

THE PSALMS IN WORSHIP

edited by John McNaugher, D. D., LL. D., 1907

Chapter 3, THE SCRIPTURAL LAW OF WORSHIP

By The Rev. William H. Vincent, D. D., Allegheny, Pa.

THE worship of a Supreme Being seems to be a universal instinct, and, because of the sovereignty, majesty, and holiness of the Object of worship, must be surrounded by such safeguards, restrictions, and sanctities as will preserve the divine honor and secure the acceptance of the worshiper and his worship.

It is of the utmost importance that every worshiper of God shall have a definite and clear understanding of what are the means and manner of worship, that it may be acceptable unto God with Whom we have to do. Without this knowledge the great mass of the world's population has for ages, like the Athenians, worshiped unknown gods. Rather than incur the wrath of heaven by a form of worship that is dishonoring and displeasing to God we should, instead of allowing ourselves ignorantly to worship, seek some divine message declaring what the mind of the Lord is, and follow it. Our worship rendered to God is of the utmost importance. It is rendered to the sovereign Lord of heaven and earth Who created us, Who preserves us, Who saves us, and Who is at last to judge us. Because He is the sovereign Lord of all, because He is infinitely high and holy, and has a watchful care over His worship that it be kept pure and holy, we are to be very watchful and conscientious that our worship be rendered according to the divine appointment.

Many branches of the Protestant Church have been all at sea on this important matter, and we need to have careful thought and carefully digested and formulated regulations on the matter of worship drawn from the Word of God, lest like the Roman Catholic Church in all its history we leave an open door for the introduction of all manner of idol worship and the inventions of men, until the purity and simplicity of the worship of God, as set forth in the Scriptures, are superseded and supplanted by the mummeries and man-made devices which corrupt and degrade our attempted approaches to God.

This subject touches some of the highest, holiest, and deepest doctrines of our religion. It is founded on the sovereignty, majesty, and holiness of God. Is God the sovereign Lord of all? Is His revealed will to be accepted as the infallible guide of human conduct? Has He a right to rule in His own house? Has He a right to prescribe the way by which He may be approached and worshiped? If these questions are to be answered in the affirmative, then His rights in these matters are exclusive. No man or potentate, however exalted, nor any number of men, as a Church council, can arrogate to themselves the right to dictate or prescribe the manner by which God is to be worshiped. God Himself must decide in what way He will be approached.

He alone can lay down the ordinances and methods by which He may be acceptably worshiped. God's sovereign right covers the whole ground, and does not leave any margin on which the intrusion of human inventions can get a footing.

The Roman Catholic Church opens a wide door for all manner of ceremonies and inventions when it gives standing in its worship to anything not contrary to the Word of God. For all its legion of inventions it claims the authority of some Council of the Church, which, though perhaps unheard-of otherwise in history, answers as a convenient scapegoat on which to lay the sin.

The Lutheran and Anglican Churches claim a place for rites and services which may be approved by the Church, so long as they are not forbidden by the Scriptures. The Reformed Churches, especially those of the Puritan family of Holland and England and the Presbyterian Churches of Scotland and Ireland with their descendants, take much higher ground and claim that the line is to be drawn excluding everything which does not have plain divine appointment. In other words that which is not commanded is forbidden. The faith of these Churches is set forth in the Catechisms, Larger and Shorter, and the Confession of Faith of the Westminster Assembly.

Question 51 of the Shorter Catechism, on what is forbidden in the Second Commandment, states: "The Second Commandment forbiddeth the worshiping of God by images or any other way not appointed in His Word." The Larger Catechism, at Question 109, says in part: "The sins forbidden in the Second Commandment are all devising, counseling, commanding, using, and anywise approving any religious worship not instituted by God Himself ... all superstitious devices corrupting the worship of God, adding to it or taking from it." The Confession of Faith, Chap. xxi., Sec. 1, says: "The acceptable way of worshiping the true God is instituted by Himself, and so limited by His own revealed will that He may not be worshiped 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 Scriptures."

That these statements of doctrine are in accord with the uniform teaching of the Scriptures is evident from the following: First. In the institution of worship, both in the Old and in the New Testament dispensations, what God appoints alone can stand; all else is excluded. This would be expected from the fact that the great God we worship is the sovereign Lord of all. The laws He lays down for His subjects are not to be bandied about according to the caprice or sinfulness of man. God is Lord of His own house. It cannot have two lords or masters. "I am the Lord, that is My name; and My glory will I not give to another." The sovereignty, majesty, and holiness of God require that in all matters pertaining to our approach to Him in holy worship it is His to command and ours to obey. "Ours not to make reply, Ours not to question why."

Accordingly we find in all the Scriptures careful provision made that the worship of God may be according to His own appointment, and surrounded with such safeguards and sanctities as shall preserve it unsullied and inviolate from the devices of man. Whence came the laws concerning sacrifices, concerning the Sabbath, concerning circumcision, concerning the feasts of the Passover, Pentecost, and Tabernacles, and concerning the Great Day of Atonement, and many more? Were they not by divine appointment only? In the structure of the tabernacle and its worship all matters were minutely laid down, and could not be altered. When God gave these commandments to Moses, at His august presence Mount Sinai was filled with thunders and lightnings and clouds and fire and smoke, and that which He commanded left no room for additions or embellishments by Moses or any artificer however skilled. That which was appointed was to stand, and all else was forbidden. When all the minute directions concerning the tabernacle and its appointments in the Book of Exodus were laid down, it was accompanied by the divine decree (xxv. 40), "And look that thou make them after their pattern which was showed thee in the mount."

The tabernacle, with all its materials and utensils, may pass away, together with the temple whose services were likewise ordered of the Lord, but the principle that God reserves to Himself the right to appoint the ordinances and manner of His own worship stands forever. Every ordinance of God's house must show its divine appointment. "See that thou make it according to the pattern which was showed thee." Not only was the order of the tabernacle and the temple service thus provided for, but in later years when the temple service was restored by King Hezekiah its sacrifices, the Passover, and other ordinances, together with the praise service, were reestablished according to the commandment of the Lord. 2 Chron. xxix. 30 says, "Moreover Hezekiah the king and the princes commanded the Levites to sing praise unto the Lord with the words of David and of Asaph the seer. And they sang praises with gladness, and they bowed their heads and worshiped." That all this was done by the king under divine authority is plainly stated in verse 25: "For so was the commandment of the Lord by His prophets."

In the order established by our Lord and the inspired Apostles in the New Testament Church the ordinances of the reading and preaching of the Word, prayer, the singing of inspired songs, the observance of the Sabbath, Baptism, and the Lord's Supper, are all provided by the great King and Head of the Church. Our Lord severely condemns the Pharisees, who by their traditions and inventions laid heavy burdens upon men's shoulders. When extortion and unholy traffic had thrust themselves into the temple, our Lord in His zeal for His holy house drove therefrom with a whip the money-changers and extortionate traders. He guards the purity of His house and worship that unholy devices may not dwell therein.

Again when He speaks of the Pharisees making void the ordinances of God by their traditions, He says, "In vain do they worship Me, teaching for doctrines the commandments of men." His last commission refers not only to the extension of His

Church, but to the purity of the doctrine and worship of His Church: "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 always, even unto the end of the world." They were to teach, not what things are not forbidden, but "all things whatsoever I have commanded you."

The people of Israel lived in the midst of heathen and idolatrous nations, and, lest they should lose their exalted heritage of the truth of God and the purity of their religious life and worship, they were enjoined from familiar intercourse and entangling alliances with the heathen around about. The Church of God today is in the same peril. Just as it begins to depart from the divine order it opens the door to all manner of abuses and corruptions in God's worship. God would guard His sacred oracles still, unto the end of time, by prescribing for His Church the ordinances of worship. He would not have the ark of God suffer an unseemly touch, nor have strange fire come upon His altar. The sacredness of this trust of holy laws and ordinances is impressed upon us in Deut. iv. 1, 2: "Now therefore hearken, O Israel, unto the statutes and unto the judgments which I teach you, for to do them. Ye shall not add unto the word which I command you, neither shall ye diminish aught from it, that ye may keep the commandments of the Lord your God which I command you." This embraces more than are commonly known as moral precepts, for verses 13 to 19 particularly guard the people against profaning and corrupting God's worship, closing with the words, "Lest thou lift up thine eyes unto heaven, and when thou seest the sun, and the moon, and the stars, even all the host of heaven, shouldest be driven to worship them, and serve them." Thus by the most minute regulations the great King and Head of the Church has guarded His holy ordinances of worship, that the conceit and devices of man may not add thereto or diminish therefrom.

Second. It is a general principle in the interpretation of law that when something is commanded, whatever is opposed thereto is forbidden. When God commands, "Thou shalt do no murder," He forbids any practices or habits which endanger our lives or the lives of others. When He commands, "Thou shalt not steal," He lays upon us the obligation to be engaged in some useful, honorable employment, that we may honestly obtain the things we need. When He commands, "Thou shalt worship the Lord thy God, and Him only shalt thou serve," He prohibits the giving of any kind of worship to any other. The worship of the sun, the moon, the stars, the Virgin Mary, the Apostles, or any of the saints, is all cast out by one sweep of the divine hand. The commandment, "Worship God," covers the whole ground, and hence the giving of worship to any other is forbidden.

When He commands the singing of inspired songs in His praise, that command covers the whole ground, and any other book of praise has no foundation in the Word of God. But some one insists that, while the use of the Psalms of the Bible is proper, sacred songs written by uninspired men may be used, since they are nowhere forbidden. That is, however, the old plea of the Roman Catholic, that things not contrary to the Word of

God may be introduced. On the same principle the worship of the Virgin Mary, confession to the priest, paying money to get friends out of purgatory, the sale of indulgences to commit sin, and the whole legion of such absurdities and heresies find an open door, and may come in to corrupt and degrade the Church of God. This old plea that things not forbidden may be introduced into the worship of the Church is a Trojan horse in which all manner of corruptions and abominations can clandestinely creep into the very holy of holies of the worship of the Church. It was said that the Rev. John Newton was a great lover of cats. Once he possessed a mother cat and a kitten. In the kindness of his heart, and to prevent the too frequent interruption of his studies by waiting on the cats, he had two holes cut in the door of his house, one for the old cat, and a smaller one for the kitten. It had not occurred to the good man that the hole that would admit the larger cat would admit also the kitten, indeed would admit not only two cats but any number of cats. When you have made an opening in the door of God's house large enough to admit songs of praise which God has not authorized, that same hole will admit the worship of the Virgin Mary, prayers to St. Peter, confession to the priest, holy water, kissing the pope's toe, and the whole brood of pollutions and monstrosities from which the Church escaped in the tremendous revolution and reformation of the sixteenth century. The great principle that only what is commanded has a place in the worship of God was one of the cornerstones of the Reformation; without it the great battle of Protestantism against Romanism could never have been fought out and won. In asserting this doctrine we are simply calling the Church back to one of the great attainments of the Reformation, when purity of worship and the inspired songs of God's Word had the right of way in all the Reformed Churches.

Third. God has revealed by startling judgments His displeasure when the divine rule is violated. When Nadab and Abihu appeared before the Lord to offer incense (Lev. x.), they took their censers and put strange fire therein to offer before the Lord. God's appointment was that the fire should be taken from off His own altar, and it was therefore holy; but instead they used fire of their own kindling. The fire which they used would perhaps burn as brightly and consume the incense just as well, and doubtless many would say "it is just as good": but it lacked this peculiar mark of sanctity — it was not of God's appointment; it was not divine fire. As a mighty judgment, fire from heaven, like a blazing bolt of lightning, smote them, and they died before the Lord. They had intruded a merely human device into holy things, and thus supplanted and superseded the sacred divine order, and they died for their sin. When King Uzziah had his heart lifted up with pride and conceit, he appeared in the temple with a censer to burn incense before the Lord. The attendant priests were horrified, and fourscore of them in their flowing robes rushed after him and cried 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." But the hot-headed king persisted, and God smote him upon his forehead with a loathsome leprosy, "and they thrust him out from thence; yea, himself hasted also to go out, because the Lord had smitten him." For any one, even for a king, to intrude himself was an offense to God, and God put a mark upon him as manifest as the

mark of Cain. When those priests with strange fire died before the Lord, the Lord said, "I will be sanctified in them that come nigh Me, and before all the people I will be glorified." Some one may say, O well, the matter cannot be regarded so strictly now, or we would see such judgments every day. But because those who offend God do not reap the punishment at once is no proof that God has ceased to hold men to an account for intruding upon His sacred appointments and offering strange fire. One judgment of this kind hangs out the red light of warning for all time. Because all liars are not struck dead for their prevarications, as were Ananias and Sapphira, it is no indication that God has ceased to hate lying. One swift, terrible judgment like that is sufficient for all time. One startling manifestation of God's displeasure like that upon Nadab and Abihu rings in our ears down through the ages the message, Beware of intruding human devices into the sacred things of God ; beware of substituting any invention of man, however pleasing, for the simple sacred order of God's appointments. "In vain do they worship Me, teaching for doctrines the commandments of men."

Thus the simple divine order of things appointed becomes the inviolable law to be observed in the worship of God for all time. Would we not count it a great sacrilege and scandal if men would substitute something else for the bread and wine in the sacrament of the Lord's Supper, which God has appointed? Would we not count it a profanation of God's ordinance of Baptism if men would set about to substitute some other liquid for the pure water which God has appointed? Is it not the same principle when men intrude any other compositions or praise books into divine worship to supplant God's book and substitute instead the invention of man?

But some may say: Can we not versify and sing other portions of the Word, as the Gospels, and thus sing the gospel? To this it may be said: (i) God's provision is to preach the gospel to the world, not to sing it; (2) The Gospels are not lyrical, and were never intended for the praise service of the house of God; (3) There is but one book which God has labeled the "Book of Praise" either in the Old or New Testament Church, and that book is the appointed and authorized Book of Psalms.

The crucial point which we emphasize in this discussion is: What has the divine appointment? By that standard every book of praise must stand or fall. That which has not the divine appointment has no standing in God's house. The Book of Psalms not only has the seal of inspiration, but it has also the clear and unmistakable appointment of God. Hence it is the book of praise for the Church of God in every age and in every land. As it has songs which relate not only to the past and present of the Church, but to the Church in the millennial age, and since the spirit of inspiration is withdrawn from the Church, the Book of Psalms is designed to continue as the manual of praise in the Church until the end of time.