

## **WESTMINSTER CONFESSION OF FAITH XXI: 1-2**

*(Reading: 1 Timothy 2:1-15; Acts 17:16-34)*

### **Which Way We Truly Worship**

We pray often for a reviving work of God's Spirit in the Church of Jesus Christ and through our society. We look for the Lord to work in people's hearts and lives the kind of extra-ordinary gracious work He has done before. Those times that we take a special interest in.

We even call ourselves after the name of one of those times - the Reformation We are known as 'reformed' Christians. In fact, doesn't so much of the foundation of our churches come from that time?

We can think of other such times and the impact they have had. There's the Great Awakening of the 18<sup>th</sup> Century that occurred in Great Britain and North America. And the Dutch Awakening of the 19<sup>th</sup> century led to a distinctly Christian world-view, as shown in politics and education.

But, now, let me ask you the question: Why would you want such a time as that? Out of all the different periods of time how come you would like to have one which is actually a very difficult time for Christians personally?

### **God Tells Us Why We Worship**

Well, isn't it actually because at those times the Lord Himself is being treated in the right way. Then, despite whatever the believers may be going through individually or corporately, God is given what is rightfully His. It's no wonder then that our first consideration this afternoon is that **GOD TELLS US WHY WE WORSHIP.**

Article 1 begins the way the apostle Paul began with the Athenians in Acts 17. For it recognises that everyone knows there is a God. So in the hearts of every person there is what John Calvin called the 'sensus divinitatis' - the sense of the divine.

The apostle raised this with the Athenians by saying to the Greeks in verse 22 that he's seen they were very religious. Religious to the degree that he notes in verse 23 their altar with the inscription: "To an unknown God."

Paul also addressed this in Romans chapter 1. In verse 20 there he said, "For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities - his eternal power and divine nature - have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that men are without excuse."

You see, the light of nature Article 1 begins with is general revelation. This is the world around us. And it shows us that there is a God who is in control of all - the God who set it all up and the God who's still keeping it up. Because this God is who He is He has to be given the highest respect, love, and praise. It would be absolute folly not to do so! And yet that's what mankind has done! For while everyone knows there is a God they neither glorify Him as God or give thanks to Him. Man's thinking actually is quite futile and his foolish heart is darkened.

That's why there are so many false religions in this world. They all prove that though people claim to be wise they've actually brought God down to their own level - to be a god they can manage and manipulate.

This is also what happens when the Church of Jesus Christ is in a serious state of disrepair. Then you will find all kinds of superstitious and pragmatic practices coming from some very fuzzy thinking about who God is. Then the Gospel of Jesus Christ becomes put right out of the picture. But there'll be lots of other pictures!

This is the situation Jeremiah lamented in the church of his own time. In Jeremiah 18 verse 12 he notes that they say, “We will continue with our own plans; each of us will follow the stubbornness of his evil heart.”

Already in Genesis 4 we see this in the story of Abel and Cain. Abel offered up the right sacrifice and Cain did not. And when Cain becomes furious and depressed about it the Lord says to him in the verses 6 and 7, “Why are you angry? Why is your face downcast? If you do what is right, will you not be accepted? But if you don’t do what’s right, sin is crouching at your door; it desires to have you, but you must master it.”

True worship has to please God. And if you want to please Him you have to find out what He likes.

Think of when you buy a gift for someone. If you’re like me you think of getting them something you think they’ll like. But how often haven’t I been wrong about that! Because many times I’ve bought them what I actually like!

Perhaps that was because it was easy for me to do that. But usually it’s because I haven’t been listening to what they’ve been telling me all along!

So when it comes to giving God what He desires we have to turn to His Word. We dare not trust anything else!

It’s like the conversation Billy Graham was having once with several liberal theologians. They were arguing with him about the Bible. You know how they go on about miracles being fanciful fairy tales and contradicting each other. And they said that not everything recorded in the Gospels as Christ’s words were actually so.

Graham saw through this, though. Replying to their self-righteous attitude, he said, “But I know no word of Christ outside of Scripture!”

Spot on! And how doesn’t this confirm Article 1 as that article goes on to say that the only acceptable way of worshipping the true God is instituted by Himself, and so limited by His revealed will.

That was the real sin of the Israelites in the incident of the golden calf in Exodus 32. It wasn’t that they worshipped another god but instead worshipped God in a way He had not told them to.

And then it’s interesting that the Roman Catholic Church have reacted to this by re-arranging the Ten Commandments. Because what is the second commandment - and has always been understood as such by the Jews - becomes in their interpretation part of the first commandment. Then they break up the tenth commandment so that coveting your neighbour’s property is different than coveting his wife.

So they have no commandment regulating how you worship God. It gets left right out of their catechism and books of devotion. Indeed, their principle regarding the acceptable way of worshipping God is that you may do anything which is not specifically prohibited. This is called the normative principle of worship.

But the scriptures are quite clear that God has laid down how we are to worship Him and that those words are the way He wants to worship Him. It is not a matter of what we can get away with but what we have been told to do. This is what we call the regulative principle of worship. You can see why, though, the normative principle of worship is quickly very popular. That’s plain to see in the vast majority of Christian churches today – also the majority of Protestant churches today. For how much hasn’t worship in churches today become anything you get away with! It seems that there’s even a competition between some churches to find the latest fad and bring it in.

This situation only shows how much we are in need of a genuine revival. And this is certainly not what many call revival which is simply a very temporary rush of human emotions. Rather the revival which shows God clearly at work. Because then it's His Word at work!

There you will find the simple and spiritual exposition of Scripture. Not all the stories about the great things human men and women have done, but the Story about what the God-Man has done and is still doing in the hearts and lives of His own.

### **God Tells Us Who To Worship**

Here we come to our next aspect. Because now we see that GOD TELLS US WHO TO WORSHIP. Thus we come into Article 2.

At the time before the Reformation the Church was denying the mediation of Christ alone. In the Council of Nicea in 787 AD the veneration of the saints was approved. This Council distinguished between 'latreia', the worship due to God alone; 'hyperdulia', the inferior worship due to the Virgin Mary; and 'dulia', the lower worship due to the saints and martyrs. So while they set out different levels to try to avoid the charge of idolatry, their so-called 'saints' became the way for them to also approach God, because of their alleged merits.

Yet 1<sup>st</sup> Timothy 2 verse 5 is quite clear about this. The apostle says there, "For there is one God and one mediator between God and man, the man Christ Jesus."

We can also see here why they call their pictures and images sacred. And we can certainly see why they have done away with the second commandment!

But not only is this error found only in Roman Catholic churches today. Many charismatic churches and ministries have taken on the same nonsense.

One example mentioned to me recently was the effect of a prayer shawl. Now that prayer shawl is one of those marketing gimmicks that televangelists promote. You'll find many examples on the so-called Christian channels. You see, if you send in a donation to a certain ministry, over a certain amount, you will receive a free gift. In this case the gift was a prayer shawl that had been specially prayed over by none other than the 'anointed' leader of that ministry.

They tell you that you can take that prayer shawl and put it in a place where it will come into contact with an unbeliever or a backsliding Christian. That physical contact will change them, it's claimed.

The story went that these folk cut up the prayer shawl and put it in the shoes of a son who had wandered from the Lord. The only problem was, though, that his unbelieving friend borrowed those shoes. And - guess what? - he was saved!

Yeah, right! I think the truth of such claims rates right along with the list of people really healed at so-called 'miracle' meetings.

The truly sad thing, however, is that God's people have become taken right away from true worship. There is no humbling yourself before the almighty and all-holy God. In fact, in many of those services man has put himself on the pedestal. It's all about how you can take control and how you have to tell God what to do. They call that standing on God's Word!

If you take the temptations that Satan laid before Jesus in Matthew 4 you'd almost get the impression that they've fallen for all of them. Because they say you can turn stones into bread; that you can throw yourself down and have an angel save you, and that you can have the whole of this present world. You just have to say the word!

The response of Jesus seems to have struck deaf ears among them. He says in Matthew 4 verse 4 that man must depend “on every word from the mouth of God.” He says in verse 7, “Do not put the Lord your God to the test.” And He says in verse 10, “Worship the Lord your God, and serve him only.”

But when those leaders set themselves up in parallel positions with the Pope in Rome, claiming to possess a unique blessing which they may ‘anoint’ upon you, then you have to wonder who’s the mediator. And when any possible concern with the leader is construed as an attack against the Lord’s Anointed then you know there’s no true worship there.

Think of that scene pictured so vividly in Revelation 19. There the apostle John is overwhelmed by the great multitude of heaven and the angel’s words to him - words which that angel was passing on from the Lord.

In reaction to this, John fell to his feet to worship him. But the angel said to him, as verse 10 records, “Don’t do it! I am a fellow servant with you and with your brothers who hold to the testimony of Jesus. Worship God! For the testimony of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy.”

You see, no anointing from the angel, no touch, no prophetic word - not even a prayer! There is simply a pointing to God through His Word, because that’s what the testimony of Jesus is.

Benjamin B. Warfield commented that, “The curse of the Church has been her apathy to truth. She has nothing to fear from truth; but she has everything to fear and she has already suffered nearly everything from ignorance.”

It’s in genuine reformation that God graciously frees His people from that ignorance. It’s as if the scales fell from their eyes, because that’s what shedding all those layers upon layers of man-made traditions and superstitions does. Then God’s people return to worshipping Him in spirit and in truth. It’s in spirit because it’s with all the heart and soul and mind and strength that Article 1 confesses, and it’s in truth because it’s from God’s Word.

Unlike what passes for revival today you will know if there’s a real reformation, because people are changed. Instead of being almost unidentifiable from the world they couldn’t stand out more!

This is also in public worship. In fact, there you will see it most clearly. Because when you worship in such a church you can’t go away without knowing you have met Jesus Christ Himself. May you have done that today!