

Renewal of Scriptural Worship

Rev. G. I. Williamson

The Reformation was, above all, a return to God in genuine worship. Out of this came the zeal that sustained the elders in their arduous task -- and the work of catechetical teaching. I'm not ashamed, then, to speak out for what many regard as a concern of another era. I refer to a holy worship of God that conforms to Scriptural standards. I've been reading, of late, from the selected works of that eminent reformer John Calvin. And it has struck me again how zealous he was -- along with the other reformers -- to get back again to a worship of God that is worthy of our God and Savior. And the only worship that's good enough is the worship He has commanded. How vital this was when the church was reformed can be seen in our great confessions -- because they all give eloquent witness to the guardian principle of all true spiritual worship. If something is not commanded by God Himself, it is therefore forbidden. We must worship God only as He tells us in His Word, and not according to our own traditions, or popular custom.

Now I assume that you know most of the Biblical texts that were cited in defense of this principle by the Reformers. Well, I don't intend to review all this -- not because I think it isn't conclusive, but simply because I want to try to give an over-view of Biblical teaching.

Let me begin, then, by reminding you of what happened at the beginning -- when Adam and Eve sinned against God, and were driven out of His presence. Would you not agree that the only way there could be acceptable worship -- from that moment on -- was for God Himself to institute it by Divine revelation? When we understand what the fall did to man, one thing is perfectly certain. Sinful man could not possibly devise for himself a way of acceptable worship. Indeed, it was precisely the failure to realize and acknowledge this fact that brought about Cain's utter rejection. He thought that he could worship God in a way of his own devising; but God made it clear that true worship had to be in the way of His institution.

And is it not this very principle that we constantly see in the Old Testament Scriptures? Did not God make it clear -- crystal clear -- that He was to be worshipped only as He commanded? Take, for instance, the five books of Moses. Is it not true that much of the content of these books -- especially Exodus and Leviticus -- deals with God's provision for acceptable worship? And is it not true that if one thing stands out again and again in these books, it is the fact that everything that pertained to the worship of God had to be only as He commanded? There is a vast amount of data given in these books, but it can be summed up in one simple statement -- everything had to be exactly as God commanded.

I. The Changes through Redemptive History

Now the worship of God -- in Old Testament times -- was by means of a system of symbols. It was like a shadowy silhouette of what was still in the future. That's why the worship of God had to be radically changed after the atonement of Jesus. The old symbols just wouldn't do any more

when the reality (of which they were a shadow only) had come into historical existence. This is what our Lord Jesus meant when He spoke to the Samaritan woman. When He told her that salvation was 'from the Jews' he was looking back at the preparatory phase of God's plan of salvation. But when He told her that now the hour had come when the old argument between Samaritan and Jew would no longer be a relevant question, He was contemplating the new temple of God with its new way of worship.

Our Savior said God is Spirit, and that those who worship Him must do so in spirit and truth. Now what, exactly, did Jesus mean by that statement? Did He mean by 'spirit' the Holy Spirit, or only the human spirit? Either way it makes very good sense and is consistent with the rest of the Bible. Taking it one way it would mean that the true worship of God must 'live and move and have its being' (as it were) in the realm of the Holy Spirit. Taking it the other way it would mean that the genuine worship of God involves the inward reality of our own human spirits. I have not been able to find any conclusive argument for either of these possible meanings. But in this instance -- as in so many others -- it really makes little difference. You certainly can't have any true worship of God apart from the Holy Spirit. And the heart of man has to be 'in it' as we say, if it is genuine worship. It may even be -- as we believe it often is in the writings of John -- that there's a deliberate dualism of meaning. In any event, the great contrast here is between the two historical eras -- the one existing before Jesus came, the other after His coming. Before Jesus came and finished His work, John says the Holy Spirit wasn't yet given (John 7:39). This doesn't mean the Spirit was not there at all, of course, in the Old Testament worship. And it doesn't mean that there was no sincerity, then, in Old Testament worship. No, it's not an absolute contrast. Yet it is a contrast that underlines the radical difference between the two historical eras and the two kinds of worship. We can see this very clearly when we consider the other term used by our Lord Jesus. We cannot say the Old Testament worship was a system of falsehood and error. No, the contrast here was rather the difference between the 'real' and the 'synthetic.' What we now have -- in the finished work of Christ -- is 'the real thing' (to use a modern expression). What they had, in Old Testament times, was only a simulation. Because we now have the true, and not a mere representation, it follows that our worship has to be radically different. We must worship God in the sphere of the real -- not the synthetic. This, says Jesus, is the kind of worship that God seeks for His people to practice.

It may not be out of place to remark, here, that there is precedent for this reformation of worship. Because there were a number of times, in the Old Testament period, where there were some radical changes. (1) In the long era of history between the time of Adam and Abraham, for instance, it appears that there was universalism in God's dealings with men which was later restricted. The first we see in Melchizedek, and in Abraham we see the second. And while Abraham acknowledged the superiority of Melchizedek's priesthood, Melchizedek also acknowledged the special calling of the one who was to become the father of the faithful. (2) Then later on, the rather simple worship of the Patriarchs gave way to Mosaic worship. And things which had been legitimate before were now expressly forbidden. The Patriarchs were priests, in a sense, within their own household of people. But now the only valid sacrifices were placed in the hands of the Levites. My point is that at least twice before God instituted radical changes. (3) How much more, then, when the final reality came in the redemptive sphere in the finished work of the Lord Jesus?

II. The Radical Difference between Old and New Testament Worship

The worship of God, under the Old Testament -- of necessity -- moved in the realm of representation. It was, in a word, worship made by men, located here on this planet. It could represent the house of God, but even Solomon realized that this was all there really was to it (I Kings 8:27). He knew that God cannot really dwell in a house made with hands. Now so long as these things could only be made known to man by shadowy symbols -- by weak and beggarly elements -- you had to have these visible, tangible objects. But now God had come down to us Himself, in the person of Jesus, reconciling us to Himself through the cross in order that He might be exalted. He now sits at the right hand of God, and there is actually praised and adored by both men and angels. And in the light of all this, our worship now must be of another order. It must be spiritual -- not ceremonial. It must move in the realm of truth -- not symbol. It is a noteworthy thing that these two things -- spirit and truth -- are closely joined in the Scriptures. And we should never try to separate the Spirit of God (or even man's own regenerate spirit) from the truth of God in the Scriptures. And this means that true worship, today, must be radically different from temple worship. Material things such as the following are no part of true worship. Under the ceremonial law you had a special building -- and in it you had an elaborate ritual -- and a priestly order with choir and musical instruments. I could go on but my point is clear; these things were proper and legitimate then because worship then was synthetic. (I will come back to this a bit later on with reference to the choir and orchestra.)

Now it seems to me that what I've summarized is one of the clearest Biblical teachings. As a matter of fact there's a whole New Testament book that deals with this subject. The book of Hebrews -- from beginning to end -- draws precisely this contrast: the old worship no longer stands as legitimate because of what we now have in Jesus. Listen to what the writer says, for example: "have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, to an innumerable company of angels, to the general assembly and church of the firstborn who are registered in heaven, to God the Judge of all, to the spirits of just men made perfect, to Jesus the Mediator of the new covenant, and to the blood of sprinkling that speaks better things than that of Abel. . . . Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom which cannot be shaken, let us have grace, by which we may serve God acceptably with reverence and godly fear. For our God is a consuming fire."

To worship God now in the Old Testament way is an insult to Jesus. We must be done with the weak and beggarly things of that era, and we must really take part -- in spirit and truth -- in this heavenly worship. This means that there is no legitimate place in the church today for what I would call 'the mentality of temple worship.' And the tragic thing is that it is so common today -- even in supposedly Reformed denominations. Let me give you an example. I attended a service, a few years ago, in a church that has had the reputation of being very Calvinistic. The day was the Lord's Day but it fell on the 25th of December. Well, there was no sermon in the 'service' that day. Instead, there was a lot of ceremonial worship. The choir sang, again and again, and then they came to what was supposed to be 'the great climax.' Candles were passed down the rows, and each person was asked to light it from another. And the tragic fact is that there was no warrant at all for practically everything in that worship.

III. The Example of Choirs

Now the truth is that there's no warrant at all in the Bible for choirs in worship. It is perfectly clear that the only choir ever sanctioned -- or commanded by God -- was part of ceremonial worship. In I Chron. 28:11-19 we are expressly told that God gave David the detailed plan for the temple. "All this," David said, "the Lord made me understand in writing, by His hand upon me, all the works of these plans." Later on, in II Chronicles 29 we read of the great work of reformation in the time of Hezekiah. Beginning in verse 25 we read that he "stationed the Levites in the house of the Lord with cymbals, with stringed instruments, and with harps, according to the commandment of David, of Gad the king's seer, and of Nathan the prophet; for thus was the commandment of the Lord by his prophets. The Levites stood with the instruments of David, and the priests with the trumpets. Then Hezekiah commanded them to offer the burnt offering on the altar. And when the burnt offering began, the song of the Lord also began, with the trumpets and with the instruments of David king of Israel. So all the congregation worshipped, the singers sang, and the trumpeters sounded; all this continued until the burnt offering was finished. And when they had finished the offering, the king and all who were present with him bowed and worshipped. Moreover King Hezekiah and the leaders commanded the Levites to sing praise to the Lord with the words of David and of Asaph the seer. So they sang praises with gladness, and they bowed their heads and worshipped."

Now please note the following facts, clearly revealed in this passage: (1) The only people who played the musical instruments, or sang in the choir, were Levites. This, right away, indicates that this was a ceremonial aspect of worship. (2) The only time when the choir, accompanied by the musical instruments, was heard was while the burnt offering was being completed. (3) Therefore, the choir and musical instruments were aspects of ceremonial worship and they have no more right to a place in our worship today than the sacrifice to which they were appended. You see, what was really going on in that temple worship was what I would call 'synthetic' redemption. It was like a program you see on TV with very tense drama. Since it isn't 'real' a musical score has to be written into the background to induce a 'feeling' response in us that approximates what we would feel if it was real. But what a tremendous difference there is between the feeling you get from watching a romance on TV and the experience you have when you actually have your own romance. Well, that's like the difference between Old and New Testament worship. We don't need a Hollywood backdrop. Yet the church today is literally full of ceremonial worship. And the more it declines in its grasp of the truth the more you see this so-called 'liturgical revival.'

Now, the tragic thing is that the worship today that you find in most of our churches is very much under the cloud -- you could say -- of this old ceremonial worship. We have choirs, and ritual, and symbols, and orchestras, and special clerical garments. We have cathedral-like buildings that make you think you are in some sacred temple. The simple fact is that none of these things has any warrant in the teaching of Scripture. As a matter of fact, it is perfectly clear that they belong to the synthetic era. I know very well that many will say -- many do say -- that this isn't very important. The important thing is that God's Word is preached and sinners are brought to conversion. Well, I say that this is simply a man-centered view of the problem. But it just isn't true that we're dealing here with a peripheral matter. No, our Lord said that we must worship God in spirit and truth. No doubt there are those who -- in spite of all these synthetic

things that shouldn't be there -- manage to worship God in truth in the spirit. But this is not because of these things, but in spite of their hindering presence.

Let me close with this illustration. There's nothing wrong with a little girl who lives to play with her little toy dolls. But what would we say of a grown woman -- who is married and has her own children -- if she spent half her time in the attic playing with her old dolls? What she should be doing is taking care of her own living children. And it is exactly the same with the Church. Paul expressed it this way: "When I was a child, I spoke as a child, I understood as a child, I thought as a child; but when I became a man, I put away childish ways." (I Cor. 13:11) Temple worship - - and all of the weak and beggarly things that were part of that system -- were designed for the use of the church before it came of age. Now it has come to age, and it ought to live in the realm of reality and no longer of mere symbols.

We selected the example of choirs. But there are many other examples, today, of the practical denial of the Biblical standard of worship. One is the celebration of special sacred days other than -- and in addition to -- the Lord's Day. Yet another is the use of musical instruments in worship. And there are others. There once was a deep concern about faithfulness to Biblical principles in worship, in Reformed churches. But at present there is a very uncritical eclecticism. And nothing is more vital to the revival of our churches, because this gives God the glory He ought to receive -- and brings us into His presence. As we see it, it is the lack of this -- more than anything else -- that lies at the root of the present-day weakness of our churches. "Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom which cannot be shaken, let us have grace, by which we may serve God acceptably with reverence and godly fear. For our God is a consuming fire." (Heb. 12:28)

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