



4901 Hardy Street Hattiesburg, MS 39402 P: 601-268-0303 F: 601-268-0778

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Dear Church Family,

Recently, Jordan and I took the kids out for ice cream. Like you, I have a favorite flavor: cookie dough... not ashamed. But I was unprepared to choose from the forty flavors that stared up at me from beneath the frosted glass. Forty flavors! I began a sampling spree and quickly built a small boneyard of tiny spoons. Eventually, my little girls lost their patience with me: "Hurry up, Daddy!" Paralyzed by options, I panicked and went with a scoop of coffee ice cream. Likewise, the many flavors of worship within Protestant churches are dizzying: from high liturgy to low liturgy to no liturgy; from rock band ballads to ascetic a cappella psalms; from robes to ripped jeans and everything in between. The discerning believer must wrestle long and hard with the question: *How should God be worshiped?*

Historically, Christians have answered this question in two ways. Some believe that while Scripture outlines the normal features of public worship, elements not expressly forbidden like dance, cinema, drama, painting, etc., may be acceptable. Reformed and Presbyterian believers, on the other hand, have historically held that the Word of God not only normalizes, but regulates worship. This *Regulative Principle of Worship* is articulated in our Westminster Confession of Faith: "But the acceptable way of worshipping the true God is instituted by Himself, and so limited by His own revealed will, that He may not be worshipped according to the imaginations and devices of men, or the suggestions of Satan, under any visible representation, or any other way not prescribed in the holy Scripture" (WCF 21:1). To put it plainly: If God hasn't commanded it, we don't do it in worship.

But is that biblical? You bet it is! If the first commandment identifies the "who" of our worship, the second commandment addresses the "how": "You shall not make for yourself a carved image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth" (Exodus 20:4). God, Whose holiness is so searing that the seraphim have to veil their faces in His presence, rejects worship born of man's imagination. Consider His worship instructions to Moses, "Everything that I command you, you shall be careful to do. You shall not add to it or take away from it" (Deuteronomy 12:32). Aaron's sons, Nadab and Abihu, learned this lesson the hard way when they offered "unauthorized fire before the Lord, which he had not commanded them (Leviticus 10:1)" and perished for their innovation. Jesus also lamented the way in which the "traditions of the elders" had oozed into public worship and mixed with the commandments of God (Mark 7:1-8).

But how do we know what worship pleases the Lord? Since the distance between sinful creatures and their sinless Creator is so vast, He must tell us. And He has! In His Word He tells us that He is delighted by the reading of the Bible (Luke 4:16-17, 1 Timothy 4:13), biblical preaching (2 Timothy 4:2, Acts 20:7), singing psalms and hymns (Ephesians 5:19), prayer (Matthew 21:13), confessing the faith (Hebrews 4:14, 10:23), observing the sacraments (1 Corinthians 11:23-26, Matthew 28:19), the collection of offerings (Psalm 96:8, 1 Corinthians 16:1), and lawful oaths and vows (Nehemiah 10:28-29, Acts 6:5-6). Thus, each item of our worship must fit neatly into one of these biblically sanctioned elements.

Why do PCA worship services sometimes look and feel different from one another? Oftentimes, these differences spring not from different elements of worship, but different *forms* and *circumstances* of worship. While elements are the essentials of our worship, the expressions, or forms of those elements may differ. According to the PCA's Directory of Worship, there is freedom in form;

“The Lord Jesus Christ has prescribed no fixed forms for public worship but, in the interest of life and power in worship, has given His Church a large measure of liberty in this matter. It may not be forgotten, however, that there is true liberty only where the rules of God's Word are observed and the Spirit of the Lord is, that all things must be done decently and in order, and that God's people should serve Him with reverence and in the beauty of holiness. From its beginning to its end a service of public worship should be characterized by that simplicity which is an evidence of sincerity and by that beauty and dignity which are a manifestation of holiness” (BCO 47-6).

Take the Lord's Supper for instance. Two faithful churches might answer the same questions differently: *Should elders serve the bread and wine or should congregants come to the front? Should we tear from a single loaf and drink from a common cup or be served individually? During the supper, should we sing or remain silent?* These are good questions with which each session must prayerfully wrestle in the light of the Scriptures. This biblically-informed freedom of form means that two regulated worship services might look and feel a bit different.

There are a host of other questions pertaining to the *circumstances* surrounding worship that also contribute to tangible differences between faithful churches. *In what kind of building or room should we worship? What time should the service start and how long should it be? How many songs should we sing? How many pastors and elders should participate in the service? Should we sit in chairs or pews? What instruments should be used to facilitate congregational singing? Should we use an overhead projector or bulletins and hymnals?* These logistical issues should be handled by the session with sanctified common sense in light of Paul's admonition, “all things should be done decently and in order” (1 Corinthians 14:40).

Having sampled the many flavors of Protestant worship, I thank God for the bold and biblical convictions manifested in the worship of First Presbyterian Church for 137 years. I am grateful for a covenant family committed to approaching the infinite, eternal, and unchangeable God in loving fear to worship Him in the splendor of holiness. How important it is that we rejoice in the blessed legacy we have inherited from our forefathers, humbly recognizing that even the most biblically-regulated worship is only pleasing to the Lord when it is the overflow of hearts regenerated by grace, indwelt by the Holy Spirit, and irradiated with love for the Savior, Jesus Christ. May we always find true joy and freedom in worshipping God, God's way.

Your grateful servant,

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read "Jim McCarthy". The signature is written in dark ink on a white background.

Jim McCarthy
Senior Minister