

WORSHIP
GOD GIVES A LITURGICAL PATTERN

by J.I. Packer

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*Come, let us bow down in worship, let us kneel before the LORD our
Maker; for he is our God*

and we are the people of his pasture, the flock under his care....

PSALM 95:6-7

Worship in the Bible is the due response of rational creatures to the self-revelation of their Creator. It is an honoring and glorifying of God by gratefully offering back to him all the good gifts, and all the knowledge of his greatness and graciousness, that he has given. It involves praising him for what he is, thanking him for what he has done, desiring him to get himself more glory by further acts of mercy, judgment, and power, and trusting him with our concern for our own and others' future well-being. Moods of awestruck wonder and grateful celebration are all part of it: David danced with passionate zeal "before the LORD" when he brought up the ark to Jerusalem, and sat in humble amazement "before the LORD" when he was promised a dynasty, and his worship evidently pleased God on both occasions (2 Sam. 6:14-16; 7:18). Learning from God is worship too: attention to his word of instruction honors him; inattention is an insult. Acceptable worship requires "clean hands and a pure heart" (Ps. 24:4) and a willingness to express one's devotion in works of service as well as in words of adoration.

The basis of worship is the covenant relationship whereby God has bound himself to those whom he has saved and claimed. This was true of Old Testament worship as it is now of Christian worship. The spirit of covenant worship, as the Old Testament models it, is a blend of awe and joy at the privilege of drawing near to the mighty Creator with radical self-humbling and honest confession of sin, folly, and need. Since God is holy and we humans are faulty, it must ever be so in this world. As worship will be central in the life of heaven (Rev. 4:8-11, 5:9-14; 7:9-17; 11:15-18; 15:2-4; 19:1-10), so it must be central in the life of the church on earth, and it should already be the main activity, both private and corporate, in each believer's life (Col. 3:17). In the Mosaic legislation, God gave his covenant people a full pattern for their worship. All the elements of true worship were included in it,

though some of them were typical, pointing forward to Christ and ceasing to be valid after he came. In the book of Psalms, hymns and prayers for use in Israel's worship were provided. Christians rightly use these in worship today, making mental adjustments when the reference is to typical features of the Old Testament dispensation of God's covenant—Israel's earthly king, kingdom, enemies, battles, and experiences of prosperity, impoverishment, and divine discipline, plus what was typical in the Jewish worship pattern.

The main features in the liturgical pattern that God gave to Israel were as follows:

(a) The Sabbath, each seventh day following six days for labor: a holy day of rest, to be observed as a memorial of Creation (Gen. 2:3; Exod. 20:8-11) and redemption (Deut. 5:12-15). God insisted on Sabbath-keeping (Exod. 16:21-30; 20:8-9; 31:12-17; 34:21; 35:1-3; Lev. 19:3, 30; 23:3; cf. Isa. 58:13-14) and made Sabbath-breaking a capital offense (Exod. 31:14; Num. 15:32-36).

(b) Three annual national feasts (Exod. 23:14-17; 34:23; Deut. 16:16) in which the people gathered in God's sanctuary to offer sacrifices celebrating his bounty, to seek and acknowledge reconciliation and fellowship with him, and to eat and drink together as an expression of joy. The feast of Passover and Unleavened Bread, held on the fourteenth day of the first month, commemorated the Exodus (Exod. 12; Lev. 23:5-8; Num. 28:16-25; Deut. 16:1-8); the Feast of Weeks, also called the Feast of Harvest and the Day of Firstfruits, marked the end of the grain harvest, and was held fifty days after the Sabbath that began Passover (Exod. 23:16; 34:22; Lev. 23:15-22; Num. 28:26-31; Deut. 16:9-12); and the Feast of Tabernacles or Booths, also called the Feast of Ingathering, held from the fifteenth to the twenty-second day of the seventh month, celebrated the end of the agricultural year, as well as being a reminder of how God led Israel through the desert (Lev. 23:39-43; Num. 29:12-38; Deut. 16:13-15).

(c) The Day of Atonement, held on the tenth day of the seventh month, when the high priest took blood into the central shrine of the sanctuary to atone for Israel's sins during the previous year, and the scapegoat went into the desert as a sign that those sins were now gone (Lev. 16).

(d) The regular sacrificial system, involving daily and monthly burnt offerings (Num. 28:1-15) plus a variety of personal sacrifices, the common features of which were that anything offered must be flawless and that, when an animal was offered, its blood must be

poured out on the altar of burnt offering to make atonement (Lev. 17:11).

Rituals of personal purification (Lev. 12-15; Num. 19) and devotion (e.g., consecration of the firstborn, Exod. 13:1-16) were also part of the God-given pattern.

Under the new covenant, in which Old Testament types give way to their antitypes, Christ's priesthood, sacrifice, and intercession supersede the entire Mosaic system for putting away sin (Heb. 7-10); baptism (Matt. 28:19) and the Lord's Supper (Matt. 26:26-29; 1 Cor. 11:23-26) replace circumcision (Gal. 2:3-5; 6:12-16) and Passover (1 Cor. 5:7-8); the Jewish festal calendar no longer binds (Gal. 4:10; Col. 2:16); notions of ceremonial defilement and purification, imposed by God to enforce awareness that some things cut one off from God, cease to apply (Mark 7:19; 1 Tim. 4:3-4); the Sabbath is renewed with a casuistry of doing good rather than doing nothing (Luke 13:10-16; 14:1-6), and re-counted, on the basis of one-plus-six rather than six-plus-one. It seems clear that the apostles taught Christians to worship on the first day of the week, the day of Jesus' resurrection, "the Lord's day" (Acts 20:7; Rev. 1:10), treating it as the Christian Sabbath. These changes were momentous, but the pattern of praise, thanks, desire, trust, purity, and service, which constitutes true worship, continues unchanged to this day.

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