

A P R I M E R O N
WORSHIP
AND
REFORMATION

RECOVERING THE HIGH CHURCH PURITAN

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canonpress
Moscow, Idaho 

Published by Canon Press
P.O. Box 8729, Moscow, ID 83843
800.488.2034 | www.canonpress.com

Douglas Wilson, *A Primer on Worship and Reformation:
Recovering the High Church Puritan*
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Cover design by Rachel Hoffmann.
Printed in the United States of America.

Scripture taken from the King James Version, unless otherwise noted. All emphases are the author's.

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Wilson, Douglas, 1953-

A primer on worship and reformation : recovering the high church Puritan / Douglas Wilson.

p. cm.

ISBN-13: 978-1-59128-061-3 (pbk.)

ISBN-10: 1-59128-061-3 (pbk.)

1. Public worship--Reformed Church. I. Title.

BX9427.W55 2008

264'.042--dc22

2008027178

08 09 10 11 12 13

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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INTRODUCTION

In conservative Reformed circles, a small but promising liturgical movement now appears to be underway. This movement is seeking to recover a practical understanding of the centrality and potency of godly worship—a worship that self-consciously renews covenant with God on a weekly basis. This small book represents an introductory effort to point out the need for such reformation, to discuss the nature of it, and then provide a description of what some of the fruit might look like.

The need for such a reformation is apparent when we look at the various cultural indicators of what defines an evangelical believer in America today. Those who surround themselves with Jesus junk obtained at their local holy hardware store feel free to do so because of how they worship God. This state of affairs did not befall us out of a clear, blue sky—it has historical antecedents. By and large, this is thanks to the rise of religious individualism over the last several centuries and the subsequent democratization of the Faith. But of course, an ever-present temptation is to fight fire with fire, and so conservatives have to be warned to actually *conserve* something. We need to strive for reformation in the Church without introducing additional

schismatic incentives. This will lead naturally to a discussion of our (apparently) oxymoronic subtitle. What, exactly, is a high church Puritan?

High church Puritan thinking begins with the authority of the Word of God, and one of the first things we are told in Scripture is that God has established enmity between the seed of the woman and the seed of the serpent. An understanding of this enmity, this antithesis, must undergird all that we do. This affects how we present ourselves in evangelism to the unbelieving world, and it affects how and why we gather in worship as the people of God. Covenant renewal is the point of all worship, but this worship also has some constituent elements that need to be reconsidered in the light of what the entire worship service actually is. And so we will consider hermeneutics and the preaching of the Word, just as we will consider the role of the sacraments in a reformation of worship. Music is another area of worship where our contemporary trivialization of holy things is most apparent, and so we will note the central role the Psalms must play in any reformation of worship. The cumulative effect of all of this is an overflow of gladness and joy, and so we briefly touch on feasting and the Lord's Day. Worship is warfare, but we are to conduct this warfare in a certain way. And last, we will embrace the importance of including and training our children in this duty of covenant renewal worship. Only in this way will what we undertake be reformational in any important sense. Without our children loving and understanding these things more than we do, all this talk of covenant renewal will be just a Reformed version of those fads or fashions that we see so frequently in the church renewal guru books—with titles like *Unleashing the Vibrant Church*, or *Vibrating the Unleashed Church*. Something like that. Which leads to our first consideration.

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THEY'LL KNOW WE ARE CHRISTIANS BY OUR SCHLOCK

The Church in our nation is in a bad way. This comment is not directed at our moribund quadrant—the ever-relevant liberals dozing off irrelevantly in their ecumenical corner—but rather at the vibrant and active section that we call modern evangelicalism. Now of course there isn't a problem with activity per se, but in the conservative and evangelical wing of the Church, vibrancy and activity always seem to cluster around cash registers.

This is not written with a sense of ironic detachment; we understand ourselves to be covenantally united with the modern evangelical church. We do not just attack these corruptions; we also confess them. Because we have confessed them, and continue to confess them, we do not hesitate to call for the *thorough* reform of the contemporary Church, root and branch. And in order to avoid spiritual confusion, this reform must concern itself first and last with the reform of the worship of God.

Seeing that many glory after the flesh, I will glory also.
For ye suffer fools gladly, seeing ye yourselves are wise.

For ye suffer, if a man bring you into bondage, if a man devour you, if a man take of you, if a man exalt himself, if a man smite you on the face. I speak as concerning reproach, as though we had been weak. Howbeit whereinsoever any is bold, (I speak foolishly,) I am bold also. (2 Cor. 11:18–21)

In this passage, Paul is rebuking the Corinthians for the tolerance that they show to fools—the reference being to the fools who oppress them in the name of bringing them the Word of God. Such ministers are glory hounds, but it is a glorying after the flesh. Two can play this game, Paul says, and so he will glory also. Paul sarcastically notes that the Corinthians are *so* wise, and this wisdom of theirs is the basis for them “suffering fools gladly.” He says that they will tolerate and put up with men who exploit them—but are in effect intolerant of true shepherds. As the people of God, we are being abused by the leadership of the modern evangelical movement—by this I mean the men standing behind the cash registers—and we cravenly submit. We know the taste of boot polish.

We consequently need to conduct an *inventory of our relics*. This phrase is taken from a pamphlet written by John Calvin, the full title of which was *An Admonition Showing the Advantages Which Christendom Might Derive from an Inventory of Relics*. Writing in the midst of a great Reformation of the Church, Calvin pointed out the church’s level of degradation and superstition by noting that if an inventory were actually taken, they would discover that every apostle had more than four bodies, and every saint two or three. Although he didn’t put it this way, it is hard to take any view seriously when it would result in enough pieces of the Virgin Mary’s veil to make a tent for Barnum and Bailey.

But the point of this is inspiration, not duplication. It is far too easy to preach against the sins of others, or attempt to bring about a Reformation that was necessary for another era.

We do need a Reformation in our day, but this means we need to be forgiven for *our* sins. And this means, in its turn, that we must repent of *our* sins. But how will we hear without a preacher? And how will they turn red and embarrassed without a satirist?

Making all necessary adjustments for the changes in time and place, the modern evangelical Church, eyes fat as grease, bastion of born aganism, is fully as corrupt as the Church prior to the Reformation. And this is not a back-handed way of praising the Church prior to the Reformation. When a people have given themselves over to a lie, the scriptural pattern is for God to give them over to more lies, so that they might learn to eat their own cooking. The further into the delusion we go, the starker the evidence of such delusion is, and the more difficult it is to get anyone to see what has actually happened. And on those occasions when someone will admit that there are “excesses” out there, it is still glibly assumed that these excesses are scattered around the periphery of modern evangelicalism. And thus, we heal the wound lightly, saying peace, peace, when there is no peace. This idolatry is right at the heart of our identity as modern evangelicals. We have sold out the faith for a buck. The one thing in our favor is that we made a bigger profit than Judas did. And, unlike Judas, we *keep* what we get.

Like the ancient Corinthians, modern evangelicalism *suffers fools gladly*. The point is not that every individual in the contemporary Church is a scoundrel. The point is that there are many scoundrels, doing very well, thank you, and the rest of us put up with them. This is our sin: *we suffer fools gladly*. And when anyone dares to rebuke the folly, revealing it for what it actually is, *then* we rouse ourselves to rebuke the one who dares to do this thing. Let someone write a trivial and inane novel about holy things, a novel bad enough to make your back teeth ache, and yet everyone sits there as solemn as a judge. I recall picking up a novel one time in a Christian book store and turned to the passage where Jesus was breaking up with his

girl friend (I think her name was Tara) because he had to go off and do the Messiah thing. Let someone write a series of novels about the Apocalypse that has the depth of a painted backdrop in a junior high play, and the modern evangelical world beats a path to their door. Let someone else write *The Vending Machine of Jabez* and sell millions of copies—is the result anything like anguish and repentance? Not a bit of it—we are too busy turning this opportunity around. There are *Vending Machine* bars of soap to be manufactured and sold! Anyone who expresses doubts about this probably doesn't have a zeal to win the lost. Probably doesn't buy Testamints[®] to share with unbelieving friends either.

The Church, when compromised, always tends to adapt itself to the surrounding and prevailing idolatry. When surrounded with the baals of Canaan, the Israelites did not chase after Greek gods. And in the American pantheon, one of the central gods is Mammon. Consequently, the compromised Church of our day bows and scrapes before the altar of this Mammon—and does so while calling the energy expended in all this shuffling a form of evangelism. “In the beginning was the logo, and the logo was with Mammon, and the logo was Mammon. And the people gathered and said they would obey all the words of this law.”

We are not attacking a trifle. Christian retailing is a four *billion* dollar a year industry. This is no peripheral thing; in the pursuit of Mammon, modern evangelicals are *ardent* disciples. Like one famous grafter of Tammany Hall, our motto is “I seen my opportunities and I took ‘em.” The results are a grotesque parody of biblical Christianity. Let's begin with logo imitation. *Christ Supreme* instead of *Krispy Kreme*. *Fruit of the Spirit* instead of *Fruit of the Loom*. *J. Christ* in for *J. Crew*. We have *Christ the King* instead of *Calvin Klein*. This leads us to conclude that all our taste is in our mouth. Speaking of mouths, we have Bible Bars featuring the seven foods listed in Deuteronomy 8:8. You can get a “Depend Upon Christ the King” rubber ducky. Per-

haps you want to purchase some “Satan Stomper” socks. If you want, you can purchase a self-help volume entitled *How to Live Through a Bad Day: Seven Powerful Insights from Christ’s Words on the Cross*. Some of this would make a cat laugh. Little wonder that Stephen Bates, writing about this kind of thing in the *Weekly Standard*, found it a bit “unsettling.” But not everyone is unsettled. “Arlo Pignotti of *godisdead.com*, for instance, entertains atheist conventions with his collection of Bible action figures and other ‘holy paraphernalia.’” Bates was not surprised that an atheist would mock this pious tomfoolery. He *was* surprised however to find that some “equally pointed jabs” came from believing Christians. Several of the jabs he mentioned included the Canon publications of *The Mantra of Jabez* by Douglas Jones and *Right Behind* by Nathan Wilson. In effect, this is how far we have fallen. A sympathetic cultural observer was surprised to find that there might be some Christians who objected to blasphemy. These are curious times we live in. At least the money changers in the Temple were selling animals that the law required to be sacrificed. We modern evangelicals set up shop in the Temple in order to sell blasphemous T-shirts, concerning which Moses said nothing at all. Why not have a post-it note left on the cross, with Jesus dashing off a message thereon about how He has gone off to see His dad? “Be back soon!” Why would any Christian object to this? Oh, I don’t know. Fear of God maybe.

And then there are the Veggie Tales. What is the issue here? That would become abundantly clear if someone seriously suggested a Veggie Tales version of *Beowulf*, or *Lord of the Rings*, or *Prince Caspian*. Modern evangelicals are reverent of everything *except* their religion. Just try to picture Aragorn as a cucumber. What does that do to the ethos of the thing? Or imagine Aslan as a beet. “We couldn’t do that! It would wreck the *story!*” I see. Apparently, as far as modern evangelicals are concerned, the Bible doesn’t have a story to wreck. If misguided evangelicals were to try to bridge current tensions by making

a Veggie Tales version of the Koran, they would all now be in hiding because of the *fatwa* declared against them. In short, the Muslims would respond with outrage over what had been perpetrated on their holy book. But we are not outraged for two reasons—first, we are clueless, and second, we did it to ourselves.

Folks defend Veggie Tales because they inculcate biblical moral values—but such values apart from reverence for *who God is* are nothing but hollow moralism. And moralism is always morally impotent. The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, including all moral wisdom, and that fear cannot be effectually made obsolete by means of cute cartoon characters.

In addition, modern evangelicals have a ravenous hunger to be hipper than thou. They have a deep and covetous *hunger to be cool*—and so we have bestselling authors, Grammy award winners, trademark lawyers, Designer Bibles with Study Notes for just about everybody, rock bands with guys filled with middle class white guy angst, earrings, and tattoos to match, rock bands with Christian women as sexy as it gets, for that special born-again T & A market niche, and onward into the fog. The biblical name for all this is *worldliness*. And to paraphrase the late P.T. Barnum, there is a sucker born again every minute.

There are only three options, which reduce actually to only two. One is to attack the folly. The weapons may vary—sermons, satire, conversation, books like this one, or prayer—but the target must always be to topple the idols. The other two options amount to just one. Join in with the wickedness, or simply suffer it gladly.

Now what does all this have to do with worship, or the reformation of worship? All cultures have a *cultus* at the center. The center of every culture is *its worship*. There is no such thing as a religion-less culture, and the same is true of all sub-cultures. Not surprisingly, the modern evangelical flotsam and jetsam at your local Jesus Junk Store is what we find floating on the surface after the shipwreck of reverent worship. In short, if

you look at what passes for worship in most modern evangelical churches today, you cannot be a bit surprised at what the people who worship in that way buy when they go out the next day to their local Bible and Bauble Book Shop.

Modern cheesiness in worship is now approaching its zenith. Recently, my wife and I were in another city on vacation on the Lord's Day, and so we sought out a place for worship. We picked a church that seemed (somewhat) safe by its name, and joined them to worship our God together. To make a long story short, the high point of the singing portion of the service was when the song leader had everyone put one arm out straight in front, with the other hand behind the head, in order that all the congregants might spin about in place, spritzing like lawn sprinklers. "Who says that church isn't *fun!*" cried one of the song leaders in a moment of religious fervor. When it comes to devotion, Thomas à Kempis got nothing on us.

The great argument advanced today in favor of such seeker sensitive worship is that we have to present the gospel to today's unbeliever in a way that is relevant to him. But the word *relevance*, though it has a fine dictionary definition, really has to be understood as the battle cry of modern unbelief. This is not because the word itself is objectionable, but because liberals and their modern evangelical cousins have freighted it with a hidden system of weights and measures—in which the world, *and not Scripture*, determines the content of our faith and practice.

There are at least two kinds of irrelevance. One is the irrelevance of offering a bicycle to an oyster. But there is another kind of irrelevance entirely, and that is the practice of setting forth the gospel of light and righteousness to those who love their darkness and iniquity. We are *commanded* to be irrelevant in this second sense. We are called to worship God in a way that is pleasing to Him, and to which unbelievers will be attracted *only if God moves them in a sovereign and mysterious way.*

In the modern world, worship that is pleasing to God will stand out as unusual, but *not* because it emphasizes external forms and liturgy while pop evangelical worship does not. It would be more accurate to say that all such external forms are inescapable—meaning that everyone does them. It just looks like “liturgical churches” are emphasizing them more because the forms are so different from our prevailing culture. The typical modern evangelical church also has music, worship, feasts, sabbaths, and church buildings. But the music is that of the Beach Boys (“Crown, crown, I get a crown”), worship modeled after night clubs and television shows, feasts on secular occasions, sabbaths in honor of new gods (Martin Luther King, Jr.), and church buildings that look like the mall.

The traditional and historic forms stand out, but not because Old Testament physical forms are intruding into a New Testament “spiritual” era. Rather, physical expressions of one inward faith differ from other physical expressions of other inward faiths. The reason the contemporary expression is not noticed is because everything about it is so commonplace. The *forms* of contemporary worship are not hard to see because they are spiritual; they are hard to see because they have thoroughly taken on the color of their surroundings. While it is true that angels are hard to see, so are chameleons.

To reapply the words of Henry Van Til, all cultures, *including all ecclesiastical cultures*, are the externalization of a religion. The only question to ask and answer is—what religion? Contemporary forms of worship express a religion. Which one? Historic liturgies express a religion. Which one? And is it the same one? This brings us back to our initial discussion of the current evangelical bedlam. Jesus said to judge by the fruit.

Of course, anti-contemporary worship forms do not carry any potency in the forms themselves. One cannot reform an ecclesiastical culture from the outside in, even if the outside is called “God-centered worship.” We know that you cannot wash the outside of the cup and thereby make the inside clean.

Love is measurement of all things spiritual. But the Bible teaches that love is defined by our behavior in the world of matter. I have encountered those who tell us that the one thing needful is for us to emphasize love, but they do it in markedly unloving ways (“Calvinists aren’t loving. *Jerks.*”). Some might say this divide is the result of some glorifying doctrine while others emphasize love. But from where I sit, the New Testament talks about Christians glorying in their doctrine and consequently loving one another with their bodies and all their stuff.

Those who want to live this way seek to emphasize love as shown in obedience to God’s commandments—God’s commandments with regard to our hands, our feet, our tongues, and our lives. And of course, it must all *begin* in the heart. “[I]f there be any other commandment, it is briefly comprehended in this saying, namely, Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself. Love worketh no ill to his neighbour: therefore love is the fulfilling of the law” (Rom. 13:9–10). And of course, “For this is the love of God, that we keep his commandments: and his commandments are not grievous” (1 Jn. 5:3). Another way of saying this is that we want our love to take incarnational forms. We do not just want to *say* that love is important, but we also want to unload moving vans, prepare meals for the bedridden, prepare feasts to invite people to, build buildings that glorify God, rest on the Lord’s Day so that we do not grind those we love into soul-weariness, and so forth, more and more.

The typological value of all such “external” things in the Old Testament *is* fulfilled in Christ. But it is not true to say that the value of a drink is done away: a glass of cold water given in the Savior’s name will still be remembered at the last day (Mt. 10:42). We still need food, drink, and rest, and we need them in Christ. The key is what Paul points to—righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Ghost. Reformational Christians do exhibit these things, and in the meantime, those who disparage the world of incarnational obedience emphasize “righteousness, peace, and joy,” in the abstract, on paper and in name. Yet their

lives are still unhappy, critical, and resentful. Hollow theology cannot result in full lives.

So we are not emphasizing one culture in order to counteract another. We are emphasizing a potent Christian faith which will take an incarnational form quite distinct from the incarnational form taken by alien faiths and compromised faiths. In short, we are emphasizing the *gospel* without all the attached gnostic inhibitors which the modern evangelical church applies. A gnostic inhibitor is the teaching that love is a matter of the heart—period. The biblical gospel brings a potent love that *begins* in the heart, and ends at the fingertips. Those fingertips may be making a salad, caressing a wife, or laying masonry in the cloister, but they must glorify God in Christ through all that they do.

This is an important part of our sanctification. It is not, however, the means of our sanctification, but rather the stuff of our sanctification. The Holy Spirit is the one who leads us into these things. A table will not bring us to Christ, but Christ most certainly brings us to a table.