



## Oceanside URC—Adult Sunday School

### What is *Reformed* Worship?

Handout #7

Rev. Danny Hyde, Pastor

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## Worship and the Word: Psalms

*“Do I eat the flesh of bulls or drink the blood of goats? Offer to God a sacrifice of thanksgiving, and perform your vows to the Most High.” (Ps. 50:13–14)*

### Worshipping with our All

John Calvin (1509–1564) famously described the Psalms like this in his “Preface” to his *Commentaries on the Psalms*:

I have been accustomed to call this book, I think not inappropriately, “An Anatomy of all the Parts of the Soul;” for there is not an emotion of which any one can be conscious that is not here represented as in a mirror. Or rather, the Holy Spirit has here drawn to the life all the griefs, sorrows, fears, doubts, hopes, cares, perplexities, in short, all the distracting emotions with which the minds of men are wont to be agitated. The other parts of Scripture contain the commandments which God enjoined his servants to announce to us. But here the prophets themselves, seeing they are exhibited to us as speaking to God, and laying open all their inmost thoughts and affections, call, or rather draw, each of us to the examination of himself in particulars in order that none of the many infirmities to which we are subject, and of the many vices with which we abound, may remain concealed....In a word, whatever may serve to encourage us when we are about to pray to God, is taught us in this book. And not only are the promises of God presented to us in it, but oftentimes there is exhibited to us one standing, as it were, amidst the invitations of God on the one hand, and the impediments of the flesh on the other, girding and preparing himself for prayer: thus teaching us, if at any time we are agitated with a variety of doubts, to resist and fight against them, until the soul, freed and disentangled from all these impediments, rise up to God; and not only so, but even when in the midst of doubts, fears, and apprehensions, let us put forth our efforts in prayer, until we experience some consolation which may calm and bring contentment to our minds....Besides there is also here prescribed to us an infallible rule for directing us with respect to the right manner of offering to God the sacrifice of praise, which he declares to be most precious in his sight, and of the sweetest odour.

St. Athanasius (d. 373) wrote a well-known letter to a friend in which he spoke of how to interpret the Psalms, and said this:

Elsewhere in the Bible you read only that the Law commands this or that to be done, you listen to the Prophets to learn about the Saviour’s coming, or you turn to the historical books to learn the doings of the kings and holy men; but in the Psalter, besides all these things, you learn about yourself. You find depicted in it all the movements of your soul, all its changes, its ups and downs, its failures and recoveries. Moreover, whatever your particular need or trouble, from this same book you can select a form of words to fit it, so that you do not merely hear and then pass on, but learn the way to remedy your ill....It seems to me, moreover, that because the Psalms thus serve him who sings them as a mirror, wherein he sees himself and his own soul, he cannot help but render them in such a manner that their words go home with equal force to those who hear him sing, and stir them also to a like reaction....It is possible for us, therefore, to find in the Psalter

not only the reflection of our own soul's state, together with precept and example for all possible conditions, but also a fit form of words wherewith to please the Lord on each of life's occasions, words both of repentance and of thankfulness.<sup>1</sup>

### **A Biblical Balancing Act**

*God's denunciation of merely formal worship:*  
Psalm 50:7–13—

Psalm 40:6—

*God's delighting in heartfelt worship:*  
Psalm 40:7–8—

Psalm 50:14–15—

Psalm 51:16–19—

*God's requires the sacrifices of praise and thanksgiving:*  
Psalm 50:23—

Psalm 107:22—

Psalm 116:17—

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<sup>1</sup> *To Marcellinus*. As found at <http://www.athanasius.com/psalms/aletterm.htm> (Accessed March 24, 2012).