

A TASTE of  
HEAVEN

WORSHIP in the LIGHT  
of ETERNITY

R.C. Sproul



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*A Taste of Heaven: Worship in the Light of Eternity*

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# Preface

WE OBSERVE THE FLIGHT OF BIRDS with a sense of awe. We watch them soar above the trees, wings arching, reaching up to the clouds. Every person has an inbred wish to be able to mimic the birds. Oh, that we could fly unaided, without the assistance of machinery. But it is not our nature to fly. God gifted the birds with inherent abilities and character traits to make flying possible. He constructed them with lightweight bones, feathers, and wings that propel them in flight. Still, birds do not fly from the moment they hatch from their eggs. They must mature for a short period in the nest, learning the rudiments of flight from their parents, until such time as the instincts of the parents push them into the gravity-defying act of flight.

In like manner, fish are endowed by their Creator with all of the necessary traits to be at home in the sea or a lake. Fish are given gills, fins, and scales to make their compatibility with their environment complete. Fish do not have to

learn to swim. They swim from the moment they are born. Just as the birds fly by doing what comes naturally, so the fish swim.

But then we see the apex of Creation, God's crowning creative act, the human species, which alone is made in God's image and is given dominion over the birds, the fish, and the whole world. It is the nature of this created being, the human being, to worship God. But something has been added to the mix that causes human beings to act against their natures, to fail to do what comes naturally. We have fallen from our original position in creation, that place where, before the fall, Adam and Eve delighted in giving honor, glory, and reverence to their Creator. Since the fall, this natural propensity for worship has been obscured and damaged.

In the first chapter of Romans, the apostle Paul makes clear that the universal sin, the most foundational sin among human beings, is idolatry. It is the proclivity to exchange the glory of God for a lie, and to worship and serve the creature rather than the ever-blessed Creator. Through the indictment of Romans 1, we learn that all human beings repress the manifest self-disclosure of God and refuse to honor Him as God, and "neither were they grateful." These twin acts of treason against the divine glory, refusing to honor Him as God and refusing to give Him the gratitude that is due Him for all of the blessings we receive from His hand, are so powerful that once a person is converted, these penchants are not instantly or automatically erased. To be sure, the Spirit of God quickens within the souls of the redeemed a new

desire for worship. But that desire is not something that can be left to the natural course of experience. It must be cultivated. It must be learned in accordance with the directives of sacred Scripture. The worship to which we are called in our renewed state is far too important to be left to personal preferences, to whims, or to marketing strategies. It is the pleasing of God that is at the heart of worship. Therefore, our worship must be informed at every point by the Word of God as we seek God's own instructions for worship that is pleasing to Him.

In our time, we have experienced a radical eclipse of God. The shadow that has fallen across the face of God cannot destroy His existence any more than a passing cloud can destroy the sun or the moon. But the eclipse hides the real character of God from His people. It has brought a profound loss of the sense of the holy, and with that, any sense of the gravity and seriousness of godly worship.

We are a people who have lost the threshold and have failed to make a transition Sunday morning from the secular to the sacred, from the common to the uncommon, from the profane to the holy. We continue, as did the sons of Aaron, Nadab and Abihu, to offer strange fire before the Lord. We have made our worship services more secular than sacred, more common than uncommon, more profane than holy.

This book is a brief introduction to the basic principles of worship, set forth for our instruction and edification, and for our obedience, in sacred Scripture. It looks at both the principles enjoined by Scripture and the models displayed in Scripture. Our modern worship needs the philosophy of the

second glance, an ongoing attempt to make sure that all that we do in worship gatherings is to God's glory, to His honor, and according to His will. May this book help bring an end to the eclipse of God in our time, and help us once again render unto God the worship we are designed to give.

# The Form of Worship

IT WAS ONE OF THOSE LOVELY autumn Saturday afternoons when people's thoughts turn to football, golf, or raking leaves. But I was doing something else entirely: reading again the *Discourse on Method and Meditations* of René Descartes.

I appreciate philosophers such as Descartes, who pursue the truth by going back to first principles in seeking for foundations upon which everything else is established and from which everything else flows. In my own activity in theology and philosophy, I use this approach frequently, because it's so easy to lose sight of the forest when you get caught among the trees. When I am confused, I like to back up and say, "OK, now, what do we know for sure? What's the foundation upon which everything is built?"

That is exactly what I want to do in this study of worship. We're living in a time when there is a manifest crisis of worship in the church. It's almost as if we're in the

midst of a rebellion among people who find church less than meaningful. They're bored. They see the experience of Sunday morning as an exercise in irrelevance. As a reaction against that, it seems that almost any church we visit is experimenting with new forms and new patterns of worship. This experimentation has provoked many disputes over the nature of worship.

The worship battle lines tend to be drawn between what's called liturgical worship and non-liturgical worship. In a very real sense, these labels represent a false dilemma. In the first place, any service of worship that I've ever attended could be called liturgical. All that *liturgical* means is that there's a liturgy, an order or a pattern, and that certain things are done in the service. The same kind of thing may be said with respect to formal and informal worship. *Informal* simply means "without form." We can't, however, have corporate worship with no form. There's some form to every worship service, so there's really no such thing as worship that is informal in the literal sense. The issue is not whether we're going to have a liturgy or a form. The question is, "What will be the structure, the style, and the content of the liturgy?"

Once we have settled on a form, we must ask whether it is a legitimate form. To find the answer to that question, we need to return to first principles, to the foundations, and search out what God wants us to do in worship. The issue is not what stimulates or excites us. Though that is not an insignificant or unimportant issue, our overriding concern needs to be what is pleasing to God. The question we need

to ask is this: “If God Himself were to design worship, what would it look like?”

We’re not left to speculate on the answer to that question, because vast portions of the Old Testament text are specifically devoted to a style and practice of worship that God Himself ordained and established among His people.

Of course, we can’t go to the Old Testament and discover what is there in terms of the format of worship and then simply carry it across and superimpose it into the New Testament community. The reason for that is obvious: Much of the ritual of the Old Testament focused upon the sacrificial system that was fulfilled once and for all in the atonement of Christ.

Take the rite of circumcision in the Old Testament. When Moses was derelict in circumcising his son, God pursued Moses and threatened to execute him because he had failed to follow God’s prescription of giving the sacred rite of circumcision to his children (Ex. 4:24–26). Clearly, then, God regarded circumcision as extremely important. But if I said that we must have our sons circumcised as a religious sign and ritual, I would be under God’s condemnation. That is clear from the book of Galatians, where Paul speaks of dealing with those who wanted to insist on total continuity between the Old Testament and the New Testament (Gal. 2). If we follow their lead and insist on total continuity between the testaments, we risk falling into this Judaizing heresy and denying the fulfillment of the covenant that was accomplished by Jesus. Clearly, then, there is some discontinuity between the Old Testament and the New Testament.

We must not fall, however, into the trap of thinking that there is no continuity at all between the testaments. The early church passed through a great crisis concerning biblical continuity. This crisis centered around a man named Marcion, who was a “heresiarch,” the arch heretic of all time regarding biblical continuity. Marcion taught that the God of the New Testament Who is revealed in Jesus is not the same God Who appears in the Old Testament. Marcion saw the God of the Old Testament as a tyrannical being, a mean, vengeful, and wrathful God. But the loving Father revealed by Jesus in the New Testament is the true God, Marcion said.

Of course, somebody could have said to Marcion, “Wait a minute, Marcion. Jesus frequently quotes the Old Testament text and addresses the Old Testament God as His Father.” Such passages were indeed problematic for Marcion, so he took his scissors and paste and, as the first Bultmannian, altered Scripture so that it conveyed the doctrine he wanted it to convey. He produced an expurgated, or abridged, version of the New Testament. He was the first scholar to offer a formal canon of the New Testament to the church. But it was radically reduced in scope from the New Testament we know today.

The church responded to that heresy by saying, “No, this is not Scripture. This is a truncated version of Scripture.” The church did that because it saw the serious danger of looking at the God of the New Testament as alien to the God of the Old Testament. Prompted by the crisis ignited by Marcion’s heresy, the church formalized the canon of

Scripture. In the process, the church affirmed the Scriptural teaching that God is immutable, that His character does not change from generation to generation, from day to day, or from week to week. In other words, the church said that there is continuity from the Old Testament to the New in at least one aspect: God Himself. So while we have some discontinuity, there is an abiding continuity as well.

I don't know of anyone today teaching pure, unvarnished Marcionitism, but his heresy is alive and well in the evangelical church in our unprecedented neglect of the Old Testament. People, particularly in America, are conditioned to think of Christianity only in terms of the New Testament. I'm sure this is why we have a crisis of morality in the church and the pervasive presence of an antinomian theology and behavioral system. Simply put, we have woefully neglected the Old Testament, just as if there is nothing but discontinuity between the two testaments.

An example of this can be seen in our approach to the law of God. Some years ago, I received a letter from a scholar who was upset about some theological issues. He complained because one of my colleagues had charged some other theologians with being antinomian, that is, opposed to the law of God. In his letter, this fellow asked, "How in the world can you charge these people with antinomianism? We're not antinomians. We believe that Christians are responsible to obey all of the commandments of Christ." But then he added, "Of course, we also believe that none of the laws of the Old Testament impose any moral obligation on believers."

I answered him this way: “From now on, I won’t discuss or use this term *antinomian* with these other people. Instead of using them as an example, I’ll use you, because when you say that the law of God in the Old Testament has no moral obligation on the Christian, you are making the classic expression of what has been defined historically as antinomianism.” This man had simply concluded that none of the laws of God in the Old Testament have continuity in the New Testament.

That’s one major way we see neglect of the Old Testament; we also see this neglect in worship. We behave as if nothing God said on the subject of worship in the Old Testament applies today. If we are to come back to the foundation, if we are to please God in our worship, doesn’t it make sense to ask whether there has ever been a time when the unchanging God Himself revealed the kind of worship that was pleasing to Him? I believe that the answer is yes, and I believe that there was such a time.

When we affirm the inerrancy of Scripture, we’re often charged with holding a view of inspiration that teaches a dictation theory of inspiration. But, of course, historic orthodoxy does not teach such a view. The church has never taught that God dictated every word of, for example, the book of Romans, with Paul acting as a secretary and simply recording the words God dictated from heaven. Conservative theologians actually bend over backward to show that the mode of inspiration is not expressed in terms of dictation.

However, if there ever was a time when God dictated

revelation, it was in those passages in the Pentateuch where He told the people word for word, line upon line, precept upon precept how He wanted Old Testament worship to be conducted. He told the Israelites how the tabernacle was to be designed and built. He gave detailed prescriptions for the making of the ephod and of the garments of the priests. He laid down specific laws governing the behavior of the priests and the people in and around the sanctuary. He outlined the services, the offerings, the festivals. In other words, God took great pains to be very specific about the form of worship in Israel.

Yes, there is discontinuity. We don't have a temple now. The curtain of the Holy of Holies has been torn. We don't make offerings on the altar of sacrifice today, but there is continuity, too. I believe we can discern principles in the patterns of worship that God revealed from heaven to His people in the Old Testament, and that those principles can and should inform the patterns our worship follows.

We must be careful, however, as we dig into these Old Testament passages in upcoming chapters, that we do not allow the pursuit of proper form in worship to become an end in itself. That has been the case far too often in the history of God's people, from ancient Israel to Jesus' time to the Reformation, with sad results in each instance.

People use various adjectives to differentiate styles of worship. Some speak of high liturgy or low liturgy, or they speak of formal worship in relative degrees, depending on whether the ministers or priests wear vestments, whether printed prayers or spontaneous prayers are used, whether the

music is classical or contemporary, and other criteria. These adjectives are employed because different styles of worship have arisen as a reaction against what could be called a high liturgy or a classical, traditional pattern of worship. Why has that reaction occurred?

At the time of the Reformation, some people in Protestant churches reacted against the traditional Roman Catholic style of worship. Some of that reaction was theological, but not all of it. Some of it was based on a zealous desire to do nothing in the way Rome did it. For instance, during the time Martin Luther hid at Wartburg Castle and translated the Bible from the original languages into German, one of his disciples in Wittenberg, Andreas Carlstadt, started vandalizing churches, smashing stained-glass windows, overthrowing the furniture, and doing all sorts of damage in the name of reform. When Luther heard of this, he was upset and disciplined Carlstadt for his over-zealous reaction against the sacred things of the past.

Carlstadt erroneously directed his ire against the “form” of Roman Catholic worship. The problem was not with the form but with the formalism into which Rome had fallen. The word *formalism* means that the form becomes the end in itself. Another word that means much the same is *externalism*, which is the condition that exists when all that exists are the external elements, while the internal elements, the heart and soul, are absent. The Reformers’ true goal was to cure the formalism and externalism of the Roman Catholic Church.

In the same way, the Old Testament prophets were vehe-

ment in their denunciations of the dead, empty formalism into which Jewish worship had degenerated. As a seminary student, I had to read two books on worship, one that favored a low liturgy and another that favored a high liturgy. The book that favored the low liturgy was presented as an expression of “prophetic” worship in the church, whereas the book that advocated a high liturgy presented itself as following the priestly tradition of worship. After reading these books, we students had to defend one or the other style of worship. I was astonished to discover that I was the only person in the class who favored the high liturgy and the priestly tradition. My professor was equally surprised at me, because he knew that I was a committed evangelical Christian, and evangelicals traditionally shy away from liturgical worship.

Why did I choose the high liturgy position? The author of the book on the priestly tradition convinced me by showing that when we go back to the prophetic critique of the deadly forms of worship that God rejected in Israel, the prophets were reformers but not revolutionaries. What’s the difference? The prophets nowhere rejected the liturgies of worship that God had ordained for His people. Instead, the prophets denounced the decadence of the people’s practice in following these liturgies. The problem wasn’t with the liturgies; the problem was with the worshipers, who came with cold hearts and went through the liturgies simply by rote, with uninvolved and untouched hearts.

Jesus, too, was a reformer in this sense. Exhibit A of externalism in the Bible is the Pharisees, who went through all of the outward rites, all of the liturgies that God had

prescribed, but their hearts were not in it. They skated on the surface of superficial lip-service to God. As Jesus said of them, “Hypocrites! Well did Isaiah prophesy about you, saying: ‘These people draw near to Me with their mouth, and honor Me with their lips, but their heart is far from Me. And in vain they worship Me . . .’” (Matt. 15:7–9a).

There is no doubt that God wants His worship to have form, so the question is not whether we will have a liturgy or not. The issue is whether the liturgy is biblical in its content, and ultimately, whether we are using the liturgy to worship in spirit and in truth. No matter what the liturgy is, whether it’s a plain liturgy, a simple liturgy, or a complex, highly symbolic liturgy, it can be formalized and externalized so that it is corrupted to the point that God despises it. As we seek out the forms of worship that please God, we must be vigilant lest we fall into formalism or externalism.



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P U B L I S H I N G

*Reformation Trust Publishing* was established by Ligonier Ministries in 2006 to produce books that are true to the historic Christian faith and the doctrines recovered during the Protestant Reformation.

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