

Swept off your Feet

Beyond Worship-as-Usual

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CHAPTER 13

Obsolete Models of Worship

Regulations for Temple Service

Performing priestly duties, based on First Covenant (Old Testament) regulations, corresponds to a cause-and-effect system of religion. Slaying sacrifices and offering gifts accrued rewards and benefits, not to God, but to supplicants and priests. So called “*worshippers*” performed religious duties for personal and corporate gain not to convey reverence to God.

Temple service and worship share an association because some Bible translators intermittently render the Greek word *latreia* as worship. Based on this selective translation, temple service along with atoning sacrifices and required offerings are construed as a form of worship. When translators render *latreia* as worship in the Book of Hebrews, they are referring to activities performed by priests according to Torah regulations.

*Now even the first covenant had **regulations of divine worship** [latreia] and the earthly sanctuary.” (Hebrews 9:1 NAS)*

*[To the Israelites] ...belongs the adoption as sons, and the glory and the covenants and the giving of **the Law and the temple service** [latreia] and the promises (Romans 9:4 NAS)*

*Now when these things [the fixtures and furnishings within the sanctuary] have been so prepared, the priests are continually entering the outer tabernacle, **performing the divine worship** [latreia, which the NIV renders “to carry on their ministry”] (Hebrews 9:6 NAS)*

*...both **gifts and sacrifices** are offered which cannot make the **worshiper** [latreuo] perfect in conscience (Hebrews 9:9 NAS)*

*Otherwise, would they [animal sacrifices] not have ceased to be offered, because the **worshippers** [latreuo], having once been cleansed, would no longer have had consciousness of sins? (Hebrews 10:2 NAS)*

Converting religious service into gestures of worship deviates from the historical example set by heavenly and earthly worshipers. Performing an obligatory religious service on earth does not correspond with the voluntary response of reverent homage offered by individuals and groups throughout the Bible.

Pharisees and Sadducees devised a hybrid system of worship based on mosaic law and religious traditions. Jesus rebuked them by saying, *“But in vain do they **worship** [sebomai] me, **teaching as doctrines the precepts of men.**”*¹ Translated elsewhere as *“devout”* or *“God-fearing”*, *sebomai* means to venerate or revere. From its primitive root *sebas*, it conveys the notion of fear with reverence or holding in awe.² This open rebuke by Jesus draws upon a prophetic reprimand conveyed by Isaiah.

*Then the Lord said, “Because this people **draw near with their words** And **honor** [kabad] Me with their **lip service**, But they remove their hearts far from Me, And their **reverence** [yir’ah] for Me **consists of tradition learned by rote** (Isaiah 29:13 NAS)*

The Hebrew word *yir’ah* means awesome respect, reverence, piety, fear, or terror. Jesus criticized Israel’s religious leaders who drew near to God with words and deeds void of heartfelt reverence and respect. Considering religious activity as worship institutionalizes it with formality. It customizes and optimizes it for good reasons, to accommodate personal convenience and corporate benefits. Service oriented worship emphasizes performance, based on laws and traditions, sanctioned at designated sites, according to approved conventions. Organizing corporate gatherings for convenience and benefit may be practical and constructive, but it does not reflect the same gesture of informed worship described throughout the Bible.

Legal Worship

Jewish leaders in Corinth accused Paul of persuading others to *“**worship** [sebomai] God **contrary to the law**”*.³ The first covenant stipulated *“**regulations of***

¹ Matthew 15:9 and Mark 7:7 NAS

² Orr, James, General Editor, *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, 1915.
<http://www.studylight.org/enc/isb/view.cgi?number=T9240> (accessed 8-9-2007)

³ Acts 18:13 NAS

divine worship [latreia]”, or per NKJ translators, “*ordinances of divine service*.”⁴ Both Jewish and Roman law governed worshipers and their religious activity during the first century. With military support, Jewish leaders brought Paul before a Roman proconsul to litigate his case in Corinth. They sought adjudication from a secular authority involving a religious infraction.

The ways and means that individuals and groups worship God reflect what type of God they worship. Throughout history, governing authorities have tried to regulate where, when, and how individuals and groups worship and serve God. They have determined who can officiate and who can participate. Violating established doctrine, ordinance, or edict had punitive consequences. Deviating from orthodox protocol meant heresy with a sentence of discipline, excommunication, prison, torture, and sometimes death.

Obsolete Temple Worship/Service

The glory of God no longer dwells behind a fabric veil in the Holy of Holies. His manifest presence does not occupy a piece of furniture perched between two cherubim statues. The Holy Spirit lives within redeemed followers of Christ. Strict mosaic laws, which governed substitutionary sacrifices and obligatory offerings, no longer apply. Jesus satisfied the justice system of heaven by offering His righteous blood on the cross. He paid our debt with arguably the most expensive commodity in the universe. Worshiping our Heavenly Father in spirit and truth now replaces symbolic ceremonies and first covenant rituals.

The law served as a tutor, demonstrating our inability to fulfill its statutes and thus, our need for Christ. It satisfied a vital purpose regarding the Levitical legal system by escorting us to Jesus our Savior. He is the Lamb of God—His blood takes away the sin of the world.⁵ Handcrafted props and surrogate priests are no longer necessary. Jesus fulfilled the entire law once for all. Legal codes no longer dictate a compulsory response because Jesus liberated us to worship our Heavenly Father from the inside out.

True worshipers are not required to conform to fastidious rules with punctilious details. Their worship is all about relational reverence, not religious etiquette and ceremonial convention. Freedom in Christ accommodates responsive reality without legalistic platitudes or hyper-pious paraphernalia. Our Heavenly Father is seeking worshipers not performers in a law-and-order script. If the knowledge of

⁴ Hebrews 9:1 NAS

⁵ John 1:29

the truth about Christ does not evoke a radical response of worship, then experiencing His transforming love, mercy, forgiveness, and grace certainly will.

Special garments, buildings, incense, prayers, songs, confessions, or gestures may be helpful but are no longer mandatory when connecting with God. Though useful at times, there is no need to approach Him through a standardized sequence, e.g., first with thanksgiving, progressing into praise, and then entering a more spiritual realm of worship. While attitudes of love and gratitude are extremely important, neither sentiment is required to fulfill the primary objective of a worshiper. Embracing the truth about God inspires sufficient awe to justify an extreme response of facedown reverence.

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