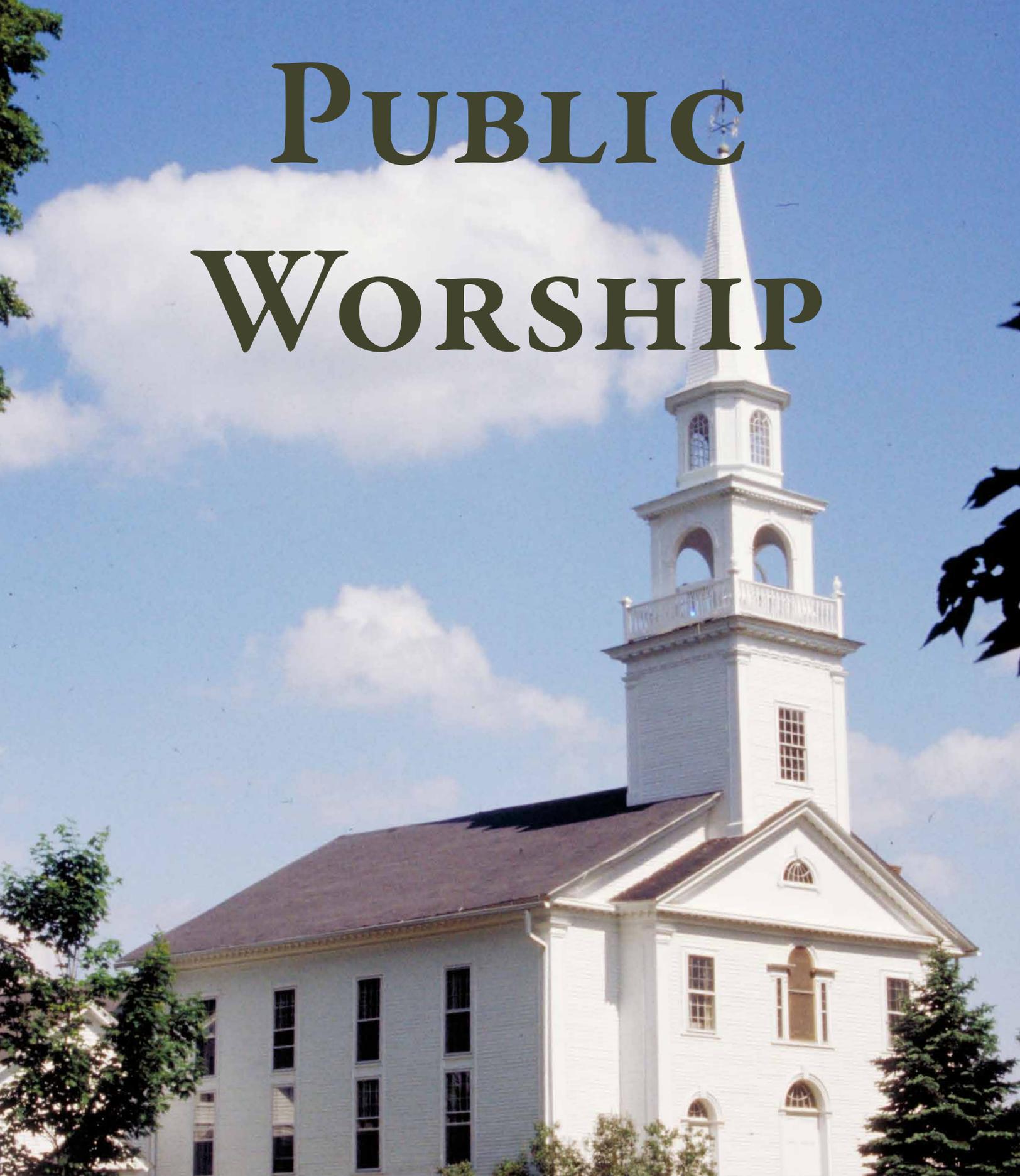


# PUBLIC WORSHIP



J. C. RYLE (1816-1900)

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Footnotes with quotations from other works and footnotes in the first person were inserted by the author. Other footnotes have been added for clarification and to define less-known words. All Scripture references are from the Authorized Version (King James Version).

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# PUBLIC WORSHIP

*God is a Spirit: and they that worship him must worship him in spirit and in truth.*—John 4:24

*We are the circumcision, which worship God in the spirit.*—Philippians 3:3

*In vain they do worship me.*—Matthew 15:9

*A shew of wisdom in will worship...*  
—Colossians 2:23

**W**E live in times when there is a vast quantity of public religious worship. Most English people who have any respect for appearances go to some church or chapel on Sundays.<sup>1</sup> To attend no place of worship in this country, whatever may be the case abroad, is at present the exception and not the rule. But we all know that quantity is of little value without *quality*. It is not enough that we worship sometimes. There remains behind a mighty question to be answered: “*How do we worship?*”

Not all religious worship is right in the sight of God. I think this is as clear as the sun at noon-day to any honest reader of the Bible. The Bible speaks of worship that is “in vain” as well as worship that is true, and of “will worship” as well as spiritual worship. To suppose, as some thoughtless persons do, that it signifies nothing<sup>2</sup> where we go on Sundays, and matters nothing *how* the thing is done, provided it is done, is mere childish folly. Merchants and tradesmen do not carry on their business in this fashion. They look at the way their work is done and are not content with work done anyhow. Let us not be deceived; “God is not mocked” (Gal 6:7). The question, “How do we worship?” is a very serious one.

I propose to unfold the subject of worship and to lay down some scriptural principles about it. In a day of profound ignorance in some quarters, and of systematic false teaching in others, I hold it to be of primary importance to have clear ideas about all disputed points in religion. I fear that thousands of English men and women can render no reason of their faith and practice. They do not know why they believe, what they believe, or why they do what they do. Like children they are tossed to and fro by every wind of doctrine (Eph 4:14), and are liable to be led astray by the

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<sup>1</sup> The author is speaking of late nineteenth century England. Sadly, England and America today have changed radically for the worse.

<sup>2</sup> **signifies nothing** – does not matter; is of no importance.

first clever heretic who meets them. In a day like this, let us try to get hold of some distinct notions about Christian worship.

I will show the [following five things]:

1. *General importance of public worship*
2. *Leading principles of public worship*
3. *Essential parts of complete public worship*
4. *Things to be avoided in public worship*
5. *Tests by which our public worship should be tried*

I purposely confine my attention to *public* worship. I purposely pass over all private religious habits, such as praying, Bible-reading, self-examination, and meditation. No doubt they lie at the very root of personal Christianity, and without them all public religion is utterly in vain. But they are not the subject I want to handle today.

## 1. General Importance of Public Worship

I have first to show the general importance of public worship. I trust I need not dwell long on this part of my subject. This paper is not likely to fall into the hands of any who do not at least call themselves Christians. There are few, except downright infidels,<sup>3</sup> who will dare to say that we ought not to make some public profession of religion. Most people, whatever their own practice may be, will admit that we ought to meet other Christians at stated times and in stated places, and unitedly and together to worship God.<sup>4</sup>

### a. God's People

Public worship, I am bold to say, has always been one mark of God's servants. Man, as a general rule, is a social being and does not like to live separate from his fellows. In every age, God has made use of that mighty principle and has taught His people to worship Him publicly as well as privately, together as well as alone. I believe the Last Day will show that wherever God has had a people He has always had a

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<sup>3</sup> **infidels** – those who deny the authority of Christ and His Word.

<sup>4</sup> To deny [God] a worship is as great a folly as to deny His being. He that renounceth all homage to his Creator, envies [*refuses to give*] Him the being of which he cannot deprive Him. The natural inclination to worship is as universal as the notion of a God, else idolatry had never gained a footing in the world. The existence of God was never owned in any nation without a worship of God being appointed; and many people who have turned their backs upon some other parts of the law of nature have paid a continual homage to some superior and invisible Being. The Jews gave a reason why man was created in the evening of the Sabbath, because he should begin his being with the worship of his Maker. As soon as ever he found himself to be a creature, his first solemn act should be a particular respect to his Creator. To fear God and keep His commandments is the whole of man (Ecc 12:13)—or 'whole man'; he is not a man, but a beast, without observance of God. Religion is as requisite [required] as reason to complete a man. He were not reasonable if he were not religious because by neglecting religion, he neglects the chiefest dictate of reason. (Stephen Charnock, *Charnock's Works*, Nichol's Edition, Vol. I, p. 182)

congregation. His servants, however few in number, have always assembled themselves together and approached their heavenly Father in company. They have been taught to do it for many wise reasons—partly to bear a public testimony to the world; partly to strengthen, cheer, help, encourage, and comfort one another; and above all, to train and prepare them for the general assembly in heaven. “Iron sharpeneth iron; so a man sharpeneth the countenance of his friend” (Pro 27:17). That man can know little of human nature who does not know that to see others doing and professing the same things that we do in religion is an immense help and encouragement to our souls.

### **b. The Scriptures**

From the beginning of the Bible down to the end, you may trace out a line of public worship in the history of all God’s saints. You see it in the very first family that lived on earth. The familiar story of Cain and Abel hinges entirely on acts of public worship. You see it in the history of Noah. The very first thing recorded about Noah and his family when they came forth from the ark was a solemn act of public worship. You see it in the history of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Wherever the patriarchs had a tent they always had an altar. They not only prayed in private but worshipped in public. You see it throughout the whole Mosaic economy, from Sinai downward, till our Lord appeared. The Jew who was not a public worshipper in the tabernacle or the Temple would have been cut off from the congregation of Israel.

You see it throughout the whole New Testament. The Lord Jesus Himself gives a special promise of His presence wherever two or three are assembled in His name (Mat 18:20). The apostles, in every church they founded, made the duty of assembling together a first principle in their list of duties. Their universal rule was, “Not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together” (Heb 10:25). These are ancient things, I know; but it is well to be reminded of them. Just as you may lay it down as a certainty that where there is no private prayer there is no grace in a man’s heart, so you may lay it down as the highest probability that where there is no public worship there is no church of God and no profession of Christianity.<sup>5</sup>

### **c. Church History**

Turn now from the Word of God to the pages of church history and what will you find? You will find that from the days of the apostles down to this hour, public worship has always been one of God’s great instruments in doing good to souls. Where is it that sleeping souls are generally awakened, dark souls enlightened, dead souls quickened, doubting souls brought to decision, mourning souls cheered, heavy-laden souls relieved? Where, as a general rule, but in the public assembly of Christian wor-

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<sup>5</sup> The reader will of course understand that I fully admit the impossibility of public worship being kept up in times of persecution. When the Roman emperors persecuted the early church, and all Christians were proscribed [*outlawed*], there could of necessity have been no public worship. But these are evidently exceptional cases.

shippers, and during the preaching of God's Word? Take away public worship from a land, shut up the churches and chapels, forbid people to meet together for religious services, prohibit any kind of religion except that which is private—do this, and see what the result would be! You would inflict the greatest spiritual injury on the country that was so treated. You could do nothing so likely to help the devil and stop the progress of Christ's cause, except the taking away of the Bible. Next to the Word of God there is nothing that does so much good to mankind as public worship. "Faith cometh by hearing" (Rom 10:17). There is a special presence of Christ in religious assemblies.

#### **d. Formality**

I grant freely that public worship may become a mere act of formality. Thousands of so-called Christians, no doubt, are continually going to churches and chapels and getting no benefit from their attendance. Like Pharaoh's lean kine,<sup>6</sup> they are nothing bettered but rather worse, more impenitent and more hardened (Gen 41:19-21). No wonder that the ignorant Sabbath-breaker defends himself by saying, "For anything I can see, those who go nowhere on Sundays are just as good people as church-goers and chapel-goers."

But we must never forget that the misuse of a good thing is no argument against the use of it. Once begin to refuse everything that is misused in this sinful world, and there is hardly anything left for you that is good. Take a broader view of the question before you. Look at any district you like in England, and divide people into two great parties: worshippers and non-worshippers. I [am sure] you will find that there is far more good among those that worship than among those that do not. It does make a difference, whatever men may say. It is not true that worshippers and non-worshippers are all alike.

We ought never to forget the solemn words of St. Paul:<sup>7</sup> "Not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as the manner of some is; but exhorting one another" (Heb 10:25). Let us act upon that exhortation as long as we live, and through evil report and good report continue regular attendants at public worship. Let us not care for the bad example of many around us who rob God of His day and never go up to His house from one end of the year to the other. Let us go on worshipping in spite of every discouragement, and let us not doubt that in the long run of life it does us good. Let us prove our own meetness<sup>8</sup> for heaven by our feelings toward the earthly assemblies of God's people. Happy is that man who can say with David, "I was glad when they said unto me, Let us go into the house of the LORD"; "I had rather be a

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<sup>6</sup> **kine** – cows.

<sup>7</sup> The Apostle Paul has traditionally been considered the author of the Epistle to the Hebrews; however, some consider the evidence for this to be inconclusive.

<sup>8</sup> **meetness** – fitness; not by merit, but in preparedness.

doorkeeper in the house of my God, than to dwell in the tents of wickedness” (Psa 122:1; 84:10).

## **2. Leading Principles of Public Worship**

I proceed, in the second place, to show the leading principles of public worship. These leading principles are so plain and obvious to any thoughtful reader of the Bible that I need not dwell on them at any length. But for the sake of some who may not hitherto have given much attention to the subject, I feel it best to state them in order.

### **a. The Right Object**

For one thing, true public worship must be directed to the right object. It is written plainly in both the Old and New Testaments: “Thou shalt worship the Lord thy God, and him only shalt thou serve” (Mat 4:10; *see* Deu 6:13). All adoration and prayers addressed to the Virgin Mary, the saints, and the angels are utterly useless and unwarranted by Scripture. It is worship that is mere waste of time. There is not the slightest proof that the departed saints or the angels can hear our worship, or that if they did hear it they could do anything for us. It is worship that is most offensive to God. He is a jealous God and has declared that He will not give His glory to another. Of all His Ten Commandments there is none more stringent and sweeping than the second (Exo 20:4-6). It forbids us not only to worship, but even to “bow down” to anything besides God.

### **b. The Mediation of Christ**

For another thing, true public worship must be directed to God through the mediation<sup>9</sup> of Christ. It is written plainly, “I am the way, the truth, and the life: no man cometh unto the Father, but by me” (Joh 14:6). It is written of Christians that they are a people who “come unto God by him [Christ]” (Heb 7:25). Without controversy, the mighty Being with Whom we have to do is a God of infinite love, kindness, mercy, and compassion. “God is love” (1Jo 4:8); but it is no less true that He is a Being of infinite justice, purity, and holiness, [and] that He has an infinite hatred of sin and cannot bear that which is evil. He is the same God that cast down the angels from heaven, drowned the world with a flood, and burned up Sodom and Gomorrah. He

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<sup>9</sup> **mediation** – Christ’s work as a go-between to reconcile God and man. “It pleased God, in His eternal purpose, to choose and ordain the Lord Jesus, his only begotten Son, according to the covenant made between them both, to be the mediator between God and man; the prophet, priest and king; head and saviour of the church, the heir of all things, and judge of the world: unto whom he did from all eternity give a people to be his seed, and to be by him in time redeemed, called, justified, sanctified, and glorified.” (1689 London Baptist Confession, 8.1; *see also* Free Grace Broadcaster 183, *Christ the Mediator*, both available from CHAPEL LIBRARY)

who carelessly presumes to draw near to Him without an atonement<sup>10</sup> and a mediator, or by any other mediator than the one Mediator Whom He has appointed, will find that he worships in vain. “Our God is a consuming fire” (Heb 12:29).

### c. Scriptural Worship

For another thing, true public worship must be either directly scriptural, deducible from Scripture, or in harmony with Scripture. It is written plainly concerning the Jews of our Lord’s time, “In vain do they worship me, teaching for doctrines the commandments of men” (Mat 15:9). No doubt there is a conspicuous absence of particular injunctions about New Testament worship. No doubt there is reasonable liberty allowed to churches and congregations in their arrangements about worship. But still the rule must never be forgotten: nothing must be required of men contrary to God’s Word.

Well says the twentieth article<sup>11</sup> of the Church of England, “The Church hath power to decree rites and ceremonies, and authority in controversies of faith. And yet it is not lawful for the Church to ordain anything that is contrary to God’s Word written.” Well says the thirty-fourth article, “Ceremonies...at all times...have been diverse, and may be changed according to the diversities of countries, times, and men’s manners, so that nothing be ordained against God’s Word.”<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> **atonement** – literally “at-one-ment”; the condition of being at one with another. Theologically, atonement means reconciliation with God by removing or covering the guilt of sin. This was accomplished through the sacrifice of Jesus Christ. See *Free Grace Broadcaster 227, Atonement*, available from CHAPEL LIBRARY.

<sup>11</sup> **twentieth article** – reference to the Thirty-Nine Articles, the reformed confession of faith of the Church of England and the Episcopal Church, formulated in the Canterbury Convocation in 1563. All ministers were required to acquiesce to them or face penalties or imprisonment.

<sup>12</sup> In agreement with the Thirty-Nine Articles of the Church of England, Ryle supports the Anglican view that the church has the authority to decree rites, ceremonies, and any practice in worship that is not in contradiction to the Scriptures. This is known as the “normative principle” of worship. While in agreement with many of Ryle’s thoughts about worship, we find his view inadequate. The Reformed view of worship maintains that “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, nor the suggestions of Satan, under any visible representations, or any other way not prescribed in the Holy Scriptures” (1689 London Baptist Confession 22.1).

This is known as the “regulative principle” of worship, and it arises from the doctrine of the sufficiency of Scripture: “The whole counsel of God concerning all things necessary for his own glory, man’s salvation, faith, and life, is either expressly set down or necessarily contained in the Holy Scripture: unto which nothing at any time is to be added, whether by new revelation of the Spirit, or traditions of men. Nevertheless, we acknowledge...that there are some circumstances concerning the worship of God, and government of the church, common to human actions and societies, which are to be ordered by the light of nature and Christian prudence, according to the general rules of the Word, which are always to be observed” (1689 London Baptist Confession 1.6, available from CHAPEL LIBRARY).

Bannerman summarizes, “In the case of the Church of England, its doctrine, in regard to church power in the worship of God, is that it has a right to decree everything except what is forbidden in the

I say, therefore, that any man who tells us that there are seven sacraments, when the Bible only mentions two,<sup>13</sup> or that any man-made ordinance is as binding on our consciences and as needful to salvation as an ordinance appointed by Christ, is telling us what he has no right to tell. We must not listen to him. He is committing not only a mistake, but a sin. St. Paul distinctly tells us that there is such a thing as “will worship,” which has a “shew of wisdom” but is in reality useless because it only satisfies the flesh (Col 2:23).

#### **d. Intelligent Worship**

For another thing, true public worship must be an intelligent worship. I mean by that expression that worshippers must know what they are doing. It is written plainly as a charge against the Samaritans, “Ye worship ye know not what: we know what we worship” (Joh 4:22). It is written of the heathen Athenians that they ignorantly worshipped an “unknown god” (Act 17:23). It is utterly false that ignorance is the mother of devotion. The poor Italian papists,<sup>14</sup> unable to read and not knowing a chapter in the Bible, may appear extremely devout and sincere as they kneel in crowds before the image of the Virgin Mary or hear Latin prayers that they do not understand. But it is utterly preposterous to suppose that their worship is acceptable to God. He Who made man at the beginning made him an intelligent being, with mind as well as body. A worship in which the mind takes no part is useless and unprofitable. It might suit a beast as well as a man!

#### **e. Heart Worship**

For another thing, true public worship must be the worship of the heart. I mean by this that the affections must be employed as well as our intellect, and our inward man must serve God as well as our body. It is written plainly in the Old Testament, and the saying is quoted by Jesus Christ Himself: “This people draweth nigh unto me with their mouth, and honoureth me with their lips; but their heart is far from me. But in vain do they worship me” (Mat 15:8-9; Isa 29:13).

It is written of the Jews in Ezekiel’s time, “They come unto thee as the people cometh, and they sit before thee as my people, and they hear thy words, but they will not do them: for with their mouth they shew much love, but their heart goeth after

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Word of God. In the case of our own church, its doctrine, in reference to church power in the worship of God, is that it has a right to decree nothing except what expressly or by implication is enjoined by the Word of God” (James Bannerman, *The Church of Christ* 1:339-440).

<sup>13</sup> **sacraments...two** – “A sacrament is an holy ordinance instituted by Christ, wherein, by sensible signs, Christ, and the benefits of the new covenant are represented, sealed, and applied to believers” (*The Westminster Shorter Catechism*, Question 92). Many Protestants and Baptists today use the word *ordinances* instead of *sacraments* to distinguish from the Roman Catholic Church. The Bible teaches there are two ordinances instituted by Christ in the New Testament: baptism and the Lord’s Supper, both of which are His gifts to the Church by which the Church is blessed in remembering Christ.

<sup>14</sup> **papists** – those devoted to the pope, i.e., Roman Catholics.

their covetousness” (Eze 33:31). The heart is the principal thing that God asks man to bring in all his approaches to Him, whether public or private. A church may be full of worshippers who may give God an immense amount of bodily service. There may be abundance of gestures, postures, turnings to the east, bowings, crossings, prostrations, grave countenances, and upturned eyes—and yet the hearts of the worshippers may be at the end of the earth. One may be thinking only of coming or past pleasures, another of coming or past business, and another of coming or past sins. Such worship, we may be very sure, is utterly worthless in God’s sight. It is even worse than worthless—it is abominable hypocrisy. God is a Spirit (Joh 4:24), and He cares nothing for man’s bodily service without man’s heart. Bodily service profiteth little. “Man looketh on the outward appearance; but the LORD looketh on the heart” (1Sa 16:7). The broken and contrite heart is the true sacrifice, the sacrifice that God will not despise (Psa 51:17).<sup>15</sup>

#### **f. Reverent Worship**

In the last place, true public worship must be a reverent worship. It is written, “Keep thy foot when thou goest to the house of God, and be more ready to hear, than to give the sacrifice of fools: for they consider not that they do evil” (Ecc 5:1). It is recorded that our Lord Jesus Christ began and ended His ministry with two practical protests against irreverent worship. On two distinct occasions He cast out of the Temple the buyers and sellers who were profaning its courts by their traffic. He justified His act by the weighty words, “It is written, My house shall be called the house of prayer; but ye have made it a den of thieves” (Mat 21:13).

People who call themselves Christians and go to churches and chapels to stare about, whisper, fidget, yawn, or sleep—but not to pray, praise, or listen—are not a whit better than the wicked Jews. They do not consider that God detests profane-

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<sup>15</sup> Men may attend on worship all their days with a juiceless [*dull and lifeless*] heart and unquickened frame, and think to compensate the neglect of the manner with the abundance of the matter of the service. Outward expressions are only the badges and liveries of service, not the service itself. As the strength of sin lies in the inward frame of the heart, so the strength of worship lies in the inward complexion and temper of the soul. What do a thousand services avail, without cutting the throat of carnal affections? What are loud prayers, but as sounding brass and tinkling cymbals, without divine charity? A Pharisaical diligence in outward forms had no better title vouchsafed by our Savior than that of hypocrisy. God desires not sacrifices nor delights in burnt-offerings. Shadows are not to be offered instead of substance. God required the heart of man for itself, but commanded outward ceremonies as subservient to inward worship, and goads and spurs unto it. They were never appointed as the substance of religion, but as auxiliaries to it.

Could the Israelites have called themselves worshippers of God according to his order, if they had brought a thousand lambs that had died in a ditch, or been killed at home? They were to be brought living to the altar, the blood shed at the foot of it. A thousand sacrifices killed without, had not been so valuable as one brought alive to the place of offering. (Charnock, “Discourse on Spiritual Worship” in *Works*, vol. I, 323)

ness<sup>16</sup> and carelessness in His presence, and that to behave before God as they would not dare to behave before their sovereign at a levée<sup>17</sup> or a drawing-room, is a very grave offence indeed. We must beware that we do not rush from one extreme into another. It does not follow, because bodily service alone is useless, that it does not matter how we behave ourselves in the congregation.

Surely even nature, reason, and common sense should teach us that there is a manner and demeanor suitable to mortal man when he draws nigh to his almighty Maker. It is not for nothing that it is written, “God is greatly to be feared in the assembly of the saints, and to be had in reverence of all them that are about him” (Psa 89:7). If it is worthwhile to attend public worship at all, it is worthwhile to do it carefully and well. God is in heaven, and we are on earth; let us not be rash and hasty (Ecc 5:2). Let us mind what we are about. “Let us have grace, whereby we may serve God acceptably with reverence and godly fear” (Heb 12:28).

I ask the reader’s special attention to the five leading principles that I have just laid down. I fear they strike at the root of the worship of myriads in our own land, to say nothing of papists, Mahometans,<sup>18</sup> and heathens abroad. Thousands of English people, I fear, are regularly spending their Sundays in a worship that is utterly useless. It is a worship without Scripture, without Christ, without the Holy Spirit, without knowledge, without heart, and without the slightest benefit to the worshippers. For any good they get from it, they might just as well be sitting at home and not worship at all. Let us take heed that this is not our condition.

Let us remember, as long as we live, that it is not the quantity of worship but the quality that God regards. The inward and spiritual character of the congregation is of far more importance in His sight than the number of the worshippers or the outward and visible signs of devotion that they exhibit. Children and fools, who admire poppies more than corn, may think all is right when there is a great external show of religion. But it is not so with God. His all-seeing eye looks at the inner man.

### 3. Essential Parts of Public Worship

I proceed, in the third place, to show the essential parts of Christian public worship. I will suppose the case of a man who has never given the subject of religion any sincere attention and has never gone regularly to any place of worship at all. I will suppose such a man to be awakened to a sense of the value of his soul and to be desirous of information about things in religion. He is puzzled by finding that all Christians do not worship God in the same way and that one neighbor worships God in one fashion, and another in another. He hears one man saying that there is no road

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<sup>16</sup> **profaneness** – contempt or irreverence for that which is sacred; particularly the use of language that implies disrespect towards God.

<sup>17</sup> **levée** – (French = *lever*: “getting up” or “rising”) morning assembly held by a king.

<sup>18</sup> **Mahometans** – *archaic*: Muslims.

to heaven excepting through his church, and another replying that all will go to hell who do not join his chapel. Now what is he to think? Are there not certain things that are essential parts of Christian worship? I answer without hesitation that there are. It shall be my next business to exhibit them in order.

I freely grant that there is little said on the nature of public worship in the New Testament. There is a wide difference in this respect between the Law of Moses and the law of Christ. The Jew's religion was full of strict and minute directions about worship; the Christian's contains very few directions, and those of the simplest and most general description. The Jew's religion was full of types, emblems, and figures;<sup>19</sup> the Christian's only contains two: baptism and the Lord's Supper. The Jew's religion approached the worshipper chiefly through the eye; the New Testament religion appeals directly to the heart and conscience. The Jew's religion was confined to one particular nation; the Christian's was meant for the whole world. The Jew could turn to the writings of Moses and see at a glance every item of his worship; the Christian can only point to a few isolated texts and passages, which are to be applied by every church according to circumstances.<sup>20</sup>

In a word, there is nothing answering to Exodus or Leviticus in the New Testament. Yet a careful reader of the Christian Scriptures can hardly fail to pick out of them the essential parts and principles of Christian worship. Where these essential parts are present, there is Christian worship. Where they are absent, the worship is, to say the least, defective, imperfect, and incomplete.

#### **a. The Christian Sabbath**

In complete public worship, the Sabbath should always be honored. That blessed day was appointed for this very purpose, among others: to give men an opportunity of meeting together in God's service. A Sabbath was given to man even in Paradise (Gen 2:2-3). The observance of a Sabbath was made part of the Ten Commandments (Exo 20:8-11). The worship of God on the Sabbath was observed by our Lord Jesus Christ Himself (Mar 1:21). To meet together on one day in the week at least was a practice of the early Christians, though they met on the first day instead of the seventh (Act 20:7; 1Co 16:2). To assemble in God's house on the Christian Sabbath has been the custom of all professing Christians for eighteen hundred years.<sup>21</sup> The best and holiest of God's saints have always pressed on others most strongly the value of Sabbath worship, and borne witness to its usefulness.

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<sup>19</sup> **types, emblems, and figures** – symbols representing other things with similar characteristics.

<sup>20</sup> While the New Testament is not as precise as the Old Testament in giving details about the form and practices of public worship, the doctrine of the regulative principle assures us that the Scriptures demand that we structure our worship after the simple directives we find in them. We are not to add or take away from the essential elements of worship, even though the circumstances or incidentals may be shaped by the specific context of a particular church. See 1689 London Baptist Confession 1.6 & 22.1 and Free Grace Broadcaster 233, *The Lord's Day*, both available from CHAPEL LIBRARY.

<sup>21</sup> Considering when the author wrote, from the first century to his day.

It sounds very fine and spiritual, no doubt, to say that every day should be a Sabbath to a Christian, and that one day should not be kept more holy than another. But facts are stronger than theories. Experience proves that human nature requires such helps as fixed days, hours, and seasons for carrying on spiritual business, and that public worship never prospers unless we observe God's order. "The sabbath was made for man" by Him Who made man at the beginning and knew what flesh and blood is (Mar 2:27). As a general rule, it will always be found that where there is no Sabbath, there is no public worship.

#### **b. A Minister**

In complete public worship there should be a ministry [*a minister conducting worship services*]. I do not for a moment say that it is of absolute necessity that it must be an Episcopal ministry; I am not so narrow-minded and uncharitable as to deny the validity of Presbyterian or Congregational orders. I only maintain that it is the mind of God that ministers of some kind should conduct the worship of Christian congregations and be responsible for its decent and orderly conduct in approaching God.

I am at a loss to understand how anyone can read the Acts of the Apostles and the Epistles to the Corinthians, Ephesians, Timothy, and Titus, and deny that the ministry is an appointment of God. I say this with every feeling of respect for the Quakers and Plymouth Brethren, who have no ordained ministers; I simply say that I cannot understand their views on this subject. Reason itself appears to me to tell us that business that is left to nobody in particular to attend to is a business that is soon entirely neglected. Order is said to be heaven's first law. Once let a people begin with no Sabbath and no ministry, and it would never surprise me if they ended with no public worship, no religion, and no God!

#### **c. Preaching the Word**

In complete public worship there should be the preaching of God's Word. I can find no record of church assemblies in the New Testament in which preaching and teaching orally do not occupy a most prominent position. It appears to me to be the chief instrument by which the Holy Ghost not only awakens sinners, but also leads on and establishes saints. I observe that in the very last words that St. Paul wrote to Timothy as a young minister, he especially enjoins on him to "preach the word" (2Ti 4:2). I cannot, therefore, believe that any system of worship in which the sermon is made little of, or thrust into a corner, can be a scriptural system, or one likely to have the blessing of God.

I have no faith in the general utility of services composed entirely of prayer-reading, hymn-singing, sacrament-receiving, and walking in procession. I hold firm-

ly with Bishop Latimer<sup>22</sup> that it is one of Satan's great aims to exalt ceremonies and put down preaching. There is a deep meaning in the words, "Despise not prophesyings"<sup>23</sup> (1Th 5:20). A contempt for sermons is a pretty sure mark of a decline in spiritual religion.

#### **d. Public Prayer**

In complete public worship there should be united public prayer. I can find no account of religious assemblies in the New Testament in which prayer and supplication do not form a principal business. I find St. Paul telling Timothy, "I exhort therefore, that, first of all, supplications, prayers, intercessions, and giving of thanks, be made for all men" (1Ti 2:1). Such prayers should be plain and intelligible, that all the worshippers may know what is going on and be able to go along with him who prays.

They should as far as possible be the joint act of all the assembly and not the act of one man's mind alone. A congregation of professing Christians that only meets to hear a grand sermon, and takes no part or interest in the prayers, seems to me to fall far short of the standard of the New Testament. Public worship does not consist only of hearing.<sup>24</sup>

#### **e. Reading the Scriptures**

In complete public worship there should be the public reading of the Holy Scriptures. This was evidently a part of the service of the Jewish synagogue, as we may learn from what happened at Nazareth and at Antioch in Pisidia (Luk 4:16; Act 13:15). We cannot doubt that the Christian Church was intended to honor the Bible as much as the Jewish. To my eye, St. Paul points to this when he says to Timothy, "Till I come, give attendance to reading" (1Ti 4:13). I do not believe that "reading" in that text means private study.

Reason and common sense alike teach the usefulness of the practice of publicly reading the Scriptures. A visible church<sup>25</sup> will always contain many professing mem-

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<sup>22</sup> **Hugh Latimer** (c. 1487-1555) – Fellow of Clare College, Cambridge, and Bishop of Worcester before the Reformation; later, Church of England chaplain to King Edward VI. In 1555 under Queen Mary, he was burned at the stake, becoming one of the three Oxford martyrs of Anglicanism.

<sup>23</sup> **prophesyings** – sometimes used by the Puritans and other writers to refer to proclaiming the truth of God's Word, i.e., preaching; the biblical concept of prophecy has many parallels to preaching, though it is not always identical.

<sup>24</sup> The reader is requested to observe that I purposely abstain from saying anything about the vexed question, whether public prayers in the congregation should be liturgical and pre-composed or extemporaneous. I say nothing because nothing is said about it in Scripture. Neither liturgies nor extemporaneous prayers are expressly sanctioned or expressly prohibited in God's Word. A large liberty is mercifully given to the churches. I think the Christian (so called) who...abuses his brother because he uses a liturgy is an ignorant, narrow-minded bigot on one side. I think the Christian (so-called) who...excommunicates his brother because he does not use a liturgy is a narrow-minded, ignorant bigot on the other side. Both are wrong!

<sup>25</sup> **visible church** – local body of professing believers: "All persons throughout the world, professing the faith of the Gospel, and obedience unto God by Christ, according unto it; not destroying their

bers who either cannot read, or have no will or time to read at home. What safer plan can be devised for the instruction of such people than the regular reading of God's Word? A congregation that hears but little of the Bible is always in danger of becoming entirely dependent on its minister. God should always speak in the assembly of His people as well as man.<sup>26</sup>

#### **f. Praise**

In complete public worship there should be united public praise. That this was the custom among the first Christians is evident from St. Paul's words to the Ephesians and Colossians, in which he commended the use of "psalms and hymns and spiritual songs" (Eph 5:19; Col 3:16). That it was a custom so widely prevalent as to be a mark of the earliest Christians, is simply a matter of history. Pliny<sup>27</sup> records that when they met they "used to sing a hymn to Christ as God."

No one indeed can read the Old Testament and not discover the extremely prominent place that praise occupied in the Temple service. What man in his senses can doubt that "the service of song" was meant to be highly esteemed under the New Testament (1Ch 6:31)? Praise has been truly called the flower of all devotion. It is the only part of our worship that will never die. Preaching and praying and reading shall one day be no longer needed, but praise shall go on forever. A congregation that takes no part in praise, or leaves it all to be done by deputy through a choir, can be hardly thought in a satisfactory state.

#### **g. Baptism and the Lord's Supper**

Finally, in complete public worship there should be the regular use of the two sacraments that Christ appointed in His Church. By baptism new members should be continually added to the congregation and publicly enrolled in the list of professing

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own profession by any errors everting the foundation, or unholiness of conversation [*lifestyle*], are and may be called visible saints; and of such ought all particular congregations to be constituted" (1689 London Baptist Confession 26.2; available from CHAPEL LIBRARY). This is often contrasted with the "invisible Church," the body of all truly regenerate believers of all time: "The catholic or universal Church, which (with respect to the internal work of the Spirit, and truth of grace) may be called invisible, consists of the whole number of the elect, that have been, are, or shall be gathered into one, under Christ the head thereof; and is the spouse, the body, the fullness of him that filleth all in all" (1689 LBC 26.1). The notions of a universal, invisible assembly and of local, visible assemblies should not lead us to think that these are two independent bodies; they are simply two ways of viewing the one Church of which Jesus said, "I will build my church" (Mat 16:18). We understand that not all of our readers will agree with this distinction.

<sup>26</sup> There is nothing in the public worship of the Church of England which I admire so much as the large quantity of Scripture that it orders to be read aloud to its members. Every churchman who goes to church twice on Sunday hears two chapters of the Old Testament and two of the New, beside the Psalms, the Epistle, and the Gospel. I doubt if the members of any other church in Christendom hear anything like the same proportion of God's Word.

<sup>27</sup> **Pliny the Elder** (Gaius Plinius Secundus, AD 23-79) – Roman author, naturalist, and philosopher, as well as military commander of the early Roman Empire.

Christians. By the Lord's Supper believers should be continually offered an opportunity of confessing their Master, and continually strengthened, refreshed, and put in remembrance of His sacrifice on the cross. I believe, with every feeling of respect for Quakers and Plymouth Brethren, that no one who neglected these two sacraments would have been regarded as a Christian by St. Paul and St. Peter, St. James and St. John.

No doubt, like every other good thing, [these two sacraments] may be painfully misused and profaned by some, and superstitiously idolized by others. But after all, there is no getting over the fact that baptism and the Lord's Supper were ordained by Christ Himself as means of grace,<sup>28</sup> and we cannot doubt He meant them to be reverently and duly used. A man who preferred to worship God for many years without ever receiving the sacrament of the Lord's Supper is a man, I am firmly persuaded, that would not have been thought in a right state in the days of the apostles.

I commend these seven points to the serious attention of my readers, and invite them to consider them well. I can easily believe that I may have said things about them with which some Christians may not agree. I am not their judge; to their own Master they must stand or fall. I can only tell my readers, as an honest man, what appears to me the teaching of Holy Scripture. I do not for a moment say that no man will be saved who does not see public worship precisely with my eyes. I say nothing of the kind.

But I do say that any regular system of public worship that does not give a place to the Sabbath, the ministry, preaching, prayers, Scripture-reading, praise, and the two sacraments, appears to me deficient and incomplete. If we attend a place of worship where any of these seven points is neglected, I think we suffer loss and damage. We may be doing well, but I think we might be doing better. To my mind these seven parts of public worship appear to stand out plainly on the face of the New Testament, and I plainly say so.

#### **4. Things to Avoid in Public Worship**

I proceed, in the fourth place, to show some things that ought to be avoided in public worship. I am well aware that there is no perfection in this world. There is no visible church, I am sure, in whose public worship it would not be easy to show faults, defects, and shortcomings. The best service in the best visible church on earth will always be infinitely below the standard of the glorified Church in heaven. I admit, with sorrow and humiliation, that the faith, hope, life, and worship of God's people are all alike full of imperfections. To be continually separating and seceding

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<sup>28</sup> **means of grace** – things that God is pleased to use in order to accomplish salvation and sanctification in the hearts of men, including the preaching of the Word, Bible reading and study, prayer, baptism, the Lord's Supper, family worship, singing, and godly fellowship with others.

from churches because we detect blemishes in their administration is not the act of a wise man. It is to forget the parable of the wheat and tares (Mat 13:24-30).

But I cannot forget, for all this, that we have fallen on dangerous times in the matter of worship. There are things going on in many English churches and chapels in the present day so highly objectionable, that I feel it a plain duty to offer some cautions about them. Plain speaking about them is imperatively demanded at a minister's hands. If the watchmen hold their peace, how shall the city take alarm (Eze 33:2-9)? "If the trumpet give an uncertain sound, who shall prepare himself to the battle?" (1Co 14:8).

There are three great and growing evils in public worship that require special watching in the present day. I feel it a positive duty to direct attention to them. We have need to stand on our guard about these evils, and to take heed that they do not infect and damage our souls.

#### **a. Imbalance among Ordinances**

Let us beware, for one thing, of any worship in which a disproportionate honor is given to any one ordinance of Christ to the neglect of another. There are churches at this moment in which baptism and the Lord's Supper, like Aaron's rod (Exo 7:12), swallow up everything else in religion. Nothing beside receives much attention. The honor done to the font and the Lord's Table meet you at every turn. All else, in comparison, is jostled out of its place, overshadowed, dwarfed, and driven into a corner. Worship of this sort, I hesitate not to say, is useless to man's soul. Once alter the proportions of a doctor's prescription, and you may turn his medicine into a poison. Once bury the whole of Christianity under baptism and the Lord's Supper, and the real idea of Christian worship is completely destroyed.

#### **b. Excessive Decoration**

Let us beware, for another thing, of any worship in which an excessive quantity of decoration and ornament is used. There are many churches at this moment in which divine service is carried on with such an amount of gaudy dressing, candle-lighting, and theatrical ceremonial, that it defeats the very purpose of worship. Simplicity should be the grand characteristic of New Testament worship. Ornament at any time should be employed with a very sparing hand. Neither in the Gospels nor in the Epistles shall we find the slightest warrant for a gorgeous and decorated ceremonial, or for any symbols except water, bread, and wine. Above all, the inherent wickedness of human nature is such that our minds are only too ready to turn away from spiritual things to visible things. Whether men like it or not, what the heart of man needs [to be taught] is the uselessness of outward ornaments without inward grace.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Pompous rites have been the great engine wherewith the devil hath deceived the souls of men, and wrought them to a nauseating the simplicity of divine worship, as unworthy the majesty and excel-

### c. Priests Who Appear to Offer Sacrifices

Let us beware, above all things, of any worship in which ministers wear the dress, or act in the manner, of sacrificing priests. There are hundreds of English churches at this moment in which the Lord's Supper is administered as a sacrifice and not as a sacrament, and the clergy are practically acting as mediators between God and man. The real presence of our Lord's body and blood under the form of bread and wine is openly taught. The Lord's Table is called an altar. The consecrated elements are treated with an idolatrous reverence, as if God Himself was in them under the form of bread and wine. The habit of private confession to clergymen is encouraged and urged on the people. I find it impossible to believe that such worship as this can be anything but offensive to God. He is a jealous God and will not give His honor to another!

The sacrifice of our Lord Jesus Christ on the cross, once offered, can in no sense or way ever be repeated. His mediatorial and priestly office He has never deputed<sup>30</sup> to any man or any order of men. There is not a word in the Acts or Epistles to show that the apostles ever pretended to be sacrificing priests, or to make any oblation<sup>31</sup> in the Lord's Supper, or to hear private confessions and confer judicial absolutions. Surely that simple fact ought to make men think. Let us beware of sacrificialism, the mass, and the confessional!

Against the three evils of which I have just been speaking, I desire to lift up a warning voice. Such worship is not acceptable in God's sight. It may be pressed upon us most plausibly by clever men. It may be very attractive to the eye, ear, and the sensual part of our nature. But it has one fatal defect about it: it cannot be defended

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lency of God (2Co 11:3). Thus the Jews would not understand the glory of the second temple in the presence of the Messiah, because it had not the pompous grandeur of that of Solomon's erecting. Hence in all ages men have been forward to disfigure God's models, and dress up a brat of their own; as though God had been defective in providing for his own honour in his institutions without the assistance of his creature. This hath always been in the world: the old world had their imaginations, and the new world hath continued them. The Israelites, in the midst of miracles, and under the memory of a famous deliverance, would erect a calf. The Pharisees, that sat in Moses's chair, would coin new traditions, and enjoin them to be as current as the law of God (Mat 23:6). Papists will be blending the Christian appointments with pagan ceremonies, to please the carnal fancies of the common people.

How often hath the practice of the primitive church, the custom wherein we are bred, the sentiments of our ancestors, been owned as a more authentic rule in matters of worship, than the mind of God delivered in his word! It is natural by creation to worship God; and it is as natural by corruption for man to worship him in a human way, and not in a divine. Is not this to impose laws upon God? to esteem ourselves wiser than he? to think him negligent of his own service, and that our feeble brains can find out ways to accommodate his honour better than himself hath done? (Charnock, "Practical Atheism" in *Works*, vol. I, 222)

<sup>30</sup> **deputed** – delegated with authority.

<sup>31</sup> **oblations** – anything offered as a sacrifice in worship.

and maintained by plain texts of Scripture. Sacramentalism, ceremonialism, sacrificialism, will never be found in Bibles fairly read and honestly interpreted.

We should search the pages of English history, if nothing else will open our eyes, and see what those pages tell us. Of worship in which sacraments, ceremonies, sacerdotalism,<sup>32</sup> and the mass are made the principal part—of such worship England has surely had enough. Such worship was tried by the Church of Rome in the days of our forefathers for centuries before the Protestant Reformation, and utterly failed. It filled the land with superstition, ignorance, formalism, and immorality. It comforted no one, sanctified no one, elevated no one, [and] helped no one toward heaven. It made the priests overbearing tyrants and the people cringing slaves!

And shall we go back to it? God forbid! Shall we once more be content with services in which baptism, the Lord's Supper, the power of the priesthood, the "real presence" of Christ in the Eucharist, the necessity of symbolical decorations, the value of processions, banners, pictures, altar lights, are incessantly pressed on our minds? Once more I say, God forbid! Let everyone that loves his soul come out from such worship and be separate. Let him avoid it and turn away from it as he would from poison!

## 5. Tests of Public Worship

I proceed, in the last place, to show some tests by which our public worship should be tried. This is a point of vast importance, and one that every professing Christian should look fairly in the face. Too many are apt to cut the knot of all difficulties about the subject before us by referring to their own feelings. They will tell us that they are not theologians, that they do not pretend to understand the difference between one school of divinity and another. But they do know that the worship in which they take part makes them *feel* so much better that they cannot doubt it is all right.

I am not disposed to let such people turn away from the subject of this paper quite so easily. I cannot forget that religious feelings are very deceitful things. There is a sort of gentle animal excitement produced in some minds by hearing religious music and seeing religious spectacles, which is not true devotion at all. While it lasts, such excitement is very strong and very contagious; but it soon comes and soon goes, and leaves no permanent impression behind it. It is a mere sensuous animal influence, which even a Romanist may feel at seasons and yet remain a Romanist both in doctrine and practice.

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<sup>32</sup> **sacerdotalism** – Roman Catholic system whereby priests represent God to man and man to God, ignoring the biblical truth that New Testament believers have direct access to God and are made "a kingdom of priests" and "a royal priesthood" (Exo 19:6; 1Pe 2:9).

#### **a. Affect Heart and Conscience**

True spiritual worship will affect a man's heart and conscience. It will make him feel more keenly the sinfulness of sin and his own particular personal corruption. It will deepen his humility. It will render him more jealously careful over his inward life. False public worship, like dram-drinking<sup>33</sup> and opium-eating, will every year produce weaker impressions. True spiritual worship, like wholesome food, will strengthen him who uses it and make him grow inwardly every year.

#### **b. Commune with Christ**

True spiritual worship will draw a man into close communion with Jesus Christ Himself. It will lift him far above churches, ordinances, and ministers. It will make him hunger and thirst after a sight of the King. The more he hears, reads, prays, and praises, the more he will feel that nothing but Christ Himself will feed the life of his soul, and that heart communion with Him is meat indeed and drink indeed (Joh 6:55). The false worshipper in the time of need will turn to external helps, to ministers, ordinances, and sacraments. The true worshipper will turn instinctively to Christ by simple faith, just as the compass-needle turns to the pole.

#### **c. Grow in Spiritual Knowledge**

True spiritual worship will continually extend a man's spiritual knowledge. It will annually give bone, sinew, muscle, and firmness to his religion. A true worshipper will every year know more of self, God, heaven, duty, doctrine, practice, and experience. His religion is a living thing and will grow. A false worshipper will never get beyond the old carnal principles and elements of his theology. He will annually go round and round like a horse in a mill, and, though laboring much, will never go forward. His religion is a dead thing and cannot increase and multiply.

#### **d. Increase in Holiness**

True spiritual worship will continually increase the holiness of a man's life. It will make him every year more watchful over tongue, temper, time, and behavior in every relation of life. The true worshipper's conscience becomes annually more tender. The false worshipper's becomes annually more seared and hard.

Give me the worship that will stand the test of our Lord's great principle, "By their fruits ye shall know them" (Mat 7:20). Give me the worship that sanctifies the life; that makes a man walk with God and delight in God's Law; that lifts him above the fear of the world and the love of the world; that enables him to exhibit something of God's image and God's likeness before his fellow-men; that makes him just, loving, pure, gentle, good-tempered, patient, humble, unselfish, temperate. This is the wor-

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<sup>33</sup> **dram-drinking** – repeated consumption of small servings of alcoholic liquor, producing dullness of the senses through drunkenness.

ship that comes down from heaven and has the stamp and seal and superscription of God.

Whatever men may please to say, the grand test of the value of any kind of worship is the effect it produces on the *lives* of the worshippers. A man may tell us that what is called ritualism now-a-days is the best and most perfect mode of worshipping God. He may despise the simple and unadorned ceremonial of evangelical congregations. He may exalt to the skies the excellence of ornament, decoration, and pageantry in our service of God. But I take leave to tell him that Christian men will try his favorite system by its results. So long as ritualistic worshippers can turn from matins<sup>34</sup> and early communions to races and operas, and can oscillate between the confessional and the ballroom, so long the advocates of ritualism must not be surprised if we think little of the value of ritualistic worship.

#### **e. Conclusion**

Let us hear the conclusion of the whole matter. The best public worship is that which produces the best private Christianity. The best church services for the congregation are those that make its individual members most holy at home and alone. If we want to know whether our own public worship is doing us good, let us try it by these tests. Does it quicken our conscience? Does it send us to Christ? Does it add to our knowledge? Does it sanctify our life? If it does—we may depend on it—it is worship of which we have no cause to be ashamed.

The day is coming when there shall be a congregation that shall never break up, a Sabbath that shall never end, a song of praise that shall never cease, and an assembly that shall never be dispersed. In that assembly shall be found all who have worshipped God in spirit upon earth (Phi 3:3). If we are such, we shall be there.

Here we often worship God with a deep sense of weakness, corruption, and infirmity. There, at last, we shall be able, with a renewed body, to serve Him without weariness, and to attend on Him without distraction.

Here, at our very best, we see through a glass darkly and know the Lord Jesus Christ most imperfectly (1Co 13:12). It is our grief that we do not know Him better and love Him more. There, freed from all the dross<sup>35</sup> and defilement of indwelling sin, we shall see Jesus as we have been seen, and know as we have been known (1Jo 3:2). Surely, if faith has been sweet and peace-giving, sight will be far better.

Here we have often found it hard to worship God joyfully by reason of the sorrows and cares of this world. Tears over the graves of those we loved have often made it hard to sing praise. Crushed hopes and family sorrows have sometimes made us hang our harps on the willows. There every tear shall be dried, every saint who has fallen

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<sup>34</sup> **matins** – scheduled morning prayer services in the Church of England.

<sup>35</sup> **dross** – scum formed on surface of molten metals; worthless trash.

asleep in Christ shall meet us once more, and every hard thing in our life journey shall be made clear and plain as the sun at noonday.

Here we have often felt that we stand comparatively alone, and that even in God's house the real spiritual worshippers are comparatively few. There we shall at length see a multitude of brethren and sisters that no man can number, all of one heart and one mind, all free from blemishes, weaknesses, and infirmities, all rejoicing in one Savior, and all prepared to spend an eternity in His praise. We shall have worshipping companions enough in heaven.

Armed with such hopes as these, let us lift up our hearts and look forward! The time is very short. "The night is far spent, the day is at hand" (Rom 13:12). Let us worship on, pray on, praise on, and read on. Let us contend earnestly for the faith once delivered to the saints (Jude 1:3) and resist manfully every effort to spoil scriptural worship. Let us strive earnestly to hand down the light of gospel worship to our children's children. "Yet a little while, and he that shall come will come, and will not tarry" (Heb 10:37). Blessed in that Day will be those, and those only, who are found true worshippers, who "worship him in spirit and in truth" (Joh 4:24)!

