

WORSHIP

The Christian's Highest Occupation

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CHAPTER TEN

OUR AUTHORITY FOR WORSHIP -- FALSE CONCEPTS CON'T

(3) *The Voice of the Church*

Still another of these false concepts of worship is due to the fact that the decrees of Church councils have been given equal authority, and even precedence over the word of God as the sole authority for worship. Many such Church councils have been convened over the years since the Church was formed. The decisions, at which these councils arrived, have been issued in the form of creeds and decrees that all must receive, hold and maintain, upon pain of excommunication.

Not only the Roman Catholic Church, but also some Protestant denominations, insist on the authority of the church, as represented by a central governing body, such as a synod to decide, by a majority vote, their church policy. We need hardly say that such a procedure is not according to the principles laid down in Holy Scripture.

The objection may be raised: "What about Matthew 16:19, where Christ said to Peter: '**Whatsoever thou shalt bind on earth, shall be bound in Heaven, and whatsoever thou shalt loose on earth, shall be loosed in Heaven.**' Does not this give authority for the church, both to make and enforce its decrees?"

Dr. C.B. Williams, explains that this passage means, "Whatsoever you forbid on earth, must be what is already forbidden in Heaven," etc. Heaven is not in the business of putting its seal of approval on every foolish and wicked decision made by man, or any company of men on earth.

The other Scripture which is often used to bolster the claim of the authority of the Church council or synod to issue decrees is Matthew 18:17. The words of our Lord are: "If he neglect to hear the church, let him be unto thee as a heathen man," etc. The context of these words will be quite sufficient to show that no such thing as the church having authority to issue decrees is taught. The matter in question here is purely a personal trespass of one Christian against another, and the mode of procedure he should adopt to effect a reconciliation with his brother. It has been well said that "text, without context, is a pretext!"

We have only to turn to the Bible to confirm this fact. In the concluding book of the Divine revelation, seven letters are addressed to seven distinct churches, each of which was actually existent at that time.

It is not without the deepest significance that each letter contains the same phrase. Let us mark it carefully and allow its truth to grip our hearts: “He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith unto the churches” (See Revelation 2:7, 11, 17, 29; 3:6, 13, 22).

Here then, is the sole authority for worship, and for every other form of assembly or Christian activity. It is not what this Council, or that Synod decrees; but only what the Spirit says that is authoritative for each assembly of believers, and each believer in that assembly. We have, in the completed word of God, all that the Spirit has said to the churches, and we need no other authority than this.

The Lord has not left His Church at the mercy and caprice of councils and synods of men, however sincere, or well versed in theology they may be. We read: **“All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be perfect, thoroughly furnished unto all good works”** (II Timothy 3:16).

In view of this, we say: “Away with your councils, synods, decrees, bulls, prescribed order of service, prayer books and books of discipline. We need them not, for we have, in the Divinely inspired word of God, what “the Spirit saith unto the Churches,” and this is enough to fully furnish the assemblies of God’s people as a whole and each man of faith in particular!

The formalism and apostasy in Christendom today is due to the “voice of the Church,” being allowed to displace the “voice of the Spirit.”

- The “order of public worship” has all been previously arranged.
- The exact wording of each prayer has been determined for each Sunday throughout the year.
- The service proceeds with machine-like smoothness, with its ready-made prayers and responses, and the hearer is impressed with what the Prayer Book saith, and not **“what the Spirit saith.”**

No provision is made for the spiritual Christian to engage in voluntary and spontaneous worship, as led by the Spirit of God. He must proceed along these cut and dried lines until the service has concluded. These prayers with their beautifully worded generalizations, may have their appeal to the esthetic nature which is in all men; but they do not belong in the realm of the Spirit. We read: **“Where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty”** (II Corinthians 3:17).

The New Testament knows nothing of an “order of public worship.” The Spirit of God delights to lead out the hearts of believers in spontaneous worship as, with holy boldness, they come by **“the new and living way,”** unfettered by “the voice of the church,” or the prescribed prayers that someone else has composed for the occasion. This is the spiritual liberty which is the birthright of every regenerated soul, and for which he must be prepared, if necessary, to give his life. The great need today is for more of those who, like the people of Berea, **“searched the Scriptures daily, whether those things were so,”** and then acted on what they found therein, to God’s glory in worship, and their own blessing through obedience (Acts 17:11).

[Our independent, Bible-believing Churches do follow a general plan of service -- but we certainly do not have prescribed prayers to be read out of a book. A Christian's prayers, as well as his worship, must be spontaneously led by the Lord. Though we have a "schedule" in our services -- never are they etched in some kind of stone, but often a Church service changes the order of the events leading up to the preaching of the Word. The preaching of the Cross is always given the pre-eminence in the service. The preaching is always after the singing of hymns, taking of the offering, and testimony time. On occasion, when a testimony service is especially touching, the time allotted for it is expanded. The only portion of the service that is not subject to spontaneous change is the preaching, unless of course, the Lord changes that pastor's message as he approaches the pulpit, and that time is followed by the invitation and altar call. We are commanded to do all things "decently and in order." But in the high, ecclesiastical "high" churches, the songs, the prayers, and even the message is already written down in a book - months prior to the service - in essence, ushering the Holy Spirit out of the service altogether- BBB]

(4) *The dictates of one's own conscience.*

One often hears the expression: "Each person should be free to worship God, according to the dictates of his own conscience."

While this sounds very well it is, in reality, an entirely erroneous conception of what God has to say regarding true worship. What makes it false is the failure to mention any authority by which the conscience is to be guided and regulated in its choice. While every right thinking person will agree that no one should be forced to worship God according to the dictates of man-made laws, whether civil or ecclesiastical; yet the conscience, in itself, is no true guide.

By the addition of a few words, this false concept can become a true one.

Let us put it this way: "Each person should be free to worship God, according to the dictates of his own conscience, as it is enlightened by, and obedient to the revelation God has given in the Holy Scriptures."

We have only to turn to the Bible to discover what utter confusion results when every person acts according to the "dictates of his own conscience."

The Book of Judges contains the sad history of Israel after the death of their great leader, Joshua. It is a most depressing record of Israel's idolatrous backsliding and punishment, followed by their confession and deliverance, monotonously repeated, time and time again.

"And the children of Israel did evil in the sight of the Lord, and served Baalim: And they forsook the Lord God of their fathers, which brought them out of the land of Egypt, and followed other gods, of the gods of the people that were round about them, and bowed themselves unto them, and provoked the Lord to anger. And they forsook the Lord, and served Baal and Ashtaroth. And the anger of the Lord was hot against Israel, and he delivered them into the hands of spoilers that spoiled them, and he sold them into the hands of their enemies round about, so that they could not any longer stand before their enemies.

“Whithersoever they went out, the hand of the Lord was against them for evil, as the Lord had said, and as the Lord had sworn unto them: and they were greatly distressed. Nevertheless the Lord raised up judges, which delivered them out of the hand of those that spoiled them. And yet they would not hearken unto their judges, but they went a whoring after other gods, and bowed themselves unto them: they turned quickly out of the way which their fathers walked in, obeying the commandments of the Lord; but they did not so. And when the Lord raised them up judges, then the Lord was with the judge, and delivered them out of the hand of their enemies all the days of the judge: for it repented the Lord because of their groanings by reason of them that oppressed them and vexed them. And it came to pass, when the judge was dead, that they returned, and corrupted themselves more than their fathers, in following other gods to serve them, and to bow down unto them; they ceased not from their own doings, nor from their stubborn way. And the anger of the Lord was hot against Israel; and he said, Because that this people hath transgressed my covenant which I commanded their fathers, and have not hearkened unto my voice; I also will not henceforth drive out any from before them of the nations which Joshua left when he died: That through them I may prove Israel, whether they will keep the way of the Lord to walk therein, as their fathers did keep it, or not. Therefore the Lord left those nations, without driving them out hastily; neither delivered he them into the hand of Joshua” (Judges 2:11-23)

The key phrase, in this dismal recital of failure, is found in the last verse of the book: “In those days there was no king in Israel: every man did that which was right in his own eyes” (Judges 21:25 cp. 17:6).

It is hardly necessary to point out that, under these conditions, little worship ascended to God from the people of Israel. The conscience can be likened to a correctly constructed sun dial, which can only tell the time as the rays of the sun are allowed to shine upon it. It would be possible for a person to go to that sun dial at night and, by means of a flashlight, get it to indicate any time he wanted! The conscience, therefore, must be enlightened by the word of God if it is to be a contributing factor in our worship. An unenlightened conscience will lead a person, as it did Paul, to **“do many things contrary to the name of Jesus of Nazareth”** (Acts 26:9).

Thousands of Christians have suffered martyrdom at the hands of religious men who acted quite sincerely, and “according to the dictates of their own conscience!”

The fact that a person is sincere and conscientious, while acting contrary to the revelation of the God’s word, only makes the consequences more tragic. It is possible to be quite sincere and, at the same time, sincerely mistaken! The head hunters of Borneo can hunt and kill a man quite conscientiously!

God has not left His people with their conscience as their only guide; but He has given them His word, by which they may adjust their consciences.

On the wall that surrounds the Royal Observatory at Greenwich is a large twenty-four hour clock which gives the correct time to the world.

Visitors who stand before that timepiece invariably take out their watches, and adjust them to the time indicated by the master clock. Let that great master clock represent God's word, and the watch, the conscience. Thus we have a good illustration of the place and purpose of the conscience, as described in the Scriptures. It is a guide, only in so far as it is adjusted to, and governed by the word of God.

It is this false conception of things that motivates the oft-given advice to new converts to: "join the church of your choice," or to indicate, on the dotted line, one's "Church preference." Scripture does not give to any Christian the right to "join the church of his choice," or to "worship God according to the dictates of his conscience."

God has given to the believer, in His word, "all things that pertain unto life and godliness."

Happy is he who rests not until he knows, on the assurance of Divine revelation, that he is where God wants him to be, and that his worship is with a good conscience that has been adjusted to, and is regulated by the holy Scriptures: "According as his divine power hath given unto us all things that pertain unto life and godliness, through the knowledge of him that hath called us to glory and virtue: Whereby are given unto us exceeding great and precious promises: that by these ye might be partakers of the divine nature, having escaped the corruption that is in the world through lust" (II Peter 1:3-4).

2. Some Wrong Estimates of Worship

Having pointed out, at considerable length, some false conceptions regarding worship, let us now look at some wrong estimates of it. A false conception always results in a wrong estimate. We shall think of three of these:

- (1) The materialistic
- (2) The religious
- (3) The uninstructed believer

(1) *The Materialistic* (Exodus 5:1-17)

When Pharaoh was approached by Moses with the demand: "Thus saith the Lord God of Israel: Let My people go, that they may hold a feast unto me in the wilderness;" the reply of this impious king was: "**Who is the Lord that I should obey his voice to let Israel go? I know not the Lord, neither will I let Israel go.**"

This is the language of materialism, which stems from enmity to and ignorance of God. Not only did Pharaoh refuse to obey God's voice, but he made the bondage of Israel more bitter by increasing their burdens.

He gave as his reason for this cruel treatment: "**They be idle, therefore they cry, saying: Let us go and sacrifice to our God**" (v. 8). Later on he said: "**Ye are idle, ye are idle, therefore ye say: 'let us go and do sacrifice to the Lord.' Go therefore now and work!"**" (vs. 17-18).

To this king, the expressed desire of God's people to obey the call and worship their God was simply an excuse to avoid hard work, and was therefore an indication of their laziness. He believed their time would be better spent in laboring for him with their hands. Egypt, in Scripture, is a type of the materialistic world, which seeks to live its life in independence of God and His Son. The unbelieving and rebellious attitude of Pharaoh to God and His people, well illustrates the opinion of the man of the world today. To him, spiritual things and the worship of God mean nothing at all, except perhaps a useless expenditure of energy and expense.

In fact it is boldly affirmed by some that: "Religion is the opiate of the people."

By "religion" they mean anything that relates to the spiritual, as compared with the physical.

The cynic views any spiritual effort in the Gospel, or the worship of God's people, as all part of a huge "racket," by means of which money is mulched from a credulous public.

Others adopt the indifferent, "what-do-I-care" attitude of Gallio, the Roman judge. Scripture records of him that he "cared for none of those things" (Acts 18:17).

One can imagine what a worldling, who was accidentally present at a worship meeting, would afterwards report of his impressions to his ungodly friends. He would say: "Why, those people who met inside that building were nothing but a lot of day dreamers! They sat around a table, with their eyes closed most of the time. Every now and then someone would rise and pray, and then, after a while, another would give out a hymn, and thus they wasted a whole hour doing nothing!"

The reason for such a wrong estimate of worship is easy to understand, for we read: "**The natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God; for they are foolishness unto him; neither can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned**" (I Corinthians 2:14).

The mind of man, by nature, is "**enmity against God.**" He neither desires, nor can he possibly comprehend spiritual realities. Least of all can he appreciate the tremendous importance and value of the worship of God's people.

(2) *The Religious*

"This I confess unto thee, that after the way which they call heresy, so worship I the God of my fathers, believing all things which are written in the law, and in the prophets" (Acts 24:14).

These words were spoken by Paul to Felix in answer to the false charge brought against him by Tertullus. Paul was charged with being: "**A pestilent fellow, and a mover of sedition among all the Jews throughout the world, and a ring-leader of the sect of the Nazarenes**" (v. 5).

From this we learn that, in Paul's day, the estimate placed by the Jewish religionists on what was undoubtedly the true worship of God, was "heresy!"

To their prejudiced and religion-blinded eyes, Paul was a heretic. They had already formed their opinion of what constituted “worship;” and because Paul ran counter to their warped and totally erroneous ideas, they designated him a “heretic.” With this wrong conception of Scripture, they designated him a “heretic.” With this wrong conception of Scripture, they persecuted him and would gladly have taken his life.

There is no form of persecution quite so bitter and vindictive as that which comes from religious people. Countless thousands of noble, true-hearted, spiritual, and devoted Christians, have had to seal their testimonies with their own blood, because they: “Dared to have a purpose firm and dared to make it known.”

Let not the believer, who has learned what true worship is, and has acted on what he has learned, be unduly surprised if he is called a “heretic,” not only by a materialistic world, but by people who are sincerely and intensely zealous for their own particular religion!

There is actually a religious system in the world today which designates as “heretics” all who refuse to subscribe to its creeds, or bow to its decisions, or join its ranks.

In the early days of Christianity, it was pagan Rome that persecuted Christian.
In the middle ages, it was religious Rome that did the same thing!

This persecution of the spiritual by the religious is as old as Cain’s hatred and persecution of Abel. Cain was a religious man, for he brought an offering unto the Lord; but he refused to come to God in the way God had plainly revealed both to him and his brother.

Cain’s offering was not the worship of a false god, but the false worship of the true God.

It was not long after God had rejected his offering that Cain stained his hands with the innocent blood of his righteous brother (Genesis 4:1-15). **“That upon you may come all the righteous blood shed upon the earth, from the blood of righteous Abel unto the blood of Zacharias son of Barachias, whom ye slew between the temple and the altar”** (Matthew 23:35) and **“Not as Cain, who was of that wicked one, and slew his brother. And wherefore slew he him? Because his own works were evil, and his brother’s righteous”** (I John 3:12) and **“Woe unto them! for they have gone in the way of Cain, and ran greedily after the error of Balaam for reward, and perished in the gainsaying of Core”** (Jude 11) and **“By faith Abel offered unto God a more excellent sacrifice than Cain, by which he obtained witness that he was righteous, God testifying of his gifts: and by it he being dead yet speaketh”** (Hebrews 11:4)

The Christian who seeks, at all costs, to worship God in the Spirit, and in accordance with the truth found in the Scriptures, may find it necessary to sever his connections with the religious system, or denomination, with which he was previously identified.

Usually these systems do no tolerate any departure from their organized order, traditions, rituals and commandments of men.

This severance of his association with them will bring upon him the wrath of his one-time religious associates. They will not hesitate to revile him and stigmatize him as “a heretic.” He will be accused of becoming “a traitor to the faith of his fathers,” and have to suffer a measure of ignominy, contempt and persecution; but the price is well worth paying.

Our Lord said: “**Blessed are ye, when men shall revile you, and persecute you and shall say all manner of evil against you falsely for my sake**” (Matthew 5:11).

All the popularity, position, power and pelf of this world can never compensate a believer for his failure to obey God’s word in this most important matter of worship.

(3) *The Uninstructed Believer* (Matthew 26:6-13)

“Now when Jesus was in Bethany, in the house of Simon the leper, There came unto him a woman having an alabaster box of very precious ointment, and poured it on his head, as he sat at meat. But when his disciples saw it, they had indignation, saying, To what purpose is this waste? For this ointment might have been sold for much, and given to the poor. When Jesus understood it, he said unto them, Why trouble ye the woman? for she hath wrought a good work upon me. For ye have the poor always with you; but me ye have not always. For in that she hath poured this ointment on my body, she did it for my burial. Verily I say unto you, Wheresoever this gospel shall be preached in the whole world, there shall also this, that this woman hath done, be told for a memorial of her” (Matthew 26:6-13)

We have already touched on this incident of Mary’s act of devotion. We refer to it again only to draw particular attention to the entirely wrong estimate that even the disciples of Christ placed on this beautiful act of worship which they had witnessed.

Their comment was: “**To what purpose is this waste?**”

They argued that this costly perfume should have been sold, and the money devoted to a more useful and worthwhile purpose, such as a gift to the poor!

They concluded that this exquisite perfume had been merely wasted on Christ!

Our Lord’s comment on the deed has forever immortalized this woman. He said of her: “**She hath wrought a good work upon me . . . Verily I say unto you: wheresoever this gospel shall be preached in the whole world, there shall also this, that this woman hath done, be told for a memorial of her**” (vs. 10, 13).

~ end of chapter 10 ~

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