

Heidelberg Catechism, Lord's Day 35, Part 3, "Elements, Circumstances and Forms"

Scripture Lesson: Acts 2:37-47

Lesson Aim	To understand the distinctions between the elements, circumstances, and forms of worship, and why this understanding is critical to thinking rightly about the worship of God in the service of worship on Sundays.
Steps to Learning	Read the Heidelberg Catechism Lord's Day 35 and Acts 2:37-47 . Discuss the sermon and the particulars of the lesson below. It may be best to work through the material over several days or sessions.
Discuss	<p>Why is the discussion about the elements, circumstances and forms of worship important in our current age?</p> <p>It is important because people are very confused about what to do in the worship service on Sundays. Many churches employ forms of worship that are in tension with what the Bible teaches about the weightiness of worshipping the one true God. Some churches today offer contemporary or traditional forms of worship as if the people are consumers of a certain style. The church must not ask what people want but what God wants in worship, which is revealed in the Bible. Therefore, in discerning what God wants, we can think about the distinction between elements, circumstances and forms.</p> <p>What are the elements of worship?</p> <p>The elements of worship are those things that God says we must have in our worship such as preaching and the Sacraments. We can discern what the elements are from passages such as Acts 2:42, which outlines four categories: The Apostles' teaching or preaching, the fellowship (the collection), the breaking of bread (Lord's Supper and Baptism) and the prayers.</p> <p>What are the circumstances of worship and how are they governed?</p> <p>Circumstances are those considerations of how to execute or perform the elements. For example, a church must consider whether to use a microphone or not, whether to use chairs of pews or whether to use a piano or pitch pipe. Circumstances are not governed by the Bible but by the considerations common to human actions and societies.</p> <p>What are the forms of worship?</p> <p>The forms of worship deal with the issue of deciding what the exact content of the element is. For example, the church must pray for it is a biblical element of worship, but the formal question is, what kind of prayer? Shall the minister pray extemporaneously, or shall he lead using the Lord's Prayer or do both? In addition, the formal issue applies to what kind of hymns and Psalms we should sing and what kind of tune is to be used. The concern with the formal issue is making sure that the elements are intelligible and God-honoring.</p>
Bible Reading	Mark 15-16, Luke 1-5 (Reading through the Gospels)