

Worship By the Book: Or, Why Sincerity Is Insufficient for True Worship

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by David Schrock

In his illuminating book, [A Secular Age](#) (summarized [here](#)), Charles Taylor argued the unbelief handed down to us from the Enlightenment, coupled with new religious expressions in the 19th century, and accelerated by the sexual revolution of the "Sixties," has resulted in many and competing spiritual longings that live somewhere between belief and unbelief.

In short, we are living in an "age of authenticity," where expressive individualism seeks to satisfy personal appetites in quasi-spiritual ways. On one hand, our age eschews organized religion and the constraints of any spiritual authority—be it a codified text or clerical leaders. Whereas faith in the divine was nearly impossible at the Middle Ages, in our day unbelief is becoming increasingly normative. On the other hand, our age is not satisfied with nihilistic unbelief. Spirituality abounds, even when such spiritual longings and beliefs are left undefined. In short,

People are increasingly looking for a life of greater immediacy, spontaneity and spiritual depth than can be provided for them in the immanent order of unbelief, while on the other hand many do not find the authenticity and wholeness that they desire in the established (mobilised) forms of religion. (From a [summary](#) of *A Secular Age*)

In this space, individuals and affinity groups continue to create new ways of spiritual living and corporate (read: customized) worship. As a result, it is hardly surprising that sincerity, not truth, is considered to be the greatest good for worship today. What defines spiritual worship is an interior experience, not conformity to a moral standard or faithfulness to God's revealed will.

How far we have fallen! Even in the church, where people and pastors know and want to know God ([or do they?](#)), this all-consuming desire for spiritual authenticity authorizes worship leaders to invent new ways of worship. Yet, when we go back to the Bible, we learn that sincerity is never enough for true worship. Rather, worship that pleases God is patterned after God's revelation itself. And we who long to worship God in Spirit and Truth must learn again from God how he wants to be worshiped.

Biblical Worship Responds to God's Revelation

In his book [Engaging with God: A Biblical Theology of Worship](#), David Peterson makes the case that true worship always responds to the Word of God. Beginning with Sinai, God wrote down his Word (Exod 31:18). His actions—not man's—are what initiate worship. To Moses and Israel Yahweh revealed how he wanted to be worshiped.

In contrast to the prevailing assumptions of our age, God the creator, the Holy One of Israel, does not want his image bearers—corrupted as we are by sin!—to worship him however they choose. He declares how he wants to be worshiped, and beginning with Moses, the Bible records a pattern of worship that repeats in every age of redemption. This pattern can be seen in Eden, in Israel, in the Church, and the New Jerusalem. (Next week I'll share more on this pattern).

In fact, “pattern” (or *typos* in the Greek) is what Moses records in Exodus 25:9, 40. In these chapters of God’s covenant with Israel, we discover that the covenant, the tabernacle, the priesthood, and the sacrifices—indeed everything revealed and written down at Sinai—are *patterned* after heavenly realities. Leaving nothing to chance or human ingenuity, God reveals what it takes for sinners to approach him. And importantly, this Sinai-pattern of worship reveals to us the way God wants to be worship *and* how we can go astray.

The Danger of Innovative Worship

Exodus 32 records Israel’s innovative worship. Instead of waiting for God’s Word from heaven (i.e., from the mountain top), Israel pressured Aaron to make a god of gold. In this event, Israel sought to worship Yahweh in the best way they knew how—through the formation of an idol, like those they saw in the world around them. The result was a golden calf that broke the second commandment (“You shall make no graven images”). This act of worship invited God’s wrath and threatened to undo God’s people. Mercifully, God heard Moses’s prayer, forgave Israel’s sin, and made a way of covenant renewal.

Looking back, we can see in this event the weakness of Sinai Covenant, the need for something (or someone) greater than Aaron to be a high priest in Israel, and God’s unswerving commitment to do good for his people. At the same time, this act of innovative worship shows us what happens when worship comes from the minds of men and not the mouth of God. As the rest of Israel’s history confirms, whenever God’s people worshiped according to the sincerity of their own hearts, *instead of God’s revealed pattern of worship*, things go badly. Just consider the idolatrous worship in Judges 17–18 or Rehoboam’s golden calves positioned in Dan and Bethel (1 Kings 12:25–33).

Today, in our age of authenticity, where expressive individualism abounds, that same spirit of innovation can be seen. Without intending it, sincerity can lead people to create new ways of worship or employ new figures of speech that do not “fit” what Scripture reveals. For this reason, we need to go back and see what the Scriptures say about worship, so that we can faithfully “improvise” the worship commanded and modeled in Scripture.

Indeed, faithfulness is not found in mere repetition of the events of Sinai, but in seeing how this event presents a pattern of gathered worship around the word of God. As Hebrews 12 teaches, Sinai is a type of the worship now conducted at Zion. And because Christ has seated us in heavenly places (Ephesians 2:5) and assembled us on the earth to bear witness to the worship around God’s throne, we need to learn afresh what such worship looks like.

Worship By the Book

This is why our summer series will take us through the books of Deuteronomy, Psalms, and Ephesians. It is our intent to answer the question: What kind of worship pleases God? And more importantly, what kind of worship has God commanded?

This Sunday we begin a three part series on Deuteronomy 4, where we will see that God's design for worship is ordered by his word, intended for his gathered people, and committed to the exposition of his word in the gathering of the covenant community. Then from Psalms 8, 12, 18, 29, and 36, we will consider a number of songs which model various forms of God-inspired worship. And finally, we will consider the place of congregational singing from Ephesians 5:18-21.

All in all, we want to learn from God's prophets and apostles how God has instructed us to worship. In this way, we protect ourselves from accidentally offering worship that arises from the spiritual longings of the secular age. We also promote in our hearts and present in our gathered assembly a kind of worship that follows God's revealed pattern—a form of worship begun at Sinai, continued in the temple worship of Jerusalem, found ultimately in Christ, and continued in this age until the return of Christ and the arrival of the New Jerusalem.

To that end, may we learn from Scripture what true worship is. And may we who have been made alive by the Spirit give ourselves to studying the Bible to see how God wants us to worship him. For as Scripture teaches, *True Praise Follows a Divine Pattern*.

Soli Deo Gloria, ds