

WORSHIP IN SPIRIT AND IN TRUTH

A CALL TO RETURN TO PURITY IN CHRISTIAN WORSHIP BY SINGING THE
PSALMS AS A CONGREGATION ON THE LORD'S DAY

BY

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Leviticus 19:1-2

And the LORD spoke to Moses, saying, "Speak to all the congregation of the children of Israel, and say to them: 'You shall be holy, for I the LORD your God am holy'."

John 4: 21-24

Jesus said to her, "Woman, believe Me, the hour is coming when you will neither on this mountain, nor in Jerusalem, worship the Father. You worship what you do not know; we know what we worship, for salvation is of the Jews. But the hour is coming, and now is, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth; for the Father is seeking such to worship Him. God *is* Spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth."

Psalms 96:1-3

Oh, sing to the Lord a new song!

Sing to the Lord, all the earth.

Sing to the Lord, bless His name;

Proclaim the good news of His salvation from day to day.

Declare His glory among the nations,

His wonders among all peoples.

Dear Christian Brothers and Sisters,

I write to you at a time when the church is in decay. The power of the Holy Spirit seems to have been withdrawn from her, leaving her often empty, anemic, and dishonored among the nations. Even in the United States, with its long Christian history, the churches are marked by compromise and worldliness. In England and Scotland, the condition is even more dire.

I plead with you to return to the worship of God. God is holy, and we are to worship Him only as He commands. His Word makes clear what that means. Return to the psalms. Confess them with your lips. Do not sit idly by, listening passively to a choir sing on your behalf. Musicians, do not separate yourselves from the congregation to play instruments. Instead, sing together with God's people. As a gathered congregation, lift up your voices in unison as a congregation, proclaiming the pure truth of the Word of God living in your hearts. Worship God in Spirit and in truth. Worship Him as Jesus and the disciples did. Sing the psalms with joy, vitality, and understanding.

I understand that even for many in the Reformed tradition today, let alone among Evangelicals, this may sound preposterous. You've likely never heard of such a thing. Yet, it is exactly how Jesus and the disciples worshiped, how the church worshiped through the centuries, and what the Reformers like Calvin taught. I urge you to join me in looking at how God has commanded us to worship Him. Then, after considering His commands, tell me—what objections can possibly remain?

In Christ,

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The Worship of God

When we hear statistics about declining church attendance, this isn't merely about the fading of a social club, a place to learn morality, or a once-popular hobby. It reflects something far more significant—the decline in the worship of God. Yet, in my experience, when you ask people why they go to church, “to worship God” often isn't among their top three reasons. Even when it is mentioned, there's often confusion about what worship truly means.

One of the most common misconceptions is equating worship with praise. Many say they go to church to sing praises to God, describing how it makes them feel close to Him. I once heard someone explain, “It grounds me for the week.” While these feelings may accompany worship, they do not define it. Others say they don't need to go to church because they can praise God at home or in nature.

Worship is unique. True worship is directed exclusively at God. While it may include praise, it is not the same as praise. A person can praise God throughout the week, and, in a sense, they can even praise other things. But worship is reserved solely for God and is uniquely expressed by the church gathered on the **Lord's Day**. True worship of God must be founded on the perfect **holiness** of God.

There are things we can know about the worship of God from general revelation (what all men can know at all times). We can know that God is real, that we have sinned against God and are alienated from Him, that we are physically dying as a call back to repent of our sin, that we cannot be restored to God unless sin is atoned for, and that neither ourselves nor another human can make that atonement or earn forgiveness through works. However, we can also know that how God will accomplish redemption is only told to us in special revelation (Scripture, the inspired and infallible Word of God, the Bible). Only there will we learn how God commands us to worship him as sinners. This is called the **Regulative Principle of Worship** and is also taught in the Second Commandment.

The Second Commandment governs how God is to be worshiped. He is not to be worshiped according to our imagination but only as he has revealed Himself. Idolatry can be physical (such as a statue) but it can also be conceptual (a false belief about God). Both are forbidden in the Second Commandment. The commandment adds: you shall not bow down to them or serve them [false images]. That means the opposite is true: we are to bow down to God and serve Him. In the wilderness, the Devil asked Jesus to violate this commandment and bow down to him, but Jesus “You shall worship the Lord your God and Him only shall you serve” (Luke 4:8). This is the essence of true worship—that we listen to God, bow down, rather than that we do it our way.

So, what exactly is **worship**? To answer that question, we must go all the way back to the beginning.

What we will learn here is that 1) God is holy, 2) God directs us how to worship Him in our public worship, 3) We are to sing the inspired, infallible, inerrant Psalms of God, 4) instruments were part of the Levitical ceremonial law at the Temple and they ended with the Temple—now we sing *a cappella* as did Jesus and the disciples at Synagogue.

Adam and Eve

In Genesis 2:3, God blesses the seventh day and makes it holy. In six days, God created the world and everything in it. His work of creation was complete, and it was very good. On the seventh day, God rested—a "rest" that signifies completed work, not the need to recover from exhaustion, as God, being infinite, does not tire. Similarly, humanity was given work to do. Man was commanded to be fruitful, multiply, and fill the earth (Genesis 1:28). However, this task went beyond simply populating the earth with bodies; humanity was to fill the earth with people who know and glorify God. By doing so, they would fill the earth with the knowledge of the glory of God. As part of this, humanity was to honor the seventh day as a holy day of rest.

But in Genesis 3, something new is introduced to the concept of worship. Adam and Eve were commanded not to eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for on the day they ate of it, they would surely die. The Serpent, however, tempted them to doubt God's command. He claimed they would not die—that God had lied to them—and that eating the fruit would make them like God, knowing good and evil as He does, not as creatures who discern what God has revealed. The Serpent further impugned God's motives, suggesting He was withholding something good from them out of selfishness.

Eve ate the fruit and gave some to Adam, who was with her and said nothing, and he also ate. The effects were immediate. In Genesis 2:25, we were told that Adam and Eve were naked and unashamed. Now, they felt shame and attributed it to their nakedness. In an attempt to cover themselves, they sewed fig leaves together. But when they heard God walking in the garden, they hid. Imagine that—until now, they had enjoyed close fellowship with God, walking with Him in the garden. Now, hearing His presence brought fear and a desire to hide.

Their sin brought alienation from God and broke their communion with Him. They believed a lie about the very One who made them—and how quickly they were to accept a lie about their Creator. Ever since, all of their children doubt God, listen to lies about Him, accuse Him of mismanagement, neglect His Word and commands, deny He knows what is best for them, and even claim He doesn't exist.

God asks them, "Where are you?"—a question that indicates He is fully aware of their hiding (as He knows all things) and is giving them an opportunity to confess and repent. Yet, instead of acknowledging their sin, Adam and Eve respond by saying they are afraid of God. Rather than admitting their guilt, they blame their fear on being naked. Their fellowship with God has turned into fear.

There is, of course, a righteous fear of God that leads to repentance and wisdom, but this was a craven fear—a wicked refusal to see their sin for what it was and repent. Their response reveals a heart that avoids accountability, deflecting the true cause of their shame. Hiding from their own guilt and from God's fatherly love.

God then asks, “Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten from the tree that I commanded you not to eat from?” This question highlights the contrast between their physical and spiritual nakedness. They had always been physically naked, but now they are spiritually exposed before God, their Creator. Once again, God provides them with a chance to repent. Yet, rather than taking responsibility, they both engage in self-justification: Adam blames Eve, and Eve blames the serpent.

At this point, God does not respond to their excuses. Imagine the temptation to argue back, pointing out the absurdity of their rationalizations and the obviousness of their guilt. But God does not do this. Instead, He imposes the curse and the promise.

God curses creation, the woman, and the man, introducing suffering and ultimately death into the world. Yet, in the same moment, He gives them hope by promising redemption through the seed of the woman. This promise, often called the protoevangelium (Genesis 3:15), is the first proclamation of the gospel.

Adam’s naming of Eve as “the mother of all living” demonstrates his repentance. While Adam and Eve had broken the command not to eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, they were also commanded to be fruitful and multiply (Genesis 1:28). After bringing sin and death into the world, the temptation for Adam might have been to despair and refuse to fulfill this second command. Even today, we hear similar sentiments: “I can’t bring children into a world like this.”

But Adam didn’t give up. Instead, he committed himself to obeying God’s command, trusting in the promise of redemption through the seed of the woman (Genesis 3:15). Naming his wife “Eve”—the mother of all living—was an act of faith. It reflected his belief that life, not death, would ultimately prevail through God’s provision.

This sets the stage for the first worship service recorded in Scripture. In Genesis 3:21, God made coats of animal skins to cover Adam and Eve, replacing the fig-leaf garments they had made for themselves. Animals do not survive the removal of their skins, so where did these coverings come from? An animal had to die for Adam and Eve to be clothed.

This act introduces the **principle of vicarious atonement**. “Vicarious” means “through another,” and “atonement” means “to make payment for sin.” Because of their sin, Adam and Eve could no longer approach God as they had before; their communion with Him was broken. The death of the animal symbolized the payment for sin necessary for them to be covered and approach God.

God’s actions here establish a pattern: **sinful humans can only come before a holy God through atonement**. The curse imposed by God was not only a judgment but also a call to repentance. The promise of the seed, the coats of skins, and the vicarious death of an animal all pointed forward to the ultimate sacrifice—Christ, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world (John 1:29).

This first act of worship reminds us that **God is holy**, His day is holy, and to treat either with anything less than reverence is sacrilege. Worship must be approached with humility, faith, and a recognition of the cost of sin and the necessity of atonement.

Cain and Abel

The very next story in the Bible centers on religious worship, continuing the theme of humanity's relationship with God. It also demonstrates the painful reality of the curse given to Eve: raising children, who are naturally at enmity with God, will be filled with sorrow. This first recorded conflict is a religious one, highlighting the nature of proper worship.

Cain, a farmer, and Abel, a shepherd, each bring an offering to the Lord from their respective work. On the surface, this seems reasonable—why would God reject Cain's sacrifice? Wasn't it enough that Cain brought an offering with good intentions? Perhaps, as some might argue, Cain didn't have access to sheep as readily as Abel did. Yet God rejected Cain's offering, and this rejection reveals much about the nature of worship.

God's rejection of Cain's offering wasn't arbitrary. It was a call to repentance, a moment for Cain to reflect on why his offering fell short. God warns Cain about the power of sin, describing it as a force that desires to dominate him. Yet, Cain is not helpless—God teaches that man must have dominion over sin. This personal instruction from God is an act of grace and love, inviting Cain to turn back to Him.

Instead of repenting, Cain grows angry—at God and at his brother. This anger should have been a wake-up call, a sign to Cain of his need for God's help. Yet, instead of turning to prayer or seeking restoration, Cain allows his anger to fester into hatred. That hatred culminates in the murder of Abel. Cain's solution to his guilt is not repentance but the silencing of the one who exposed his sin before God.

Once again, God questions Cain: "Where is your brother?" This question, like those posed to Adam and Eve, is an opportunity for Cain to confess and repent. Instead, Cain evades responsibility, responding with the now-famous words, "Am I my brother's keeper?" In doing so, Cain denies not only his brother but also the reality that God sees all things and knows all things.

God pronounces judgment on Cain, further intensifying the curse. The ground, already cursed for Adam's sin, will now yield even less for Cain. Additionally, Cain is sentenced to a life of restless wandering, alienated from the land and from community.

This story illustrates the critical nature of worship and the heart's posture before God. Abel's offering was accepted not merely because of its outward form but because it reflected faith and obedience (Hebrews 11:4). Cain's rejection reveals that worship is not about personal preference or convenience; it must align with God's revealed will. Worship offered in defiance or self-justification will not be accepted, and it leads to a spiral of sin and alienation unless repentance is embraced.

Still, Cain does not repent. Unlike Adam, who repented immediately and without complaint, Cain grumbles that his punishment is too severe. In response, God puts a mark on Cain, temporarily suspending capital punishment. This act reveals something significant about the natural moral law: even long before the Law of Moses, it was clear that justice demands an equal payment—a life for a life. Yet God, in His mercy, delays judgment for now. Cain then goes out from the presence of God, signaling an even greater division between God and those in Cain’s line—unbelievers who refuse to worship God as He commands.

This story sets the context for worship today. Worship is done in the presence of God’s holiness and must follow His commands. Good intentions are not enough. Worship that disregards God’s instructions reveals, at the very least, a culpable neglect of His purposes. God requires that all who come before Him do so through vicarious atonement. In Genesis 3, this was prefigured in the death of an animal. The animal, though innocent of sin, died to cover the sins of Adam and Eve.

However, animals are not moral agents created in the image of God. They cannot sin, and therefore, they cannot fully atone for human sin. This means Adam and Eve understood from the start that the animal sacrifice only pointed forward to another: the seed of the woman, who would ultimately die for humanity’s sins.

The seed of the woman refers to one who comes uniquely from a woman, not from both a man and a woman, as all others do. This makes Him the second Adam—a man who can truly represent humanity before God. Yet this seed of the woman is also the Son of Man, a human who fulfills what Adam failed to do.

Still, a mystery remains: how can one man pay for the sins of so many? As the Scriptures unfold, they reveal more about this profound truth, pointing us to the one who is fully man and fully God—the only one who can bear the infinite weight of sin and satisfy God’s justice.

Noah Before and After the Flood

As we continue tracing the development of worship, we come to the genealogies recorded in Genesis 5. These genealogies provide an important reminder: **Genesis is history**. It records the names of real people, their lifespans, their descendants, and their spiritual status before God. At this time, the curse on humanity was less heavy, and people lived extraordinarily long lives. Yet, even amidst these blessings, sin was at work.

Genesis 6 records a pivotal disaster. The “sons of God”—those who believed in God and sought to keep His commands—compromised their faith by marrying the beautiful but unbelieving daughters from the line of Cain. This mixing of the two lines led, as it always does, to unbelief gaining the upper hand.

Do you remember the first command given to humanity? To be fruitful, multiply, and fill the earth—with people who know and worship God. But now the earth was filled with those who hated God. The

consequence of this was a world filled with **violence and corruption**. God, in His sovereignty, permitted this rebellion to reveal something profound about His patience, mercy, and justice. The story of Noah and the flood highlights that the heart of fallen humanity is desperately wicked. A longer lifespan only provided more time to devise evil and build communities entrenched in sin.

In response, God "repented"—not in the sense of regret over a mistake, but in the sense of changing direction regarding humanity's future to reveal a new aspect of his glory. This leads us to Noah and the Great Flood. Jude references Enoch's prophecy concerning Noah, and God confirmed Enoch's faithfulness by taking him directly to Himself without experiencing death (Genesis 5:24). Enoch "walked with God," echoing the close communion that Adam once enjoyed before the Fall.

Noah, too, understood the need for vicarious atonement. We see this in Genesis 7:2, where Noah is instructed to bring extra clean animals aboard the ark—animals set apart for sacrifice. After the flood, the first act Noah performs upon leaving the ark is an act of worship: he builds an altar and offers a sacrifice to the Lord (Genesis 8:20). God increases suffering on mankind by decreasing their lifespan, introducing eating animals, and reinstating the death penalty that has been suspended for Cain when men were so few. All of this was a call to repent but the vast majority of mankind neglected this call.

Noah's actions demonstrate his understanding of the gravity of sin and the necessity of atonement. The flood was not merely a natural disaster but a divine judgment that swept away an unbelieving system built by those who refused to know God and keep His commands. By offering this sacrifice, Noah marked the beginning of the post-flood world with an acknowledgment of God's justice, mercy, and holiness. Worshiping God through vicarious atonement was the foundation of this new start.

Abraham

Humanity quickly returned to sin after the flood. Rather than obeying God's command to fill the earth, they sought to stay together and build a great tower—perhaps believing it would protect them from another flood. In response, God increased the curse by confusing their language, preventing them from working together effectively. This forced humanity to spread out and fill the earth as God had originally commanded, but it also introduced strife and conflict among these newly divided linguistic groups.

Still, the human heart remained hardened. A mighty man named Nimrod arose, seeking to build a civilization centered on himself. Nimrod, from the line of Noah's cursed son Ham, did not repent of his sin. His civilization was built entirely on worldly principles, relying on his skills as a great hunter to provide food and protection from enemies. It's not hard to imagine that Noah's godly son, Shem, opposed Nimrod and worked to preserve the true worship of God. Could Shem have lived near what would later become known as Jerusalem, maintaining a sanctuary of faithful worship?

Abraham grew up in this context, witnessing Nimrod's rise and the spread of false worship. Nimrod's influence led many into idolatry, but Abraham refused to worship these false gods. Abraham's life overlapped with Noah's later years and intersected significantly with Shem's, giving him firsthand

knowledge of the events before and after the flood. He learned from these faithful forebears about humanity's turning away from God and the consequences of sin.

God called Abraham out of the great city of Ur, one of the leading centers of the day, to move to an untamed and dangerous desert in the west. Abraham obeyed, leaving behind the security of civilization to follow God's command. Throughout his journey, Abraham worshiped God by offering sacrifices, demonstrating his faith and devotion.

While many significant events marked Abraham's life, the pinnacle of his faith was God's test when He commanded Abraham to offer his only son, Isaac, as a burnt offering. This test parallels God's question to Adam, "Where are you?" It was not to inform God—He already knew—but to reveal something profound to Abraham and to us.

Abraham's obedience demonstrated his trust in God's promises, even when the command seemed incomprehensible. This moment foreshadowed the ultimate act of worship: God's own sacrifice of His only Son for the sins of the world.

Abraham knew that human sacrifices were vile and forbidden by God. How, then, was he to understand God's command to offer Isaac as a burnt offering? This command was not an instruction for a human sacrifice as practiced by pagan civilizations. A human sacrifice involves one sinner being killed for another, which achieves nothing. Such rituals only fill civilizations with violence and bloodshed. The one sacrificed dies, and the one for whom the sacrifice is made remains alienated from God.

Abraham understood several key truths that shaped his response. First, he knew that Isaac was a sinner in need of atonement himself. Therefore, Isaac could not be the one to die in place of others. A sinful person cannot atone for another's sin. Second, Abraham knew God's promise: through Isaac, Abraham would become a great nation (Genesis 12:2). If Isaac were to die and remain dead, this promise would be nullified, and God cannot break His promises.

Reasoning from these truths, Abraham concluded that God could raise Isaac from the dead, even after the complete destruction of a burnt offering (Hebrews 11:19). This faith in God's power over death gave Abraham the confidence to obey. As they climbed Mount Moriah, Abraham told Isaac, "God will provide the lamb" (Genesis 22:8).

And God did provide. In that moment, He provided a ram caught in the thicket to take Isaac's place. But this provision pointed forward to an even greater fulfillment: the Lamb of God, Jesus Christ. As the only Son of God, Jesus would die not for His own sins, for He had none, but for the sins of the world (John 1:29). Unlike Isaac, who was spared, Jesus completed the sacrifice, providing the ultimate atonement that reconciles sinners to God.

Moses and the Ceremonial Law

Abraham taught Isaac and Jacob about vicarious atonement through the practice of animal sacrifice. Jacob, in turn, passed this knowledge to his twelve sons. These sons and their families eventually moved to Egypt to survive a famine, where they remained for generations until the time of Moses. It was Moses who led the children of Israel out of Egypt and to Mount Sinai, where God gave His law.

The Law of Moses consists of three parts:

1. **The Moral Law**, summarized in the Ten Commandments, reflects God's unchanging character and applies to all people, in all times and places.
2. **The Civil Law** applies the moral law to the national life of Israel, addressing their unique circumstances and governance.
3. **The Ceremonial Law** provides commands regarding how God is to be worshiped, emphasizing His holiness and humanity's uncleanness in sin.

The ceremonial law underscored the holiness of God and the sinfulness of man. It included detailed instructions about clean and unclean practices, requiring Israel to wash and purify themselves before entering the house of worship. All sacrifices were centralized at the Tabernacle and, later, at the Temple in Jerusalem. At these sacred places, animal sacrifices were offered to God, and the Levites played the commanded instruments, accompanying worship with inspired songs.

The ceremonial law served to teach Israel what to expect in the coming Messiah. It pointed forward to the Lamb of God who would take away the sin of the world. These laws relied on outward and external signs to convey profound inner and spiritual truths. Central to this teaching was the command: **"You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy"** (Leviticus 19:2). This foundational truth shaped every aspect of worship. Any who presumed to innovate or offer worship according to their own preferences, no matter how well-intentioned, faced death as punishment for their presumption (Leviticus 10:2).

Before the Temple was built in Jerusalem, the ceremonial law was carried out at the Tabernacle. This structure, described in detail by God, was designed to be portable, allowing it to be constructed, taken down, and transported as Israel journeyed. Every aspect of its construction and use had to follow God's precise instructions.

The word **"tabernacle"** means "to dwell with." Adam's sin had broken humanity's communion with God, leaving man estranged from His presence. Through the ceremonial law, God was teaching Israel—and us—what was necessary for sinful humanity to once again dwell with a holy God.

The Tabernacle had two main sections, a structure that was later mirrored in the design of the Temple. Outside the Tabernacle, the priests performed their duties at the altar of sacrifice and the bronze basin. Only priests were permitted to offer sacrifices, symbolizing the necessity of a mediator between sinful humanity and a holy God. At the altar, sacrifices were made, and at the basin, the priests washed, preparing themselves to enter God's presence.

Inside the Tabernacle, the first section was called the **Holy Place**, and only priests could enter here. This area contained three significant items:

1. **The Altar of Incense**, representing the prayers of the people ascending to God.
2. **The Golden Lampstand (Candelabra)**, symbolizing the light of the Gospel meant to shine forth to the nations.
3. **The Table of Showbread**, representing the bread of life and God's provision.

These elements taught Israel—and by extension, all nations—that worship involved prayer, the proclamation of God's truth, and reliance on His sustaining grace.

Behind the altar of incense and the curtain was the **Most Holy Place** (or Holy of Holies). Only the high priest could enter this sacred space, and even then, only once a year on the Day of Atonement. The high priest brought the blood of the atoning sacrifice and sprinkled it on the **Mercy Seat**, the lid of the Ark of the Covenant.

The **Ark of the Covenant** itself contained three items, each rich in symbolism:

1. **The Ten Commandments**, signifying God's perfect law, which humanity had broken.
2. **Aaron's Rod**, which had miraculously bloomed and borne fruit, symbolizing God's power to bring life out of death through His Word.
3. **A Pot of Manna**, representing God's provision of the bread of life to sustain His people in the wilderness.

Together, these objects pointed to God's holiness, humanity's sinfulness, and the need for atonement. The Most Holy Place underscored that only the death of another—symbolized by the blood on the Mercy Seat—could pay for sin and restore communion with God. Furthermore, the high priest's role emphasized the separation between God and man, showing that humans are so sinful that only a designated mediator could approach God to atone for sin.

This system of worship was not devised by man but commanded by God, each element pointing forward to the ultimate fulfillment in Christ. Through the Tabernacle, Israel was taught about God's perfect law, His power to bring life from death, His provision for His people, and the necessity of substitutionary atonement.

David, Solomon, and the Temple

David conquered Jerusalem, subdued Israel's enemies, and laid the groundwork for the building of the **Temple**. Although he was not permitted to construct it himself, David gathered the materials, designed the plans, and made extensive preparations. Solomon, inheriting a kingdom at peace and full of abundance, oversaw the construction of what was, at the time, the greatest building ever made. Upon its completion, Solomon consecrated the Temple with a grand ceremony (1 Kings 8).

During the dedication, Solomon acknowledged an important truth: the God who created all things does not dwell in a house made by human hands. Pagan temples were built for finite deities, imagined as confined to their small, man-made shrines. But the Temple of the true God demonstrated something far greater—it symbolized God’s willingness to dwell with His people, though only on the basis of His holiness.

This central reality underscored humanity’s problem: sinful man cannot approach a holy God. To approach God in worship, man must be washed, pardoned, and cleansed. These correspond to the inner spiritual realities of regeneration, justification, and sanctification. The Temple’s outward rituals—washing, sacrifice, and the ministry of the priests—taught these profound truths. Worship that disregarded God’s commands was not only unacceptable but would bring God’s curse. Solomon warned Israel that if they departed from God’s holy law governing the Temple, they would face destruction.

David, under divine inspiration, also established psalm singing as a vital part of worship. He composed the majority of the psalms, which were collected into the inspired hymnal of Israel. Additionally, David, by God’s command, directed the Levites in the use of specific musical instruments for worship (1 Chronicles 15; 1 Chronicles 25; 2 Chronicles 5; 2 Chronicles 29). These instruments (cymbals, harps, lyres) were to be used exclusively by the Levites, only in the Temple, and only in the precise manner God had commanded. When the ceremonial law and Temple worship ended, so did the use of these instruments in public worship.

The **restrictions on the use of instruments** highlighted God’s holiness. Worship was not a matter of personal preference or creativity but of obedience to God’s revealed will. In worship we acknowledge God and praise Him. Due to our sin, we cannot compose a song that is worthy of use in the corporate worship of God. Just like God gives us the Bible for preaching so too He gave us the Psalms for singing in worship. The Temple stood as a vivid reminder that God’s presence is holy and can only be approached through the means He provides.

Ezekiel

And yet, Israel failed to honor God’s commands. Fast-forward through the history of the divided kingdom, past the destruction of the northern tribes of Israel by the Assyrians—Israel had set up golden calves to worship instead of coming to the Temple in Jerusalem—and past the eventual destruction of Judah by the Babylonians. In this period of devastation, the prophet Ezekiel, carried away into captivity, is given a vision (Ezekiel 1:10).

Ezekiel is shown the filthiness that had been brought into the Temple. Pagan idols and fertility worship had been set up within God’s holy sanctuary. He witnesses the ultimate tragedy: the glory of God departing from the Temple (Ezekiel 10:18). We often think of consequences and punishments as something positive such as God sending a flood or famine. But this outcome is much worse. God

withdraws His presence and leaves them to their sin. God can do this same thing to the church when it refuses to worship Him as He commanded.

Why would God do this? God had tabernacled with His people, but now He left them. Surely, some might say, Israel had good intentions in introducing these idols. Perhaps they thought that by including elements of pagan worship, they would make the pagans feel more comfortable and open to hearing the Law of Moses. Perhaps they sought to affirm what was "good" in pagan religions, emphasizing shared virtues and seeking common ground. They might have even viewed these idols as useful aids to worship, imagining that this would show pagans that God cared about them and their histories.

But God is holy. **God commands how He is to be worshiped.** Israel was called to be a light to the nations—not by adopting the practices of idolatrous cultures, but by teaching them the Law of Moses. Rather than desecrating God's Temple with pagan idols, Israel should have exposed the sin of idolatry, calling the nations to tear down their own temples and come to worship the true and living God in Jerusalem through vicarious atonement. Instead, Israel had polluted the worship of God on earth.

Pause and reflect on the gravity of this. At that time, nowhere on earth was there correct worship of God. This tragedy was not new—it had been true before the Flood, again just after the Flood, and repeatedly throughout history. **True worship of God had always been rare**, a small remnant amidst the flood of nations and their idolatrous temples. And now, with God's glory departing from the Temple, His tabernacling with humanity was broken once more.

The Temple in Jerusalem was rebuilt in the days of Ezra. In Ezra 3, after the foundation of the Temple was laid, the priests came forward with their musical instruments, following the instructions given by David. During this time, Ezra organized the Book of Psalms into the form we know today. There is a profound mystery in the order of the Psalms. Why did God inspire them to be arranged this way? What truths are we meant to learn from this divine ordering?

When the new Temple's foundation was completed, the reaction of the people was mixed. The younger generation shouted with joy, but the old men who had seen the grandeur of Solomon's Temple wept (Ezra 3:12). Solomon's Temple had been magnificent and elaborate, while this new Temple was simple and sparse by comparison. Yet, the prophet Haggai declared that the glory of the latter Temple would surpass that of the former (Haggai 2:9). This was true not only in Haggai's time but also later, during the reign of Herod the Great, when a colossal Temple complex was built. But why was the latter Temple considered greater?

An important part of Ezekiel's prophecy sheds light on this. In Ezekiel 40–48, he describes a vision of a rebuilt Temple, emphasizing how it would be protected from uncleanness and **kept holy**. Through outward signs and practices, this Temple provided even more precise teaching about the defilement of sin and the holiness of God. Its greater glory came not from its physical grandeur but from its emphasis on holiness, which symbolized God's perfect standard and humanity's need for purification.

Haggai's prophecy, however, goes even deeper. The greater glory of the latter Temple ultimately points forward to the Church. The Church, as the body of Christ, fulfills the purpose of the Temple by bringing people into communion with God through Jesus, the ultimate High Priest and perfect sacrifice. With this, we are now ready to consider Christian worship and how it fulfills the principles of holiness and atonement established in the Temple system.

Jesus, the Synagogue, and the Temple

The **synagogue** was the local place that Jews met each **Sabbath** to hear the Word and sing Psalms. Jesus grew up attending synagogue as a child and young adult. In the synagogue, the Jews sang psalms—but without instruments. Why was this the case? Was it because they were too poor to afford instruments? That cannot be the reason, as history shows humanity's ability to craft musical instruments even in the most extreme poverty. Was it because they lacked creativity or hated music? Certainly not, as the grandeur and artistry of Temple worship demonstrate their appreciation for music and the arts.

The reason psalms were sung without instruments in the synagogue was that God must be worshiped as He commands. God's holiness requires that worship conform to His revealed will. According to the ceremonial law, **instruments** were to be used in worship exclusively by the Levites and only within the Temple, under specific conditions. This demonstrates that even when instruments were permitted, their use was carefully regulated and not left to personal innovation. Jews understood this and did not use instruments in the synagogue.

This means that Jesus, His disciples, and the Apostle Paul all grew up in a tradition of singing psalms and hearing the Word of God read and expounded. Outside of the Temple, this was the structure of worship: the inspired Word of God was central. It is significant that God provided a specific book of songs, the Psalms, for worship. The Jews did not improvise by singing the entire Torah (the Christian Old Testament); they adhered to this simple principle, which dates back to Adam and was demonstrated in the offerings of Cain and Abel.

In the Temple, however, the ceremonial law could still be practiced. We know that Jesus and His family faithfully traveled to Jerusalem three times a year, as required by the Law, to participate in the prescribed worship. There, they worshiped God through sacrifices and observed the laws of clean and unclean, as God had commanded.

This distinction between Temple worship and synagogue worship underscores the principle that God's worship is not a matter of human preference but of divine command. Whether through the psalm singing of the synagogue or the sacrificial system of the Temple, God's people were reminded of His holiness and their dependence on His Word and provision for atonement.

Jesus startled the Jewish leaders when He said, "Destroy this Temple, and in three days I will raise it up" (John 2:19). They were outraged, misunderstanding His words as a threat to the physical Temple in Jerusalem. But Jesus was speaking about His own death and resurrection. All that the Temple had

outwardly taught Israel for over a thousand years was now coming to fulfillment in Him, the true Lamb of God. No longer would an animal signify the coming Messiah—the Messiah was with them. Tragically, they did not recognize Him because they had failed to grasp the spiritual truths conveyed by the ceremonial law.

Which was worse: Judah's desecration of Solomon's Temple by bringing in idols, or the Jewish leaders' failure to recognize the Lamb of God? The Jews of Jesus' time were meticulous about observing the ceremonial law, ensuring they never again departed from it as they had in the days of the prophets. Yet, despite their strictness, they failed to understand what the ceremonial law taught.

Nicodemus, a Pharisee and teacher of Israel, exemplifies this misunderstanding. When he came to Jesus by night to inquire about His teachings, Jesus confronted him with the necessity of being "born again." Nicodemus's confusion revealed that even the most learned among them did not comprehend regeneration, justification, or sanctification—the very truths the ceremonial law was meant to point toward.

Jesus's crucifixion and resurrection occurred on the "**eighth day**," a day with profound significance in Jewish practice. The eighth day was when a baby boy was circumcised, an act that symbolized the need for a new heart. Circumcision was an outward sign pointing to the inward reality that all people are born dead in their trespasses and sins and in need of regeneration. Jesus's resurrection on the eighth day fulfilled this symbolism, inaugurating the new creation and providing the way for humanity's spiritual renewal.

In the New Testament, we find Christians gathering for worship on the **Lord's Day**—Sunday (Acts 20:7; Revelation 1:10). The **Sabbath principle** of one day in seven remained, but the day of worship shifted to the first day of the week, commemorating the resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ. This change marked the fulfillment of the ceremonial law and the beginning of a new covenant reality.

The Lamb of God had paid the penalty for sin in the place of sinners. Though He was without sin, He was made sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God (2 Corinthians 5:21). By His death and resurrection, Jesus completed the work of atonement that the ceremonial law had symbolized for centuries. Animal sacrifices, the priesthood, and the Temple rituals were no longer necessary because they were shadows of the true and final sacrifice accomplished by Christ.

The shift to the Lord's Day as the day of worship signified the new creation inaugurated by Christ's resurrection. Just as God rested on the seventh day after creation, the Church now celebrates the first day, rejoicing in the finished work of Christ and the rest He provides for His people.

In Matthew 26:30, at the end of the Last Supper, it says, "When they had sung a hymn, they went out to the Mount of Olives." It is important that it uses the word "hymn." This shows us how that word was understood in the New Testament era. We know the Jews sang Psalms 113-118 during the Passover. They sang 118 at the end. This is the hymn Jesus, and the disciples, would have sung at the end of their dinner. They understood that the Psalms were their hymns of praise.

The Church

The word "**church**" means "the gathering." The church is not a building; it is the gathering of God's people. After Christ's crucifixion, death, burial, resurrection, and ascension, Christians were commanded to go into all the world, discipling the nations and teaching them to observe all that He had commanded (Matthew 28:19-20). During the Temple era, the nations were called to come to Jerusalem to learn to worship the true God there. But with the fulfillment of the ceremonial law, public worship could now take place everywhere on earth.

Still, the principles of worship remained unchanged from the time of Adam. God is holy and can only be approached by those who are clean and covered by vicarious atonement. To approach God in any other way is the way of Cain. However, in Christ, those who were alienated from God are restored to communion with Him (Colossians 1:21-22). The outward signs and rituals of the ceremonial law always pointed to this truth, and now, in Christ, they are fulfilled. The instruments, played only by Levites, represented the glory of redemption accomplished. When Christ obtained our full redemption, the unique glory of the Temple worship was totally fulfilled.

We are told that our bodies are the temple of Holy Spirit (I Cor 6:19). Worship is to come out of us rather than be something done to us. The Word of God springs from our hearts and is confessed with our lips as worship the holy God. We should never return to external worship and long for its rituals. We now have purity of worship just as Christ said would happen to the Samaritan woman. Christian worship follows the principle given from the beginning that God is only to be worshiped as he commands because God is holy. God gives us the Bible from which we preach on Sunday, and he gives us the songs that we sing together.

The early Church understood this principle. They recognized, as the Jews did in the synagogue, that God must only be approached in worship as He commands. With the end of the Temple system, the use of musical instruments—an integral part of Levitical worship—ceased to be a part of Christian worship. Believers now approach God in Spirit and in truth, as Jesus explained to the Samaritan woman at the well (John 4:23-24). The Samaritans had introduced their own ways of worshiping the God of Jacob, diverging from the commands given in the Law of Moses. Jesus corrected this, teaching that true worship is not about external rituals but about the inner reality of a heart devoted to God.

Why does God command worship in this way? Because **God is Spirit** (John 4:24), and He desires worship that flows from inner truth rather than reliance on outward ceremonies. The external rituals of the ceremonial law, though divinely instituted, were always meant to point to Christ. Now that Christ has come and fulfilled their purpose, those rituals are no longer necessary.

As Jews sang in their synagogue without instruments, they were affirming that God had commanded the ceremonial law. As Christians sing in churches without instruments, they are affirming that God has ended the ceremonial law and given the reality in Christ. We don't need outward forms anymore. We don't need priests, sacrifices, incense, or instruments all associated with Temple music.

To return to the ceremonial law's use of instruments is to fail to see the reality of Christ. The ending of the ceremonial law's use of instruments does not open the door to doing whatever we want in worship any more than it opens the door to preaching from any book we want. The worship of God is still limited to his commands. We are to trust him as his children that he has given us the best and withheld no good thing from us.

Instead, the people of God now sing His inspired psalms with their lips, offering a sacrifice of praise to Him (Hebrews 13:15-16). They are to show they understand and affirm the Word of God. Worship is no longer mediated through Levites or accompanied by instruments tied to the Temple, but through the perfect mediation of Christ Himself. By His sacrifice, believers are cleansed and enabled to come directly before God, offering worship that is spiritual, heartfelt, and grounded in truth.

When we look at the New Testament, we see that the disciples recognize the Book of Psalms as their song book. Not only did they quote it more than any Old Testament book, but by giving it this name they are calling it their worship song book. In Acts 1:20 this is how Peter speaks about the Book of Psalms. It isn't even the point he is making, which shows us they didn't question the status of the Psalms. It was their book of worship songs. Then in Acts 2:25-36, Peter shows us that he and the disciples understood the Psalms to point to Christ. Psalm 110 is the most quoted Psalm in the New Testament. The disciplines understood the Psalms to be Christological. They didn't complain that the Psalms are Old Testament and Christians need songs about Christ.

Introducing Uninspired Hymns

The practice of using **uninspired hymns** in worship began to emerge in the fourth century. At first, these hymns were written by Christians with good intentions, often praising Christ and reflecting on personal experiences of faith. While Christians should certainly write songs of praise and devotion and sing them in their daily life, the error came when these uninspired compositions were introduced into the worship of the perfectly holy God, replacing the inspired psalms He had given for His praise.

Initially, this might have been done by singing biblical songs outside the Book of Psalms, such as the Magnificat (Luke 1:46-55). From there, portions of Scripture not originally intended as songs were set to music. The final step in neglecting God's holy worship was the replacement of the psalms altogether with uninspired compositions. This marked a departure from God's command that He be worshiped as He has prescribed.

Notably, **Augustine** argued against this practice. He warned that such innovations, including the introduction of musical instruments, could distract worshipers from singing the psalms and professing their truths together as a congregation. Augustine, in his commentary on Psalm 150, explained that while musical instruments had a role in the Temple under the Old Covenant, for Christians they serve as symbols. Each instrument represents aspects of personal worship. For instance, the harp and lyre symbolize the worship of God through the heart and voice, and Christians are called to fulfill in real worship what these instruments merely symbolize. For the Christian who

objects to Psalms on the basis that Christians need New Covenant songs, Augustine would say, “you’re right, New Covenant worship means without the ceremonial instruments of the Old Covenant.”

As Christians began constructing **cathedrals**, the use of musical instruments—most notably the **organ**—became more common. These cathedrals were designed to impress with their grandeur, drawing the eyes of worshipers upward toward heaven. The music of the organ was loud and enveloping, intended to inspire awe. Yet, in doing so, many Christians returned to outward forms, forgetting the inner spiritual truths that worship was meant to convey. The focus shifted from congregational participation to spectacle, losing the simplicity and purity of worship commanded by God.

Calvin and the Reformation: Returning to Pure Worship

During the Reformation, **John Calvin** led Christians back to the worship of God through the singing of Psalms without instruments. This was a Reformation not a new work. The Reformers returned to the **Bible as their authority**. Others argued that tradition (the preferences of men over time) or even reason (intuitions about “how things ought to be done”) were equal to the Bible. The Reformed view is that the Bible is above both of those. Where a tradition or our intuitions contradicts the Bible, the Bible must be followed.

This practice reflected a return to the worship observed by Jesus and His disciples. Calvin firmly rejected the use of musical instruments in worship, viewing them as part of the ceremonial law fulfilled and set aside in Christ. In his *Commentary on the Psalms*, Calvin wrote:

"Musical instruments in celebrating the praises of God would be no more suitable than the burning of incense, the lighting up of lamps, and the restoration of the other shadows of the law."

In the preface to the *Geneva Psalter*, Calvin emphasized that worship should center on the congregation singing the pure Word of God with their hearts. He warned against the return to Temple ceremonial practices, such as the use of incense and instruments, which he saw as promoted by the Roman Church.

Calvin also recognized the power and significance of music, cautioning against its misuse. He stated:

"Now among the other things which are proper for recreating man and giving him pleasure, music is either the first, or one of the principal; and it is necessary for us to think that it is a gift of God deputed for that use. Moreover, because of this, we ought to be the more careful not to abuse it, for fear of soiling and contaminating it, converting it to our condemnation, where it was dedicated to our profit and use. If there were no other consideration than this alone, it ought indeed to move us to moderate the use of music, to make it serve all honest things; and that it should not give occasion for our giving free rein to dissolution, or making ourselves effeminate in disordered delights, and that it should not become the instrument of lasciviousness nor of any shamelessness."

Calvin understood music as a gift of God meant to inspire holiness and honor Him. However, he was keenly aware of its potential for misuse, warning against allowing music to lead to **self-indulgence**, **distraction**, or **improper worship**. In his view, congregational singing of the psalms united believers in proclaiming God's Word and kept the focus on inner spiritual truth rather than external ceremonies or spectacle.

Through Calvin's influence, the Reformation restored worship to its biblical simplicity, grounded in the Word of God, sung from the heart by the gathered congregation.

The Power of Music Misused

John Calvin, in his reflections on music, acknowledged its profound influence on human emotions and morals. He wrote:

"There is scarcely in the world anything which is more able to turn or bend this way and that the morals of men, as Plato prudently considered it. And in fact, we find by experience that it has a sacred and almost incredible power to move hearts in one way or another."

Calvin observed that music has a unique ability to penetrate the heart and influence behavior, often more deeply than mere words. He compared the combination of melody and corrupt lyrics to poison poured into the heart, saying:

"Every bad word (as St. Paul has said) perverts good manners, but when the melody is with it, it pierces the heart much more strongly, and enters into it; in a like manner as through a funnel, the wine is poured into the vessel; so also the venom and the corruption is distilled to the depths of the heart by the melody."

He noted that in his time, many people were captivated by "dishonest and shameless songs," which he described as "mortal and Satanic poison." Calvin warned that without proper regulation, music could become a tool for vice rather than virtue. Thus, he emphasized the need to guide music toward God-honoring purposes, ensuring it uplifts the soul rather than corrupts it.

Calvin also underscored the importance of singing with **understanding**, distinguishing human worship from the mindless sounds of birds. He explained:

"Spiritual songs cannot be well sung save from the heart. But the heart requires the intelligence. And in that (says St. Augustine) lies the difference between the singing of men and that of the birds. For a linnet, a nightingale, a parrot may sing well; but it will be without understanding. But the unique gift of man is to sing knowing that which he sings."

True worship requires both the intellect and the heart. Singing, Calvin argued, must come from a place of understanding, affection, and memory. For this reason, he praised the Psalms, calling them

"divine and celestial hymns," perfectly suited for worship. He urged Christians to replace the "vain, frivolous, stupid, and vile" songs of the world with the inspired psalms of Scripture.

On the matter of **melody**, Calvin insisted it be "moderated in the manner we have adopted to carry the weight and majesty appropriate to the subject." Music in worship should reflect the dignity and reverence owed to God, avoiding excessive ornamentation or frivolity. While God did not give us the specific melodies he wanted used, Calvin correctly points to the kinds of melodies we should fit to each Psalm.

Calvin was not teaching his own view any more than Augustine was, or Paul was. Calvin was *Reforming*, he was turning the heart of the church back to God's Word. This is what makes a *Reformed* Christian of whatever denomination. This is a person who says that the Word of God is the highest authority for the church and governs the worship of the church.

King Saul and King David

In **1 Samuel 16**, we see that King Saul had young David play music for him to soothe his troubled spirit:

"Then Saul sent to Jesse, saying, 'Please let David stand before me, for he has found favor in my sight.' And so it was, whenever the spirit from God was upon Saul, that David would take a harp and play it with his hand. Then Saul would become refreshed and well, and the distressing spirit would depart from him." (1 Samuel 16:22-23).

This passage highlights the power of music to bypass cognition and directly influence emotions. Music can have a calming effect, as it did for Saul, or it can have a stimulating effect, much like the energy of a punk concert. While music is a powerful tool, its effects depend on how it is used and what it directs the heart toward.

But let's contrast Saul and David on this point. In the Psalms, David recounts times when he, too, was troubled in spirit. He sings a Psalm, and the titles sometimes indicate the use of an instrument. Yet, his solution is never the instrument itself but meditation on the Lord. As David writes in **Psalm 143:5**, *"I remember the days of old; I meditate on all that you have done; I ponder the work of your hands."*

For David, musical instruments were an aid to his singing, not a means of bypassing cognition to manipulate his emotions. When he directed for there to be musical instruments in public worship at the Temple they were played by the Levites. What truly affected his emotions was his understanding of who God is and what God has done. The Psalms display the full range of human emotions, and in every case, the principle remains the same:

- When fearful, **meditate on the works of God.**
- When joyful, **praise God for His glorious deeds.**

- When lonely or distraught, **find comfort in communion with God.**

David's response to his emotions was not escapism but worship, grounded in truth.

This is what Saul failed to do. He wanted music to calm him, but he did not seek the Lord or find comfort in meditating on His works. As a result, Saul's experiences only grew worse as he drifted further from God. He did not train himself in the godly practice of going to the Lord in prayer and meditation. Instead, he sought an easier way out—using music to manipulate his emotions rather than truly seeking God.

The Psalms train us in how to deal with emotions in a godly way. Emotions are part of our nature as created by God, but they are also affected by our sin. They are what get us “into motion.” When a speaker wants to get his audience to act quickly, he appeals to their emotions. We must learn how to interpret our emotions in a way that pleases God and how to act on them in a way that is consistent with His Word. The Psalms teach us exactly what we need to know about emotions.

The longing for instruments expressed by people I speak with is a longing for the emotional influence they have. Instead, our longing should be for the content of the Psalms and to sing them with understanding together with the entire congregation.

Pagan and Worldly Worship

Worldly worship found among the pagans has some common characteristics. First, it is **otherworldly**. It is meant to take you out of this world and into a spiritual realm. Their temples and sacred places were built to direct your mind away from the world. Their teaching is that this world is evil, and that material existence is the course of sin and corruption. You don't see this kind of architecture at the Temple of Jerusalem. It does not direct your attention “to heaven.” Instead, it directs your attention to the holiness of God and the need for vicarious atonement to enter his presence here.

In keeping with this otherworldliness, the pagans used rituals to teach **secret** meanings that were hidden from the uninitiated. The material world and ordinary human life did not give access to these mysteries. Instead, a professional priest who was inhabited by a daemon would tell the worthy religious persons the important truths unavailable to the rest of humanity. They looked to Oracles who would reveal the secrets to the select few who could understand the riddle.

By contrast, Biblical worship affirms that all of God's works reveal his glory. The Levitical priests were a professional class but not because they were initiated into secrets but because they were to be kept holy to remind the people of the holiness of God. All believers have access to the Word of God which is read to them each Sabbath. Material existence is not something to be escaped, nor is it the cause of evil and suffering. God made the world very good, and it shows his glory to all. Pagan worship denigrates God's creation whereas Biblical worship affirms it is His work. The earth is currently filled with the glory of God, and it will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of God. We

are not spirits stuck in a body. We are a body-soul unity, and we will be raised from the dead and live in our resurrected body forever.

The pagan worship included many **devotional aids**. These were statues, images, relics, repetitive prayers, outward ceremony, supposed miracles such as crying statues or talking images, all to keep the person outwardly stimulated while causing no true inner spiritual change. The pagans use droning and chanting to hypnotize and also frenzied movement to push the body into an exhausted state. These are considered “religious states of consciousness” where the person can no longer think soberly. We saw these **manic behaviors** in the **priests of Baal** and the clarity of mind in **Elijah** (1 Kings 18:20-40). Biblical worship is orderly and decent (1 Cor 14:40). We are to approach God with understanding, and we learn this by his Word. Whereas the pagan worship is characterized by altered mental states, Biblical worship is characterized by a clear mind that understands the truths of God.

God could have given us devotional aids for use on the Lord’s Day if this was how we were to learn. He didn’t. In fact, scripture commands against their use. Instead, he gave us his perfect Word. We are to learn from the Word and the two sacraments of Baptism and the Lord’s Supper. We don’t know what we need, but God does. When we are to learn from God even about how we are to learn. This is what it means to approach him as a **little child** eager to learn from him.

The willingness to set aside God’s Psalms is universally accompanied by a willingness to set aside his Word for some other devotional aid. At its heart, this is the same as the pagan worship which says it will worship on its terms and not as God provided. By contrast, when we humble ourselves and learn from God’s infallible Word, we see that he is the perfect teacher for our souls. His Psalms teach us what we need and how to live godly lives.

Pagan worship was according to the **flesh**. The “flesh” means our fallen nature. The flesh has its definitions of what counts as “religious.” They follow what was just outlined about pagan worship. A building that directs our attention away from material existence, rituals that symbolize secret teaching, ceremonies that feel official and important, rules for how to live well now so you can depart the body at death for a spiritual realm, and worship that is according to our desires about how religion should feel.

Biblical worship calls us out of the flesh. Biblical worship on the Lord’s Day assumes you are a professing Christian who is regenerated. You confess that you are a sinner and God is holy. On that basis, you understand your need for the Word of God to be instructed on how God offers you redemption and what that looks like when applied to the Christian life. You confess that your intuitions about how religion should look are fallen and that it is the infallible Word of God that tells you what worship should look like according to the will of God.

Worship Restored: A Call to Faithful Obedience

We have traced worship from the very beginning, through the time of the patriarchs, the Temple, and the synagogue, to the Reformation's restoration of congregational psalm singing. My purpose in going back to the beginning has been to show that, ever since sin entered the world, mankind has been guided by one unchanging principle in the worship of God: **God is holy and can only be approached as He has commanded.** All false worship violates this principle. Throughout history, both Jews and Christians have often strayed from it, no doubt with good intentions, by adopting forms of worship that appeal to the flesh rather than honoring God. This is no different than the way of Cain.

Today, Psalm-singing churches are rare. Even those that do say they sing Psalms rarely include them and uninspired hymns outnumber Psalms. Those of us who attend one may feel hesitant or embarrassed to explain it to other Christians. When we do, we are often met with looks of shock or incomprehension. "Why would you do that?" they ask. "Don't you like the sound of a guitar or a piano? Don't you want to feel happy and sentimental during worship?" One Christian even told me, "I can't do without the energy of my praise band." Yet notably absent from these conversations is any mention of the content of the songs, the focus of the worship, or God's commands.

The truth is sobering. God has often removed His presence even from those who profess faith in Him. When believers violate His holiness and neglect His commanded worship—improvising to suit their preferences—He withdraws His presence. This is a terrible consequence, greatly to be feared.

We understand this principle instinctively when dealing with an earthly ruler. Imagine standing before a king. Would you not take care to avoid offending him with anything he considers disrespectful? If you failed, he would withdraw his favor, and you might never be allowed in his presence again. How much more, then, should we approach the King of kings with reverence and obedience, worshiping Him only as He has commanded?

With God, we are often lazy. This isn't just a modern issue—it's a human problem that began with Adam and Eve. We fail to pay careful attention to God's commands, preferring to do things our own way. As Christians, we might insist on freedom and reject Psalmody as **legalistic**. But Christian freedom means freedom from the ceremonial law. Ironically, to return Christians to the use of musical instruments is to return them to the ceremonial law.

The current form of this neglect has its roots in the **Second Great Awakening**. During that period, large crowds flocked to tent gatherings where popular music was played. These events often drew more attendees than the regular Sunday worship services. Church leaders reasoned, "*Why not attract people to Sunday worship by offering the same kind of music they enjoy at the tent meetings?*" And so began the transformation of Christian worship in America. Today, psalm singing has become rare. Even in Presbyterian churches, which historically championed psalmody, it is common to hear only one psalm on a Sunday—if any at all.

Do you remember the reasoning behind bringing idols into the Temple? Or the justification for building grand cathedrals with impressive organs as the place to worship God? I have referred to these as "good intentions," but the truth is they are not good at all. They are of the flesh—sinful

humanity's attempt to tell God how He should be worshiped and what we think we need. Scripture is clear about God's view of such worship. In Isaiah 1, Jeremiah 6, and Amos 5, God declares that He hates worship offered on human terms.

Why, then, is it so difficult, even for believers, to worship God with the songs He has given us? The Psalms are inspired by God Himself, far surpassing even the most heartfelt love song composed by a human lover for his beloved. Yet we treat them with disdain, as if they are inadequate. We feel "put upon" if told we should use them in worship instead of uninspired songs. We demand instruments to overpower the words, to stir our emotions, and to add energy, believing these things make worship better.

But God's inspired songs need no enhancement. They teach us to approach Him in reverence and truth, and they direct our hearts toward His holiness and glory. The question is, will we humble ourselves to worship as He has commanded, or will we insist on telling Him what we think worship should be? They are the songs of redemption, the new song. **Sing a new song** not the old songs of the world.

The Standard Objections

I often encounter specific objections from Christians when discussing exclusive psalmody. They say:

- Christians need songs that use the name of Christ.
- Christians need New Covenant songs.
- Christians need songs that reflect their unique Christian experience.
- I don't see a sentence in the New Testament that says we must only sing psalms without instruments.
- It is legalistic and joyless.

These arguments reveal an attitude that stretches all the way back to the Garden of Eden. Remember how quickly Adam and Eve doubted God, and how easily the serpent convinced them that God was withholding something good from them? That same attitude—the belief that God's commands are not enough—underlies these objections.

No Christian doubts that the Psalms are inspired by God. No Christian doubts that God could have provided a New Testament book of songs if He had so chosen—but He did not. No Christian denies that Psalms like 22 give us an intimate, first-person account of the mind of Christ, more personal than anything recorded in the Gospels. No Christian denies the need to be taught by God how to live the Christian life, rather than assuming our intuitive, fleshly experiences are already sanctified.

And yet, even so, many Christians resist singing the Psalms. They argue and fight against them, preferring worship forms that return to the outward ceremonial practices of the Old Covenant. This resistance should be a call to repentance, to recover the fear of God. When Cain offered false worship,

God corrected him, but Cain grew angry and refused to learn. Will Christians today respond differently?

Options:

1. Only inspired inerrant Word in the worship service
2. We can use uninspired fallible compositions of man in the worship service

Sometimes, in the name of #1, a Reformed person will say that a hymn is based on a Psalm. We can look and see if this is a translation of a Psalm, or a paraphrase of a Psalm, or merely mentioning a Psalm. Unfortunately, it is often merely mentioned or at best loosely paraphrasing. What we want in Psalm singing is the same connection to the text as we want in a correct English translation.

What about the tunes?

Which tunes will we use? Sometimes you will encounter this as an objection. The idea is that some of the Psalms name the tune, but we don't have this tune any more therefore . . . It isn't clear what follows from this. God did not provide inspired tunes and that alone indicates that no specific tune is divinely inspired for us to use. This is the same as God's ability to provide a New Testament inspired inerrant book of Psalms if he had so desired—yet he did not which tells us to continue with the Psalms rather than to import uninspired and fallible compositions.

To sing the Psalms we need to use a tune. They were sung rather than chanted in the Old Testament and in the Synagogues. Chanting (Gregorian) was borrowed by Medieval Christians from the way that pagans worshiped in their temples. The pagans used chanting and droning to produce a form of hypnosis and invoke what they considered to be a susceptible religious consciousness. This is not pleasing to God who asks us to worship in understanding as we glorify him in all of his works.

What is important is that the tune matches the content. This requires someone with knowledge of music to organize the Psalms into a Psalter. The tunes should be sober and respectful, not distracting from the content but instead making it easy for the congregation to sing together with understanding.

The way this was first done in the early Reformation was to use a metrical Psalter where the Psalms were organized so that they fit into common meter songs. There were many well-known tunes in common meter so this meant any Psalm could be sung using one of those tunes. The idea for tunes is that notes cannot be too busy so as to distract from the content nor can they be so similar that no distinctions are made in the flow of thought. The goal is to teach the worshiper to sing with understanding. God wants to be worshiped in Spirit and in Truth.

Today there are several good Psalters available for use in worship. This is an embarrassment of riches and all the more highlights the neglect of the Psalms in corporate worship by Christians who have access to so much but who use so little. Christians who had to hide their Psalters from Roman

Catholic persecutors should be an example to us of the freedoms we now have and the shame in neglecting such a rich heritage.

Instruments and a Choir

A well-intended Christian brother once told me, “I like when there is a piano playing while we sing because it helps drown out the bad singing of the congregation.” I believe this is a common sentiment. In other words, the focus is on the music and not on the words. The congregation can always learn to sing better. But God does not command us to wait to sing until we are better at it. He asks us to raise our voices from whatever condition we find ourselves in.

There is beauty in the very idea of a congregation of untrained persons singing together because of the joy of the Lord in their hearts. For this brother, the goal was to hear the notes, and for that, a piano is very useful. But for the Psalmist, the goal is to understand the content.

I have heard similar remarks about why a choir is enjoyable to listen to. *They* are trained, and it is good to just sit and enjoy the performance. None of that is objectionable outside of the Lord’s Day. But on the Lord’s Day, it makes the same mistake we have seen throughout—removing the congregation from singing the inspired songs of God and instead focusing on how a performance makes *me* feel. The Christian is to actively praise God rather than passively listen. The church service is the unique time each week set aside for just this act of worship—do not lose that blessing or give it away so that you can merely listen.

Does the end of the Temple mean that now anyone can use musical instruments in public worship since there are no longer Levites? Just the opposite is the case. The Levites were commanded to use instruments, their function ceased, and no command was given to take up instruments by any other person or the congregation as a whole. Now we sing God’s inspired songs *a cappella*, together as a congregation without instruments and with understanding.

To “sing acapella” is from an Italian word for “as in chapel.” It was the recognized format that singing in chapel was without instruments. This means that when someone says with surprise, “your church sings acapella without instruments?” they are surprised that you are singing the way it was done in chapel for centuries. Singing without instruments in any setting today is called “acapella,” making a comparison to the main place people understood singing without instruments to happen, in church.

God Speaks to You

Let’s look at Psalm 27. This is a Psalm of David, and it does what many Psalms do. It tells about real historical events in the life of David while also pointing us to events in the life of Christ. Many such Psalms, 22 is the best-known example, even give us a look into the inner thoughts of Christ as he experiences the many kinds of pains that were part of his humiliation.

These Psalms do something else that no song of mere human composition could ever do—they are God speaking to us. In 27:13, David says, “I remain confident of this: I will see the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living.” This echoes the idea in Psalm 16:10 that Christ would not be abandoned to the grave but would be raised. He then says, “Wait for the Lord; be strong and take heart and wait for the Lord.” This is David encouraging himself. And it is David encouraging his readers.

Additionally, it is also the inspired Word of God meaning that this is God speaking to us. The one who trusts he will not be abandoned to the grave but will be raised to see the kingdom of God fill the earth is telling us to be strong. None of us could compose a song that contains words of God speaking to the audience. But each of the Psalms do this in one way or another. They are God’s songs to us. The best human composition, and there are many admirable examples, does not come close to this. Which Christian would not want to hear directly from God? When we come into the worship of God and use His Word, He speaks to us. And yet, we see how easily Christians set aside the Psalms for uninspired fallible human compositions.

Severe Consequences

The consequences of ignoring God’s commands in worship are severe. God has withdrawn His presence from much of Christian worship today as He has done many times throughout history. How many Christians were truly honoring God in their worship in 900 AD? Or in 1300 AD? Or today? The punishment for false worship is not always physical famine or war—it is spiritual famine. As Amos 8 warns, God’s people face a famine of the Word of God when they reject His commands.

When we neglect His inspired psalms and replace them with songs of our own making, we turn away from the bread of life and suffer the consequences. Will we humble ourselves, repent, and return to worshiping God as He has commanded, or will we continue in the way of Cain, offering worship on our own terms? Why is our natural inclination to doubt God, to resist His inspired Word, to look for loopholes or ways around his commands, and to justify ourselves at His expense?

It is said that when Christians worship God rightly, the earth will believe. In one sense, it is no surprise that the correct worship of God is so rare. Christians struggle with many errors in their understanding of God and His Word, and these errors inevitably manifest in their public worship. To correct worship requires addressing these deeper issues, but the reverse is also true—correcting public worship can lead to deeper cleansing of false beliefs. From the beginning, God has commanded that only His Word be used in worship, and we do not need to wait for perfection in other areas to obey this command.

Return to the Psalms

Christians, some of you may greet these words with eager delight, while others may reject them in disdain. If you eagerly sing the psalms, remember to do so with understanding, not from a place of mere legalistic piety. Sing them with joy and liveliness. These are the very Words of God given to you as songs of love. They teach us the purity of His truth and holiness.

Sing them with courage and conviction as your own. God doesn't expect you to be a professional singer any more than He expects everyone to be professional theologians. We all improve with time. But He does require us to make use of the Word He gave us as a special gift. He asks us to raise our voices as they are now and with other Christians. This delights God. As his child, take joy in delighting Him. As a Christian, the Psalms are yours and they are perfect—lacking nothing for worship of the most holy God. Don't listen to the lie that God has kept some good thing from you by not including a book of inspired songs in the New Testament. To neglect what He has given us, and especially to replace it with a man-made tradition, is a serious error, committed very many times by Israel and the Church.

But if you resist the use of God's Word in worship, be warned: you are treading the path of Cain and his descendants—a path that leads to separation from God. Let this reality stir within you the fear of God and a desire to return to Him. I am not calling into question your saving faith. Many believers in the Old Testament, New Testament, and church history, have neglected God's Word and resisted its truths when it is brought to them. They may indeed still believe in Jesus as their Savior but the more they resist Him the more they give us all reason to doubt the credibility of their faith.

God has graciously told us how to worship Him, and it is a delight to do so. His Word is perfect, teaching us everything we need to know to be restored to communion with Him. His Psalms lack nothing that the Christian needs. His Psalms provide the fullness of what **worship requires**: they praise the glory of God (psalms), teach us doctrine (hymns), and express the experiences of the believer's life (spiritual songs). These are the titles given to the Psalms in the Septuagint. These are the very categories we are commanded to sing in the New Testament:

"Addressing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody to the Lord with your heart" (Ephesians 5:19).

"Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, with thankfulness in your hearts to God" (Colossians 3:16).

The Hebrew reader would have recognized the titles given to **Psalms in the Septuagint**. The Word of God in the Psalms is sufficient for our worship. Will you humble yourself to delight in the worship God has prescribed, or will you continue in the error of inventing worship according to human preference? Choose the path of faithful obedience, for in doing so, we honor the holiness of God and draw nearer to Him in Spirit and truth.

Return to the pure worship of God. God has removed the glory of His Psalms from your churches and your worship services. Seek His face in repentance. Confess that you held his holiness and purity of worship in low esteem and placed your own comfort and preferences first. Ask him to help you understand His Word in the Psalms to see them as a source of joy and life. Learn to sing them to each other in times of joy and times of trials (James 5:13). If you turn to Him in repentance and bear fruit

in keeping with that repentance, He will forgive and restore you. Your communion with God will deepen and you will thank Him for His fatherly love in calling you from worldly worship.

Sing Psalms let joy resound. Give all glory to God who alone is worthy of our praise.