

# How God Wants Us To Worship Him, Pt. 3

*Biblical Worship*

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Talked about Nadab and Abihu. What did they do that was so terrible? Well, they did what the Lord had not commanded. They took upon themselves to make an offering and we are not commanded to make an offering. They took upon themselves to come up with what the Bible calls strange fire. It is also translated profane fire. We don't know exactly what that was, but we do know it wasn't the fire that was prescribed in the Bible. It wasn't worshipping God the right way. And what did he do? He killed them. And his father Aaron held his peace because he realized that the Lord was right. It is a chilling example of worship and what the Lord expects.

This is the third sermon in our series on worship and, as I said last week, the reason I have chosen to preach on this subject is because worship is the most important thing we do as human beings. Everything else we do comes second in importance to worship.

You know, remember what Jesus said, "If anyone comes to me and does not hate his father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and his own life also, he cannot be my disciple."

I don't know about you, but I think that is one of the most difficult verses in the Bible. What does that mean? Does that mean Jesus is saying, well, we should hate our loved ones? No, I don't think so because the Bible is clear elsewhere that we are not to hate our loved ones and we know the rule in the Bible is that when there is a difficult verse we look elsewhere in the Bible to see what that verse may mean. We know that God wrote the Bible, the Old Testament and the New Testament. He can't contradict himself. We know that. We have faith in God that he is not a liar and that he doesn't contradict himself. So he doesn't say something on one part of the Bible that he goes around and contradicts himself over here.

So what did Jesus mean? Well, it means he is meaning to draw a stark contrast between the two loves. Think of how much you love your family. Think of a moment how much you love your brothers and sisters, your parents, your children, your wife, your husband, your very life.

Jesus says that your love for him must be so overwhelming that your love for your family and your own life looks like hate in comparison. Not that you would ever hate them. Ok? In fact, you love them with all your heart, but your love for the Lord is that radical, that deep. The Lord is telling you that if you ever had to choose between him and them that if you are his disciples you would choose him. The Lord elsewhere says... he makes that clear several places.

Praise God that he would never make us choose, but if you are a Christian and someone in your family opposes you, it is a difficult thing, but you have to choose the Lord.

His test is: Are you willing to choose him? If you trust him enough to know in your heart that he would give you the strength to love him more than life itself, then you know [?]. And your love for him is expressed most perfectly in worship. And that is why we are talking about it.

We have been looking at Scripture attempting to answer the question: What is the proper way to worship God? And we are going to spend a few minutes just kind of summarizing the last two sermons.

Now the very question: What is the proper way to worship God? Might strike some people as very odd. They might say, "Well, the proper way to worship God, well, it is any way that makes you feel closer to him. I mean, as long as you have the right heart, as long as you are sincere, God doesn't care about the details."

We said that people who say things like that forget that you can be very sincere, but very wrong.

Proverbs 14:12, you will remember me quoting it, a chilling verse. "There is a way which seemeth right unto a man, but the end thereof are the ways of death,"<sup>1</sup> God says. It seems right. It seems holy, but the end thereof is the way of death. Just because you feel right and holy it not necessarily is. God says you are on the road to hell and you don't even know it.

Matthew 7:21 Jesus said:

Not every one that saith unto me, Lord, Lord, shall enter into the kingdom of heaven; but he that doeth the will of my Father which is in heaven. Many will say to me in that day, Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in thy name? and in thy name have cast out devils? and in thy name done many wonderful works? And then will I profess unto them, I never knew you: depart from me, ye that work iniquity.<sup>2</sup>

Yes, you can be very sincere and be very lost.

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<sup>1</sup> Proverbs 14:12.

<sup>2</sup> Matthew 7:21-23.

Now we pointed out that worshipping God is not a right. It is a privilege he gives to his people. We pointed out we must choose between two paths. There are only two ways to go. We can create our own rules for worship or we can follow the rules that God has given us right here in the Bible.

God makes it clear that we are forbidden to add to or subtract from his Word. Now, you know that. And there are several verses in the Bible that say, “Don’t add to my Word. Don’t subtract from it.” Almost the very last verse in the Bible says that if anybody adds to my words, I will add the plagues to him. If anybody takes away from the Word, God will take away his part out of the holy city and from the promises that are written in the book.”

Since the commandments in his Word include how we are to worship him, therefore, if we add to his worship things we made up, aren’t we adding to God’s Word? Sure we are. Hey, same thing if we take it away. We know he command something in worship like singing psalms and we don’t do it, we are taking away from God’s Word.

Churches have no right to make up ceremonies or music or worship styles, quote, or anything else that God does not command. We don’t have that privilege.

We have said the rule must be: Unless Scripture commands it in worship, it is prohibited. And this is called the regulative principle of worship and it is one of the founding precepts of the Reformation of John Calvin and Martin Luther, et cetera. The Lutheran churches have gone off on it [?] on that one, but that was the founding, one of the founding premises of the Reformation. Unless Scripture commands it in worship it is prohibited. Everything we do in worship must pass through the screen of God’s Word and find authorization there.

And I quoted my hero John Knox the Scottish reformer who said, “All worshipping, honoring or service invented by the brain of man and the religion of God without his own express commandment is idolatry.”

James Begg asks, “Is it possible to find a single instance in Scripture of accepted worship that was not prescribed by God?” The answer is no.

Search if you will, you will never find a single instance in Scripture of accepted worship that was not prescribed, not commanded by God. Nowhere in Scripture do you find God saying things like, “As long as you have love for me, that is what counts in worship.” Or that is what only counts in worship, I should say. Or he doesn’t say, “As long as your heart is right the external forms don’t matter.”

No, you won’t find that in the Bible. He says exactly the opposite that external forms are critical to him.

But... but... but... don’t think I am preaching Legalism. God forbid that I would ever

preach or you would ever practice Legalism which is that you have to follow certain rules in order to be saved. That is the religion of the Pharisees and the modern Pharisees. That is the... you know who the modern Pharisees are. I don't have to name names.

God is also equally concerned with our hearts, equally concerned with our hearts. External forms yes, our hearts, yes, too.

Jesus said the true worshippers are those who worship in spirit and in truth.

Now I focus mostly on truth because you can walk into so many churches today and find that almost the entire emphasis is on the spirit in worship with very little attention paid to truth. And though it has never crossed our mind that God might have certain things he demands from his worship. That is because so much of what passes for worship today is self centered. The focus is on the worshipper, how much he or she loves God or what God has done for him or her as though God exists for the sole purpose of solving all our problems and giving us a trouble free life.

You wonder what Paul would have thought of that theology.

After all, wasn't he an apostle, closer to God than almost anyone? And you know he had one of the most trouble free lives ever, right? No, of course he didn't. His life was filled with violence and persecution, imprisonment, stoning, terrors. He was stoned to the brink of death on more than occasion, wasn't he? And finally he was beheaded as far as we know from history.

So God is here to give you a trouble free life?

Now to be a happy person if you are a Christian, but God doesn't guarantee you won't have any troubles because we know from Scripture he sends troubles to do all sorts of things to build us up.

So, "All things work together for good,"<sup>3</sup> Romans 8:28, "to those who love God, those who are called according to his purpose." That is all things. That is all things, not just the good things. The all things.

So I don't want you to think that I am only concerned about truth in worship and forgetting about the spirit. Jesus said that true worshippers are those who worship in spirit and in truth. So we take both, spirit and in truth. If we have all the externals down exactly, but our hearts are far from God, we are no better than the Pharisees. And you know what Jesus said to the Pharisees. He bitterly condemned them as people who honor God with their lips while their hearts are far from him. We are to worship God in spirit and in truth.

Now what is truth, well, Jesus told us the answer in John chapter 17. God's Word is truth. Worshipping in truth means worshipping in conformity to God's Word, his written

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<sup>3</sup> Romans 8:28.

commandments for worship. Without spirit our worship is wooden and sterile, just going through the motions. It is an offense before God. Without truth our worship is emotionalism, the gush effervescence of a fervent heart. Also an offence before God, what he calls zeal, but not according to knowledge.

We must have both zeal and knowledge, spirit and truth to worship God in a manner he will accept. Any other worship is abomination to him.

Proverbs 28:9 says, “He that turneth away his ear from hearing the law, even his prayer shall be abomination.”<sup>4</sup>

Everything Israel did, every sacrifice, every sprinkling, every burning of incense in worship had to be exactly as God dictated. Everything Israel built for worship, the tabernacle and the temple and all the furnishings had to be exactly as God had commanded down to the smallest detail, exact measurements. Every song they sang was given to them from the Lord. Nothing was to be added or subtracted. Nothing was to come out of any man’s ideas.

Ok, you might be think, well, that is the Old Testament. You have been talking about the Old Testament sermon series. I am convinced the Old Testament, yeah. But in New Testament times we haven’t been given all those details. Absolutely right. We have not and we know that most of those details have been fulfilled because they look forward to the coming of Christ. And we are under grace, not law. We have been given the freedom to worship God in the spirit, not the law. That is what a lot of people would say.

It is true we haven’t been given all the details in the New Testament about how we are to worship God. And we are going to talk about that, but it is not true that because we live under grace and not under law that we have the freedom to worship God only in the spirit. That is a vile idea. It is a disease that infects much of Christendom and we all need to get our shots.

I hope you can instantly see now how the statement, “We can now worship God in the spirit alone,” is so very wrong. It displays profound confusion over who God is and what worship is as we talked about spirit and truth.

We are under grace, not law. That is what the Bible says. Romans 6:14. But that has nothing whatever to do with the false idea that we have the freedom to worship God in the spirit alone. What did Jesus say in the New Testament, not in the Old? That true worshippers are those who worship God in spirit and in truth. That is not from the Old Testament. That is from the New Testament.

Nowhere does he say that we have the freedom to worship God only in the spirit. In fact, what Romans 6:14 says is... And I am dwelling on this a little bit because you hear it so often. Well, we are under grace, not under law so we don’t have to do that, whatever it might be.

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<sup>4</sup> Proverbs 28:9.

Well, what does the entire verse? Well, before it says... Before Paul says you are not under the law, but under grace he says, “For sin shall not have dominion over you: for you are not under law, but under grace.”<sup>5</sup> Romans 6:14.

That is the context. And the whole context as you read the other verses there preceding, he is talking about sin having dominion over us. Not that it is a carte blanche to do anything we feel like doing because we are under grace and not under law. We are most definitely not under law. We are under grace, but God hates Legalists, ok?

Jesus hated the Legalists of his time with such intense passion that it is heart stopping to read it.

John 8:44, in talking to the Legalistic Pharisees Jesus said, “Ye are of your father the devil.”<sup>6</sup> It sort of throws the idea of meek and mild Jesus out the window on this one.

“Ye are of your father the devil, and the lusts of your father ye will do. He was a murderer from the beginning, and abode not in the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he speaketh a lie, he speaketh of his own: for he is a liar, and the father of it.”<sup>7</sup>

If you are a Legalist, that is if you are someone who thinks you are saved because you follow a list of rules for what you should do and what you shouldn't do, God calls you a son of the devil. God calls you to repentance.

If you are truly God's child you obey God's commandments because you love him, not because you expect a reward. He is your loving, gentle, wonderful Father and you obey him out of pure love and desire to be an obedient son or daughter, not because you hope to get some reward for obedience. That is cheap, really, in my opinion.

Would you treat your earthly father like that? Would you hope you can get whatever you could out of him by going through the motions of doing what your father wants? May God forbid. And I am talking to you children as well as the adults here. God forbid that you would ever insult your father like that. I don't think you would, much less God himself.

Your love for God your Father should flood over you so that you want to obey God's commandments because you love him, pure and simple.

Now what is a Legalist anyway? I have a very dear brother in the Lord, Jack Einstein who had a great comment on Legalism. He says, “Well, I haven't killed anybody today. I must be a Legalist.”

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<sup>5</sup> Romans 6:14.

<sup>6</sup> John 8:44.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

According to Paul who defined what a Legalist is in the book of Galatians, a Legalist is someone who wants to put people under the law for salvation. The Judaizers were Legalists. A Legalist claims you can earn your salvation by obeying God.

Well, tell that to Lazarus, dead stinking Lazarus. Did he have the power to do good works for salvation in the grave? Could he accept Christ in quotes while he was rotting in the grave? Yet he was saved. The Bible that Lazarus was a picture of us before God calls us. In our spirit dead, rotten, stinking in our sins, completely, spiritually dead, unable to respond until the Lord brought our spirit to life and gave us faith. Lazarus didn't accept Christ. A dead man can't accept anything. He received Christ. He is totally passive. Christ chose him to receive life.

So do me a favor. From now on get the word "accept" out of your vocabulary. Talk about accepting Christ. The proper biblical term is receive. One receives Christ. They are passive.

Turn to Ephesians chapter two verses eight and nine. A lot of you know this by heart. We never tire of reading it, do we? Ephesians chapter two.

For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God: Not of works, lest any man should boast.<sup>8</sup>

Now look at that very carefully. How are we saved? Through God's grace, by God's goodness, by God's grace, number one. Because we don't exercise God's grace, do we? No. God exercises grace.

Through faith. But the faith, he says, is not of us either. We don't stir up faith in God and accept him. It says right there, "Faith is not of yourself. It is the gift of God." So even your faith is a gift from God.

And it goes on. That faith is not of works. This salvation, the subject of the sentence, is not of works or good deeds. Why? Because if it was something we did on our own we could feel pretty proud of that, pretty good about how we cooperated in our salvation. We did something, you know. And it is so much a part of man. That is why the majority of Christianity preaches the opposite, that you have to cooperate with God for salvation because it is man's pride. Man can't give up that idea that I have got to do something. I have got to have some involvement in my salvation. It can't be all of God. I have got to... Man's pride. That is what keeps him from seeing this verse properly.

Now the Legalists are those who say that you can be saved by your own power, as we said, your own good works in cooperation with God. They claim that Jesus' suffering, death and resurrection actually saved no one. Do you know that? They say it actually saved no one Jesus died and rose, that it potentially saves people, but only if they accept Christ.

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<sup>8</sup> Ephesians 2:8-9.

So if nobody ever accepted Christ, Christ died in vain, right? Right?

Tell it to Lazarus.

These Legalists we have—and there is a name for them—they are called Arminians after a man named Jacobus or sometimes called James Ariminus who in the 1500s he didn't invent the idea, but he developed it, wrote about it and was the prime mover on it, that you have to contribute to your own salvation and it is not entirely up to the Lord.

It was a new idea to the church around... well, the idea had been circulated, but Arminius had come up... basically popularized it. In other words, the Lord can be frustrated by man in his plans. He has certain plans and you can frustrate those plans. He is a God of damage control.

And that, of course, makes the Lord the servant of men.

Arminian Legalists give lip service to Christ and the Holy Spirit, but when they say that Christ never actually saved anyone on the cross, that his death only made it possible for those who accept him to be saved, they are saying that it is up to you to make the effort and reach out and grab your own salvation. In other words, you have to cooperate with Christ to be saved. He made salvation possible for every last person on earth. But his sinless life, suffering, death and resurrection actually saved no one unless they work to reach out and grab it.

Again, tell it to Lazarus. The Bible doesn't know anything about that.

Rather it is crystal clear that Christ paid the penalty for sins, all of the sins of his people. The Bible said he died to save his people from their sins. And he did save every one of his people 2000 years ago, every one of his people past, present and yet to be born.

You have it on highest authority that the Lord Jesus Christ in his own words while he was on earth, Legalists are of their father the devil.

Now what about you this morning? Do you believe with all your heart that Jesus is your personal Lord and Savior, that he died and rose from the grave to pay the penalty for you, for you personal sins, all of them, past, present and future, that he is alive at this very minute, that he will come again on the last day to judge the living and the dead? If you are weak in faith, don't be satisfied about that. Cry out to God. He deserves to be trusted with such confidence as a child is his parent.

Ask him to increase your faith.

And you who have faith, keep it jealously and exercise it habitually. Feed it with God's Word every day. Just as we eat food for our bodies, our soul needs the Word of God every day.

Ask God to increase your faith. And pray to the Lord to [?]. Are you strong in the faith? Ask to be stronger still.

But if you don't know whether or not you are in Christ or know for sure that you are not and you are asking yourself, "What do I have to be saved? I do feel condemned." Well, hear Christ's own words.

"He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved; but he that believeth not shall be damned."<sup>9</sup>

Believing is giving up everything we have to Christ. Taking everything Christ has to ourselves.

May God execute that transfer for you and give you faith.

He that believeth in him shall not be ashamed. It is Christ that died. God has accepted Christ in the place of his people. Are sins are paid for in Christ as his people. And if you receive Christ to stand in your place you will find that your sins are put away, that his righteousness is credited to you, that you are accepted by God. And don't worry about feeling accepted. Trust what God says.

You know, his child is loved by him no matter how they feel. If you are a parent, you know that. You love your child. Sometimes your child doesn't feel that you love him, but is he loved? Sure he is.

"Confess with thy mouth the Lord Jesus, and shalt believe in thine heart that God hath raised him from the dead, thou shalt be saved."<sup>10</sup>

Ok. It is not like I wanted to say that this morning.

Getting back to our focus on worship we were talking about the ceremonial law that was a picture of Christ. It has been fulfilled in him. We are no longer to observe it. Because Christ has come for us to return to Old Testament worship with its animal sacrifices, its priesthood, its vestments, its musical instruments, its incense, its golden altar and all the rest to testify to the coming Christ. Because Christ has come for us to return to that worship would be to deny that Christ has come. You see, all that has been abolished.

So it is very important to understand that because there is so much confusion about it. It is a heresy. We are not under the ceremonial law. We are not to depend for salvation on our ability to keep from sinning.

So if you remember all that you won't be fooled by those who say, "Well, we are not under the law, but under grace." What they are doing is using God's Word to justify whatever they feel like doing. You know? I think that is the bottom line.

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<sup>9</sup> Mark 16:16.

<sup>10</sup> Romans 10:9.

Now is it only in the Old Testament where we find the regulative principle of worship, that God is to be worshipped in the manner he is commanded and we are not to add to or take away anything from it?

Now, really, if we only found it in the Old Testament and it wasn't part of the ceremonial law which was pointing to Christ which has been fulfilled, that would be enough. I mean, there is one author of the Bible, Old and New Testaments. And it is ridiculous not to mention blasphemous to think that he can oppose or contradict himself. So God is the author of both. He is one God, one Bible.

But the answer is no. Not only in the Old Testament do we find this regulative principle of worship, but it is reaffirmed mightily in the New Testament.

Here is an important rule of what theologians call hermeneutics, the art and science of biblical interpretation. The rule is—and, in fact, this rule has to be. It is very important to understand this. What is not expressly fulfilled in the New Testament out of the Old Testament is still in force. What is not expressly fulfilled in the New Testament is still in force. We can't just throw the Old Testament out because we have the New Testament. The Bible is one book, one author, one book. And there is not a speck of evidence whatever that God has changed his mind about demanding obedience to his commandments, is there? That includes his demand to be worshipped according to his will and not ours. What is not expressly fulfilled in the New Testament is still in force.

Now if you deny that, do you know what you are saying? This is going to be very harsh to you. It is going to sound very harsh. But I told you last week I wouldn't pull any punches in preaching God's Word.

If you deny that what is not... if you deny that the Old Testament is still in force except the parts that have been fulfilled, you are saying among other things that pedophiles and rapists should be free to walk around your neighborhood.

Why do I say that? Did you know that pedophilia and rape are not mentioned in the New Testament? Only in the Old Testament. Now is there anybody who calls themselves a New Testament Christian would like to say that rape and pedophilia are ok now because it is not mentioned in the New Testament? Incest? There is a whole list of them. Of course not. One God, one Bible. What he has not changed is still in force.

So just the fact that the principle of the regulative principle saturates the Old Testament, even if it were never hinted at in the new that would be all we needed to know that it is still in force. But worship is so important that God reaffirms it over and over and over again in the New Testament. There can be absolutely no mistake or misunderstanding. He reaffirms it with such force that nobody has any excuse not to obey it.

Jesus didn't... of the foundation of the regulative principle when he says, "God is a Spirit: and they that worship him must worship him in spirit and in truth,"<sup>11</sup> as we said.

On the Mount of Transfiguration when Jesus talked with Moses and Elijah and Peter wanted to make three tabernacles for them, remember that?

Turn in your Bibles to Matthew 17 verses one through six.

And after six days Jesus taketh Peter, James, and John his brother, and bringeth them up into an high mountain apart, And was transfigured before them: and his face did shine as the sun, and his raiment was white as the light. And, behold, there appeared unto them Moses and Elias talking with him. Then answered Peter, and said unto Jesus, Lord, it is good for us to be here: if thou wilt, let us make here three tabernacles; one for thee, and one for Moses, and one for Elias. While he yet spake, behold, a bright cloud overshadowed them: and behold a voice out of the cloud, which said, This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased; hear ye him. And when the disciples heard it, they fell on their face, and were sore afraid.<sup>12</sup>

God said, "This is my Son, my beloved Son, hear him. Peter, I haven't instructed you to make any tabernacles. Instead of trying to bring in your own ideas, your own inventions to worship, shut your mouth and hear my beloved Son."

Regulative principle of worship.

We have already talked about what Jesus said to the Pharisees and we added to the worship of God.

In Mark 7:6, "Well hath Esaias prophesied of you hypocrites, as it is written, This people honoureth me with their lips, but their heart is far from me. Howbeit in vain do they worship me, teaching for doctrines the commandments of men."<sup>13</sup>

Now he later say they make the word of God no effect because they have added their own ideas to worship. This is the regulative principle of worship affirmed by God once again.

The Lord Jesus told his apostles in the Great Commission of Matthew 28 to go and teach all nations. Now what did he say? He said, "Teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you."<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> John 4:24.

<sup>12</sup> Matthew 17:1-6.

<sup>13</sup> Mark 7:6-7.

<sup>14</sup> Matthew 28:20.

Now, he didn't say, "Teach them to observe whatsoever I have not forbidden, teach them to observe whatsoever I have not commanded..."

But if you go into almost any church and ask the minister to show you where in the Bible is the basis for what they do in worship he or she will tell you in so many words, "Well, it is not forbidden in the Bible."

That is the answer you will get. It is not forbidden.

Was that what Jesus in his final commandment to his disciples really meant? Teach all nations to observe whatsoever I have not forbidden? That is not what he says.

I have to tell you what this twisting of Scripture brings to my mind. Turn to Genesis the third chapter beginning with verse one.

Now the serpent was more subtil than any beast of the field which the LORD God had made. And he said unto the woman, Yea, hath God said, Ye shall not eat of every tree of the garden? And the woman said unto the serpent, We may eat of the fruit of the trees of the garden: But of the fruit of the tree which is in the midst of the garden, God hath said, Ye shall not eat of it, neither shall ye touch it, lest ye die. And the serpent said unto the woman, Ye shall not surely die: For God doth know that in the day ye eat thereof, then your eyes shall be opened, and ye shall be as gods, knowing good and evil.<sup>15</sup>

Now pay careful attention to how the serpent suddenly twists God's Word. God had said in Genesis 2:16, "Of every tree of the garden thou mayest freely eat: But of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, thou shalt not eat of it: for in the day that thou eatest thereof thou shalt surely die."<sup>16</sup>

The serpent knew that God had said they could eat the fruit of any tree except one. The serpent knew that, but he twists what God said and asks Eve, "Hasn't God said not to eat of any of the trees?"

And Eve rightly answers, "No, only the one tree. And if we eat of that tree we shall die."

The serpent spun God's Word to make it say what God never said. And then he compounds the evil by flatly saying God is a liar.

"Ye shall not surely die."<sup>17</sup>

To say that what we do in worship is not forbidden in the Bible is doing exactly to God's Word what the serpent did. It is taking what the Lord Jesus said, "Teach them to observe

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<sup>15</sup> Genesis 3:1-5.

<sup>16</sup> Genesis 2:16-17.

<sup>17</sup> Genesis 3:4.

whatsoever I have commanded you,” and spinning it to say, “Teach them to observe whatsoever I have not forbidden.”

Now that should be enough to convince anybody that that the regulative principle of worship that we do only in worship what God has commanded is reaffirmed in the New Testament. But there is more. But I don't think you want to hear a four hour sermon today.

So what we will do is stop there in our sermon series and somebody asked me how long this sermon series is going to be. I don't know. I can tell you one thing. It gets longer and longer every time I write. But in any event, I appreciate your patience in that.

Let us pray.

*Father, forgive us of our many sins in worship. None of us has searched thy Word enough to discover how thou wishes to be worshipped. Forgive us. We have taken liberties in introducing innovations of men into your worship. Please forgive us, Father. We have wrongly thought that if something seems right and holy to us than it must be also to you. Forgive us of that, please. We have wrongly thought that as long as our heart is right, we felt that our heart is right the details in worship didn't matter even when you warned us and you said, "I the Lord search the heart. I try the reins even to give to every man according to his ways and according to the fruit of his doings." Father, we have forgotten that you have warned us that the heart is deceitful above all things and desperately wicked. Who can know it? Father, forgive us. Put in us a renewed desire to worship you in spirit and in truth and give us and give us our church leaders, all churches, Father, that are faithful to you, that arte trying to be, Father, a holy passion to search the Scriptures, to conform our worship to your Word and not to the traditions and ideas and inventions of men. And give us courage to stand for your truth in worship and avoid idolatry at all costs no matter what men may say to us or about us, knowing that your beloved Son has promised, "Him that overcometh will I make a pillar in the temple of my God and he shall go no more out and I will write upon him the name of my God and the name of the city of my God which is new Jerusalem which cometh down out of heaven from my God. And I will write upon him my new name. He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith unto the churches." Lord, in the name of your precious Son our Lord and Savior, give us ears to hear and faith to hold fast. Amen.*

Our psalm is Psalm 121 and what John brown says about this psalm, “Here in the firm faith of being heard, David supplicates divine help and protection, verses one through two. He comforts himself and others with the assurance of God's infallible direction and protection in verses three through eight.”

So it is Psalm 121 on page 286. If you would stand please.

# Biblical Worship

by Kevin Reed

## Chapter 1

### Introductory Remarks

The worship of God is a universal duty. This fact is acknowledged by all men except blatant infidels.

Christianity rests upon a fundamental premise that God's favor is extended only to those who come to him through the person and work of Christ (John 14:6; Acts 4:12). Yet, while many profess faith in Christ, professing Christians differ widely in the manner in which they conduct their worship.

Such diversity in practice may prompt an inquiry. What means of worship possess the Lord's approval? What pattern of worship does the Lord truly require of his people? Specifically, is there a biblical measure by which we may evaluate various practices of worship?

The present ecclesiastical scene illustrates the urgency of seeking a biblical understanding of worship. Some churches are introducing "contemporary" modes of worship: drama, sacred dance, multi-media productions - even puppet shows. Others advocate free-style services, wherein anyone present may exercise his "gifts" spontaneously - religious democracy with a vengeance. There are still others who are alarmed by growing ecclesiastical anarchy; their solution is to embrace the liturgical forms of Rome, Canterbury, or Eastern Orthodoxy.

We hold a different perspective. We maintain that the Bible contains general principles which regulate all matters of worship. First, religious worship must be directed to the Lord God alone; worship must not be given to false deities, humans, or any created thing. Second, the only acceptable means of worship are those established by God.

This latter principle will be at the center of attention throughout our discussion. We will refer to it as the scriptural law of worship, as a reminder that the Lord regulates the worship of his people by means of his word.

Our premise differs sharply from contemporary attitudes toward worship. Many people claim that Christians are free to employ a variety of practices in worship, as long as the means employed are not specifically forbidden in scripture. (If something is not forbidden, it must be o.k.) When their worship activities are challenged, their response is, "Show us what is wrong with this practice."

We reject this view as inadequate. Certainly, any method of worship which is demonstrably unbiblical should be discarded immediately. But we reject the idea that the burden of proof rests upon us to prove a negative - to show that every new fad in worship violates some particular scriptural prohibition.

We believe that the scriptures contain a general prohibition against all elements in worship besides those which God himself has instituted. In other words, the burden of proof falls upon those who wish to introduce a practice into worship, to prove that God has required it in his word. This is the force of the scriptural law of worship; it guards against man-made innovations in worship. We trust that this truth will be amply demonstrated in the pages which follow.

It would be nice if a discussion about worship could be conducted without major conflicts; but that is not likely. Ever since the days of Cain and Abel (Gen. 4:3-8), there has been enmity between the practitioners of unapproved worship and the true worshippers of the Lord God. The advocates of corrupt worship always seek to subvert or exterminate true worship among the people of God. This is the real source of conflict over worship, and we cannot overlook that fact. If we seek to practice genuine biblical worship, we will encounter heated opposition from the advocates of synthetic worship.

Readers will note that the discussion which follows is largely concerned with matters of corporate worship. This focus on the public worship does not mean that family worship are unimportant. Indeed, domestic piety is essential among God's people; and we hold that private exercises of piety are also restricted to the elements of worship commanded in the word of God.

All of our worship should possess two preeminent characteristics: (1.) we must come to the Lord with sincere hearts filled with love for him; (2.) we must worship God using only the means established in his word. Any worship which lacks either of these qualities is sinful; we must not approach the Lord with corrupt motives or with improper methods.

Finally, it has been the author's goal to provide a succinct statement of the general principles of worship taught in holy scripture. A publication the size of this booklet cannot be expected to treat its subject in every particular detail. Readers who are interested in exhaustive polemics will have to look elsewhere.

## **Chapter 2**

### **Worship in the Old Testament**

We begin our examination of biblical worship by looking at the scriptural law of worship, as declared by Moses. We will then see how the precepts of the law apply within the historical narratives of the Old Testament.

#### **The Old Testament Law and Worship**

The tablets of the moral law begin with commandments regarding worship. Thus, the chief principles regulating worship were inscribed in stone, asserting the perpetual obligation of mankind to worship God according to his word.

The first commandment reminds us that the Lord is the only proper recipient of our worship. The command prohibits the worship of false gods, and enjoins us to worship only the true God, the Lord. "I am the Lord thy God . Thou shalt have no other gods before me"(Ex. 20:2-3).

The second commandment continues the focus on worship by telling us how God is to be worshipped. It does so in a negative sense, by forbidding us to worship God with human inventions. "Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image"(Ex. 20:4).

A graven image is not merely a statue of a false deity. If that were the case, the second commandment would be redundant of the first. Instead, the second commandment plainly forbids making or revering physical or artistic representations of the true God.[1]

When the Lord revealed himself to the Israelites, he did so by means of his word - not by physical images to be imitated or embellished. Therefore, he warned them: "Take ye therefore good heed unto yourselves; for ye saw no manner of similitude on the day that the Lord spake unto you in Horeb out of the midst of the fire: lest ye corrupt yourselves, and make you a graven image, the similitude of any figure," etc. (Deut. 4:15-16).

The apostle Paul instructed the Athenians, "We ought not to think that the Godhead is like unto gold, or silver, or stone, graven by art and man's device"(Acts 17:29; cf. Ps. 115:4-8). Any attempt to represent God by human devices is an insult to the Lord. His pronouncement is clear: "I am the Lord: that is my name: and my glory will I not give to another, neither my praise to graven images" (Isa. 42:8).

The prohibition expressed in the second commandment reaches beyond what we might call an image, in the strictest sense of the term. In its broader scope, this commandment really forbids the use of all man-made devices in worship. It directs us to the basic concept: that the only acceptable way of worshipping God is to render homage to him according to the instructions given in his word. Any deviation from his word by adopting humanly-devised forms of worship is, de facto, a violation of the scriptural law of worship.

When we consider the corrupt nature of fallen mankind, we may perceive why biblical directives in worship are so essential. "There is none that understandeth, there is none that seeketh after God"(Rom. 3:11). The natural tendency of

mankind is to pollute the worship of God, changing the truth of God into a lie, worshipping and serving the creature more than the Creator (Rom. 1:25).

Apart from God's word, men cannot attain an adequate knowledge of the way of salvation. Likewise, they can have no proper understanding of worship apart from the revealed will of God in the scriptures.

It is a maxim of Protestant theology that the word of God is our rule of faith and practice. The scriptures are necessary to make us "wise unto salvation" (2 Tim. 3:15-17). And, among the redeemed, we further recognize the word of God is essential "for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness," in order to be "thoroughly furnished unto all good works." We must not be ruled by personal feelings or human traditions, "but by every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of God" (Matt. 4:4).

As regards our service to God, we need instruction about how to worship God. The biblical regulations respecting worship are a merciful provision, given to the people of God by their Redeemer, that they might know how to worship him aright.

As we survey the scriptures, we find that, from the earliest days of recorded history, the Lord gave to his people a divine pattern for worship. Although the Lord has sometimes made changes to outward forms and ceremonies, as he has unfolded the plan of redemption, God's people have never been left without commands for worship.

The Lord demands obedience from his people. He tells them how to conduct worship; and it is unlawful to worship God by means which he has not established. Any humanly-devised alterations or additions to the worship of God are a species of idolatry.

In other words, all religious ceremonies and institutions must have clear scriptural warrant, if they are to be admitted as valid expressions of worship. This concept has sometimes been called the regulative principle of worship. It is merely an application of the sola scriptura rule of Protestant theology.

### **The Precepts of the Law**

In order to confirm our understanding of the scriptural law of worship, we turn to the precepts of the law. In the book of Deuteronomy, Moses exhorts the children of Israel to keep the law of God; in the 12th chapter of the book, Moses reviews scriptural precepts pertaining to worship.

The Lord forbids his people to imitate pagan ways of worship; the Israelites were commanded to eradicate the remnants of corrupt worship from their midst (Deut. 12:2-3). They were commanded to destroy "all the places" wherein the heathen served their gods. They were instructed to purge the land of all the implements associated with false worship: "Ye shall overthrow their altars, and break their pillars, and burn their groves with fire; and ye shall hew down the graven images of their gods." Even the terminology of corrupt worship was to be erased: "Destroy the names of them out of that place."

To the modern mind, this may sound strangely intolerant. But the Lord warned his people against the danger of imitating the worship practices of the nations: "Ye shall not do so unto the Lord your God" (Deut. 12:4).

The chapter concludes with another stern warning against imitating heathen worship. There is no room for comparative religion or the assimilation of man-made devices in the worship of the true God. "Take heed to thyself that thou be not snared by following them, after that they be destroyed from before thee; and that thou inquire not after their gods, saying, How did these nations serve their gods? even so will I do likewise. Thou shalt not do so unto the Lord thy God. What thing soever I command you, observe to do it: thou shalt not add thereto, nor diminish from it" (Deut. 12:30-32). That last statement points to doctrine highlighted earlier in the book of Deuteronomy respecting the sufficiency and authority of scripture. "Ye shall not add unto the word which I command you, neither shall ye diminish ought from it, that ye may keep the commandments of the Lord your God which I command you" (Deut. 4:2). The general sufficiency and

authority of scripture are brought to bear upon the content of our worship. This is the meaning of the scriptural law of worship: all forms of worship must have express scriptural warrant, if they are to be admitted as legitimate means of worship. The biblical pattern of worship needs no supplements of human devising; indeed, such man-made additions are a snare - graven images - the very seed of idolatry.

### **Worship in the Wilderness**

We have seen the general precepts of worship stated clearly by Moses. We now turn to some historical narratives in the Bible which illustrate the scriptural law of worship. These narratives demonstrate the binding nature of the regulative principle of worship.

During the wilderness wanderings, the Israelites had to be schooled in proper principles of worship. Their native tendency toward corrupt worship was early shown, while they waited for Moses to return from Mt. Sinai. Growing restless, Aaron and the people constructed a golden calf to serve as a visible symbol of deity.

Virtually all expositors decry the action of the Israelites as idolatry. What is often overlooked, however, is the manner in which the Israelites justified their action. They did not view the calf as a newly-created deity; rather, they made the calf as a testimony of their divine deliverance from Egypt. The calf-image evoked a sense of the strength displayed in their deliverance. "These be thy gods, O Israel, which brought thee up out of the land of Egypt. And when Aaron saw it, he built an altar before it; and Aaron made proclamation, and said, Tomorrow is a feast to the Lord" (Ex. 32:4-5)

In other words, the Israelites did not claim to worship new deities - that would be blatant idolatry. No, they intended the calf to serve as a symbol of deity; and Aaron seeks to honor the sacred name of the Lord through this monstrous invention.[2]

Now, when Moses returned, he did not regard this matter lightly. He did not employ the tactic which Papists have used for centuries (and which evangelical churchmen presently endorse), simply cautioning the Israelites not to worship false gods, noting that the image itself was not a deity, and then allowing the image to remain strictly as a symbol. No, Moses was not trained in the sophistries of medieval scholasticism. "He took the calf which they had made, and burnt it in the fire, and ground it to powder, and strawed it upon the water, and made the children of Israel drink of it. And Moses said unto Aaron, What did this people unto thee, that thou hast brought so great a sin upon them?" (Ex. 32:20-21).

The 10th chapter of Leviticus contains a startling account of God's displeasure with human innovation in worship. It is the case of Nadab and Abihu. These men were sons of Aaron the high priest; they had been consecrated to the priesthood. In an act of carelessness, or presumption, they "offered strange fire before the Lord, which he commanded them not." Immediately, "there went out fire from the Lord, and devoured them" (Lev. 10:1-2).

Note the simplicity of their offense; Nadab and Abihu had not performed an act which was expressly forbidden. No, they merely added a bit of strange fire which the Lord had not commanded. Irrespective of their office or their motive, they were immediately consumed by fire from the Lord. The judgment which fell upon Nadab and Abihu stands as a perpetual testimony against those who presume to worship God by means which lack divine warrant. It is a solemn warning: "the Lord spake, saying, I will be sanctified in them that come nigh me, and before all the people I will be glorified" (Lev. 10:3).

### **The Folly of Saul**

The case of king Saul illustrates the folly of claiming good intentions as an excuse for worship which God has not sanctioned.

Saul found himself in distressing circumstances. He was faced with a formidable number of enemy troops; and Samuel was late for their appointed meeting. Therefore, Saul decided to make a burnt offering himself, without waiting any longer for Samuel.

According to the Mosaic law, only the priests were authorized to make such offerings, but king Saul performed the priestly task on his own. No sooner had Saul committed his presumptuous deed, than Samuel arrived.

Samuel rebuked Saul, exclaiming, "What hast thou done?" Saul pleaded the necessity of his action, based upon pragmatic considerations. Regardless of the distressing circumstances, or Saul's apparent motive, Samuel pronounced God's judgment on the king. "Thou hast done foolishly: thou hast not kept the commandment of the Lord thy God, which he commanded thee: for now would the Lord have established thy kingdom upon Israel for ever. But now thy kingdom shall not continue" (1 Sam. 13:13-14).

Saul's foolishness did not end with this first incident. A short time later, he led the Israelites in battle to destroy the Amalekites. Saul had been specifically instructed to destroy both the Amalekites and their livestock as well, taking no booty (1Sam.15:3).

Instead, "Saul and the people spared Agag," king of the Amalekites, "and the best of the sheep, and of the oxen, and of the fatlings, and the lambs." His subsequent explanation was that these choice animals would make an excellent sacrifice unto the Lord (1Sam.15:9,21).

From a human perspective this decision might sound reasonable. After all, when they considered the best of the livestock, it probably seemed like a terrible waste simply to destroy them. Wouldn't it be better to retain them as an offering unto God? If the motive was sincere, how could such a generous act of worship be tainted?

Samuel's response was blunt: "Hath the Lord as great delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices, as in obeying the voice of the Lord? Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice, and to hearken than the fat of rams. For rebellion is as the sin of witchcraft, and stubbornness is as iniquity and idolatry. Because thou hast rejected the word of the Lord, he hath also rejected thee from being king" (1Sam. 15:22-23).

The lesson of this incident is simple. No motive or action in worship is acceptable, if it runs contrary to God's revealed word. At no point had Saul professed the worship of another god; yet the king's actions toward the Lord were unacceptable, because they deviated from God's revealed word. Therefore, Saul's deeds are likened to the very opposite of true worship - to witchcraft and idolatry.

## **Temple Worship**

As noted earlier, the 12th chapter of Deuteronomy opens and closes with general statements prohibiting the corruption of worship through imitation of heathen practices. The middle portion of the chapter is significant as regards the outward ceremonies of worship under the Levitical priesthood. Even at the time of Moses, it was understood that the portable tabernacle would eventually give way to a permanent place for the Levitical sacrifices. "There shall be a place which the Lord your God shall choose to cause his name to dwell there; thither shall ye bring all that I command you" (Deut. 12:11; cf. 12:5,14).

The designation of a fixed place of worship did not reach fulfillment until the Israelites conquered and settled the land of Canaan. During the reign of king David, Jerusalem was designated as the permanent location for the ark, thereby establishing Jerusalem as the center for the sacrificial ordinances associated with the Levitical priesthood. Even so, the entire program of worship, from the tabernacle to the temple, was directed by divine revelation.

The tabernacle worship was not the invention of Moses; it was built according to a divine blueprint. The Israelites were instructed: "Let them make me a sanctuary; that I may dwell among them. According to all that I shew thee, after the pattern of all the instruments thereof, even so shall ye make it" (Ex. 25:8-9; Ex. 25:40; 27:8; Num. 8:4; cf. Acts 7:44; Heb. 8:5). Throughout the description of the tabernacle furnishings, it is reiterated that all things must be made according to the God-given pattern.

The ark of the covenant was placed within the tabernacle. It was a symbol of God's presence among them - the meeting-place between the Lord and his people. The Levitical priests performed sacrifices in the tabernacle: all according to the

divine pattern given by God to Moses (Ex. 25:10-22; 29:42-46).

Later, when David sought to transfer the ark to Jerusalem, the ark was moved initially in a careless manner. The law required the ark to be carried on poles by the priests (Ex. 25:14; Num. 4:1-5). Instead of following the biblical procedure, the Israelites placed the ark upon an ox cart. While this method might have seemed more convenient, it resulted in a tragedy. "And when they came unto the threshingfloor of Chidon, Uzza put forth his hand to hold the ark; for the oxen stumbled. And the anger of the Lord was kindled against Uzza, and he smote him, because he put his hand to the ark: and there he died before God" (1 Chron. 13:9-10; cf. 2 Sam. 6:1-10).

David was troubled by the death of Uzza. He wondered, "How shall I bring the ark of God home to me? So David brought not the ark home to himself to the city of David." The ark was left temporarily at the house of Obed-edom. "And the Lord blessed the house of Obed-edom, and all that he had" (1 Chron. 13:12-14).

The problem was not with the ark. The problem was the failure of the Israelites to maintain the biblical order. Therefore, David called for the priests and Levites, and he charged them, "Sanctify yourselves, both ye and your brethren, that ye may bring up the ark of the Lord God of Israel unto the place that I have prepared for it. For because ye did it not at the first, the Lord our God made a breach upon us, for that we sought him not after the due order" (1 Chron. 15:12-13).

David's lesson is not a quaint tale recorded for our amusement. Just as the earlier events regarding Moses, "All these things happened unto them for ensamples: and they are written for our admonition, upon whom the ends of the world are come" (1 Cor. 10:11). There is a timeless principle contained in such declarations, "Make all things according to the pattern shewed to thee in the mount" (Heb. 8:5; cf. Ex. 25:40). We, too, must seek God after "due order" - not according to convenience or what seems right in our own eyes.

After the ark was moved to Jerusalem, David organized the courses of the priests, including the Levitical musicians. Everything was ordered "according to the commandment of David, and of Gad the king's seer, and Nathan the prophet: for so was the commandment of the Lord by the prophets" (2 Chron. 29:25).

Later, David provided Solomon with a plan for building the temple: "David gave to Solomon his son the pattern of the porch, and of the houses thereof and the pattern of all that he had by the spirit also for the courses of the priests and the Levites. All this, said David, the Lord made me understand in writing by his hand upon me, even all the works of this pattern" (1 Chron. 28:11-13, 19). Nothing was left for improvising; everything was ordered by the divine pattern for worship.

Solomon built the temple according to the heavenly blueprints left by David. The kingdom prospered under Solomon, and Jerusalem remained the seat of public worship for the entire kingdom of Israel.

After the death of Solomon, the nation became divided and the people slid into corruption and apostasy. The northern tribes immediately embraced false worship, and never recovered from their apostasy. Within the kingdom of Judah, there were several seasons of reformation, amidst waves of idolatry. The key to understanding the history of the Israelites is to note the critical connection between the worship of the people, and God's dealings with them in relation to their worship.[3]

### **The Apostasy of the Northern Kingdom**

When the nation of Israel was divided, Jeroboam received a prophecy, that his reign in the northern tribes would be firmly established, if he would walk according to the statutes and commandments of God. Instead, the condition of the northern kingdom was sealed negatively, because Jeroboam took a pragmatic approach to worship (1 Kings 11:37-38).

As we have seen, Jerusalem was the divinely-appointed center for the sacrificial ordinances of the Old Testament. Jeroboam reasoned that his authority would be undermined, if his subjects continued to participate in the temple worship of Jerusalem. So Jeroboam devised a "local" program of worship suited to his own purposes:

"Whereupon the king took counsel, and made two calves of gold, and said unto them, It is too much for you to go up to Jerusalem: behold thy gods, O Israel, which brought thee up out of the land of Egypt. And he set the one in Beth-el, and the other put he in Dan. And this thing became a sin: for the people went to worship before the one, even unto Dan. And he made an house of high places, and made priests of the lowest of the people, which were not of the sons of Levi. And Jeroboam ordained a feast in the eighth month, on the fifteenth day of the month, like unto the feast that is in Judah, and he offered upon the altar. So did he in Beth-el, sacrificing unto the calves that he had made: and he placed in Beth-el the priests of the high places which he had made. So he offered upon the altar which he had made in Beth-el the fifteenth day of the eighth month, even in the month which he had devised of his own heart; and ordained a feast unto the children of Israel: and he offered upon the altar, and burnt incense" (1 Kings 12:28-33).

Jeroboam's actions were wholly revolutionary. He established a new center for worship, new means for worship, and a new priesthood. It was not so much that Jeroboam encouraged his people to worship other deities, but that he devised new methods which displaced the biblical means of worship; Jeroboam's offense was akin to the Aaron's sin in making the original golden calf. Jeroboam was confirmed in his evil, and cursed on account of it. Similarly, the northern kingdom never recovered from this disastrous undertaking (1 Kings 13:33-34).

The kings of northern Israel are denounced for retaining the legacy of Jeroboam. Baasha exterminated the descendants of Jeroboam, but retained the corrupt religion. Therefore, the Lord sent a prophet to pronounce judgment on Baasha because he "walked in the way of Jeroboam, and has made my people Israel to sin, to provoke me to anger with their sins" (1 Kings 16:2).

Zimri destroyed the house of Baasha; but Zimri was himself vanquished "for his sins which he sinned in doing evil in the sight of the Lord, in walking in the way of Jeroboam, and in his sin which he did, to make Israel to sin" (1 Kings 16:19). Zimri's ultimate successor was Omri, who "did worse than all that went before him" (1 Kings 16:26).

The downward spiral continued with Ahab, the son of Omri. Ahab "did evil in the sight of the Lord above all that were before him. And it came to pass, as if it had been a light thing for him to walk in the sins of Jeroboam the son of Nebat, that he took to wife Jezebel the daughter of Ethbaal king of the Zidonians, and went and served Baal, and worshipped him. And he reared up an altar for Baal in the house of Baal, which he had built in Samaria. And Ahab made a grove; and Ahab did more to provoke the Lord God of Israel to anger than all the kings of Israel that were before him" (1 Kings 16:30-33; cf. 21:25-26).

Unfortunately, the spirit of Ahab is prevalent in our own day, especially among pluralistic cultures (and churches); corrupt worship is viewed merely as "a light thing."

There is one especially curious episode in the latter history of the apostate northern kingdom. When Jehu took the throne, he exterminated the house of Ahab, and repudiated the Baalism of his predecessors. Jehu professed a "zeal for the Lord;" he developed a crafty plan for destroying the prophets of Baal, and he eradicated Baal worship from Israel (2 Kings 10:16; 18-28).

Jehu's action brought temporal blessings for his house, but his heart was not right: "Howbeit from the sins of Jeroboam the son of Nebat, who made Israel to sin, Jehu departed not from after them, to wit, the golden calves that were in Beth-el, and that were in Dan. But Jehu took no heed to walk in the law of the Lord God of Israel with all his heart: for he departed not from the sins of Jeroboam, which made Israel to sin" (2 Kings 10:29-31).

The reign of Jehu shows that the guilt of Israel came not merely from idolatry, in the narrow sense of the term: that is, the worship of false deities. Jehu eradicated the worship of other deities and claimed to worship the Lord, but he clung to the unhallowed methods of worship instituted by Jeroboam. Thus, Israel was charged with corrupt worship for attempting to worship the true God, the Lord, with unsanctioned means. The comparison here between Jeroboam and Jehu illustrates that Jeroboam's original crime was in establishing alternate forms of worship from those enjoined in the Mosaic law. Jeroboam's initial action took Israel to the slippery slope of corrupt worship. From there, the nation frequently degenerated into further idolatry by worshipping false gods as well. Therefore, let it be noted that the first step on the path of idolatry is taken when men presume to worship the Lord through means and measures not ordained in

the word of God.

Jehu's "reform" was not a genuine reformation. Jehu rejected the false gods of Baalism, and he professed to serve the Lord, but he retained the false elements of worship established by Jeroboam. He did not restore the correct means of worship decreed in the scriptures. Jehu is typical of multitudes who claim to serve the Lord, but who cleave to man-made forms or worship, instead of worshipping God exclusively by the means commanded in his word.

The kings of Israel were idolaters; the apostasy of the nation was thorough; and so the Lord destroyed the northern kingdom. A chilling account is provided in 2 Kings 17:4ff., with a summary statement in verses 20-24 of that same chapter:

"And the Lord rejected all the seed of Israel, and afflicted them, and delivered them into the hand of spoilers, until he had cast them out of his sight. For he rent Israel from the house of David; and they made Jeroboam the son of Nebat king; and Jeroboam drave Israel from following the Lord, and made them sin a great sin. For the children of Israel walked in all the sins of Jeroboam which he did; they departed not from them; until the Lord removed Israel out of his sight, as he had said by all his servants the prophets. So was Israel carried away out of their own land to Assyria unto this day" (2 Kings 17:20-24).

The 17th chapter of 2 Kings also explains the origin of the mongrel religion of the Samaritans (2 Kings 17:24-41). After the Assyrians conquered the northern kingdom of Israel, the Assyrian king deported the Israelites; he then used the land of Israel as a relocation center for Babylonians and other displaced persons. These heathen refugees "feared not the Lord: therefore the Lord sent lions among them, which slew some of them" (2 Kings 17:25).

Alarmed by this development, the king of Assyria sent back an Israelite priest to instruct the people how to serve the Lord. The people then professed to worship the Lord God, but they attempted to render service to the Lord by resorting to their customary idolatry, employing their own devices and priesthood. "So they feared the Lord, and made unto themselves of the lowest of them priests of the high places, which sacrificed for them in the houses of the high places. They feared the Lord, and served their own gods, after the manner of the nations whom they carried away from thence. So these nations feared the Lord, and served their graven images, both their children, and their children's children: as did their fathers, so do they unto this day" (2 Kings 17:32-33,41).

The technical term for such a religious admixture is syncretism. For centuries it has been the modus operandi of Roman Catholicism. Sadly this Samaritan approach to worship is also quite prominent among professing Protestants, especially in the church growth movement among contemporary "evangelicals." The trends in popular culture and the deviant worship of the pluralistic masses are adopted as a way to make worship "relevant" and appealing to modern society.[4]

## **The Kingdom of Judah**

After the separation of the northern kingdom, the people of Judah retained their connection with the kingly descendants of David. Sadly, not all of the kings of Judah walked in the ways of their father David, who had displayed such commendable zeal for the true worship of God.

Judah became apostate during the reign of Rehoboam by resorting to unhallowed means of worship: "Judah did evil in the sight of the Lord, and they provoked him to jealousy with their sins which they had committed, above all that their fathers had done. For they also built them high places, and images, and groves, on every high hill, and under every green tree. And there were also sodomites in the land: and they did according to all the abominations of the nations which the Lord cast out before the children of Israel"(1 Kings 14:22-24).[5]

When Asa became king in Judah, he instituted reform. In the summary of his reign, he is commended for removing corrupt worship. "Asa did that which was good and right in the eyes of the Lord his God: for he took away the altars of the strange gods, and the high places, and brake down the images, and cut down the groves: and commanded Judah to seek the Lord God of their fathers, and to do the law and the commandment. Also he took away out of all the cities of

Judah the high places and the images: and the kingdom was quiet before him" (2 Chron. 15:2-5; cf. 1 Kings 15:12-14).

The detailed narrative of Asa's reign tells us that the Lord sent a prophet to admonish the king to faithfulness. As a result, Asa "took courage, and put away the abominable idols out of all the land of Judah and Benjamin, and out of the cities which he had taken from mount Ephraim, and renewed the altar of the Lord, that was before the porch of the Lord." He led the people "into a covenant to seek the Lord God of their fathers with all their heart and with all their soul" (2 Chron. 15:8, 12).

Moreover, Asa expelled the queen-mother: "he removed her from being queen, because she had made an idol in a grove: and Asa cut down her idol, and stamped it, and burnt it at the brook Kidron." An exception is noted, that "the high places were not taken away out of Israel." Nevertheless, Asa is commended because he did not later apostatize, as some of the kings who resorted to idolatry in the latter years of their reigns (2Chron. 15:16-17; cf. 1Kings 15:14).

Contemporary readers may find it strange that so much attention is given to a king's attitudes and practices respecting worship. Yet, the details of the inspired narrative illustrate the critical relationship between true worship and the state of the nation.

The reign of Jehoshaphat was generally positive, although some exceptions are noted in the biblical narratives. Jehoshaphat is praised for "doing that which was right in the eyes of the Lord." "The Lord was with Jehoshaphat because he walked in the first ways of his father David, and sought not unto Baalim; but sought to the Lord God of his father, and walked in his commandments, and not after the doings of Israel." Further, he rid Judah of "the remnant of the sodomites, which remained in the days of his father Asa" (1 Kings 22:43; 2 Chron. 17:3-4; 1 Kings 22:46).

Jehoshaphat's shortcomings are recorded; he foolishly "joined affinity with Ahab," the wicked king of Judah, for Jehoram, son of Jehoshaphat married Athaliah, the daughter of Ahab. Jehoshaphat's further misadventures with Ahab nearly cost him his life (even as Ahab was slain) (2Chron. 18:1; 2Kings 8:16-18; 2 Chron. 18; 1 Kings 22).

In spite of his personal weaknesses, Jehoshaphat conducted substantial reforms within Judah. "He went out again through the people from Beer-sheba to mount Ephraim, and brought them back unto the Lord God of their fathers" (2 Chron. 19:4-11). He appointed judges and admonished them to "judge not for man, but for the Lord." Moreover, he charged the priests to fulfill their duties "in the fear of the Lord faithfully, and with a perfect heart" (2 Chron. 20). During a time of national crisis, Jehoshaphat proclaimed a fast and led the people in supplication to God for deliverance. Such public humility and worship were not without effect. The Lord delivered Judah, even as a Levitical chorus was raised to praise him.

At some point during his reign, Jehoshaphat removed certain "high places and groves out of Judah." The conjunction of these high places and groves suggests that these were sites of pagan worship devoted to false gods (2Chron.17:5; cf. 19:3; cf. Deut. 12:2-3).

We are told that "as yet the people had not prepared their hearts unto the God of their fathers." They apparently resorted to other sites of corrupt worship, "for the people offered and burnt incense in the high places," and these high places were not taken away (2Chron.20:33; 1 Kings22:43; 2Chron.20:33).

From this passage, we see that corrupt worship is symptomatic of a serious problem of the heart. A plea of sincerity is no excuse for disobedience to God's commands; so the people are guilty of sin, regardless of their professed motives. In conducting unsanctioned worship, the people exhibited that their hearts were "not prepared" unto God. Also, in this case, the example of a godly leader was insufficient to overcome the inherent tendency of the general population to corrupt worship.

Before Jehoshaphat died, he designated his firstborn son, Jehoram, as successor to the throne. Jehoram "walked in the way of the kings of Israel, like as did the house of Ahab: for he had the daughter of Ahab to wife: and he wrought that which was evil in the eyes of the Lord" (2 Chron.21:6). Jehoram murdered his six brothers; and "he made high places in the mountains of Judah, and caused the inhabitants of Jerusalem to commit fornication, and compelled Judah thereto"

(2 Chron. 21:2-4,11). By thus undoing the reforms of his father, Jehoram provoked the anger of the Lord. He died of disease after a brief reign of eight years.

Jehoram's son, Ahaziah, also became an evil king, and was killed after a reign of only one year. These events paved the way for Athaliah to usurp the throne and destroy the royal descendants of the house of Judah. (Unknown to her, there yet remained one descendant of the house of David.) The apostasy during Athaliah's rule was notable. "For the sons of Athaliah, that wicked woman, had broken up the house of God; and also all the dedicated things of the house of the Lord did they bestow upon Baalim" (2 Chron. 24:7).

It took an armed conspiracy of reformation to restore proper worship after the usurpation of Athaliah. The true heir to the throne, Joash, was only a young child, and he was secretly sheltered for several years in the home of Jehoiada the priest. At an opportune time, Jehoiada assembled the captains and the Levites. They installed Joash as king and executed Athaliah. "And Jehoiada made a covenant between him, and between all the people, and between the king, that they should be the Lord's people. Then all the people went to the house of Baal, and brake it down, and brake his altars and his images in pieces, and slew Mattan the priest of Baal before the altars. Also Jehoiada appointed the offices of the house of the Lord by the hand of the priests the Levites, whom David had distributed in the house of the Lord, to offer the burnt offerings of the Lord, as it is written in the law of Moses, with rejoicing and with singing, as it was ordained by David" (2 Chron. 22:11-12; 2Kings 11:2-3; 2 Chron. 23; 2 Kings 11; 2 Chron. 23:16-18; cf. 2 Kings 11:17-20).

Jehoiada's good influence over the young king was considerable. "Joash did that which was right in the sight of the Lord all the days of Jehoiada the priest." The temple was repaired, proper worship was restored, "and they offered burnt offerings in the house of the Lord continually all the days of Jehoiada" (2 Chron. 24:3; cf. 2 Kings 12:2; 2Chron. 24:6-14; 2Kings 12:6-16).

Sadly, after Jehoiada's death, king Joash followed the wicked counsel of the princes of Judah. "They left the house of the Lord of their fathers, and served groves and idols: and wrath came upon Judah and Jerusalem for this their trespass" (2 Chron. 24:18).

Could anything be clearer? The Lord detests corrupt worship and he punishes this sin. God "sent prophets to them, to bring them again unto the Lord; and they testified against them: but they would not give ear" (2 Chron.24:19).

Amaziah's reign was of a mixed character. The throne next passed to Uzziah, whose government was generally good and prosperous. Uzziah "did that which was right in the sight of the Lord.... He sought God in the days of Zechariah, who had understanding in the visions of God: and as long as he sought the Lord, God made him to prosper." Nevertheless, "the high places were not removed: the people sacrificed and burnt incense still on the high places" (2Chron. 25:2-4,14-16; 2Kings14:3-6; 2 Chron. 26:4-5; 2 Kings 15:4).

Having achieved great success, Uzziah later became proud, and took unto himself a priestly function. "He transgressed against the Lord his God, and went into the temple of the Lord to burn incense upon the altar of incense" (2 Chron. 26:16). On the surface, this might have seemed pious - a personal desire on the part of the king to burn incense unto the Lord. Yet, even if his motive was sincere, such motivation was no excuse for going beyond the boundaries of worship prescribed by God (as the case of Saul had previously exhibited).

"Azariah the priest went in after him, and with him fourscore priests of the Lord, that were valiant men: and they withstood Uzziah the king, and said unto him, It appertaineth not unto thee, Uzziah, to burn incense unto the Lord, but to the priests the sons of Aaron, that are consecrated to burn incense: go out of the sanctuary; for thou hast trespassed; neither shall it be for thine honour from the Lord God" (2 Chron. 26:17-18). Uzziah became angry with the priests, but the king was immediately struck with leprosy, and he ended his days in seclusion (2 Chron. 27:2).

Uzziah was followed by Jotham, who "did that which was right in the sight of the Lord, according to all that his father Uzziah did: howbeit he entered not into the temple of the Lord. And the people did yet corruptly." "Howbeit the high places were not removed: the people sacrificed and burned incense still in the high places. He built the higher gate of

the house of the Lord" (2 Kings 15:35).

Since the people remained corrupt, the Lord sent them the leadership they deserved. After Jotham died, Ahaz became king. Ahaz "did not that which was right in the sight of the Lord, like David his father: for he walked in the ways of the kings of Israel, and made also molten images for Baalim. Moreover he burnt incense in the valley of the son of Hinnom, and burnt his children in the fire, after the abominations of the heathen whom the Lord had cast out before the children of Israel. He sacrificed also and burnt incense in the high places, and on the hills, and under every green tree" (2 Chron. 28:1-4; cf. 2 Kings 16:2-4).

This wicked king plundered the house of the Lord. After visiting the king of Assyria, Ahaz determined to construct an altar after the fashion of one he had seen in Damascus.[6] Ahaz sent the pattern of the Damascan altar to Urijah, who built a replica of it. When Ahaz returned to Jerusalem, he personally made offerings upon the new altar. He subsequently moved and mutilated the brazen altar which properly belonged in the forefront of the house of the Lord (2 Chron. 28:21; 2 Kings 16:8; 2 Kings 16).

Eventually, Ahaz "gathered together the vessels of the house of God, and cut in pieces the vessels of the house of God, and shut up the doors of the house of the Lord, and he made him altars in every corner of Jerusalem. And in every several city of Judah he made high places to burn incense unto other gods, and provoked to anger the Lord God of his fathers" (2 Chron. 28:24-25).

Ahaz's actions are typical of those who form their worship based upon personal preferences. Initially, he cast his eyes upon the novel worship of others. Perhaps he was moved by fascination, or possessed a desire not to be excluded from the experience of others. Regardless of his motive, the new practices embraced by Ahaz progressively crowded out the proper worship of Jerusalem. Ultimately, true worship was displaced altogether by the corrupt worship of the king. The pattern of Damascus and the king's impulses completely replaced the pattern of worship prescribed in the scriptures. God's verdict on the matter is clear; this process "provoked to anger the Lord God of his fathers" (2 Chron. 28:25).

After the devastation wrought by Ahaz, the kingdom stood in need of comprehensive reform. The Lord raised up Hezekiah for this task. Hezekiah "did that which was right in the sight of the Lord." "He trusted in the Lord God of Israel; so that after him was none like him among all the kings of Judah, nor any that were before him. For he clave to the Lord, and departed not from following him, but kept his commandments, which the Lord commanded Moses" (2 Chron. 29:2; 2 Kings 18:5-6).

During the first year of his reign, Hezekiah reopened the house of the Lord and commenced repairs. He directed the Levites to cleanse the temple so that the priesthood and proper sacrifices were restored. The passover was reinstated. Hezekiah's zeal was so fervent that he sent letters among the tribes of Ephraim and Manasseh, encouraging them to come to Jerusalem and keep the passover; a proclamation went "throughout all Israel, from Beer-sheba even to Dan, that they should come to keep the passover unto the Lord God of Israel at Jerusalem" (2 Chron. 30:5).

It was a call to repentance: "Ye children of Israel, turn again unto the Lord God of Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, and he will return to the remnant of you, that are escaped out of the hand of the kings of Assyria. And be not ye like your fathers, and like your brethren, which trespassed against the Lord God of their fathers, who therefore gave them up to desolation, as ye see. Now be ye not stiffnecked, as your fathers were, but yield yourselves unto the Lord, and enter into his sanctuary, which he hath sanctified for ever: and serve the Lord your God, that the fierceness of his wrath may turn away from you" (2 Chron. 30:6-8).

While many in Israel mocked the call to repentance, "diverse of Asher and Manasseh and of Zebulun humbled themselves, and came to Jerusalem" (2 Chron. 30:11). The passover was kept, and the king and the people confessed their sins and sought the Lord's forgiveness. Thus, it was a season of genuine spiritual revival.

The restoration of the passover was such a wonderful event, the people remained in Jerusalem an extra week. "So there was great joy in Jerusalem: for since the time of Solomon the son of David king of Israel there was not the like in Jerusalem" (2 Chron. 30:26).

In conjunction with the passover celebration, the people "arose and took away the altars that were in Jerusalem, and all the altars for incense took they away, and cast them into the brook Kidron." After the passover, "all Israel that were present went out to the cities of Judah, and brake the images in pieces, and cut down the groves, and threw down the high places and the altars out of all Judah and Benjamin, in Ephraim also and Manasseh, until they had utterly destroyed them all" (2 Chron. 30:14; 2 Chron. 31:1).

From these actions, we see two aspects of reform united: the positive work of reform in restoring the biblical pattern of worship, and the negative work of reform in removing the elements of unscriptural worship. Both aspects are essential components of thorough reform.

Both the positive and negative aspects of reform are further illustrated in the actions of Hezekiah. A positive facet of reform occurs in Hezekiah's restoration of the biblical courses of the priesthood. "Hezekiah appointed the courses of the priests and the Levites after their courses, every man according to his service, the priests and Levites for burnt offerings and for peace offerings, to minister, and to give thanks, and to praise in the gates of the tents of the Lord." The appointments were all made "as it is written in the law of the Lord." Hezekiah "set the Levites in the house of the Lord with cymbals, with psalteries, and with harps, according to the commandment of David, and of Gad the king's seer, and Nathan the prophet: for so was the commandment of the Lord by his prophets." As a negative facet of reform, Hezekiah "brake the images, and cut down the groves, and brake in pieces the brasen serpent that Moses had made: for unto those days the children of Israel did burn incense to it: and he called it Nehushtan [ a piece of brass]" (2 Chron. 31:2-3; 2 Chron. 29:25; 2 Kings 18:4).

The destruction of the brasen serpent is an extremely important event, for it demonstrates the far-reaching scope of genuine reform. The brasen serpent was originally made at the command of God. It had not, however, been designated as an implement for use in the ordinary worship of the Lord. Therefore, because the brasen serpent had been superstitiously abused, it was necessary to destroy it.

Contemporary readers may find it difficult to comprehend this deed. It is easier to discern why Hezekiah led the people to destroy the high places, images, and groves dedicated to unsanctioned worship. But, truly, the brasen serpent was a hallowed symbol of God's former deliverance of the Israelites. Why destroy it? Why not simply caution the people against the abuse of a traditional symbol?

Hezekiah was wiser than our modern churchmen, who would, no doubt, follow a more "moderate" course. The king realized that the serpent had become a snare; it fostered superstition. And Hezekiah knew that this superstition - this corruption of worship - was sufficient to provoke the wrath of God. Far better to dispense with a sacred relic, than leave it as a temptation for present and future generations.

As noted, the brasen serpent was included in no part of the ordinary worship of God. By contrast, the passover was an integral part of the stated worship of God; therefore the passover was renewed and restored. But since the serpent had no sanctioned role in the stated worship of God, it was better to remove it altogether.

It is noteworthy that, throughout Hezekiah's reformation, the king enjoyed the widespread assistance of other men. Hezekiah freely delegated tasks to others, and he used his authority to impress upon the lesser rulers and priests their own particular obligations. If a day of genuine reform and revival dawns upon our own land, it will be with the widespread participation of pastors, other church officers, and the generality of the people as well. There will be manifest repentance among all. The task of reforming worship is too broad to be accomplished by individual effort alone.

Hezekiah's good reign was followed by the government of wicked king Manasseh. The apostasy of Manasseh was shocking.

"He did that which was evil in the sight of the Lord, after the abominations of the heathen, whom the Lord cast out before the children of Israel. For he built up again the high places which Hezekiah his father had destroyed; and he reared up altars for Baal, and made a grove, as did Ahab king of Israel; and worshipped all the host of heaven, and served them. And he built altars in the house of the Lord, of which the Lord said, In Jerusalem will I put my name. And he

built altars for all the host of heaven in the two courts of the house of the Lord. And he made his son pass through the fire, and observed times, and used enchantments, and dealt with familiar spirits and wizards: he wrought much wickedness in the sight of the Lord, to provoke him to anger. And he set a graven image of the grove that he had made in the house, of which the Lord said to David, and to Solomon his son, In this house, and in Jerusalem, which I have chosen out of all tribes of Israel, will I put my name for ever: Neither will I make the feet of Israel move any more out of the land which I gave their fathers; only if they will observe to do according to all that I have commanded them, and according to all the law that my servant Moses commanded them. But they hearkened not: and Manasseh seduced them to do more evil than did the nations whom the Lord destroyed before the children of Israel" (2 Kings 21:2-9; cf. 2 Chron. 33:2-9).

As a result of Manasseh's corruption, the Lord declared that he would bring judgment upon the people of Judah (2 Kings 21:11-15).

Manasseh later repented, and set about undoing much of the evil which he previously fostered: "He took away the strange gods, and the idol out of the house of the Lord, and all the altars that he had built in the mount of the house of the Lord, and in Jerusalem, and cast them out of the city. And he repaired the altar of the Lord, and sacrificed thereon peace offerings and thank offerings, and commanded Judah to serve the Lord God of Israel. Nevertheless the people did sacrifice still in the high places, yet unto the Lord their God only" (2 Chron. 33:15-17).

In spite of Manasseh's repentance, the conquest and captivity of Judah were determined. After Manasseh's death, the kingdom passed to Ammon, who governed wickedly. Judah was fast approaching the day of reckoning.

The Lord sent one final revival before the captivity. It came during the rule of godly king Josiah. "He did that which was right in the sight of the Lord, and walked in all the way of David his father, and turned not aside to the right hand or to the left." "And like unto him was there no king before him, that turned to the Lord with all his heart, and with all his soul, and with all his might, according to all the law of Moses; neither after him arose there any like him" (2 Kings 22:2; 23:25-27).

Josiah conducted thorough reforms. He purged "Judah and Jerusalem from the high places, and the groves, and the carved images, and the molten images. And they brake down the altars of Baalim in his presence; and the images, that were on high above them, he cut down; and the groves, and the carved images, and the molten images, he brake in pieces, and made dust of them, and strewed it upon the graves of them that had sacrificed unto them. And he burnt the bones of the priests upon their altars, and cleansed Judah and Jerusalem. And so did he in the cities of Manasseh, and Ephraim, and Simeon, even unto Naphtali, with their mattocks round about. And when he had broken down the altars and the groves, and had beaten the graven images into powder, and cut down all the idols throughout all the land of Israel, he returned to Jerusalem" (2 Chron. 34:3-7; cf. 2 Kings 23:4-14, 24).

In addition to purging the kingdom of corrupt worship, the young king directed repairs of the house of the Lord. Josiah restored the word of God to the people and led them to renew their covenant obligations before God. The passover and priestly services were reinstated, down to minute details, including the Levitical musicians (2Chron.34-35; 2Kings 22; 2 Chron. 35:15-18).

After the reign of Josiah, the kingdom of Judah passed again into apostasy. The nation fell to the Babylonians, and the people were carried away into exile.

### **The Period of Captivity**

During the captivity, it was impossible for the Jews to conduct the public ordinances related to the temple in Jerusalem. Nevertheless, the Lord's people were still obligated to keep themselves free from idolatry.

Consider the example of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-nego. They were told to accede to idolatry on the direct orders of king Nebuchadnezzar. (The king spoke in a tart manner; his commands sounded remarkably similar to the high-sounding rhetoric of contemporary church rulers who instruct church members to submit to unscriptural worship.) The

response of the Israelites was equally direct: "Be it known unto thee, O king, that we will not serve thy gods, nor worship the golden image which thou hast set up" (Dan. 3:18).

The prophet Daniel was confronted with the tyrannical decree of Darius. To comply with the decree, Daniel would be required to neglect an important element of private worship, prayer. The prophet responded with open defiance, by performing his exercises of worship openly. "Now when Daniel knew that the writing was signed, he went into his house; and his windows being open in his chamber toward Jerusalem, he kneeled upon his knees three times a day, and prayed, and gave thanks before his God, as he did aforetime" (Dan. 6:10).

These short lessons from the exile are a perpetual testimony to God's people to keep themselves from idolatry. No authority, whether civil or ecclesiastical, has the right to enjoin corrupt worship upon the people; and it is unlawful to submit to usurped authority, if we are ordered to participate in idolatry. Similarly, no rulers, whether civil or ecclesiastical, have the right to discharge us from our duties of worship. If faced with such unlawful demands, our response should be plain, "We ought to obey God rather than men" (Acts 5:29).

#### Restoration and Reform

During the reign of Cyrus the king of Persia, the Jews were permitted to return to their homeland and commence rebuilding the temple in Jerusalem. They were careful to restore the temple and its services according to the scriptural pattern. "And when the builders laid the foundation of the temple of the Lord, they set the priests in their apparel with trumpets, and the Levites the sons of Asaph with cymbals, to praise the Lord, after the ordinance of David king of Israel." When the construction was complete, "they set the priests in their divisions, and the Levites in their courses, for the service of God, which is at Jerusalem; as it is written in the book of Moses" (Ezra 3:10; 6:18).

Having reestablished the proper place and the proper priesthood for public worship, the children of Israel celebrated the passover. "For the priests and the Levites were purified together, all of them were pure, and killed the passover for all the children of the captivity, and for their brethren the priests, and for themselves. And the children of Israel, which were come again out of captivity, and all such as had separated themselves unto them from the filthiness of the heathen of the land, to seek the Lord God of Israel, did eat, and kept the feast of unleavened bread seven days with joy: for the Lord had made them joyful, and turned the heart of the king of Assyria unto them, to strengthen their hands in the work of the house of God, the God of Israel" (Ezra 6:20-22).

During the reforms of Nehemiah, the word of God was restored to a prominent position, the people confessed their sins and renewed their covenantal obligations, and provisions were made to sustain the public ordinances of worship (Neh. 8-10; Neh. 10:32-33).

#### Old Testament Summary

Based on the Old Testament precepts and narratives, we have discovered these general truths:

1. God is holy and jealous for his honor. He has forbidden us to worship anyone or anything beside him.
2. God has prescribed the proper way of worship; he has furnished a "divine pattern" - a "due order" for worship. Since mankind has a inherent tendency to corrupt worship, we need divine instructions if our worship is to be acceptable unto God. Therefore, proper worship is restricted exclusively to the means ordained by God.[7]
3. All elements of worship which lack divine warrant are forbidden.[8]

To state these ideas simply: Nobody has the right to add to (or subtract from) the biblical pattern of worship; we are forbidden to alter the proper elements of worship in any way. The restriction applies to both the church collectively, and to persons individually, regardless of their station. Only the Lord has the prerogative to modify the means of worship used by his people.

With respect to reformation, we observe that genuine reform in the Old Testament included the following components:

1. Repentance and confession of sin.
2. Restoration of the word of God to a preeminent position.
3. Restoration of the outward ordinances established by God, including the proper place of worship, the proper priesthood, and the Levitical ceremonies.
4. Renewal of covenant obligations.
5. Removal of the implements of superstitious, false and corrupt worship.

## Footnotes for Chapter 2

1. Readers should note that Roman Catholics and Lutherans divide the ten commandments differently than ordinary Protestants. Papists and Lutherans combine the first two commandments into one, thus subsuming the second command as a mere appendix to the first. They divide the tenth commandment into two commands prohibiting different types of covetousness. Thus, they still maintain ten in number, but the effect on their doctrine of worship is devastating.

In practice, many Protestants have unwittingly adopted this same viewpoint. The second commandment is expounded as a mere expansion of the first, and restricted in application only to false deities and open homage to images. As a result, they admit images into churches, ostensibly for didactic purposes, especially for teaching children. This is merely a rehash of the old papal doctrine that images are the "books of the laity." The only didactic function of a graven image is as a "teacher of lies" (Hab. 2:18). For a summary of the genuine Reformed position, consult: Heidelberg Catechism, #96-98; Westminster Confession, 21:2-3; Westminster Larger Catechism, # 107-109. For good expositions of the second commandment, see: Thomas Boston, Works (edited by Samuel M'Millan; 1853; rpt. Wheaton: Richard Owen Roberts), vol. 2, pp. 127-57; John Calvin, Institutes of the Christian Religion (trans. by Ford Lewis Battles; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960), Book 1, chapter 11, (pp. 99-116); William Cunningham, "The Worship of Saints and Images," chapter 12 of Historical Theology (1862; rpt. Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1979), vol. 1, pp. 359-89; Robert L. Dabney, Lectures in Systematic Theology (1878; rpt. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1972), pp. 361-64; Thomas Vincent, The Shorter Catechism of the Westminster Assembly Explained and Proved from Scripture (1674; rpt. Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1980). pp. 121-30; Thomas Watson, The Ten Commandments (1692; rpt. Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1976), pp. 59-84.

2. Even an Anglican author, J. I. Packer, explains this incident as an attempt by Aaron to worship the Lord (not other gods) - an attempt using unlawful means: "Aaron made a golden calf (that is, a bull-image). It was meant as a visible symbol of Jehovah, the mighty God who had brought Israel out of Egypt. No doubt the image was thought to honor Him, as being a fitting symbol of His great strength. But it is not hard to see that such a symbol in fact insults Him: for what idea of His moral character, His righteousness, goodness, and patience, could one gather from looking at a statue of Him as a bull? Thus Aaron's image hid Jehovah's glory. In a similar way, the pathos of the crucifix obscures the glory of Christ, for it hides the fact of His deity, His victory on the cross, and His present kingdom. It displays His human weakness, but it conceals His divine strength; it depicts the reality of His pain, but keeps out of our sight the reality of His joy and His power. In both these cases, the symbol is unworthy most of all because of what it fails to display. And so are all other visible representations of Deity." Knowing God (Downers Grove: InverVarsity Press, 1973), pp. 40-41.

3. The author is convinced that ignorance of the historical books of the Old Testament, especially Kings and Chronicles, is a preeminent reason why Christian do not perceive the importance of biblical worship. The critical nature of worship, and God's dealings with his people in relation to their worship, are themes scarcely known in contemporary churches. After all, when was the last time you heard a series of sermons based upon 2 Chronicles?

4. The implication, whether stated or merely implied, is that the older, biblical forms of worship are simply boring, and

must give way to more creative contemporary ideas.

5. Today, many evangelicals decry the sins of abortion and homosexuality as manifestations of our nation's corruption (which they are indeed); but our contemporary moralists generally seem oblivious to the heinous sin of corrupt worship.

6. Note well: this is precisely the kind of imitation forbidden in Deut. 12.

7. The biblical doctrine of worship is a corollary to the biblical doctrine of salvation. As regards salvation, mankind has nothing acceptable to offer to God to procure his favour, since "all our righteousnesses are as filthy rags" (Isa. 64:6). Through Christ Jesus, God has declared the way of salvation in his word. When men go about to establish their own salvation, deviating from the way declared in God's word, they incur added guilt. "For they being ignorant of God's righteousness, and going about to establish their own righteousness, have not submitted themselves unto the righteousness of God" (Rom. 10:3).

Similarly, when men seek to worship God according to their own innovations, they are concurrently deviating from the biblical means of worship, and thereby adding to their own guilt. The Lord declares of such: "In vain they do worship me, teaching for doctrines the commandments of men" (Matt. 15:9).

8. "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." Westminster Confession, 21:1.

### **Chapter 3**

#### **Worship in the New Testament**

Turning to the New Testament, we find changes in the outward forms and ceremonies of worship dictated by God unto his people. Nevertheless, the great underlying principle remains the same: the only acceptable forms of worship are those which possess divine warrant. It is still unlawful for us to alter the God-given elements of worship, or to supplement the biblical means with methods of human devising.

#### **Christ's Temptation in the Wilderness**

When Christ was tempted in the wilderness, he reinforced the biblical law of worship. Three times Satan assaulted Jesus with temptation. In all three cases, Jesus responded with quotes from the scriptures: "It is written..." (Matt. 4:4,7,10). When the devil sought to induce Christ to idolatry, through the lure of power, Jesus replied, "Get thee hence, Satan: for it is written, Thou shalt worship the Lord thy God, and him only shalt thou serve" (Matt. 4:10).

Satan uses similar temptations to destroy men in our own day; but for some reason, Christians act as if idolatry is not a real and present danger among the people of God living in twentieth-century American culture. Yet, if it were not a real temptation, there would be no need for the timeless scriptural warning: "Little children, keep yourselves from idols" (1 John 5:21). We must be watchful against all species of idolatry, whether in the blatant form of worshipping false deities, or in more subtle ways by adopting corrupt means of approaching the true God.

Consider how Christ handles this temptation. He goes back to the foundational precepts of the law, as given in the book of Deuteronomy. So should we. When discussing the subject of worship (or any other subject, for that matter), we should not hesitate to consult the law of God. Sometimes, for fear of being labelled legalists, we cast aside our strongest defense. We drift into a pragmatic defense and allow the debate to be conducted over subjective and pragmatic considerations. Instead, we should take the higher ground and consult the law of God.

Of course, appeals to God's law will be unpopular. If we merely discuss things from a pragmatic perspective, our opponents will politely discuss topics such as the didactic use of images, clerical attire, the merits of hymns, ecclesiastical festivals, liturgies, etc. But simply mention that these practices are condemned by the scriptural law of worship, and the reaction will become quite heated. Formalists will always discuss the "practical" reasons, pro and con; but they cannot

abide an appeal to the law, because it shuts them off altogether.

We should follow the example of our Lord, who closed the discussion with a reference to biblical law. Christ did not enter into a lengthy academic debate over the matter. After all, such confrontations are a temptation, although we do not always perceive it that way when we are faced with similar assaults. When we are presented with faulty suggestions about worship, our response should be simple: "To the law and to the testimony: if they speak not according to this word, it is because there is no light in them" (Isa. 8:20).

### **Christ's Confrontation with Vain Worship**

The 15th chapter of Matthew records a confrontation between Christ and Jewish religious leaders of his day. In considering this passage, we should recall that the scribes and the Pharisees were not heathen idolaters. They did not worship Baal, nor did they bow before the state god, Caesar. They did not make graven images, adhering to the strict letter of the law. They had a high regard for the temple in Jerusalem, which they knew to be the prescribed place for the public ordinances. But was their religion scriptural?

No! The scribes and Pharisees held to the traditions of their fathers so zealously, that their traditional practices had, in many respects, superseded the precepts of the Old Testament (Matt. 15:2). Hence, the apostle Paul later refers to this traditionalism as "the Jews' religion" (Gal. 1:13-14), indicating that it was not the religion of the Bible.

A conflict was created because the Jews sought to supplement the biblical precepts with practices of their own devising. Jesus rebukes them for substituting man-made duties in the place of God-given responsibilities. "Why do ye also transgress the commandment of God by your tradition?" (Matt. 15:3).

The Saviour then exposes the method of subterfuge the Pharisees had invented in order to cover their negligence. They had cloaked a corrupt practice by claiming a high regard for the temple, the focal point of public worship. Yet, their argument was merely a pretence for neglecting family duties prescribed in the law.

As a result, the divine verdict was against them: "This people draweth nigh unto me with their mouth, and honoureth me with their lips; but their heart is far from me. But in vain do they worship me, teaching for doctrines the commandments of men" (Matt. 15:8-9; cf. Isa. 29:13).

Here Christ draws a connection between the religious service performed by these men, and the worship which they offer. Their worship is eclipsed by the spurious religious traditions which they annex to it.

This rebuke clearly condemns the notion that mankind (or the church as an institution) has the right to institute new modes of worship and religious service. If men assert the right to invent new forms of religious piety, they are usurping the authority which belongs to God alone. Christ is the King of the church, the only lawgiver.

The Pharisees paid lip service to God. We know they made long prayers, fasted twice a week, and arranged financial bequests to the temple. As formalists, they were exceedingly concerned about outward conformity to man-made regulations.[1] At first, we might not link their practices to "public worship," since many of these activities were conducted outside the temple and synagogue services. Yet, their traditional observances are accounted by Christ a measure of their worship. And their worship is declared to be vain. It is vain because it ignores scriptural directives; it is vain because it exalts human innovations (called traditions), thereby violating the spirit of the second commandment; and it is vain because it leads to perdition (Matt. 15:13-14).

### **The Essence of True Worship**

Christ describes the essence of true worship during his conversation with the woman at the well (John 4:17ff.). After the Saviour declares the woman's immorality, she perceives that he is a prophet. Therefore, she propounds to him the prominent religious controversy which existed between the Jews and the Samaritans.

Specifically, the dispute was over where to worship. Now, it is true that God had prescribed Jerusalem as the place for public ordinances - although that would soon change. But the dispute had degenerated into a focus strictly upon the outward forms of religion. Thus, Christ was confronted with a loaded question - the kind frequently spawned by religious controversy.

Jesus responds by placing the dispute within a larger context: the nature of true worship. He notes that there is more to the matter than simply settling a dispute over the proper place for worship. He also points to the approaching changes which would render obsolete the whole debate about the locale for worship.

Outwardly, as to the place for public ordinances, the Jews were right. God had prescribed a pattern of worship which was focused upon Jerusalem. The divine pattern was designed as a witness for all mankind, regarding the right way of salvation. "Salvation is of the Jews," for "unto them were committed the oracles of God" (John 4:22; Rom. 3:22). In this sense, the Jews worshipped what they knew: that is, they adhered to the knowledge of the law as it pertained to the place for divine ordinances. (Herein we are again directed to the importance of revealed religion, as given in the law.) The Samaritans had abandoned the law, and forged their own mongrel religion. (See 2 Kings 17.)

In another manner, Jesus reiterates the importance of God's appointment in religion. "The hour cometh, when ye shall neither in this mountain, nor yet at Jerusalem, worship the Father" (John 4:21). A great change was about to occur, respecting the outward ordinances of worship. At whose direction? Not by man's appointment, but by the appointment of God. He alone is the lawgiver. None may tamper with the pattern which he has established; yet it is the Lord's prerogative to make alterations in conformity with his purposes.

Jesus next summarizes the essence of true worship, which includes the inseparable union of both piety and knowledge. True worshippers shall worship God "in spirit and in the truth" (John 4:23-24). The worship of these true worshippers is characterized in this manner, as an outworking of God's saving grace. God's sovereignty in salvation extends not only to the manner in which elect are saved, but also to the purposes for which they are redeemed. One essential design in the salvation of the elect is that they shall worship in spirit and truth: "for the Father seeketh such to worship him" (John 4:23).

The language is repeated in imperative form. It is language similar to other imperatives in the teaching of Christ, such as the statement recorded in the previous chapter of John's gospel: "Ye must be born again." The true worshippers "shall worship the Father in spirit and in truth. they that worship him must worship him in spirit and in truth" (John 3:7; John 4:23-24).

True worship must be "in spirit." It involves the inner man, demanding sincerity and love. Worship includes more than the mere outward forms of devotion. Many times God has pronounced a curse against persons wedded to empty forms of religion. The unbelieving Jews had hearts far from the Lord, even though they were in the right place for external ordinances. Our worship must flow from hearts of sincerity and love toward God our Saviour (Cf. Matt. 15:8-9; Isa. 29:13).

Likewise, genuine worship must be "in truth." That is, our worship must be in conformity to God's written revelation. There is, indeed, an outward measure for our worship. In the present day, it is common to hear comments that the "heart" is all that matters: a mistaken concept that sincerity of motive and fervent emotion are the substance of genuine worship. But Christ does not confine the essence of worship to worship in spirit; he adds the measure of truth. Acceptable worship is more than the gushy effervescence of a fervent heart. Without truth, such fervor is an offense before God; it is zeal, "but not according to knowledge" (Rom. 10:2).

Christ's statements imply a solemn warning. By his reference to "true worshippers" (John 4:23), we may perceive a distinction which sets them apart from other worshippers. In other words, there is a class of worshippers who are false in their worship. Therefore, we must examine our own worship, that we may discern to which class we belong.

## **Worship in the Synagogue**

As we consider Christ's teachings about worship, we should not overlook his practice with respect to worship in the synagogues. A lengthy discussion on the synagogue system is beyond the scope of this booklet. Nevertheless we note that the divine warrant for the basic elements of synagogue services may be found in the biblical commands enjoining prayer, reading of scripture, and instruction in the word of God. These elements of worship are found throughout the Bible, not being tied exclusively to the temple services in Jerusalem. Prayer is an essential duty, and it was always lawful for prayer to be offered in any place. The wide diffusion of biblical truth was commanded, that the earth might be "filled with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord, as the waters cover the sea" (Hab. 2:14; Isa. 11:9).

The synagogues developed during the period of captivity, when worship in Jerusalem was impossible. No sacrifices were conducted in the synagogues, so they never became rival centers of worship with Jerusalem, even after temple services were restored.

The synagogues served as repositories of the scriptures. It would be centuries until the invention of printing presses; individuals and families could not readily obtain Bibles. By attending services in the synagogues, the people had regular access to the word of God through the public reading of the scriptures.[2]

The synagogues were the stage for several confrontations between Jesus and the corrupt Jewish leadership of his day (Matt. 12:9-13; Mark 1:21-28; 3:1-6; Luke 6:1-11). Yet, Jesus participated in the synagogue services, "as his custom was" (Luke 4:16) by reading and teaching from the scriptures. "And when he was come to his own country, he taught them in their synagogue, insomuch that they were astonished and said, Whence hath this man this wisdom and these mighty works?" (Matt. 13:54; cf. Mark 6:1-6; John 6:59; 18:20).

The New Era Following the Death of Christ

As Christ indicated to the woman at the well, a great change was occurring; it would render the dispute between Samaritans and Jews obsolete. When Christ died upon the cross, the veil of the temple was torn in two "from the top to the bottom" (Matt. 27:51). This event signified the fulfillment of the Levitical ordinances of the Old Testament. Formerly, "the priests went always into the first tabernacle, accomplishing the service of God." Now "Christ is not entered into the holy places made with hands which are the figures of the true; but into heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God for us" (Heb. 9:6; 9:24; cf. 8:2). The earthly tabernacle (the temple) had always been a mere "example and shadow of heavenly things." Now that the substance is manifest in Christ, the types and shadows give way to reality (Heb. 8:5; cf. 10:1; Col. 2:17).

Through his priestly offering on the cross, Jesus "by himself purged our sins" and "sat down on the right hand of the Majesty on high." Having been declared "a priest for ever after the order of Melchisedec," Christ rendered the Levitical priesthood obsolete (Heb. 1:3; 5:6; 7:12).

With "the priesthood being changed," and the temple ceremonies having fulfilled their purpose, Jerusalem is no longer the fixed locale for the preeminent expressions of public worship. With the Old Testament ceremonies gone, what remains?

## **Apostolic Practice and Teaching**

Although temple worship reached its conclusion, several ordinary elements of worship continue. These are practices of piety which always were found beyond the precincts of the temple - in private worship, family worship, and the synagogues - things such as prayer, the reading of scripture, and biblical instruction.

We are told that the church "continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, and in breaking of bread, and in prayers" (Acts 2:42). As Christ's commissioned messengers, the apostles arranged things according to divine directives. They had been ordered to "observe all things whatsoever" Christ commanded (Matt. 28:20). The church still was not permitted to worship and serve God according to human wisdom or man-made devices. Therefore, the apostles' doctrine was not something invented by the apostles; it was simply the doctrine of Christ - the doctrine of the holy

scriptures.

Under the direction of the apostles, the reading and exposition of the scriptures were regular practices in the public assemblies of the church. These practices were not novelties, "for Moses of old time hath in every city them that preach him, being read in the synagogues every sabbath day" (Acts 15:21; cf. 2Cor.3:15).

Since the apostles were Christ's appointed messengers, apostolic epistles were also read publicly as part of the canon of scripture. The practice of reading apostolic epistles in the public assemblies could easily be inferred from the fact that the letters are addressed to the churches as a whole. Lest there be any doubt, however, we note Paul's commands, "I charge you by the Lord that this epistle be read unto all the holy brethren" (1 Thess. 5:27). "And when this epistle is read among you, cause that it be read also in the church of the Laodiceans; and that ye likewise read the epistle from Laodicea"(Col. 4:16)[3]

Closely tied to the reading of the scriptures was the practice of expounding the word by public preaching and teaching. Jesus routinely expounded the word of God within assemblies for public worship: "Jesus went about all the cities and villages, teaching in their synagogues, and preaching the gospel of the kingdom" (Matt. 9:35; cf. 4:23). Thus it is not surprising to see the apostles adopting the same course: "And daily in the temple, and in every house, they ceased not to teach and preach Jesus Christ" (Acts 5:42). Later, Paul and Barnabas abode in Antioch, "teaching and preaching the word of the Lord, with many others also" (Acts 15:35). Before Paul departed from Troas, "upon the first day of the week, when the disciples came together to break bread, Paul preached unto them" (Acts 20:7).

There are scores of passages in the New Testament illustrating the apostolic practice of expounding the scriptures. It was obviously a regular part of public worship. Hence the apostolic aspirations, "I am ready to preach the gospel to you that are at Rome also" (Rom. 1:15); and the apostolic admonitions: "Preach the word; be instant in season, out of season; reprove, rebuke, exhort with all longsuffering and doctrine" (2 Tim. 4:2)

## **Fellowship**

The reference in Acts 2:42 to fellowship points to an important truth. Although temple worship has been discontinued, that does not mean that religious duties are now limited to private and family exercises. There yet remains a role for congregational worship and public ordinances. The public exercises of worship are no longer centered around a particular location (Jerusalem); nevertheless, corporate obligations are extensive among the people of God.

"For as we have many members in one body, and all members have not the same office: so we, being many, are one body in Christ, and every one members one of another" (Rom. 12:4-5; cf. 1Cor. 12:12). For this reason, we find an apostolic admonition to provoke one another "unto love and to good works: not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as the manner of some is" (Heb. 10:24-25).

Wherever the gospel was received, gathered congregations were formed and organized. It is in the context of the congregation assembled corporately that we find many expressions of public worship and service. Therefore we see why it was mentioned as an important factor that the early Christians continued steadfastly in apostolic fellowship (Acts 2:42). Corporate worship is the highest public expression of adoration rendered unto God.[4]

### **The Sacraments**

The "breaking of bread" (in Acts 2:42) appears to be a reference to the Lord's Supper, one of the public ordinances of the New Testament. Although the ceremonies of the temple have reached their fulfillment, the church still possesses outward signs or seals of God's covenant. The Lord's Supper and baptism serve as a visible word to compliment the word preached.

The Lord's Supper was instituted by Jesus on the night before his crucifixion. It was a commanded ordinance; the lan-

guage is plain: "Take, eat. Drink ye." "This do in remembrance of me" (Matt.26:26-27; Luke22:19-20; cf. Mark 14:22-23).

That these actions were meant to be an ongoing observance, is clear from both the words of the Saviour, and the apostolic commentary provided in 1 Cor. 11: 23-26: "For I have received of the Lord that which also I delivered unto you, that the Lord Jesus the same night in which he was betrayed took bread: and when he had given thanks, he brake it, and said, Take, eat: this is my body, which is broken for you: this do in remembrance of me. After the same manner also he took the cup, when he had supped, saying, This cup is the new testament in my blood: this do ye, as oft as ye drink it, in remembrance of me. For as often as ye eat this bread, and drink this cup, ye do shew the Lord's death till he come."

The divine warrant for baptism should be unquestioned, since it is embedded in the words of the Great Commission (Matt.28:19-20). "Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost: teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you: and, lo, I am with you alway, even unto the end of the world. Amen." Numerous baptisms are recorded throughout the book of Acts.[5]

"Though fewer in number, and administered with more simplicity, and less outward glory" than the old ordinances, the New Testament sacraments hold forth Christ "in more fulness, evidence, and spiritual efficacy, to all nations, both Jews and Gentiles." [6] Through them the gospel is preached through the divinely-ordained "pictures," much as the Old Testament ordinances prefigured the gospel in a typical manner (cf. Heb. 4:2). The Old Testament ordinances pictured the Messiah who was yet to come; whereas the New Testament signs declare the work of Christ who has already come and conquered sin and death.

Since these signs are ordained by God, it should be clear that it is a monstrous presumption for anyone to add new sacraments, or to supplement the two sacraments of Christ with other "images" of human devising.[7] Yet, throughout history, men have often corrupted the church with liturgical "aids to worship" and new ecclesiastical ordinances. Others have embellished the sacraments by imposing a superstitious manner of observing them - such as Romish baptismal rites or Anglican liturgical forms. These deviations are an insult to Christ, because they imply a deficiency in the scriptures, as though the sacraments of Christ are insufficient as signs and seals, and therefore require humanly-devised supplements to increase their effectiveness.

## **Prayer**

Prayer is a basic element of worship, whether public or private. Throughout the Old Testament, prayer was freely offered in a variety of settings beyond the boundaries of the temple. Therefore, we should not be surprised to see Christians constantly resorting to prayer within congregational meetings. There are numerous examples of congregational prayer in the book of Acts (Acts 4:24-31; 6:6-7; 12:5; 13:3; 14:23; 16:13; 16:25; 20:36; 21:5). Apostolic injunctions repeatedly enjoin prayer. "Be careful for nothing; but in every thing by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known unto God." "Continue in prayer." "Pray without ceasing." "Brethren, pray for us." "Finally, brethren, pray for us, that the word of the Lord may have free course, and be glorified, even as it is with you: and that we may be delivered from unreasonable and wicked men: for all men have not faith." "I exhort therefore, that, first of all, supplications, prayers, intercessions, and giving of thanks, be made for all men; for kings, and for all that are in authority; that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and honesty. I will therefore that men pray every where, lifting up holy hands, without wrath and doubting" (Phil. 4:6; Col. 4:2; 1 Thess. 5:17; 5:25; 2 Thess. 3:1; 1 Tim. 2:1-2, 8).

## **Other Practices of Worship**

Based upon Acts 2:42, we have briefly noted several basic elements of public worship found in the New Testament: the reading and preaching of the word of God, the sacraments, and prayer. Readers may wonder - beyond the subjects mentioned in Acts 2 - are there additional elements of worship which continue from the Old Testament, or which have been instituted by Christ or the apostles?

From other passages of scripture, we learn that psalm-singing was a regular practice within the Christian church. The

Bible additionally provides a warrant for fasting, as well as special seasons of thanksgiving. Also, the scriptures also mention temporary practices of worship and church order which were suited to the transitional era of the apostles. These temporal aspects were not intended to become permanent elements of worship. In order to address some of these related topics, we have furnished a preliminary discussion in the following chapter and the Appendix.

#### Apostolic Warning

We cannot conclude our discussion of the New Testament without looking at Paul's warning to the Colossians. The apostle warns them not to be beguiled by religious ordinances which are merely "the commandments and doctrines of men." He cautions that such ordinances "have indeed a shew of wisdom in will worship, and humility, and neglecting of the body, not in any honour to the satisfying of the flesh" (Col. 2:18-22).

The religious ordinances in question impose a burden upon those who practice them, requiring a degree of "humility, and neglecting of the body." This kind of religious discipline might seem commendable, but it is only a show.

A key to understanding the root problem with these ordinances is in the expression "will worship" (Col. 2:23), which is somewhat cryptic to modern readers. The Greek term here, *ethelothreeskia*, might be rendered "voluntary worship" or "arbitrary worship." [8] The gist is that these ordinances are forms of worship or religious service chosen by man (according to the will of man), not means chosen by God.

This is the essence of corrupt worship, when men seek to establish their own forms of religious service. We might call it free-will worship, since the advocates of man-made worship are claiming that men possess the right (or freedom) to institute acceptable means to worship God. [9]

This passage was cited frequently by the Reformers in their struggles against the corrupt worship and burdensome ordinances of Roman Catholicism. The passage was again employed by Scottish Protestants and English Puritans to repel the impositions of the Anglican liturgy. Indeed, Paul's warning furnishes a sweeping indictment against all humanly-imposed forms of worship and religious ordinances.

#### New Testament Summary

Based upon the doctrine of Christ and the apostles, we reiterate the following truths (which we found initially in the Old Testament):

1. God is the only proper recipient of worship.
2. Mankind must worship according to the means prescribed by God.
3. It is unlawful to amend or alter the worship prescribed by God in his word.

In contrast, with the Old Testament, we note the following changes made by the Lord in the New Testament:

1. There is no longer a central place for worship. The temple ordinances have reached fulfillment.
2. The ordinances of public worship are no longer conducted by the Levitical priesthood.
3. The church no longer observes sacrificial ordinances. The New Testament ordinances are simpler and fewer in number.

#### Summary Remarks

From an overview of scripture, we have seen that the Bible consistently teaches (1.) that the Lord God alone is to be worshipped; (2.) that he is to be worshipped only through the means appointed in his word; and (3.) that it is sinful to employ man-made additions or alterations to the worship of God. We should ponder some ramifications of these truths.

Corrupt worship is a widespread evil in our own society. Americans often feel that their culture has advanced beyond primitive societies which worship false deities. The truth is, however, that contemporary society is cluttered with polluted worship, even among professing Christians. Man-made innovations in worship are prevalent, especially within "conservative" and "evangelical" churches. If biblical principles of worship were upheld, there would be little fascination with liturgical superstitions, sacred dance and drama, musical performances, multimedia spectacles, and puppet shows in worship services.

We need to grasp the truth that deviant forms of worship are evil. The basic principles of worship are embedded in the decalogue; transgression of the commandments is blatant immorality. In our modern pluralistic age, professing Christians have lost a sense of the immorality of false worship.

Variant forms of worship should not be treated as the subjects for mere academic debates and theoretical speculations. What is at stake is the proper worship of God, who has declared that he will not give his glory to another nor his praise to graven images (Isa. 42:8).

Individually, we must examine our hearts and practices. Are our hearts prepared to seek the Lord God? Have we repented of our own sins - including our sins of corrupt worship? Will we reform our practices in worship (privately and in our families) to conform to the scriptural law of worship?

Corporately, churches need to purge their services of all elements of worship which lack clear biblical warrant. Congregations should carefully examine all practices of worship which are urged upon them. Disputed matters must be settled on the basis of a scriptural evaluation alone.

From Kings and Chronicles, we have seen that public worship is an outward indicator of the true spiritual condition of a nation. This truth should drive us to repentance and prayer, as we survey the current pollutions of worship in our land.

Moreover, corporate worship is a significant indicator of the true spiritual condition of a congregation (or denomination). Christians should refuse to affiliate with any church which openly embraces corrupt worship. "What agreement hath the temple of God with idols? ...Where fore come out from among them, and be ye separate, saith the Lord, and touch not the unclean thing; and I will receive you...." (2 Cor. 6:15-18).

Finally, we should work to restore the proper elements of worship given in the scriptures: prayer; the reading, preaching, and hearing of God's word; singing of psalms; and the right administration of the sacraments - as well as occasional appointments of fasting and thanksgiving. The Lord has not left us groping in darkness, guessing at the proper means of worship. He has provided a sufficient manual of worship in the scriptures. His word needs no supplements of human origin. Let us stir our souls in adoration for the living God, who has appointed all sacred means of worship.

### **Footnotes for Chapter 3**

1. In our own day, we meet with many humanly-imposed measures of piety. For example, some fundamentalists condemn all use of alcoholic beverages, and they use this doctrine as a measure of spirituality. For centuries, the Roman Catholic church has enjoined celibacy upon the clergy as a requirement for service. At root, the issue is still the same: "Do men have the right to institute supplemental measures of piety, beyond those given in scripture?"

2. These considerations illustrate the oft-criticized doctrine of "good and necessary consequence," mentioned in the Westminster Confession (1:6). Prayer and biblical instruction have been commanded, indicating that we must pray and study the scriptures at some place and at some time. Since these duties are not restricted by God's word to a particular place and time, we may establish an appropriate location and time, provided that we avoid a superstitious regard for a place or manner of doing these things. As the Confession states, "There are some circumstances concerning the worship of God, and government of the Church, common to human actions and societies, which are to be ordered by the light of nature and Christian prudence, according to the general rules of the word, which are always to be observed" (1:6).

3. Peter classifies Paul's epistles as scripture ( 2 Pet. 3:15-16). Since we know that the epistles were read when the congregations assembled for worship, we may safely conclude that the reading of scripture continued to hold a prominent place in the public worship of the churches.

4. A puritan writer, David Clarkson, explores this theme in a provocative sermon entitled, "Public Worship to be Preferred Before Private," based upon Psalm 87:2: "The Lord loveth the gates of Zion more than all the dwellings of Jacob." See *The Practical Works of David Clarkson* (Edinburgh: James Nichol, 1865), vol. 3, pp. 187-209.

5. A detailed discussion respecting the proper subjects and mode of baptism is beyond the scope of this publication. Nevertheless, the author maintains that these important questions should not be left to individual preference or mere ecclesiastical tradition. Rather, such details pertaining to public ordinances must be settled by the word of God. It is our fundamental premise that the administration of all ordinances of worship must be conducted according to the word of God.

6. Westminster Confession of Faith, 7:6.

7. Often, we have heard men argue that we need " pictures of Jesus" to instruct children and other unlearned people. Their arguments are nothing but rehashed papal doctrine that images serve as "books for the laity." If individuals sense the need for a visible representations of divine truth, we suggest that they study the lawful administration of the sacraments. In baptism and the Lord's Supper they will find divinely-ordained, outward representations of the essential truths of redemption.

8. The Geneva Bible has "voluntary religion," with a note explaining it as "such as men have chosen according to their own fantasy." Tyndale translates it "chosen holiness."

9. It is ironic that many professing Calvinists abandon their principles when it comes to worship. On the one hand, they denounce free will as a fatal error respecting the doctrine of salvation; on the other hand, they grant to mankind free will in respect to worship. Does this make sense?

## **Chapter 4**

### **Disputed Aspects of Worship**

Throughout church history, various disputes have erupted over particular practices in wor ship. Frequently, these conflicts have promoted an inquiry into general principles of worship, in order to assess the particular practices in question. Among the many controverted subjects during the Reformation, there were disputes over the Roman Catholic mass, the correct posture for receiving the Lord's Supper, the use of ministerial vestments, the observance of ecclesiastical festivals, etc.[1] In the 19th and 20th centuries, conflicts have persisted over the use of non-canonical hymns, instrumental music, ecclesiastical holy days, and crosses. We offer the following observations, in an effort to evaluate the issues in conformity with the scriptural law of worship.

### **Instrumental Music in Worship**

Throughout the scriptures, mankind is instructed to worship God only in the manner prescribed in God's word. When Moses revealed the details of tabernacle worship, there was anticipation that the portable tabernacle would eventually give way to a permanent place of worship (Deut. 12:5-14). Nevertheless, in both settings, the public ordinances were conducted under the Levitical priesthood. The priests offered the prescribed sacrifices; and certain priests were also designated as musicians.

When David brought the ark of the covenant to Jerusalem, he learned the importance of seeking the Lord according to the "due order" of God's word. Part of the priestly order of the Old Testament included the appointment of Levitical musicians in both the tabernacle and the temple (1 Chron. 15:12-13).

After bringing the ark to Jerusalem, David left priests "to minister before the ark continually, as every day's work required" (1 Chron. 16:37, 42). These priests included those making sacrificial offerings, and "with them Heman and Jeduthun with trumpets and cymbals for those that should make a sound, and with musical instruments of God" (1 Chron. 16:37, 42).

When David divided the courses of the priesthood, the divisions included those "who should prophesy with harps, with psalteries, and with cymbals," etc., "for song in the house of the Lord, with cymbals, psalteries, and harps, for the service of the house of God" (1 Chron. 23:6ff.; 25:1; 25:6).

When David delivered to Solomon the divine pattern for the temple, it included "the courses of the priests and the Levites, and for all the work of the service of the house of the Lord" (1 Chron. 28:12-13, 19, 21).

When the temple was dedicated, the ark of the covenant was placed within it. The Levitical musicians made a great sound of praise, and the Lord filled the house with a cloud of glory. During the feast of dedication, "the priests waited on their offices: the Levites also with the instruments of music of the Lord, which David the king had made to praise the Lord" (2 Chron. 5:12-14; 7:6).

Throughout these narratives, it is absolutely clear that the musicians and their instruments were not employed simply from the aesthetic tastes of the king or the people. Rather, the musicians were selected in conformity with the divine pattern for worship delivered to David. Some of these heavenly directives came by "Gad the king's seer, and Nathan the prophet," and all the details were by "the commandment of the Lord by his prophets" (2 Chron. 29:25).

Moreover, it is indisputable that these musicians were part of the Levitical priesthood. They ministered near the ark of the covenant, the meeting-place between God and his people.

Throughout the history of Israel, there were many seasons of apostasy. When the people later repented of their wickedness, temple worship was restored according to biblical law. Such reforms required a resumption of priestly duties which had been neglected.

During Hezekiah's reform, the king directed the Levites to cleanse the house of the Lord and resume the offerings and sacrifices. Also, "he set the Levites in the house of the Lord with cymbals, with psalteries, and with harps, according to the commandment of David, and of Gad the king's seer, and Nathan the prophet: for so was the commandment of the Lord by his prophets. And the Levites stood with the instruments of David, and the priests with the trumpets" (1 Chron. 29:1-24; 2 Chron. 29:25-26; cf. 30:21).

Again we see conformity to the divine pattern for worship, down to minute details. Even the instruments themselves were not chosen haphazardly, or according to personal taste. There is a specific reference to "the instruments of David." Similar language is used elsewhere: "the musical instruments of David, the man of God," and even, "musical instruments of God" (2 Chron. 29:26; Neh. 12:36; 1 Chron. 16:42). Such statements indicate that the particular instruments were selected by the Lord himself, in order to fulfill his own purposes.

The priestly character of the musicians is again underscored in the reform conducted by King Josiah. The house of God was repaired, "and the men did the work faithfully" under the oversight of Jahath and Obadiah, etc., "and other of the Levites, all that could skill of instruments of music" (2 Chron. 34:12).

During Nehemiah's reform, after Israel's captivity, there is further evidence of the priestly character of the instrumental musicians. "At the dedication of the wall of Jerusalem they sought the Levites out of all their places, to bring them to Jerusalem, to keep the dedication with gladness, both with thanksgivings, and with singing, with cymbals, psalteries and with harps. and certain of the priests' sons with trumpets. and his brethren. with the musical instruments of David the man of God" (Neh. 12:27, 35-36).

There are additional references to musical instruments in the Old Testament narratives and the Psalms. But these appear to be further references to temple services, or to the use of instruments in conjunction with prophetic offices, or to musi-

cal pursuits associated with everyday life (Ps.150:1-5; 81:2-3; 1Sam.10:5-6; 16:14-23; 18:6,10; 19:9; 1 Chron.25:1-3).

Musicians should always seek to glorify God with their music; that principle is not contested. The real question before us is whether musical instruments were ever commanded by God as ordinary implements in worship apart from their use in the temple services (Ps.33:2-3; 57:7-9; 1 Cor.10:31).

After examining these Old Testament narratives, we should note the following facts:

1. The appointment of tabernacle and temple musicians came under divine direction as part of the biblical pattern for worship.
2. These musicians were all Levites, ministering near the ark of the covenant, the meeting -place between God and his people.
3. The specific instruments used by the Levitical musicians were dictated by divine inspiration.

As we examine New Testament passages relevant to this subject, we discover certain elements of discontinuity, as well as some aspects of continuity with the Old Testament.

The most prominent feature of discontinuity is the replacement of the Levitical priesthood and the temple ordinances.

Christ has come as "a priest after the order of Melchisedec," and his superior priesthood takes precedence over the Levitical priesthood. "The priesthood being changed" (Heb. 5:6,10; 7:11), the courses of Levitical priests, including the musicians, no longer minister in the tabernacle near the ark.

Moreover, "the priesthood being changed, there is made of necessity a change also of the law." The old covenant had "ordinances of divine service, and a worldly sanctuary." The ninth chapter of Hebrews contains a description of the furniture in the tabernacle, and the ark; all of these items had significance as "a shadow of heavenly things," "figures of the true" tabernacle in heaven (Heb. 7:12; 9:1; 8:5; 9:24).

The Levitical sacrifices and ordinances were types which were fulfilled in the work of the Lord Jesus Christ. But now, Christ has come as our high priest, "by a greater and more perfect tabernacle, not made with hands." As our high priest, Christ "needeth not daily, as those high priests, to offer up sacrifice, first for his own sins, and then for the people's." No, Christ was "once offered to bear the sins of many," and "when he had by himself purged our sins, sat down on the right hand of the Majesty on high" (Heb. 9:11; 7:27; 9:28; 1:3).

It is striking to recall that the instrumental musicians in the public worship of the Old Testament were all Levites, ministering in tabernacle or temple ordinances. The priestly services of the Levites have been replaced in the New Testament. Therefore, the burden of proof rests with the proponents of instrumental music; they must prove a divine warrant for such service apart from tabernacle or temple ordinances, if they wish to introduce instrumental music into new covenant worship. Without such a warrant, it is improper to reintroduce such ceremonial observances back into public worship.

Moreover, should the proponents of instrumental music establish a warrant for their use in public worship, it would seem incumbent upon them to restore only the "instruments of David," or such specific instruments as were divinely ordained for use in worship. By any scriptural measure, they would not possess a blanket endorsement to use all musical instruments, according to subjective preferences.

Within the New Testament, we find certain elements which correspond to the priestly service of the Levites in the Old Testament. These elements of new covenant practice provide continuity with the old.

For example, in the New Testament, we are taught that all Christians are made "kings and priests unto God" - "an holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices, acceptable to God by Jesus Christ" (Rev. 1:6; 1 Pet. 2:5). As priests, Christians present their bodies "a living sacrifice" (Rom. 12:1) as a reasonable service unto God. They "offer the sacrifice of

praise to God continually, that is, the fruit of our lips giving thanks to his name" (Heb. 13:15). And they speak to one another "in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody in their hearts"(Eph. 5:19). (Note that the melody which is specifically enjoined is in the heart.)

These actions reveal the true priestly service of the New Testament, as expressed in the life of the believer. These actions reflect the legitimate continuity between the Levitical forms of the Old Testament and Christian piety in the New Testament. All too often, however, a preoccupation with outward Levitical forms and liturgies has been marked by a neglect of the practical godliness. It has always been so with Rome; and it is presently so today among professing Protestants who are obsessed with liturgies.

In commenting on Psalm 81:3, John Calvin observed:

The Levites, under the law, were justified in making use of instrumental music in the worship of God; it having been his will to train his people, while they were yet tender and like children, by such rudiments, until the coming of Christ. But now when the clear light of the gospel has dissipated the shadows of the law, and taught us that God is to be served in a simpler form, it would be to act a foolish and mistaken part to imitate that which the prophet enjoined only upon those of his own time. From this, it is apparent that the Papists have shown themselves to be very apes in transferring this to themselves.

In a similar vein, Calvin remarks upon Psalm 33:2.

I have no doubt that playing upon cymbals, touching the harp and the viol, and all that kind of music, which is so frequently mentioned in the Psalms, was a part of the education; that is to say, the puerile instruction of the law: I speak of the stated service of the temple. For even now, if believers choose to cheer themselves with musical instruments, they should, I think, make it their object not to disserve their cheerfulness from the praises of God. But when they frequent their sacred assemblies, musical instruments in celebrating the praises of God would be no more suitable than the burning of incense, the lighting of lamps, and the restoration of the other shadows of the law. The Papists, therefore, have foolishly borrowed this, as well as many other things, from the Jews. Men who are fond of outward pomp may delight in that noise; but the simplicity which God recommends to us by the apostle is far more pleasing to him.[2]

For a summary of the typical nature of instrumental music in the Old Testament, the reader may find it helpful to consult John L. Girardeau's classic work, *Instrumental Music in the Public Worship of the Church* (Richmond, 1888). Girardeau explains,

The instrumental music of temple-worship was typical of the joy and triumph of God's believing people to result from the plentiful effusion of the Holy Ghost in New Testament times.

[I]t pleased God to typify the spiritual joy to spring from a richer possession of the Holy Spirit through the sensuous rapture engendered by the passionate melody of stringed instruments and the clash of cymbals, by the blare of trumpets and the ringing of harps. It was the instruction of his children in a lower school, preparing them for a higher.[3]

### **Biblical Hymnody**

The book of Psalms in the Bible is comprised of spiritual songs composed over the course of many centuries. The psalms were used in a variety of settings - for private, domestic, and public worship. It is not surprising, then, that we find the psalms similarly employed in the New Testament.

In the Hebrew Old Testament, the psalms are sometimes called psalms (*mizmohr*) in the titles affixed to them.[4] In other cases, a psalm may be referred to as a praise (*t'hillah*), especially since many of the psalms begin with the word Hallelujah in Hebrew, which means, "Praise the Lord." [5] A psalm may also be called a song (*sheer*), by title, or as a description of its nature.[6]

In the Greek New Testament, there are several terms which correspond closely with the nomenclature of the Old Testa-

ment. The word translated psalm (psalmos) is equivalent to its Old Testament counterpart. The word translated hymn (humnos) comes from a root word meaning praise. Likewise, there is another word for song (odee), from which we get the English term ode. All three Greek terms are found numerous times in the descriptive headings of the Psalms within the Septuagint version of the Old Testament. The three terms are used together in Ephesians 5:19 and Col. 3:16.

The singing of the 150 biblical psalms is a practice which Christ and the apostles carried over into the New Testament. The psalter is the divinely-inspired songbook for worship, and it contains timeless expressions of praise to God. Even when the psalter makes reference to the older and displaced forms of worship, and the history of the Old Testament, the words may be sung with spiritual profit, as "ensamples written for our admonition, upon whom the ends of the world are come" (1 Cor. 10:11).

After Christ instituted the Lord's Supper, he and his disciples sang a hymn (a praise), before going to the Mount of Olives (Matt. 26:30; Mark 14:26). This singing was probably from the hallel, or praise psalms traditionally associated with the Jewish passover.[7]

In Paul's first epistle to the Corinthians, the apostle rebukes the church for its discord and chaos. In chapter 14, verse 26, he mentions a psalm as one of the elements of public worship. Whereas Paul chides the Corinthians for unseemliness in many aspects of their practice, he never questions the propriety of psalms in worship.

Both Ephesians 5:19 and Colossians 3:16 affirm the continued use of psalms in the New Testament. The words used are "psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs." These are different terms, previously used in scripture, undoubtedly referring to various portions of the biblical psalter. Many modern readers employ these passages as a justification for introducing uninspired "hymns" into public worship. Unfortunately, popular nomenclature is not as precise as scripture; and this argument for non-canonical hymnody has a ring of plausibility, only because several generations have been raised singing nothing but uninspired hymnody drawn largely from 17th to 20th century composers. Thus, many people attempt to read back into the text of Ephesians and Colossians a meaning for the word hymn that is far from the apostle's original intent.

Paul's epistles offer no genuine support for non-canonical hymnody, since the scriptural use of the terminology must govern the meaning of the words used in this context. If the advocates of uninspired hymnody wish to establish their case, they must prove that Paul is using these terms in a manner contrary to their ordinary scriptural usage; or, they must show that, elsewhere, Christians have been enjoined to compose new psalms to supplement those given in the Bible.

In other words, the burden of proof rests upon the advocates of new hymnody to demonstrate that uninspired hymns are part of the divinely-revealed pattern for worship. The opponents of non-canonical hymnody in worship need no further proof of their unlawfulness, since there does not exist a biblical warrant for their use in worship.

Ecclesiastical Holy Days

For centuries, the Romish church has promoted a liturgical calendar, complete with major festivals, lesser holidays, and saints' days. Some Protestants have joined with Rome in the celebration of major holidays - such as Christmas and Easter - while eschewing the grosser superstitions associated with saint worship.

The discussion of religious holidays is emotionally-charged, but the root issue is really quite simple: "Who hath required this at your hand?" (Isa. 1:12). Who established these religious ordinances - God or man?

Under the Mosaic law, the Israelites observed the weekly sabbath, as well as special holy days in conjunction with the Levitical ordinances. After the death of Christ, the ceremonial holidays were no longer to be observed. The Lord's day is the Christian sabbath - the day for public worship. "There is no day commanded in scripture to be kept under the gospel but the Lord's day, which is the Christian sabbath. Festival days, vulgarly [commonly] called holy-days, having no warrant in the word of God, are not to be continued." [8]

The liturgical year and the ecclesiastical festivals have been brought into the church without any warrant from the scriptures. They are man-made observances, and therefore should be abolished on that basis alone.

Furthermore, the chief religious holidays actually developed out of pagan religious festivals: Christmas from Saturnalia, and Easter from the heathen fertility rites of spring. Saturnalia was a riotous festival in honor of the birth of the sun god, and it included homage to Bacchus, the Roman god of revelry and wine. The term Easter is derived from the name of the pagan goddess of spring (cf. Deut. 12:3); hence, the association with the symbols of fertility (rabbits and eggs) and illicit sexual activities.

The incorporation of such elements into Christian worship was a process of syncretism - the absorption of pagan worship into ecclesiastical ritual. For this reason, a double-condemnation rests upon these observances, because the Bible forbids the imitation of heathen worship, and commands the people of God to purge the implements of corrupt worship from their midst. (Deut. 12:2-3, 30-31)[9]

The Sign of the Cross

It is appropriate for us to offer a few comments on the placement of crosses in edifices of worship. When we speak of the cross, or crosses, we are referring to the visible symbol called a cross, not the sufferings of the Saviour. When the apostle Paul exclaimed, "God forbid that I should glory, save in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ" (Gal. 6:14), he uttered a precious truth. But the apostle's expression is obviously a synecdoche, by which he exalts the saving work of Christ. Paul's statement has no reference to visible symbols, known among us as crosses.

The direct adoration or worship of crosses is plainly forbidden by the scriptures, in the first and second commandments, which prohibit worshipping anyone or anything besides the Lord. Historically, Protestants condemned the adoration of crosses; for example, the Scottish Confession of 1580 specifically lists the "worshipping of images, relics and crosses," among the deplorable practices of "the Roman Antichrist." (This condemnation was extended to the superstitious gesture of "crossing," which is also employed within Romish rites and ceremonies.)

Most Protestants still acknowledge that the direct worship of crosses is sinful. But a dispute results when many professing Protestants defend the use of the cross as a symbol.

Now, what is a symbol? It is a visible representation of something. If they say that the cross is a symbol of deity, then they again violate the second commandment, which prohibits making or using representations of the Lord (Cf. Deut. 4:15-16; Acts 17:29). Of course, most Protestants would not claim that the cross is a representation of God. Therefore, cross-keepers must explain it as a symbol of something else; so they shift the argument to say that a cross is a symbol of redemption, or of the work of Christ.

In this situation, the cross now becomes a man-made rival to the sacraments. As we have noted, baptism and the Lord's Supper serve as visible signs and seals of Christ's redemptive work; the sacraments are a visible word to testify of redemption. "For as oft as ye eat this bread, and drink of this cup, ye do shew the Lord's death till he come" (1 Cor. 11:26).

Cross-keepers implicitly impugn the wisdom of Christ by supplementing the sacraments with the cross as an accessory sign. It is an inescapable implication, that the cross, employed as a symbol or as an aid to devotion, partakes of a sacramental characteristic as a sign.

Some will claim that the posting of a cross in a home, or on a church building, is an incidental thing, much as the arrangement of chairs, carpet, and wallpaper. But such incidental elements of decor do not possess the symbolic character of the cross. Cross-keepers must contend with the undeniable fact that the placement of a cross within an edifice of worship is not a merely indifferent aspect of architectural design. The only incidentals in a place of worship are those "circumstances concerning the worship of God, and the government of the Church, common to human actions and societies, which are to be ordered by the light of nature and Christian prudence, according to the general rules of the word, which are always to be observed." [10]

One must also consider the evil associations of the cross. The cross, as a symbol or gesture, is not found in the scriptures. For centuries, the cross has been - and continues to be - a prominent implement of Popish worship and superstition. No sane man can deny these facts. Since the cross has no biblical warrant for its use, why should it have any place

among those who worship "in spirit and in truth"? (John 4:23-24). The people of God have been commanded to purge from their midst the implements of corrupt worship used by false religions (Deut. 12:2-3, 30-31).

Moreover, even if the cross had possessed a noble origin, the superstition now linked with it would argue for its abolition. Consider the example of Hezekiah in reference to the brazen serpent. The brazen serpent was originally constructed at God's command, yet it was destroyed when it became a snare to the people of God (2 Kings 18:4). How much more quickly, then, should we discard a man-made symbol which continues to be an ensign of the Roman Antichrist?

In summary, there is no scriptural warrant to designate the cross as a symbol (or gesture) to adorn the assemblies of God's people. Until cross-keepers can produce such a warrant, the use of crosses stands condemned on this basis alone, since the regulative principle of worship forbids all human additions to God's appointed rites and symbols in worship. Further, the superstition fostered by crosses demands that they be purged from among the people of God.

#### **Footnotes for Chapter 4**

1. Historic disputes about worship are covered in the following publications: John à Lasco, "The Abolition of Vestments," in Iain Murray (ed.), *The Reformation of the Church* (London: Banner of Truth, 1965); William Ames, *A Fresh Suit Against Human Ceremonies in God's Worship* (1633); David Calderwood, *The Perth Assembly* (1619), *The Pastor and the Prelate* (1628); William Cunningham, "Leaders of the Reformation," in *The Reformers and the Theology of the Reformation* (1862; rpt. Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1979), pp. 27-46 (a portion of this article appears in Murray, *The Reformation of the Church*); George Gillespie, *A Dispute Against the English Popish Ceremonies Obtruded upon the Church of Scotland* (1637); John Knox, *True and False Worship* (1551; rpt. Dallas: Presbyterian Heritage, 1987). Peter Lorimer, *John Knox and the Church of England* (1875); C.G. M'Crrie, *Public Worship in Presbyterian Scotland* (1892).
2. Related remarks by Calvin are located in his commentary on the Psalms; see the following references 71:22; 92:3; 93:6; 149:3; 150:3.
3. Pages 60-63. Girardeau discusses this proposition more extensively, from pages 49-75, and he produces numerous citations from earlier reformed authors to illustrate that such views were not a novelty.
4. This term will be noted at the head of Psalms 3-6, 8-9, 12-13, 15, 19-24, etc.
5. See the title of Psalm 145; the first verses of the following psalms begin with the word the word Hallelujah, "Praise the Lord;" hence, their designation: 106, 111, 112, 113, 135, 146, 147, 148, 149, 150.
6. In the titles affixed to the following Psalms: 30, 45-46, 48, 65-69, 75, 83, 87-88, 92, 108, 120-34; cf. Ps. 137:3.
7. Hallel - a shortened form of Hallelujah; see note 5 above; the hallel psalms generally sung at the celebration of the Passover were 113-18.
8. "An Appendix, Touching Days and Places for Public Worship," as annexed to the Westminster Directory for the Public Worship of God (1645).
9. For a more extensive discussion of ecclesiastical holidays, see: Michael Schneider and Kevin Reed, *Christmas: A Biblical Critique* (Dallas: Presbyterian Heritage, 1993).
10. Westminster Confession of Faith, 1:6.

#### **Appendix**

##### **Temporary Officers and Practices Related to Worship**

Throughout the Bible, we find accounts of temporary gifts and officers among the people of God. That is, men sometimes receive special abilities to perform particular tasks; these endowments are not expected to be permanent gifts or

practices within the church.

For example, when the Lord sent Moses to deliver the children of Israel, the revealed word of God was accompanied by peculiar signs and wonders; many supernatural actions were performed by the hand of Moses.

When Moses received the law and the tabernacle ordinances, the Lord provided a divine pattern for the furnishings of the tabernacle. The worship in the tabernacle included many practices which were established as ongoing observances. Nevertheless, at the outset, God provided special gifts to certain individuals who were chosen to build the implements of tabernacle worship. The Lord "called by name Bezaleel the son of Uri" and "filled him with the spirit of God, in wisdom and understanding, and in knowledge, and in all manner of workmanship; and to devise curious works, to work in gold, and in silver, and in brass, and in the cutting of stones, to set them, and in carving of wood, to make any manner of cunning work. And he hath put in his heart that he may teach, both he and Ahiohiab. Them hath he filled with wisdom of heart, to work all manner of work, of the engraver, and of the cunning workman, and of the embroiderer, in blue, and in purple, in scarlet, and in fine linen, and of the weaver, even of them that do any work, and of those that devise cunning work" (Ex. 35:30-35; 38:21-23).

After the tabernacle was completed according to the divine pattern (Ex. 39:43), there was no expectation that the special gifts of Moses and Bezaleel would be needed in an ongoing manner. Nor did the Lord appoint successors to Bezaleel to continue fashioning new implements for the tabernacle.

We find a parallel case in the pages of the New Testament. The death of Christ ushered in a new era; Jerusalem was no longer the focal point of public worship. The Saviour instructed the apostles to take the gospel to the farthest reaches of civilization. As the gospel spread, the apostles fulfilled a foundational role in building up the church, which is likened to the temple (or tabernacle) of God (Eph. 2:20-21).

When this new era of gospel worship was inaugurated, the Lord furnished the apostles with special gifts, "God also bearing them witness, both with signs and wonders, and with diverse miracles" (Heb. 2:4). Thus, we read about tongues of fire, miraculous healings, and supernatural deliverances. There were also special assistants to the apostles, called evangelists, some of whom wrote the gospel accounts in the scriptures. And there were New Testament prophets among the churches.

There is no indication in the Bible that these special gifts and officers were expected to become permanent fixtures in the church. On the contrary, just as Moses and Bezaleel had no permanent successors to their special offices and functions, so the apostles and prophets had no designated successors. Rather, their special offices and functions gave way to the ordinary operations of the church, conducted by ordinary ecclesiastical officers - pastors, teachers, elders, and deacons.

In Acts 14:23, we read of Paul and Barnabas ordaining elders for the government of the churches they had planted. They did not appoint new apostles. (As long as the apostles lived, they possessed a peculiar authority as Christ's special messengers. But once the apostles passed from the scene, the responsibilities regarding church government fell to elders.) From these facts, we conclude that some aspects of worship, as described in the New Testament narratives, were never intended to be permanent, since they were practices linked to the special gifts of apostles and prophets.

For example, we do not presently conduct public healing services. Certainly the apostles performed some healings in the course of their ministry. But the normal directions for the sick are to resort to individual prayer, appropriate medicinal substances; and, in special cases, they may seek a visitation from the elders of the church (2 Cor. 12:7-9; 1 Tim 5:23; James 5:14-15).

We freely acknowledge the instantaneous gift of foreign tongues, which was manifest on the day of Pentecost. But that was an altogether extraordinary occasion. There is no indication from the Bible that this miraculous event was to become a routine ordinance in Christian worship. A strong case can be made that the only persons who actually spoke with these tongues on the day of Pentecost were the apostles, since the response of the hearers was, "Are not all these which speak Galilæans?" (Acts 2:7).

Moreover, it is certain that the tongues mentioned in Acts 2, and in other references in the New Testament, were known languages - not an unintelligible dialect, as claimed by modern-day charismatics. When references are made to unknown languages in Paul's epistles, the apostle is emphatic that a message spoken in a foreign language cannot profit the hearers, unless there is an interpreter present.

For centuries, Protestants criticized the Papists for conducting worship services in an unknown language (Latin), wherein the general public could not understand the content of the worship. The criticism was warranted, because, as the apostle notes, "If therefore the whole church be come together into one place, and all speak with tongues, and there come in those that are unlearned, or unbelievers, will they not say that ye are mad?" (1 Cor. 14:23). Likewise, charismatics are guilty of similar folly when they advocate the practice of chattering in unintelligible gibberish as a central part of their worship.

Questions have been raised as to whether the tongues mentioned in the apostolic era were revelatory in nature. Regardless of the answer to this query, the apostle's restrictions apply to any spoken word in the church, whether revelatory or not. No service of worship should be allowed to degenerate into a chaotic scene where multiple speakers are blithering in unintelligible noises which cannot be understood by any of the hearers.

If we conclude that the gift of tongues was a revelatory gift, we still have no indication that it was a permanent gift. In fact, the evidence is to the contrary, since tongues were associated with the apostolic signs and wonders which were passing away as the New Testament writings were nearing completion. As noted, there were many special (but temporary) operations of the Spirit when the new era of Christian worship was inaugurated.

Further, true spiritual knowledge is now acquired through the patient study of scripture (2 Tim.2:15-16; 3:14-17; 4:13) - not direct revelation. Hence, the apostle commends studying and the use of books.

Throughout this booklet, we have sought to emphasize how the precepts of the Bible apply to the historic narratives of the scriptures. The accounts in Kings and Chronicles are understood in the light of the commandments previously given in the book of Deuteronomy. That is the proper approach to hermeneutics, because not all of the recorded actions of biblical characters are approved examples of behavior we should imitate.

We remind readers of this basic principle of interpretation as we consider a portion of the 14th chapter of Paul's epistle to the Corinthians. These verses have been variously cited by diverse groups - from charismatics to Plymouth Brethren - to justify their peculiar methods of worship. A key to understanding this passage is the proper interpretation of verse 26, "How is it then, brethren? when ye come together, every one of you hath a psalm, hath a doctrine, hath a tongue, hath a revelation, hath an interpretation."

The crux of the issue may be resolved if we answer a basic question. Is Paul's statement here prescriptive? or is it merely descriptive, without implying approval for the practice of the Corinthians?

Charismatics and Plymouth Brethren contend for the former, claiming that Paul's remarks establish a warrant for free-style worship services, wherein church members may independently introduce various elements of worship. But this position violates the sense of the immediate context of the verse, as well as the general tenor of Paul's letter as a whole.

Earlier in his letter, Paul chides the Corinthians for a number of problems within the congregation. He first describes their current practices, and then explains what needs to be done to remedy the situation.

For example, twice in the eleventh chapter Paul commences a statement with the words, "when ye come together," as a prelude to a corrective admonition: "First of all, when ye come together in the church, I hear there be divisions among you. When ye come together therefore into one place, this is not to eat the Lord's Supper. For in eating everyone taketh before other his own supper: and one is hungry, and another is drunken. Shall I praise you in this? I praise you not" (1 Cor. 11:20-22).

In chapter 14, the apostle is rebuking them for their chaotic worship because, when the church convenes, various persons bring competing preferences, and their conflicting desires promote anarchy. "How is it then, brethren? when ye come together, every one of you hath a psalm, hath a doctrine, hath a tongue, hath a revelation, hath an interpretation" (1 Cor. 14:26).

Paul's rebuke is clear from the latter portion of verse 26 and verse 33. "Let all things be done unto edifying. For God is not the author of confusion, but of peace, as in all churches of the saints." For this reason, the apostle places restrictions on the proceedings, that "all things be done decently and in order" (vs. 40).

Regarding speakers using unknown languages, the apostle is clear: "In the church I had rather speak five words with my understanding, that by my voice I might teach others also, than ten thousand words in an unknown tongue." Hence, those who speak in a foreign language may speak in church only if there is an interpreter present. Moreover, speakers of all types are restricted to specific numbers (1 Cor. 14:18, 27, 29). And women are not permitted to speak at all (1 Cor. 14:34-35), since they are not allowed to exercise authority over men or teach in church (1 Tim. 2:11-15).

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