabernacle, he says exactly what is to be done and what's not to be done, exactly how the sacrifices are to be offered, exactly what every detail is meant to be.

Now, the tabernacle is gone and the temple is gone, which was the more permanent expression of the tabernacle, but of the same sacrifices and rituals and so on.

[16:41] Now, what do we take as our pattern of worship? We look and we see what does the Bible tell us should be in that worship?

Well, we take as our example again Jesus and the apostles. We know that Jesus, as was his practice, he went into the synagogue on the Sabbath day and the Psalms, he stood up for to read the scriptures.

So, we know that the reading of the scriptures is part of worship as it should be, religious worship as it should be. We also know that the expanding of the scriptures is part of what worship should consist in in terms of public worship.

Certainly, the reading of scripture should be part of worship if we have Bibles and so on, if we have access to them. Not all Christians all over the world do, but the reading of God's word where possible, the expounding of it should be part of worship.

Again, we have an Old Testament reference for this. In Nehemiah chapter 8, we see it, verse 2, Esther the priest brought the law before the congregation both of men and of women and of all that could hear with understanding upon the first day of the seventh month and he read therein before the street that was before the water gate from the morning until midday before the men and the women and those that could understand and the ears of all the people were attended unto the book of the law.

[18:01] And Esther the slide stood upon a pulpit of wood which they had made for the purpose of pulpit of scriptural too. And verse 8, so they read in the book in the law of God they stated and gave the sense and caused them to understand the reading.

It's there in the Old Testament, it's there in the New Jesus, unpacked and expounded the scriptures. And as he did so, we remember that the people were marveled at it because he taught them as one that had authority and not as the scribes.

Authority in the sense of being the author of these scriptures. But also, what an absolutely critical part of true worship is prayer.

We are to be in communication with the living God. Prayer with thanksgiving is an essential part of true worship to God. In fact, I should have mentioned that first.

Prayer first and the reading and expounding God's word probably after that. Because prayer is that which can be made at any time, at any place and under any circumstances. We read, you know, that Paul and Silas, they prayed and they sang praises to God in prison.

[19 : 11] We read that Daniel prayed in his house. We read that Jesus prayed on the mountaintop as well as, you know, offering up prayers in the temple and the synagogue and have you prayed in the garden.

People can pray anywhere and at any time. And it behoves the believer to worship not only individually and secretly with his closet or his or her closet and private, but also in families where possible as well as the public gatherings.

But prayer first and foremost. And it's not just a case of, you know, repeating or going through a set form and repeating words. That may be helpful as an introduction.

It may be helpful to set our minds on prayer but it's got to be us talking with the Lord. It's got to be us communicating with the Lord. And this we have, you know, way back in the tabernacle again, they were very specific.

The Lord was very specific about, you know, the altar of incense. Incense was to be the symbol of prayer. The symbol of the people's prayer. When they burned the incense they had a cloud would ascend.

[20 : 18] And as the cloud ascended upwards it was to symbolise the people's prayers going up to God. Now prayer is that which you can't, you know, it's not like a poop or a lecture it's made of wood.

You can physically make the shape. You can physically nail it down. Even a Bible it's a physical book. Prayer. You can't grasp at a prayer or put it in a bottle or put it in a box and just like the cloud of incense which ascended up to heaven as it were.

You can't grasp it or grab at the cloud and force it into a box or a bag or a bottle so you can't nail down prayer. So likewise we read in Luke chapter 1 you know, when Zacharias, the father of John the Baptist, we read that he was a priest of the order of Abiah and according as the custom of the priest's office his lot he came, his turn by lot was to burn incense when he went into the temple of the Lord and the whole multitude of the people were praying without at the timing of incense and there appeared an angel of the Lord standing on the right side of the altar of incense so he's burning the incense and the people are praying outside.

Prayer together collectively. In Revelation we read that the odour is the scent of incense is the prayers of the saints. So prayer to the Lord collectively or individually that is an absolutely categorical part of religious worship through worship.

If we cannot pray if we do not pray even secretly in our hearts we are not in touch with the Lord we are not communicating with the Lord we are not worshipping the Lord even if we physically read the Bible read the words close the book afterwards but we don't pray there is no communication between us and the Lord.

[22 : 05] God wants to hear the cry of your heart God wants to know what is in your mind your thought he knows it already but he wants to hear you express it he wants to hear you say it to him he wants you to listen for his reply God desires communication with his people prayer is absolutely categorical without prayer to the living God Father, Son and Holy Ghost we cannot say that we are worshipping at all now you could say well praise me to the Father through the Son by the Spirit and so on that's perhaps for another day and as we go look in more detail at the subject of prayer itself we can do that in another day we'll probably be doing it next Lord's Day evening but leave that aside for now we've got prayer we've got the reading of God's word there's also occasions when fasting is an appropriate part of religious worship we've got the apostles doing that when they set apart the elders we'll look at fasting after a while this evening as well solemn oaths and vows are part of religious worship the induction that will take place this coming Wednesday in Stoneway solemn questions oaths vows will be put to the minister in question he will give us answers it's part

of religious worship not of every occasion but of certain solemn occasions it's part of religious worship also the more joyful we might say aspect of religious worship singing of praise to the Lord yes we have to exhort we have to expound

Paul says to Timothy 1 Timothy 4 verse 13 till I come give attendance to reading that means reading of the scriptures to exhortation expounding it and unpacking it preaching it to doctrine but there's also the singing of praise to God and as you'll all be aware I'm sure that Colossians and Ephesians passages Ephesians 5 19 Colossians 2 16 to 19 hear that the word of Christ dwell in you richly in all wisdom teaching and admonishing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs singing with grace in your hearts to the Lord and whatsoever ye do in word and indeed do all in the name of the Lord Jesus giving thanks to God and the Father by him this is what we what we seek to do this is how we seek to worship now just in case you're all thinking oh is he going to get into the business of psalms and hymns and what's right and so on this is not the occasion for going there you all know that our own branch of the church has now allowed the use of hymns and instrumental music the rights and wrongs of that no doubt have been debated at great length and in great detail you'll all be aware

I come from a denomination which was a hymn singing denomination a music music denomination now I'm in a church which by and large still is more psalm orientated and unaccompanied in its worship and I want to say oh both are equally right I'm sure people on both sides don't think both are equally right so what is the guideline what is the rule here yes most of us probably are guided by simply what we have grown up with I can tell you hand in the bible that for all the years that I grew up in churches and congregations in the mainland it never crossed my mind it might ever be unscriptural or whatever to sing hymns or use music and I imagine most people that grew up in exclusive psalmody free churches it never crossed their mind that there might be any other way of doing things because we are used to what we grow up with and that tends to be what guides us often rather than oh what does the scripture actually say about this let's look at the detail of it and as I say this is not the time or place to delve deeply into all the wise and clear forms it's like so many of these other things it's like whether it's meat sacrificed to idols or whether it's maybe the moderate use of alcohol or whatever by Christians or whatever it might be there's things that may be allowed all things are lawful unto me but all things are not necessarily expedient and perhaps it is a good rough guideline and you see what Paul writes to the Romans in chapter 14 he says let every man be fully persuaded in his own mind he that regardeth the day for example regardeth it unto the Lord he that regardeth not the day to the Lord he that regardeth he that eateth eateth to the Lord and giveth God thanks he that eateth not to the Lord he eateth not and giveth God thanks none of us liveth to himself and no man dieth to himself for whether we live we live unto the Lord and whether we die we die unto the Lord whether we live therefore or die we are the Lord's if we are in any doubt about whether eating meat sacrificed idols or allowing ourselves this wee bit of liberty or doing anything that way is in any doubt your best just to avoid it if you have any anxiety over whether maybe it's not actually okay to say then don't just think to yourselves if you think it's okay it's okay it should be better to sing the name of Jesus and so on then by all means do it but don't do it guiltily don't do it saying oh this is actually a sin it's not a sin if it's praising the Lord from the heart and soul and spirit in spirit and in truth but at the same time if it's going to give somebody else a thanks just be a clear of it that's the rule of love that's what we should be doing in spirit and in truth you could make a whole series of sermons on the rights and wrongs of sounds over against hymns and music over against unaccompanied but this is another place the object of this discussion this sermon is to look at the subject the content of religious worship we know that there must be prayer we know that there should be reading of

God's word and where possible a little expanding of it there should be where appropriate singing of praises to God Paul and Silas sang praises to him in prison in the deepest darkest dungeon he still praised God if we are thinking in terms of rule of thumb that is good if we think in terms of what's absolutely essential for worship of God when I was younger I used to look around and see Episcopal Church and oh they're beautiful all the gold crosses and oh the stained glass windows and velvet coverings and oh they're so much more beautiful than our churches this is fantastic this is great but then you think well supposing you're doing this when you're washed up on a desert island and you don't have a beautiful church and you don't have all these beautiful artwork and velvet and gold and pictures and everything you don't have all this lovely stuff all this furniture how are you going to worship now if these things are so essential how are you going to worship now the

truth of course is they're not essential what is essential first and foremost is prayer to the living God the Father

Son of all God and we can pray anytime you can pray in your desert island you can pray when you're still washed up in the sea desperately holding onto a piece of driftwood hoping you won't drown and when you're washed up on the shore you can pray to the Lord that he has actually spared your life if your Bible is preserved you can read your Bible there you can offer up worship and spirit and truth to the living God there on your desert island without walls without furniture without all that is there Jesus prayed on the hillside he prayed in the synagogue he prayed everywhere it is always right to pray to the living God at your workplace while you're driving your car in your home wherever you may be prayer is always right if it be done with reverence to the living God in the name of Christ because in doing so we are acknowledging the true living God the fact of his reality of his reality in our lives and that we expect and hope and trust he will make a difference in our lives if we have his word it behoves us to read it yes 66 chapters you can read the Bible in a year if you set yourself to it something like four chapters a day you can read it in two years if you give yourself a little more time to do it then but always you should be reading it every day if you have it and all of us here have one it doesn't matter what language you do it in whether it's Gaelic or English or anything else it doesn't matter even necessarily what version you may choose as long as it's accurate and true but you read

[30 : 48] God's word the more you take in of it the more you become familiar with what he himself has revealed and the singing of praise to him is a natural outpouring of joy you see it's not complicated and it doesn't have to be all too gloomy and Solomon sober and restricted it is how God himself has revealed it he desires the sacrifice of our prayer he desires his word to be known and read he desires to hear our praises he desires above all that we be in communication with him through religion and undefiled before God and the fatherless this Jesus said the widows and the orphans and the fatherless and the affliction to keep himself unspotted from the world you and I will not be able to keep ourselves unspotted from the world if we are doing it in our own strength we will only be able to retain that strength against the world when we are drawing strength from the Lord when we are in constant relationship with him worship is not just something you do on the Lord's day or on a midweek or whenever the people gather worship is meant to be a way of life it is meant to be something which is part of every day in your life whatever you are and whatever you are doing we worship the Lord in the beauty of holiness because we seek to be his the hour cometh and now is when the true worshipers who truly love the Lord who truly desire to be in his presence the whole time who want to be in communication with them shall worship the Father they will recognize him as Father not as some false god or some distant

Allah or some guru that they can take wisdom from they will worship him as Father in spirit and in truth for the Father seeketh such to worship him God is a spirit and they that worship him must worship him in spirit and in truth you can't nail him you can't put him in a box you can't carve him out of gold or paint him on a window or whatever it may be God is a spirit you can't contain God but you can communicate with God every day in your life and the more so solemnly and yet more joyfully as the Lord's people gather day by day midweek Sabbath by Sabbath we will come to the subject of the Sabbath Lord willing next week but for now let us recognize that true religious worship is that which is to God alone through Christ alone by the spirit praying constantly worshipping and reading as a way of life knowing more and more of him because the Father seeketh such to worship him to worship