

Traditional versus Reformed Worship Ezekiel 20:18-29, 39, 41

From John Calvin, *Commentaries on the First Twenty Chapters of the Book of the Prophet Ezekiel*, trans. Thomas Myers (Edinburgh, Scotland: Calvin Translation Society, 1843), Vol. II, 309-310, 315-318, 320-322, 334-336, 339, emphasis added; English updated.

Ezekiel 20:18-20 “But I said to their children in the wilderness, ‘Do not walk in the statutes of your fathers, nor observe their judgments, nor defile yourselves with their idols. I *am* the LORD your God: Walk in My statutes, keep My judgments, and do them. And sanctify My Sabbaths, and they will be a sign between Me and you, that you may know that I *am* the LORD your God.’”

After God has shown that the obstinate wickedness of the people was such that they profited by neither rigor nor clemency, He now says that the sons were altogether like their fathers. For when He says that He turned His discourse to their sons, He obliquely indicates that He was so broken down by their disgust, that He is unwilling to address the deaf. *I said, therefore, to their sons: why not to themselves?* because they had become obdurate in their impiety, and gave no hope of repentance. Since then God had experienced their utmost obstinacy, He says *that He turned His discourse to their sons.*

Beware of following tradition and custom!

Do not walk in the statutes of your fathers, and do not observe their judgments. Here God does not speak of bad examples and of plain and palpable crimes, but He uses words seemingly favorable—*judgments and statutes*. If He had simply said that their fathers were wicked, and hence the sons must take care not to imitate them, that would have been ordinary teaching; but by adaptation He uses honorable expressions, namely, *My statutes and judgments*. Meanwhile **He forbids their descendants to conform to the statutes and laws of their fathers, meaning to their ceremonies and rites.** Lest any should object that those statutes were to be observed which tend to a right end, He adds, *that you pollute not yourselves with their filth and defilements*. Here the former language of accommodation is removed, and God as it were wipes away the coloring, that it may be clearly apparent that those statutes and precepts differed in nothing from thefts, robberies, and adulteries. This is the Prophet Ezekiel’s meaning.

Do not blindly follow the example of the church fathers or the traditions of men.

Besides, this passage is worthy of notice, because we may learn from it **how frivolous is the excuse of those who boast of their fathers**, and arrogantly predict that they will be pardoned if they conform themselves to their example. For **God not only forbids us to imitate the gross and open wickedness of our parents, but their laws, statutes, and ceremonies, and whatever is apparently plausible, and seems to the common sense of mankind worthy of praise.**

Jesus said, “For what is highly esteemed among men is an abomination in the sight of God” (Luke 16:15).

And thus the foolishness of the papists is detected, who think that they lie safely concealed under the shield of Ajax¹, when they boast to us of the examples of their fathers, and the value of antiquity. We clearly see how plainly God's Spirit refutes them when **He pronounces that they must obey His statutes and precepts, and not listen to open wickedness only, but not even to good intentions, as they say, and devotions, and the traditions of the fathers.**

False worship is "fabricated by the will of man," even if by men who have "good intentions," "devotion," and respect for the "traditions of the fathers." False religion opposes man's traditions to the pure and simple truth of Scripture alone.

But what is the worship of God in the papacy in these days but a confused jumble, which they have thrown together from numberless fictions? for whoever will examine all their trifling, will find them **fabricated by the will of man; and they are not ashamed to oppose the traditions of their fathers to the word of God.**

Traditional worship is not true worship.

Now, therefore, we see the whole papacy laid prostrate, and all the remarkable traditions of the fathers in which they boast, when the Prophet says, *walk you not in the statutes of your fathers.*

But since antiquity deserves some reverence, it would be gross and barbarous [barbaric, uncivilized] promiscuously [indiscriminately] to reject all the examples of the fathers. Hence we need prudence and selection here, and God's Spirit suggests this to us when He adds *pollutions* or idols. Hence **the traditions of the fathers must be examined; and it is a mark of prudent discretion to observe what they contain, and from where they proceed.**

Thus, God calls His people, in every generation, to examine critically their own practices and "traditions." We must question what we do and why we do it. We must critically examine the traditions that have been passed down to us by our fathers, whether our parents or past generations of Christians. As we examine each practice, we must ask ourselves, "Where did this come from? Scripture or men? Does this practice come from Scripture, or is it an invention, a fabrication of men? Did God ordain it, or did man invent it?"

If we discover that they [these practices or "traditions"] have no other tendency than to the pure worship of God [i.e., that which is prescribed by God's all-sufficient Word], we may embrace them; **but if they draw us away from the pure and simple worship of God, if they infect true and sincere religion by their own mixtures, we must utterly reject them.**

Biblical worship is Reformed. Christians are called to be reformed and always reforming. We must always strive to grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. We must renew our minds, put off corruption, and put on the perfect righteousness and holiness of Christ. We must seek to reform our own practices

¹ Calvin refers to secular literature to provide an analogy between Ajax's shield and the defense used by Papists to defend their religious practices. In Greek mythology, Ajax was a warrior in the Trojan War, a man of great stature and might who fought against Troy. Because he was not awarded the armor of the dead hero Achilles, Ajax resolved to kill the Greek leaders Agamemnon and Menelaus. Athena, the goddess of the arts, war, and wisdom, prevented Ajax from succeeding in his plot, and she made him go insane. Such is the fictional legend of ancient Greek mythology.

and our churches, so that we and they will conform to the teachings of the Word of God alone. We must follow what God has commanded and prescribed for His people in His all-sufficient Word.

False worship is insincere, complex, and complicated. It denies the sufficiency of the Scriptures.

True worship is sincere, pure, and simple. It is simple because the Bible alone is the word of God, and the Bible alone prescribes God's will for how Christians are to live and how God seeks to be worshipped.

Let us proceed then. *I*, says He, *am the LORD your God; walk you in My statutes, and observe My judgments*. God confirms the former sentence, and at the same time provides a remedy for all corruptions when He says, *walk you in My precepts, because I am your God*: for by these words He claims as peculiarly His own what men commonly arrogate to themselves. They do not dare, indeed, to despoil God of His authority, but they carry themselves as His allies, and infect His law with their additions, as if it was not sufficient for complete and solid wisdom.

Here, therefore, God pronounces Himself to be the only lawgiver. If, therefore, *I am your God, walk you in My statutes*. Hence it follows, that we indirectly deny God when we turn aside even a little from His law. The passage is remarkable, if we only estimate the Prophet's language rightly. For the two clauses must be read together, *because I am your God, therefore walk you in precepts*, and thus show that you are My people.

But if they are not content with God's precepts only, but mingle human additions with them, God indirectly teaches that He is not acknowledged, since they deprive Him of a portion of His rights; for if God is one, He also is the only lawgiver.

Ezekiel 20:21-25 "Notwithstanding, the children rebelled against Me; they did not walk in My statutes, and were not careful to observe My judgments, 'which, *if* a man does, he shall live by them'; but they profaned My Sabbaths. Then I said I would pour out My fury on them and fulfill My anger against them in the wilderness. Nevertheless I withdrew My hand and acted for My name's sake, that it should not be profaned in the sight of the heathen, in whose sight I had brought them out. Also I raised My hand in an oath to those in the wilderness, that I would scatter them among the heathen and disperse them throughout the countries, because they had not executed My judgments, but had despised My statutes, profaned My Sabbaths, and their eyes were fixed on their fathers' idols. Therefore I also gave them statutes *that were* not good, and judgments by which they could not live."

False worship is not good; it is futile and self-destructive.

In the next verse, the Prophet confirms what I have briefly touched on, namely, that *the laws called not good* are all the fictions of men, by which they harass themselves, while they think that God is worshipped acceptably in this way. For we know how miserably men labor and distract themselves when Satan has fascinated them with his toils, and when they anxiously invent numerous rites, because there is no end of their superstitions; hence these statutes are not good. **For when they have undergone much labor in their idolatry, no other reward awaits them than God's appearance against them as an avenger to punish the profanation of His own lawful worship.**

They indeed by no means look for this, but they utterly deceive themselves; hence they must hope for no reward but what is founded on the covenant and promise of God; for all false and vicious forms of worship, all adventitious [adopted] rites, which men heap together from all sides, have no promise from God, and hence they vainly trust to them for life. God began to show them this in the wilderness; but in succeeding ages He did not fail to exercise the same vengeance.

Superstition and false worship is a sign of God's judgment.

We see how they fell in with the superstitions of the Moabites; and why so? unless **God blinded them by His just judgments** (Numbers 25:1-3). He had experienced their untamed dispositions, and so He set them free from control; and not only so, but afterwards gave them up to Satan, and so He says *that He gave them laws that were not good*.

The Prophet might indeed have said, that they despised God's law through their own wisdom, that they foolishly and rashly legislated for themselves. This was indeed true; but he wished to express the penalty of which Paul speaks, when he says that the impious were delivered to a reprobate mind and to obedience to a lie (Romans 1:24-26), since they did not submit to the truth, and did not suffer [allow] themselves to be ruled by God, and thus were given up to the tyranny of Satan and to the service of mere creatures.

Thus, the prideful and rebellious who refuse to submit to God and allow Him to rule over them in accordance with His Word face a dire future judgment.

Now, therefore, we understand the Prophet's meaning, I have given them also, says He, laws not good, as if He had said that the people so threw themselves into various idolatries, that God desired in this way to avenge their incredible obstinacy; for if the Jews had calmly acquiesced in God's sovereignty, He would not have given them evil laws, that is, He would not have suffered them to be so tormented under Satan's tyranny; but when they were entangled in his snares, God openly shows them to be unworthy of His government and care, since they were too refractory. It follows —

Ezekiel 20:26 "and I pronounced them unclean because of their ritual gifts, in that they caused all their firstborn to pass through *the fire*, that I might make them desolate, to the end that they might know that I am the LORD."

There is no doubt that God here continues the same doctrine. Hence we gather that injurious laws were given to the people when they adopted various errors and worshipped idols of their own fabrication instead of God. Hence it is added, *I polluted them in their gifts*. This, then, was added by the Prophet, lest the Jews should object that they had not altogether rejected the worship of God; for they mingled the ceremonies of the laws with the fictions of the Gentiles, as we saw before, and the Prophet will shortly repeat. In this way they thought they discharged their duty to God, though they added mixtures of their own.

Here the Prophet meets them, and cuts off all occasion for turning aside, since they were polluted in their gifts, and **nothing was pure or sincere when they thus corrupted God's precepts by their additions**.

However, **they daily offered their gifts, and professed to present them to the true God; yet they obtained no advantage, because God abominated mixtures of this**

kind, as we have previously said; for He cannot bear to be worshipped by the will of men, but wishes His children to be simply content with His commands.

Indeed, God cannot bear to be worshipped by the will of men, in accordance to human tradition and worldly wisdom. God wishes His children to be simply content with His commands and neither add to nor subtract from the simplicity of the true worship and commands that He has prescribed.

God detest traditional worship, if it is worship based on the inventions of men, whether contemporary people or those of “the fathers” who invented such traditions in ages past. God loves true worship and seeks those who will worship Him in spirit and in truth (John 4:23).

Now, we perceive the meaning of the Prophet—*God pollutes them in their gifts*; that is, renders their gifts polluting whenever they think that they discharge their duty;— but how? why, He says, *when they cause whatever opens the womb to pass through.*

Here the Prophet touches on only one kind of superstition, but, by a figure of speech, he means all kinds, by which the Jews vitiated [corrupted] God’s pure worship; for this superstition was very detestable, to pass their sons through the fire, and to consecrate them to idols. But in this passage God speaks only of the first-born, so as greatly to exaggerate the crime: that ceremony was indeed general; but since God claimed the first-born as His own and wished them to be redeemed at a fixed price (Exodus 13:2; 22:29; 34:19, 20) and by this act wished the remembrance of their redemption to be kept up, since all the first-born of Israel, as well as of animals, had escaped, while those of the Egyptians perished (Numbers 3:13; 8:16), was it not monstrous to pass through the fire, and to offer to idols those who were specially devoted and sacred to God? We see, then, that the Prophet does not speak in vain of the first-born.

That I should destroy you, He says, and they should know that I am the LORD. God here shows that **He had proceeded gradually to the final vengeance**; and for this reason the people were the more convicted of stupidity, since they never perceived God’s judgments manifest. If God had suddenly and impetuously issued His vengeance from heaven, men’s astonishment would not have been wonderful [surprising]; but when He grants them space of time and a truce that they may weigh the matter at leisure, and admonishes them to repentance, not once only, but often; and then if they remain always the same and are not effected, they show themselves utterly desperate by this slothfulness, as the Prophet now asserts.

But when He adds, *that they may know that I am the LORD*, He means that as He was not acknowledged as a father by the Jews, He would be their judge, and compel them whether they would or not to feel the formidable nature of that power which they despised. Since we have treated this subject fully before, we now pass it by more lightly. Yet we must notice this, that God is recognized by the reprobate, since, when His fatherly goodness has been for a long time despised by them, He at length appears as a judge, and draws them against their will to His tribunal, and executes His vengeance, so that they cannot escape.

PRAYER

Grant, Almighty God, since You have once redeemed us by the death of Your only-begotten Son, that we may not interrupt the course of Your favor by our ingratitude; but may we so proceed in obedience to Your Gospel, that we may be brought at length to

the perfection of that grace which is begun within us. And may we proceed more and more every day in true piety, until at length we are gathered into Your heavenly kingdom and enjoy the inheritance promised and obtained for us by the same Christ our Lord. Amen.

Ezekiel 20:27-28 “Therefore, son of man, speak to the house of Israel, and say to them, ‘Thus says the Lord GOD: “In this too your fathers have blasphemed Me, in that they have committed a trespass against Me. When I brought them into the land *concerning* which I had raised My hand in an oath to give them, and they saw all the high hills and all the thick trees, there they offered their sacrifices and provoked Me with their offerings. There they also sent up their sweet aroma and poured out their drink offerings.”

God condemns false worship, superstition, and syncretism.

. . . This passage, like many others, teaches, that not only is God’s worship corrupted when His honor is transferred to idols, but also when men heap up their own fictions, and contaminate God’s commands by the mixture.

We must remember, then, that there are two kinds of idolatries; the one being grossest when idols are worshipped openly, and Moloch, or any Baal, is substituted for the living God: that is a palpable superstition, because God is in some sense cast down from His throne. But the other kind of idolatry, although more hidden, is abominable before God, namely, when, under the disguise of a name, men boldly mingle whatever comes into their minds, and invent various modes of worship; as at present we see in the papacy statues adored, and dead men invoked, and God’s honor violated in various ways.

Hence, however the papists chatter, they are self-convicted, and the wonder is that they are not utterly silenced, since their superstitions are so gross that even boys perceive them. But there are other superstitions more specious and refined; for when they have invented many things in honor of God, they will not bring forward the names of either St. Barbara or St. Christopher, but the name of God covers all those abominations.

But we see that this excuse is frivolous, when men assert that they have nothing else in their mind than the worship of God. **Not only does God wish worship to be offered to Himself alone, but that it should be without any dependence on human will. He wishes the law to be the single rule of true worship; and thus He rejects all fictitious rites.**

False worship is futile and elicits God’s just judgment.

Hence the Prophet deservedly excuses the Israelites, *because they turned their eyes towards every high hill and every branching tree, and there offered the provocation of their offering.* He calls it *the provocation of their offering*, since they not only foolishly poured forth much money on those vitiated [corrupt] rites, but also provoked God to anger. We see, therefore, that **men not only lose their labor when they decline from God’s commands, and rashly fatigue themselves with their own superstitions, but they provoke God to a contest, because they snatch from Him the right of a lawgiver: for it is in His power to determine how He ought to be worshipped; and when men claim this power to themselves, it is like ascending to the very throne of God.**

But if they follow the inventions of others, still it is setting them up as lawgivers, while God is degraded from His tribunal. Thus it is not surprising if God’s wrath is provoked by

any sacrifices, besides those which the law prescribes. And this is expressed very clearly by Isaiah, when God announces that He will do what will frighten them all as an unexpected prodigy [an extraordinary event that inspires wonder]: **I will blind the eyes of the wise, says He, and I will take away prudence from the aged (Isaiah 29:14).** And why so? **because they worship Me by the precepts of men.**

False worship, self-made worship (Colossians 2:23) is a declaration of war against God.

. . . [The prophet Ezekiel] shows that the people purposely took all means of declaring war against God when they falsely pretended that nothing more was prescribed than to worship Him as they pleased.

Ezekiel 20:29 “Then I said to them, “What is this high place to which you go? So its name is called Bamah to this day.”

. . . [The people] were not deceived through ignorance since he [Ezekiel] has often cautioned them against profaning the true and genuine worship, for he often endeavored to draw them back again when he saw them wandering after their own superstitions. Hence they are continually rebuked by the prophets; and their obstinacy is the more apparent, since, nevertheless, they followed their own perverseness. . . .

Ezekiel 20:39 “As for you, O house of Israel,” thus says the Lord GOD: “Go, serve every one of you his idols -- and hereafter also -- if you will not obey Me; but profane My holy name no more with your gifts and your idols.”

A hallmark of false religion is manmade worship—worship invented by men.

Now again God expressly bears witness that He rejects the Israelites because they infected the pure worship of the law with their mixtures; for we said that they were deceived by a vain imagination when they thought God pleased with their obedience, while they worshipped Him only half-heartedly. When they heaped up fictions, they thought this diligence would be pleasing to God, because they professed to acknowledge the true God as their Redeemer. . . .

Traditional and contemporary worship are equally to be rejected.

This passage is peculiarly remarkable, since at this time many people are deceived, while they rest upon their own inventions, and think that they best discharge their duty towards God when they partially obey His commandments, and then pile up a great heap of superstitions, **partly received from their fathers [traditional worship] and partly fabricated by themselves [contemporary worship].**

Again, scarcely one in a hundred will be found who does not think it better partially to worship God than entirely to devote themselves to idols; and this indeed is true as far as man is concerned; for the impiety is more foul and detestable when men openly reject God, and divorce themselves from Him, and devote themselves to idols, than if they partly worshipped God and partly idols. But in the meantime, we see that God pronounces that He cannot bear this profanation; and we must diligently notice the reason which is added; for **when gross and palpable impiety is indulged in, God’s name is not so profaned as when clever men reconcile the pure worship of God with superstitions.** . . . But God here exclaims that He could not endure this deception when men profess to worship Him, for they defile themselves with

superstitions, since profaneness is added to impiety, and both are the result of hypocrisy. The rest tomorrow.

We yesterday saw the reason why God prefers that men should be entirely devoted to their superstitions rather than mingle them with the resemblance of true piety, since this is but a profanation of His holy name. He wishes to be kept separate from all idols. Hence it is not surprising that He loosens the reins from the Israelites, that they should cast themselves entirely on their idolatries; and He repeats again what He had said, that His name was profaned by gifts and idols, since the unbelievers pretended to worship Him, but at the same time transferred His glory to idols. Hence He does not suffer Himself to be trifled with in this way; so wherever offerings and idols occur, we should notice that **all mixtures by which the pure simplicity of lawful worship is corrupted are condemned.** . . .

Ezekiel 20:41 “I will accept you as a sweet aroma when I bring you out from the peoples and gather you out of the countries where you have been scattered; and I will be sanctified in you before the Gentiles.”

. . . God delights in the pure and sincere worship of the faithful, when they try nothing, but by His law.

God calls us to abandon false worship, manmade worship, whether traditional or contemporary.

God calls us to follow Scripture alone, to worship God in spirit and truth, purely and with simplicity. True worship is Reformed worship.

“. . . the acceptable way of worshipping the true God is instituted by Himself, and so limited by His own revealed will, that He may not be worshipped according to the imaginations and devices of men, or the suggestions of Satan, under any visible representation, or any other way not prescribed in the Holy Scripture.”—Westminster Confession of Faith, chapter 21, paragraph 1.

Surrender your life to Jesus Christ, and let His Spirit reform your worship and conform it to the perfect law of God. The Great Physician has prescribed how He is to be worshipped; may we never stray from His precepts but live by every word of God (Matt. 4:4; Luke 4:4).

PRAYER

Grant, Almighty God, since You have once redeemed us by the death of Your only-begotten Son, that we may not interrupt the course of Your favor by our ingratitude; but may we so proceed in obedience to Your Gospel, that we may be brought at length to the perfection of that grace which is commenced within us, and may proceed more and more every day in true piety, till at length we are gathered into Your heavenly kingdom, and enjoy the inheritance promised and obtained for us by the same Christ our Lord. Amen.