

Will-Worship

The Names Nadab and Abihu

Leviticus 10:1 Now Nadab and Abihu, the sons of Aaron, each took his censer and put fire in it and laid incense on it and offered unauthorized fire before the LORD, which he had not commanded them.

² And fire came out from before the LORD and consumed them, and they died before the LORD.

(Lev 10:1-2)

New Year Fire

Being in Leviticus 10 at the **start of a new year is providential**. Recall that chapter 8 began the ordination of the priests on the first day of Israel's year. Leviticus 10 is the last day of that ritual. Thus, the contents of this chapter are here that you might **soberly assess** what it means to be a follower of the God-Who-Does-Not-Change, in light of people and cultures that most certainly do. Its message should give us perfect eyesight regarding this God (**Father, Son, and Holy Spirit ... Jesus with Pharisees**) and the

worship he requires of us, not only so long ago, but in 2020 and beyond.

Leviticus is about holiness, about the God who is the **Holy One** of Israel. It is about his unique uncommon otherness. It is also about how he has provided the means by which the Holy One may be approached without us being incinerated in the scorching searing flames of the All-Consuming Fire. This was a lesson that **Nadab and Abihu**, the two oldest sons of Aaron, now fully ordained priests in the service of Yahweh, learned the hard way. Our passage today says, “**Now Nadab and Abihu, the sons of Aaron, each took his censer and put fire in it and laid incense on it and offered unauthorized fire before the LORD, which he had not commanded them. And fire came out from before the LORD and consumed them, and they died before the LORD**” (**Lev 10:1-2**). This appears just one verse after the LORD did come in the same flame to the people and no one was hurt.

Through this new year’s story of fire and disaster in the worship of God, I invite you to think with me about **the state of much American Christianity**, particularly its worship, what that worship is doing to people, and why our church looks so different from so much of what is out there.

Here is a true story to help you see the seriousness of this. Several years ago, a member of our church who no longer attends, invited his sister to come. Her response was, **your church is a cult**. The reason? The legalistic worship service we have. It doesn't look like the big mega-churches, which is what church is obviously supposed to look like. This reminds me of a **Thomas Sowell** quote I saw recently. **“When people get used to preferential treatment, equal treatment seems like discrimination.”** Similarly, when people get used to the innovations and novelties of contemporary worship, biblical worship seems like a cult. **“Cult” is a damning term**; it means you are not even Christian.

If this is really a perception out there, then something is seriously askew in a very dangerous sort of way. For our church is not the church that has changed. In fact, our service is barely different from that of Calvin or Spurgeon or any Reformed church for the last 500 years. For that matter, most Evangelical churches were not all that different from ours until about 40 years ago. I was told by a seminary professor that **Confucius** once said, *the man floating on the river does nothing. The man standing in the river is resisting*. This is a **brilliant paradox** because if you are the one floating on the

river, the man standing still looks like he is the one moving! Reality, of course, is just the opposite. And this blinding perspective for the floating man can be incredibly dangerous if, just out of his eyesight, looms Niagara Falls.

As we move into this, my aim is to take three things from this passage and think about them in our modern context. The first is the language of “strange fire.” The boys offered “strange fire” to the LORD. Strange fire is defined by **Leviticus 10:1** as **doing what God has not commanded** in his worship. Contemporary equivalents can seem quite benign to us, though in fact that are deadly serious to God.

That leads to the second thing. Why would something deadly serious to God **seem nonthreatening or harmless to us**? This will take us into the realm of the names of the two men who offered the strange fire. **Nadab** means “voluntary” or “willing” as in one’s free will.¹ **Abihu** means “He is my

¹ On this and the following definitions see **Stelman Smith and Judson Cornwall**, *The Exhaustive Dictionary of Bible Names* (North Brunswick, NJ: Bridge-Logos, 1998), 180; **Mary Douglas**, *Leviticus as Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 201; **Richard S. Hess**, “Leviticus 10:1: Strange Fire and an Odd Name,” ed. Craig A. Evans, *Bulletin for Biblical Research*, Vol. 12, 2002, 192. It can also mean “liberal.” We can think of people who are liberal with giving their money to others. Or, we can think of people who are liberal with respect to being open to new ideas. If applied to wrong thinking or small-minded bigotry, having a liberal mind can be good. When applied to biblical values or to orthodox theology and worship, being liberal can be extremely disruptive and dangerous.

father.” Scholars have argued that the names of these men are a vital clue to the meaning of the text.²

The third thing will be to think about **why it is that fire came out from God and consumed these men**. This will lead us to answer the question of why we do what we do in our worship service. The end of all this will be to help you think through why you come to church.

Contemporary Worship: A Problem

Several years ago, I did **a study on contemporary worship** for a class I took in seminary called *Pastoral Theology and Worship*. I spent a lot of time on it, as it was my final project of my final class before graduation. The things I had already known about but was also discovering anew in this study were extremely disconcerting to me. But I had reached a tipping point, and I didn't care what the professor was going to say about the paper. I figured he might not even hand it back to me, because he would be so **outraged** that I would dare to question what other good Christians were doing in their churches. I was right, he didn't hand it back to me. Well, he did. But he wanted the paper back, and

² Both Douglas and Hess have stressed this point.

much to my surprise he asked me if he could make it [mandatory reading](#) in that class in future years. I was dumbfounded. Apparently, I wasn't the only one in Evangelical circles who was concerned. I want to share with you some of those findings.

As I perused the school library for recent book titles on worship, I found the titles [Innovative Worship](#) (1999), [Creative Worship](#) (2002), [The New Worship](#) (2001), [Diverse Worship](#) (2000), [Blended Worship](#) (1998), and [Contemporary Worship](#) (1997). I was able to find only one book written during my time at the school on the clearly antiquated notion of “[biblical worship](#).” Facts are, most people don't even think there is such a thing. I'm pleased to tell you that 18 years later, this has changed for the better, although, many new books are still coming out along the same lines such as [Emerging Worship](#) (2009), [Creative Worship](#) (2012), [The Next Worship](#) (2016), and so on.

These titles perfectly describe what we now see at what Flip Wilson 50 years ago called [The Church of What's Happenin' Now](#), which today you can find at a local assembly near you. He was making fun of churches that still had the [traditional methods](#) of worship, methods that were originally informed by Scripture, but had perverted the

message that was supposed to complement them and were using those methods against their intended purpose. But today, it is not only the message that is like Scarlet's plantation—Gone With the Wind.

All of the traditional elements and what I'll call the furniture of worship are gone. The elements of worship are those things that God has commanded or demonstrated in his word are to be present when God's people gather. There is no call to worship anymore. Music both begins and then absolutely dominates almost all services. This isn't congregational singing, but a concert you will get, often complete with your own personal earplugs. This music is often a fine-tuned machine with highly paid bands, lighting systems that would rival a U2 concert, and subwoofers that make it impossible to hear the person next to you. The content of the songs could literally be anything, except a deeply theological arrangement that is. A friend of mine told me that a contemporary church she attended sang the theme song to Scooby Doo, the 70's cartoon, in their worship service (she had no idea why they did this)! Public discussion of sin is hardly mentioned, let alone public confession of sin being present. Communion, if they have it, isn't part of the furniture of the space up front, but you are likely to get

individually wrapped “take-out” wafers and juice that you can pick up on your way out the door. Extended [intercessory prayer](#) is almost completely absent. And the [sermons](#), if you can even call them that, are more like Christian version of TED Talks. With almost nothing of the gospel present, you will most likely hear some kind of moral or political outrage followed by some kind of self-help law-light thing where the good news is, “[You can become a better dad, I know you can!](#)” Scripture is hardly even appealed to, let alone exegeted. In fact, it is kind of embarrassing and pastors increasingly apologize when they say they still believe in it.

And during the entire show, which is essentially what it is, you could see anything from a drama, to puppets, clowns, jugglers, artists painting gawdy pictures of Jesus, concerts, mimes, dances, movies, candles, chants, mazes, smoke machines, zip lines, people barking like dogs or laughing uncontrollably, or just about anything else you can imagine.

Meanwhile, the furniture is the non-essential but theologically informed “stuff” that goes into making the service conducive to true worship. As I said, [communion tables](#) and [baptistries](#)? Gone. [Pews](#) are replaced with pragmatic seating. This is not a permanent space given over

to the worship of God and we are now all individuals rather than people who share the seats together. **Pulpits** are replaced with lazy-boy chairs, for it is not the word that is central, but the fire-side chat. **Windows and lighting**, so central and important in churches of the past, have to give way to black walls and darkness, because when you watch a movie, you don't want lights interfering with your entertainment (and popcorn). What people are struck with as they walk in are the enormous amounts of money spent on lighting, stages, props, sound, media ... packaging. And they love it! Most of all, you are struck, probably subconsciously, by the very important and deliberate essential truth that what you are seeing around you does not in any way, shape, or form remind you that this is church (at least, if it can be helped).

In essence, worship these days is essentially **Forrest Gump's box of chocolates**. You never know what you're going to get. Though, you can be sure of one thing. This box will not contain those **nasty coconut chocolates** that we call **informed biblical worship** that Christians from every other century or culture throughout history would understand to be what we are supposed to be doing when we gather together.

Long ago, Calvin noticed something very important as it regards the methods of our worship. In discussing the basic problem at Corinth (1Co 1:18-27), he was contemplating Paul's language of why preaching is called "foolishness." Knowing that this was a center rich in Greek culture and philosophy and rhetoric, he came to the conclusion that the fundamental problem that started the whole unravelling of that churches morality, ethics, and doctrine began with "persons who did not openly take away anything from *the substance of the gospel*, but, as they burned with a misdirected eagerness for distinction ... with the view of making themselves admired, they contrived a new method of teaching, at variance with the simplicity of Christ" (emphasis added).³

The thing is, this is basically identical in nature to what Nadab and Abihu were doing over 1,000 years earlier in the Sinai desert. They were not worshiping the wrong God. They were not changing the message of Moses. All they were doing was entering into the tabernacle, which is precisely what they were supposed to do, and putting fire

³ John Calvin and John Pringle, *Commentaries on the Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Corinthians*, vol. 1 (Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software, 2010), 39.

on the altar of incense that God had not commanded. They were literally **changing the method of worship**.

“Strange fire” is therefore a method of worship that God has not commanded. Theirs was a fire that came from a source of **their own imagination**. It was their **innovation**, their **creativity**, their **new** and **contemporary** and **emerging** worship. It did not come from the eternal fire that miraculously came down and lit the altar in the previous verse. It was simply a fire that came from some other place. No big deal. Fire is fire. Why in the world would God get all bent out of shape about something so trivial, so non-essential to the message of Moses?

Contemporary Worship: It's Theology

Calvin may unwittingly answer this question in the very next words that he says about Corinth. He says, “**This must necessarily be the case with all that have not as yet *thrown off self*, that they may engage unreservedly in the Lord's work. The first step towards serving Christ is to *lose sight of ourselves*, and think only of the Lord's glory and the salvation of men**” (emphasis added). This was Nadab and Abihu's problem. **All**

they were thinking about was themselves. And this is precisely the problem with contemporary worship as well.

After looking at book titles, I then took a look at the most recent editions of cutting-edge periodicals to see what they had to say about worship. I found the following. *Group Magazine*'s cover article was "The Cool Church."⁴ *Your Church Magazine* had articles: "Lighting and Video: How Lighting Can Work For You," "The Immediate Bible," "A Primer on Choosing The Right Church For You," and "Now Playing at a Church Near You... creatively reinforce your message by integrating audio, video, and lighting."⁵ There is one thing that underlines all of these. **Self**. Every single one of these is about how to make me happy in worship. Who wants to be an old fogey that is out of touch? I want to be cool. Who doesn't want to have worship be relevant to their hearts? Who wants to struggle through the hard work of reading the Bible, when you can have it all now? This is the holy trinity of contemporary worship: **Me, Myself, and I**. Notice what nothing these talk about are actually about. God.

⁴ *Group*, 5/6/2001.

⁵ *Your Church*, May/June 2001.

Redefining “Church”

In my mind, at least **two very significant things** have gone into this **seismic shaking** of holy worship. The first was unwittingly and obliviously divulged in my seminaries’ own magazine. As I was looking at more articles for that paper, I read the then seminary president make the following statement. “**Reaching [this generation] for Christ includes the use of video, PowerPoint presentations and graphic arts to enhance the effectiveness of sermons, worship times and Bible study methods.**”⁶

At first glance, this probably seems like a perfectly fine and obvious statement to almost anyone reading it. But **did you notice** something? I’m not talking here about the use of technology, *per se*. That is a different discussion. I’m talking about the reason the technology is to be used. It is to be used in **reaching this generation**. And where are we to reach them? **In our sermons and worship times.**

Do you understand what this means? It means that the worship time is not, in fact, for Christians. It is for the “unreached.” It is for pagans. We must use technology to

⁶ **Craig Williford**, “Technology and Seminary Education: An Oxymoron?” *Focal Point* (Spring 2001), 3.

enhance all of these things ... for *their* sake. This is the first tectonic shift. It is **the redefinition of what church is and who it is for**. Whereas everywhere in the Bible, church is for Christians, suddenly, it is now for everyone *but* Christians. (The technology issue itself may be a point of “strange fire,” or it may not necessarily be. That depends in large part on its purpose, and to a lesser degree on its own nature.)

This is **an innovation of such historical novelty and importance** that it staggers my imagination to even think that it happened. But happen it did, and only recently. Really, it was in the well-meaning Seeker Sensitive movement in the 80s from, of all people, someone who grew up in a Reformed church (Bill Hybels), that this all changed. The sincerity to reach non-Christians with the good news of Christ ended up **redefining the very heart of what it means to be the church and to worship God**. When that movement gained traction, everything about worship had to change. It was well-meaning, yet perhaps the most destructive thing that has happened to the church in its 4,000 plus year history.

If worship is not for Christians, but non-Christians, then who has to be made happy? If worship is for people and not for God, then everything about it is going to be

fundamentally different than it was before. It can't help but be that way. This was precisely what **Nadab and Abihu** seemed to think as well. For in offering strange fire, they were not concerned with what God would think, but with what they thought. They were not concerned with what would make him happy, but them happy. Indeed, in bringing the fire “**before the LORD,**” it is clear that they were trying to selfishly gain a glimpse at the divine for their own self-gratification.

In a recent interview with the Christian Post, **Keith Getty**, the North Irish composer of the wonderful modern hymn “**In Christ Alone**” said that the contemporary worship movement is “**utterly dangerous,**” and is leading to the “**de-Christianizing of God's people**” because it is a movement of “**cultural relevance**” where worship begins with **catharsis**, rather than an authentic picture of the God of the Bible.⁷ This is what modern worship is doing to people.

Catharsis is the process of releasing and thereby providing relief from strong or repressed emotions. It is a

⁷ **Leah MarieAnn Klett**, “Keith Getty: Modern Worship Mov't is ‘Utterly Dangerous,’ Causing ‘De-Christianizing of God's People,” *The Christian Post* (Nov 9, 2019), <https://www.christianpost.com/news/keith-getty-modern-worship-movement-is-utterly-dangerous-causing-de-christianizing-of-gods-people.html>.

deliberate purging of those emotions through methods that incubate, foster, and nurture and then finally bring freedom and sweet release of those emotions. Essentially, it is nothing but **a religion of feelings**.⁸

He is right. In a piece that came out in the *Washington Times* on Monday, the title was, “**Losing our Religion: America Becoming ‘Pagan’ as Christianity Cedes to Culture**.”⁹ Essentially, it argues that it is **becoming pagan** because it doesn’t teach anything from the Bible anymore. As the example it gives demonstrates, if Christians no longer know who the Good Samaritan is, “**That makes them pagans, in the very real sense of the word. They have no knowledge, no practice, no anything.**” This in turn is creating millions of what it calls “**apathetics**,” people who call themselves Christian but really don’t care about it, and “**nones**,” people who have no religious affiliation who don’t

⁸ I learned about this article from a friend who posted another article on it. See **Jonathan Aigner**, “Keith Getty States the Painfully Obvious: Contemporary Worship is ‘Dangerous,” *Ponder Anew* (Nov 24, 2019), https://www.patheos.com/blogs/ponderanew/2019/11/24/keith-getty-states-the-painfully-obvious-contemporary-worship-is-dangerous/?utm_medium=social&utm_source=share_bar&fbclid=IwAR0xrnHIGC1_cfpsBRlQLAKwzkVwyIQ2LuRz9ClgdK0Ofj-VYOLuVE99tBM, and other

⁹ **Stephen Dinan**, “Losing Our Religion: America Becoming ‘Pagan’ as Christianity Cedes to Culture,” *The Washington Times* (Dec 20, 2019), <https://m.washingtontimes.com/news/2019/dec/30/faith-in-us-withers-as-apathy-trumps-religion/?fbclid=IwAR3e8w-Dw1I1WHWaV9z2xQISRSTzSbHeXQUbPFyc6Xx-WtmZGgcmfOr-mtA>.

actively question or reject God, as much as they don't see a reason to bother with religion.

Pelagianism, Freewill, and Choice

The **second great quake** that has changed the very landscape of worship is a **theology**, long understood even by Rome to be dangerous and deadly to Christianity. It is the heresy called **Pelagianism**. In 2001, **R. C. Sproul** wrote an article where he argues that it is no longer Arminianism that dominates the evangelical church landscape. Rather, it is the centuries old heresy Pelagianism that has captured the heart of the church. Surveys bear this out. When asked the question if “**man is basically good**,” 83% of the general population, 77% of “born again Christians,” 74% of evangelicals, 98% of Catholics and 90% of mainline Protestants agrees with this statement.¹⁰ Furthermore, 82% of Americans believe “**God helps those who help themselves**,” while “84% of those attending an evangelical church, 83% of those who are Catholic, and 87% of those who are aligned with a mainline Protestant church

¹⁰ **George Barna**, *What Americans Believe*, (Ventura, CA: Regal Books, 1991), 89.

concur.”¹¹ The numbers were actually higher among church goers than the general population! When considering these facts, Sproul is correct in his assessment: “Neither of these positions is semi-Pelagian [or Arminian, for those positions both hold that we are by nature sinners]. They’re both Pelagian.”¹² For Pelagians, humans are not born sinful; sin is simply a learned condition. At our heart, we are all basically good and perfectly capable of applying techniques to help ourselves.

Because humans are basically good, everything in the Pelagian system glorifies in an increasingly narcissistic way, freewill and the innate “felt need” that goes hand in hand with it for humans to control their environment through their choices. Freewill is at the heart of the names of Aaron’s two sons.

As I said earlier, Nadab means “voluntary” or “willing” as in one’s freewill. Abihu means “he is my father.” The idea seems to be either that because he’s just our dad, God couldn’t possibly treat me like an enemy and therefore whatever we come up with in worship of our own freewill should be A.O.K. with him. Or, the idea is that the father

¹¹ Ibid., 80.

¹² R. C. Sproul, “The Pelagian Captivity of the Church,” *Modern Reformation*, May/June 2001, p. 27.

here is Aaron and this story actually harkens back to the Golden Calf incident which also brought great judgment upon Israel by God (**we will look at that more next time**). Either way, it was the voluntary innovation of worshiping God as they wanted to worship him that was at the heart of their mistake. Essentially, their worship was driven by a puff-up view of their own goodness. And this becomes the reason why our innovations in worship seem so harmless. We are so totally focused on self, on our choices, on what makes us happy that we are oblivious to the Holy One of Israel to whom worship is supposed to be directed.

The myth of **Narcissus** is worth mentioning here. The story goes that Narcissus once had an admirer, a nymph named **Echo** who had fallen deeply in love with him. She followed him around, and when he sensed someone was present, he shouted, “Who’s there?” Echo repeated the line back to him, “Who’s there?” Eventually she identified herself and attempted to embrace him. Narcissus threw her back and told her to go away. Heartbroken, Echo lived out the rest of her days lonely and alone until all that was left of her was an echo that could be heard in the glens.

Nemesis decided to get revenge for his horrible treatment of Echo, so one summer day, as Narcissus was

getting thirsty after hunting, the goddess lured him to a pool where he leaned upon the water and saw himself as a handsome youth. Narcissus did not realize it was his own reflection and he fell deeply in love with it, like it was someone else. Unable to leave the allure of his image, he eventually realized that his love could not be reciprocated and he melted away from the fire of passion burning inside him, eventually turning into a gold and white flower. This perverted kind of self-love is what prevents us from looking outward towards the Beloved who is the groom of the bride who wants only the best for her. It blinds us to all that he is.

Paul actually discusses this in a different way with another of those Greek city churches: the church of the [Colossians](#). In fact, he coins his own word for it. He chides those Christians for what he calls “[will worship](#)” ([Col 2:23](#) KJV). The word is *ethelothreskia*. It is a compound word from *ethelo*, “[to will](#),” and *threskeia*, which has to do with “[religious worship](#).” “[The term means just what Luther says: *selbsterwählte Geistlichkeit*, a self-chosen worship that is willed by the will of those who want it and *not* a type of](#)

worship that is willed by God. These Judaizers invent their own worship.”¹³

The Geneva Bible calls it “voluntarie worshipping” where “men have chosen according to their own fantasy.” Hendriksen says, “In the present context the word used by Paul probably means *self-chosen worship, self-imposed cult or ritual, self-made religion* (hence, in reality, *would-be religion*).”¹⁴ It is “a form of worship which a man devises for himself.”¹⁵ It is “a self-chosen worship that is will by the will of those who want it and not a type of worship that is willed by God.”¹⁶ And the old Puritan Robert Rollock said of it that it is “worship as is not commanded by God, but invented by the vain head of man. Woe worth such a worship! when a man follows his own fancy” (spelling updated).¹⁷ However you want to say it, this is the definition of what Nadab and Abihu were doing, yet this is said to the NT church at Colossae.

¹³ R. C. H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Paul's Epistles to the Colossians, to the Thessalonians, to Timothy, to Titus and to Philemon* (Columbus, OH: Lutheran Book Concern, 1937), 144.

¹⁴ William Hendriksen and Simon J. Kistemaker, *Exposition of Colossians and Philemon*, vol. 6, *New Testament Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1953–2001), 133.

¹⁵ Herbert Carson, *The Epistles of Paul to the Colossians and Philemon* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1979), 79.

¹⁶ Lenski, 144.

¹⁷ Robert Rollock, “Lecture 22,” *Lectures Vpon the Epistle of Paul to the Colossians. Preached by That Faithfull Seruant of God, Maister Robert Rollok, Sometime Rector of the Vniuersitie of Edenburgh*, Early English Books Online (At London: Imprinted by Felix Kyngston, dwelling in Pater-noster row, ouer against the signe of the Checker, 1603), 235.

Sadly, this is the worship that dominates Evangelicalism, Mainline Protestant, Roman Catholic, and even many Reformed churches today. Leonard Payton begins his wonderful little booklet on worship music with these words, “Westerners demand a choice. We must have the right to choose. Truth be told, we are far more concerned that we be allowed to choose than we are about making the right choice.”¹⁸ But what does choice have to do with worship today? Elmer Towns explains,

Historically, when Protestant church members moved their home from one location to the next they usually chose a new local church on the basis of doctrine, not on the basis of worship style... Now they choose a church primarily by its style of worship ... America’s Protestants choose churches on the basis of what entertains us, satisfies us, or makes us feel good about God and ourselves.¹⁹

In a consumer culture **choice is omnipresent**. When the church adapts itself to mimic the culture, this necessarily has to dominate our worship too. In a market driven society,

¹⁸ Leonard R. Payton, *Reforming Our Worship Music* (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 1999), 9.

¹⁹ Elmer Towns, *Putting and End to Worship Wars* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1997), 9, 10, 11.

choices are made by the subjective tastes, fads, and **personal preferences of the consumer**. So Towns says, “**If we recognize church worshipers as consumers, we will recognize church programs as menus, and types of worship as the main entrees in a restaurant. Consumers go where the menu fits their taste.**”²⁰ Much like we expect to get what we want when we want it at any store we go into, the **same holds true of our worship today**.²¹ And if we don’t get what we want, we’ll take our business elsewhere. Barna shows clearly that Christians are flitting and fleeting from one church to the next, quite comfortable with not committing to any given congregation (or in some cases committing to more than one congregation) because they like parts of one church here and parts of other churches there. He unwittingly makes my point when he says, “**Our preference is for variety in our church experiences, rather than getting the most out of all that a single church has to offer.**”²² The key words are “**preference**”, “**variety**”, and “**experiences.**”

²⁰ Ibid., 11.

²¹ The church-growth movement’s language that the church is a business with a product sell and customers to buy has certainly contributed greatly to this notion. The overlap between the type of worship that dominates today with the theology of this movement can not be understated.

²² **George Barna**, *The Second Coming of the Church* (Nashville: Word Publishing, 1998), p. 19.

He seems to just assume that these are good things. We go to church to “get out of it” what we can.

Sadly, this includes many Calvinists who, while having better theology in some areas, have not reformed their theology of worship along with their doctrine of God. MacArthur goes after the Young, Restless, and Reformed crowd when he says,

Evangelicalism’s childish fascination with teenage fashions, milk rather than meat, and trivial entertainment rather than serious doctrine is deeply rooted in a pragmatic ministry philosophy. It is not “Reformed” in any sense but is a classic expression of man-centered free-willism—what Colossians 2:23 refers to as “self-made religion.”²³

Someone else comments on his words here. “What MacArthur identified as objectionable is not the theology of the movement (for the most part) but its practices. In commenting upon Colossians 2:23, MacArthur equated self-made religion with asceticism because it seeks to glory

²³ John MacArthur, “Grow Up Advice for YRRs (part 2)” [article online] (Grace to You, 25 July 2011, accessed 5 September 2013) available from <http://www.gty.org/blog/B110725>.

self and not God. He called this “the antithesis of the Bible’s emphasis on the sovereignty of God.”²⁴

What is striking here is not that when your theology is man-centered, your worship will necessarily follow suit. What is striking is that even when parts of your theology are god-centered, your worship *may not* follow suit! You can’t tell me that Nadab and Abihu had gone through seven days of deeply intricate liturgy and ritual only to suddenly become totally man-centered in their theology of God and salvation. No, it was their worship, which revealed that the heart of even believers remains a bastion of selfishness even after conversion. It must be kept in check. But is there any way to help that happen that doesn’t end up making us the center of our own sanctification?

Contemporary Worship: It’s Theology

There is, and it leads me to the third point from our text. “And fire came out from before the LORD and consumed them, and they died before the LORD” (Lev 10:2). Why would this happen? First, remember that the very same fire

²⁴ Drew Curley, “New Calvinism, Part II: Prominent New Calvinists,” *Journal of Dispensational Theology, Volume 19* 19, no. 56 (2015): 8–9.

came out from the very same place just two verses earlier, and no one got angry about it then. No one was hurt then. Therefore, fire coming out from the LORD at this point is the same fire from the same LORD. God is being who God is.

But this fire consumed these two men. Why? It is because holiness cannot reside side-by-side with the profane. Especially in the place of God's presence when we come to worship him. This has been the repeated emphasis of each of the sacrifices and of the seven-day ritual that led up to this point of Leviticus. God has to be approached in very particular ways, ways that he has prescribed. Otherwise, his holiness will consume all that is unholy and profane. That's the nature of his Otherness.

J. I. Packer was recently asked, “What are your biggest discouragements and encouragements concerning Evangelicals today?” When a 90+ year old living Christian sage answers, we should probably listen,

Let me begin with the discouragements, of which I see quite a number. It seems to me that for the last 150 years, Christian preaching and teaching amongst evangelicals, let alone Liberals, has been very lopsided. Highlighting the love of

God and the redeeming love of Christ, celebrating Calvary ... but going very light on the holiness of God and the fact that you cannot please him, save as you practice holiness and so get deeper and deeper into the process of sanctification.²⁵

Now this is partly, I think, due to cultural pressures. The last 150 years have seen the English-speaking Christian world ... becoming more and more secular and materialistic, and less and less spiritual in any positive sense of that word. When that's what's happening around you, the easiest thing is to go with the flow. We call it "worldliness."²⁶ But that doesn't mean that those who define it know it when they see it ... I should say specifically in the church. ...

The result is that again and again in congregations they go light on holiness, they forget what holiness involves, they are indulging in self-indulgence if I can say it that way. Without realizing it, they are encouraging Christians not to attempt to be different from their friends who are not Christians. And that is a very unhappy state of affairs.²⁷

²⁵ He is not speaking here of justifying faith where God is pleased with Christ rather than us, but sanctifying faith where God is pleased with Christians because they love and obey his law as people already justified.

²⁶ In the context of Leviticus, we could call "worldliness" "profane," because it is common or profane. "Profane" isn't necessarily evil. Nor is worldliness, in the right contexts. Both could be, but they are certainly not holy.

²⁷ **J. I. Packer**, "Theologian J. I. Packer: Evangelical Preaching Is Too Light on the Holiness of God," *Preaching* (no date), <https://www.preaching.com/videos/video-theologian-j-i-packer-talks-about-his-concern-that-evangelical-preaching-has-been-too-light-on-the-holiness-of-god/>.

This is what contemporary worship is doing to us. It is turning people into worldly Christians, a contradiction if ever there was one. For we are in fact not worldly, if we have been chosen and called in the Beloved. Rather, we are holy. We are saints. By definition, we are other-worldly creatures now, new creations being conformed into the image of the Son of God who is the exact representation of the Father. The Spirit was sent to ensure that God's people would conform to this image.

But self-willed, freewill, omni-choice worship is perhaps [the greatest tool being used today by the devil](#) to short-circuit this in the visible church. It leads many astray into false security of salvation when they in fact have none. And even the elect may not find themselves sanctified in this life as they are supposed to be, when they unknowingly and unwittingly worship him according to their own imaginations. If Nadab and Abihu were believers, and I think they were, would it make any difference to you how you interpret this text? Of course it would, for now it would not be God punishing presumptive reprobates, but God warning the rest of the church that this is the consequences of not taking his Name as holy. Those boys received no

more days on this earth to be conformed to the image of Christ. They were cut off from the land of the living.

So what is the solution as it regards these things? It is to understand that there is such a thing as biblical worship. This is outright denied by many. Rick Warren tells us, “the truth is, there isn’t a biblical style of worship. Each Sunday true believers around the world give glory to Jesus Christ using a thousand equally valid expressions and styles.”²⁸ Paul Basden remarks, “What the New Testament *never* does is identify one particular style of worship as more Christian, more biblical or more holy than another.”²⁹ Another person has said, “It is not how you worship, it is who you worship.”³⁰ Friend, this is the lesson of Nadab and Abihu. If there is no other lesson here, learn this one.

Part of the Pelagianism of our day is its unwillingness to critically evaluate anything. Why should we? Everything we do is, by default, perfectly fine because mankind is innately good. Could it be that the assumption is that our “basically good” human natures are simply incapable of

²⁸ Rick Warren, *The Purpose Driven Church* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995), p. 241.

²⁹ Paul Basden, *The Worship Maze: Finding a Style to Fit Your Church* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity, 1999), p. 35.

³⁰ Towns, 23.

worshipping God improperly? The Bible makes it clear that one can be a Christian and still worship God the wrong way.

All of the reformational confessions are unanimous here. Clearly, the second commandment teaches us that we should not represent God or worship him in any other manner than he has commanded in his word.³¹ They get this from Leviticus 10:1-2 and many other places.

So rather than worship God according to our imaginations, we are to worship him according to his commandments. When we do, what many do not understand is that the very **means of grace** to be transformed from one degree of glory to another are present. When we do not, they are missing.

Those commandments include just a few essential **elements** that must be present in God's worship. We've looked at them already. Some kind of sense that God has welcomed you into his presence through a **call to worship**, some kind of sense that he dismisses you from his presence with a **benediction**. Some way for people to hear about and **confess sin**. Some time spent together in corporate **intercessory prayer**. Some time spent **singing** together,

³¹ See *Heidelberg Catechism* questions 96-98; *Westminster Confession of Faith* 20.2; *Belgic Confession* Article 7; *The Baptist Confession of 1689* 22:1, *The Baptist Catechism* questions 56-58.

congregationally, so that you can hear one another sing songs that will “Let the word of Christ dwell in your richly, teaching and admonishing one another” (Col 3:16). This informs the content of our songs as well as the style. Some time reading the Scriptures to one another, out loud, in fairly large portions. Some time hearing the Scripture expounded in preaching so that you can understand what it means. Some time participating in the covenant renewal meal of the Lord’s Supper. Some time seeing baptisms of new converts together. Some time giving him praise and thanks for all his blessings in Christ (see especially London Baptist Confession chapter 22).

These things do not seem by outward appearances to do much of anything. They are especially not outwardly exciting. In fact, they seem quite mundane and even incapable of generating changes in people that we “feel” like we get when our emotions are roused by man-made excitements. This is precisely what Calvin was getting at when he said that the Corinthians were giving into methods that were at odds with “the simplicity of Christ.”

God puts things in worship that he knows will be good for you, that he has personally blessed and said, “This will be for your sanctification.” And he does it in such a way that

you have to have faith to receive it. For the natural eyes do not look at these means of grace as anything more exciting than the people did when they saw Jesus of Nazareth—the God-man—walking around the streets of his home city. *Is this the Messiah?*

The greatest reason these things are God's means of grace to you is because everything about them is the opposite of your own imaginations of what worship should be. In your heart, you create laws, man-made rules like Paul dealt with at Colossae: Do not handle, do not taste, do not touch, things that have an appearance of wisdom, but have no value in stopping the indulgence of the flesh (Col 2:23). But the means of grace do, because their chief end is Jesus Christ and the good news that he has done all that is necessary and possible for you to have salvation and sanctification in this life. Whereas your means of grace are laws; his is the gospel. And he tells you, "The gospel is the power of God to salvation to everyone who believes" (Rom 1:16). This is the ultimate reason behind his commands in worship. They are not there to keep you down, not there for you to become legalistic. They are there to lead you to Jesus Christ.

Wrongness in Worship: A Good Self-Inspection

Last time, I told you about a conference that John MacArthur had a few years back called *Strange Fire*. He took the title from **Leviticus 10:1**. As he was introducing the topic to the audience, immediately before launching into an exposition of this passage, he began by paraphrasing some words that are familiar to many.

The highest duty and the highest privilege, the most essential behavior, and the supreme responsibility for humanity is to worship God. The Father seeks true worshipers. Believers in the gospel, in the Lord Jesus Christ, are those true worshipers. This is, then, our eternal duty, and privilege, and priority ... The most serious activity anyone will ever do is worship. The most serious activity anyone will ever do is worship.”³²

The more familiar way of saying this comes from the catechism which asks, “**What is the chief end of man?**” “**The chief end of man is to glorify God and enjoy him forever.**”

³² John MacArthur, “Strange Fire,” (Oct 16, 2013). Transcript: <https://www.gty.org/library/sermons-library/TM13-1/strange-fire-john-macarthur>; Video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jRqD89ZBWyg>.

To glorify God is to worship God, to praise him, to laud his Name, to tell of his greatness, to sit under his holiness, to believe his gospel, to learn and to obey his commandments. It isn't just an activity that you do on the Lord's Day together. However, what you do on here does, I believe, very much impact the kind of people you will be on Monday through Saturday. And **if it doesn't, something is wrong**.

Allow me to conclude by helping you think properly about this wrongness as we begin our new year reflecting upon that old new year so long ago in a barren waste outside the Promised Land. If a worship service is not producing the fruit of the Spirit in your life, then **the "wrongness" could be on your side or its side**. What I mean is, there could be something wrong with you, even though the worship is itself holy. However, there could be **something wrong with the worship itself**, even though you yourself are a Christian and have been given the Holy Spirit. Of course, there could also be something wrong with both. If the problem is you, you should be to ask God to use corporate worship to convict you and lead you to repentance and worship. If the problem is with the worship, then you need to understand the seriousness with which God takes his worship, understand what will-worship is doing to individuals, to

churches, to entire nations full of churches, and find a way to get yourself to a church where the means of grace are present, where Jesus Christ is exalted in his person and work, and where people come so that the Triune God would be pleased with their praises which are directed not at self, but towards the Holy One of Israel who alone is worthy of all praise.

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