

MALACHI, LIBERALS, AND WORSHIP

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Introduction

The fundamental Truth that since the cross none have been accountable to the Old Testament excuses no one from carefully studying it. The God Christians worship is the Creator God of Genesis 1:1, the God of the Patriarchs, and the God of Israel. His attributes, attitudes, and incomparable power—which certainly includes the revelation of Himself throughout Old and new Testaments alike (Mal. 3:6; Jam. 1:17)—are changeless from eternity. Thus Paul observed: “For whatsoever things were written aforetime were written for our learning, that through patience and through comfort of the scriptures we might have hope” (Rom 15:4).

God’s plan for man’s salvation in the church of Christ by the blood of Christ is revealed in the New Testament of Christ, rather than in the Old. Those who seek to justify their doctrines and practices by the Old Testament are wrong, but the extreme view that avoids any study of the Old Testament is equally mistaken.

One subject about which we can learn much from the Old Testament is worship. Most certainly, the specific acts of worship God ordained for the church are different from those He required of the Patriarchs and of Israel. Nevertheless, we can profit spiritually from some valuable, timeless Old Testament **principles** relating to worship, several of which are accentuated in the book of Malachi.

Men Are not Long Content with God-Authorized Worship

Proud men have been rebelling against God on the subject of worship from the time of Cain (Gen. 1:2–4; Heb. 11:4). Other such notable Bible personalities include Nadab and Abihu (Lev. 10:1–2), Saul (1 Sam. 13:9), Jeroboam I (1 Kin. 12:26–33), and Uzziah (2 Chr. 26:16). They all did what **they preferred** rather than what **God commanded** in worship.

In the fourth century B.C., Israel as a whole had decided they would live as they pleased, instead of as God had ordained. Jehovah sent Malachi to upbraid them for their apostasy, a major element of which involved worship. Their offerings were to be unblemished firstfruits (Lev. 22:20; Deu. 15:21; 17:1; 18:4 et al.). They supposed that God would accept their polluted, blind, lame, and sick offerings, which were not even fit for their governor (Mal. 1:7–8, 13–14).

Some never learn. A century and a half ago the copycat, innovative spirit of several loose thinkers in the church insisted on adding mechanical instruments of music to the church's worship. Those who thus challenged God's authority pretty much brought in their instruments and dared the faithful to object. Within a half century, the church suffered an awful division, principally over this innovation. This division spawned two new denominations (i.e., the Disciples of Christ Christian Church and the Independent Christian Church) that have added innumerable other unauthorized practices through the years. Note it well: An early primary target of those pioneer change agents was the worship of God, which invited vast changes in other areas of their theology.

An increasing number who currently masquerade as God's people are afflicted with Cain's rebellious spirit. Like their forebears, one of their major attacks upon the Lord's church has been at the point of worship. Their approach has been much more patient and subtle than that of their predecessors, however. They began about forty years ago (1) dogmatizing that "dogmatic" preaching was harmful, (2) judging those to be "judgmental" who preach straightforwardly, and (3) being very negative toward what they perceived to be "negative preaching." Some of these fellows became so "positive" in their approach that they were blind to error and sin. This diluting of the Gospel prepared the soil for the devastation that has followed.

The generation that followed them has found the attitudes, doctrines, and practices of denominationalism more and more—and the strictures of New Testament Truth less and less—appealing. They began a continuing scheme in local churches designed either to "convert" or run off "traditionalists" by implementing incremental changes, almost always starting with worship. Their strategy is to push into previously untested territory until resistance becomes strong, and then, after a bit of relaxation, to sally forth on another and more daring push.

These campaigns usually involve such things as a detailed orchestration of worship activities by "praise teams," small groups (or a soloist) singing to the assembly, the raising, fluttering, and clapping of hands, dramatic productions, short pop psychology pep talks delivered by casual-to-slovenly dressed talkers (not to be confused with "preachers"), and the use of women in leadership roles.

These tactics have paved the way for bringing in a piano or an organ (or about any other addition to the worship of God) with hardly a whimper of resistance. As in

Malachi's time, these modern folk are pleasing themselves rather than God—their “offerings” are polluted and blemished.

God Does not Accept Whatever Men Choose to Offer

The attitude that God is obligated to accept whatever men decide to offer to Him has long been evident in Protestant, Catholic, and Orthodox circles. However, they did not originate this attitude. It must have been at least partly responsible for the behavior of the aforementioned Old Testament characters who stumbled at God's worship instructions. It may also explain the behavior of many today who have left the Lord's church in heart and have indicated a proclivity for the doctrines and practices of men.

Malachi makes it clear that we must offer what **God** has chosen rather than what **we** choose:

Oh that there were one among you that would shut the doors, that ye might not kindle fire on mine altar in vain! I have no pleasure in you, saith Jehovah of hosts, **neither will I accept an offering at your hand**.... “Ye say also, Behold, what a weariness is it! And ye have snuffed at it, saith Jehovah of hosts; and ye have brought that which was taken by violence, and the lame, and the sick; thus ye bring the offering: should I accept this at your hand? saith Jehovah (Mal. 1:10–13; cf. Lev. 7:18; emph. DM).

All of those aforementioned Old Testament offenders learned that worship to God is not accepted merely because it is offered, regardless of their sincerity. God's attitude toward presumptuous, unauthorized acts of worship has not (and will not) change. Those (within or without) who believe that it is irrelevant and unnecessary to seek a “thus saith the Lord” for their worship practices are in for a rude awakening at the Judgment if they do not repent. God does not accept that which He has not authorized.

Those Responsible for the Apostasy

Malachi immediately identified the priests—Israel’s leaders—as the principal perpetrators of apostasy:

A son honoreth his father, and a servant his master: if then I am a father, where is mine honor? And if I am a master, where is my fear? saith Jehovah of hosts unto you, O priests, that despise my name. And ye say, Wherein have we despised thy name? (1:6).

The leaders brought their polluted and blemished offerings with the attitude that it was no “big deal” (vv. 7–8). Of God’s way they said, “Behold, what a weariness is it!” (v. 13). In chapter 2 the prophet promised a most graphic curse upon the priests if they did not repent:

And now, O ye priests, this commandment is for you. If ye will not hear, and if ye will not lay it to heart, to give glory unto my name, saith Jehovah of hosts, then will I send the curse upon you, and I will curse your blessings; yea, I have cursed them already, because ye do not lay it to heart. Behold, I will rebuke your seed, and will spread dung upon your faces, even the dung of your feasts; and ye shall be taken away with it (vv. 1-3).

The priests were especially culpable because of their leadership role: “For the priest’s lips should keep knowledge, and they should seek the law at his mouth; for he is the messenger of Jehovah of hosts” (v. 7). They had first “turned aside out of the way” themselves, corrupting God’s covenant, and by their behavior they had “caused many to stumble in the law” (v. 8).

Apostasy almost always begins with and is perpetuated by spiritual leaders who stray. While in God’s spiritual Israel there is no separate priesthood (all are priests [1 Pet. 2:9; Rev. 1:6]), still God has spiritual leaders (i.e., elders, preachers, and teachers)

who are just as responsible for the direction of His people as were the priests Malachi addressed.

Spiritual leaders, mostly preachers and teachers (including editors, professors, and authors), led the apostasy of the nineteenth century. In the present apostasy, elders and school administrators have played a more prominent part, simply because there were far more of both of them by the twentieth century. Many elderships have deliberately **led** their flocks astray. Others have simply forfeited their leadership to apostate preachers, ignoring God's commands to "watch," "oversee," and "rule" (Acts 20:28–31; Heb. 13:17), while wily wolves wasted their flocks.

The governing boards of most universities founded by faithful brethren have ignored their legal and moral obligation to enforce the chartered principles of the founders, acquiescing to strong-willed administrators who seem to care little for Scriptural authority. The boards and the administrators of most of these schools have proved themselves unfaithful stewards (1 Cor. 4:2).

Preachers, professors, editors, and authors are by no means guiltless in the current digression. They have likely been the most influential of all in leading thousands astray. However, they could not have done so had their supervisors (i.e., congregational elders and university administrators, respectively) not supported and protected them. Such derelict supervisors failed to issue appropriate warnings about poisonous books and periodicals (and their authors and editors).

The Remedy Set Forth

Malachi states the remedy explicitly: "Remember ye the law of Moses my servant, which I commanded unto him in Horeb for all Israel, even statutes and ordinances" (Mal. 4:4). The priests had led the people to cease honoring and fearing Jehovah and to despise Him instead (1:6). In these passages the close connection is evident between honoring and fearing God and remembering His law. At the close of Moses' charge to Israel he set a time when they were to hear the reading of the law, and he stated the purpose of it:

Assemble the people, the men and the women and the little ones, and thy sojourner that is within thy gates, that they may hear, and that they may learn, and fear Jehovah your God, and observe to do all the words of this law (Deu. 31:12).

The relationship between fearing God and observing His law is undeniable. When men of liberal spirit willfully reject the commands of God, they rebel against His name, His authority, yea, His very Person. Rebellion against the Word of God is an advertisement of fearless irreverence and dishonor toward the Author of that Word. Jesus equated rejection of His words with rejection of Him (John 12:48). Those today who belittle respect for Divine law, ridicule those who emphasize obedience, and despise the concept of keeping God's commandments would have been comfortable in the company of Cain and would have fit in marvelously with Malachi's contemporaries.

Conclusion

Thankfully, not all rejected the preaching of Malachi:

Then they that feared Jehovah spake one with another; and Jehovah hearkened, and heard, and a book of remembrance was written before him, for them that feared Jehovah, and that thought upon his name (Mal. 3:16).

Would to God that we could see such response from more of those who have ceased to fear God as we faithfully preach the Word. We say to them all—leaders and followers alike—on behalf of the Lord: “Remember ye the law...which I commanded..., even statutes and judgments” (4:4). There is no other remedy.

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