

# Excerpts of Archived Lecture:

## FORMALISM & FALSE RELIGION

By Foy Vinson

### Definition of Subject

**Formalism** is defined as “strict or excessive attention to outward forms and customs” or “an over-emphasis on ceremony or outward form, often without practical meaning.” For our purposes, formalism simply refers to a spiritual cardiectomy in which the worship and spiritual life of an individual or people have been dispossessed or deprived of its heart, and all that remains is that which is outward or external. We shall see that this sin or condition applied especially to worship.

**False religion** is somewhat more general in its meaning and may take various forms. I find it interesting that, in the New Testament, the word *threskeia*, which is translated “religion” in Acts 26:5 and James 1:26, 27, is rendered “worship” in Colossians 2:18. Further, a form of this same word is translated “will-worship” in Colossians 2:23. So “false religion” is tantamount to “false worship.” Thus, both parts of my subject bear a direct connection to worship.

### What Constitutes Worship

There are four component parts to worship, any worship, and they are (1) an object; (2) a subject; (3) an attitude; and (4) a form. We have rightly affirmed through the years that scriptural or acceptable baptism consists of three things, i.e., a proper subject, a proper action, and a proper purpose or design, and that if any one of these three parts is missing, we no longer have the “one baptism” of the New Testament. So, it is with worship. It takes all four of the above-mentioned parts, and each must be the right part to constitute true or acceptable worship, and if any part is missing, such an omission vitiates the whole. Hence, let us examine these essential components of true worship as they applied to Israel then as well as to us now.

## The Right Object

Obviously, in worship the principal concern has to do with whom or what is being worshipped. This concern determines the very nature and character of the action of worship. Therefore, in examining what constitutes true worship, we, properly, begin with a consideration of the right object of such worship. God left the people neither in the days of the prophets nor in this present age to wonder or doubt or to have to discover for themselves who the proper object of man's worship is.

In the very first words to Israel that He thundered down from Sinai, God said:

You shall have no other gods before me. You shall not make for yourself any carved image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth; you shall not bow down to them nor serve them. For I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God. (Exod. 20:3–5)

When Jesus during his temptations was asked of Satan to worship him, the Lord cited a statement penned by Moses to Israel in the book of Deuteronomy, which said, "You shall worship the Lord your God and Him only you shall serve" (Matt. 4:10). Notice the exclusivity of that statement! The devil had not said, "Quit worshipping God and begin worshipping me." Satan is content merely to share the homage that properly belongs to the Creator. But Moses taught, and Jesus reinforced, the vital truth that Jehovah is the *only* acceptable object of divine worship.

In the sad and yet ultimately beautiful story unfolded in the book of Hosea, we see that God cannot tolerate polytheism even though He may be included! In that story, Hosea symbolizes Jehovah, and Gomer represents Israel. Gomer's lovers are a picture of the other gods Israel worshipped. The scenario that is portrayed is not that Gomer (Israel) wholly and consciously forsakes Hosea (God), but that she becomes an adulteress and, hence, unfaithful to Him. Israel is described as having a divided heart (10:2). Boice in *The Minor Prophets* comments as follows:

No doubt, when Hosea's wife Gomer went off with her lovers, she would have said that she was not being entirely unfaithful to Hosea. She may have said that she did "still love him." But "love" like that has no place in marriage. By its very nature and by the law of God marriage is an exclusive affair. It is one man and one woman, faithful to each other—"in plenty or in want, in joy or in sorrow, in sickness or in health, until death us do part." When another comes into the marriage what happens is that love is betrayed and the vacillating partner is seen to be unfaithful. This is what Israel was doing. She was coming to the shrines of Jehovah and was pretending to worship Him. She would have said that Jehovah was her God. But even while saying this, Israel was multiplying false altars. Israel was really committing spiritual adultery with the idols of the land. (68)

One of the severe condemnations of the Gentiles of old was that they “exchanged the truth of God for the lie, and worshipped and served the creature rather than the Creator” (Rom. 1:25). When the apostle John was inclined to pay special reverence to the angel who had shown him the wondrous visions of Revelation, he was rebuked with these words, “See that you do not do that. For I am your fellow servant, and of your brethren the prophets, and of those who keep the words of this book. Worship God” (Rev. 22:9). Therefore, if the object of worship is wrong, the worship is false.

## The Right Subject

A second essential ingredient of true worship involves the worshipper himself. Many, seemingly, think that God accepts worship from anyone. The Jews often made this mistake, but such is an inexcusable presumption on the part of man. Solomon, even before the days of the minor prophets, proclaimed, “The sacrifice of the wicked is an abomination to the Lord, but the prayer of the upright is His delight” (Prov. 28:9). Later, God, through Isaiah, said:

Bring no more futile sacrifices; incense is an abomination to Me. The New Moons, the Sabbaths, and the calling of assemblies—I cannot endure iniquity and the sacred meeting. Your New Moons and your appointed feasts My soul hates; They are a trouble to Me, I am weary of bearing them. When you spread out your hands, I will hide My eyes from you; even though you make many prayers, I will not hear. Your hands are full of blood. (Isa. 1:13–15)

Another poignant passage, found in Amos 5:21–24, reads:

I hate, I despise your feast days. And I do not savor your sacred assemblies. Though you offer Me burnt offerings and your grain offerings, I will not accept them, Nor will I regard your fattened peace offerings. **Take away from Me the noise of your songs, For I will not hear the melody of your stringed instruments.** But let justice run down like water, And righteousness like a mighty stream.

What God was saying was: “Get your life in order. Treat your fellowman as you should and respect My will. *Then* you may acceptably worship Me.” Jesus made the same point in the Sermon on the Mount when he cautioned: “Therefore if you bring your gift to the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar, and go your way. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift” (Matt. 5:23, 24).

Note, again, that the worship described in the foregoing passages was not rejected or condemned because it was directed to the wrong object. God was the One being worshipped. The problem was not with the One being worshipped, but with the ones doing the worshipping. They were the wrong subjects! **God desires the devotion and homage of “the upright,”** i.e., those who continue to “hear the law,” (Prov. 28:9), but the incorrigibles who persist in following their own way rather than submitting themselves to the will of the Lord may as well save themselves the effort of offering any act of worship, for He will not have it! Worship directed to our Maker should only proceed from a heart of love, devotion, and humble submission to the divine will. If worship comes from any other source, it is but a sham and a cheap substitute for the real thing.

Interestingly, in the New Testament only a certain class of people are described as the proper subjects of worship—the people of God, those who have been reconciled to God in the one body. In 1 Corinthians 3:16, the apostle asks, “Do you not know that you are the temple of God and that the Spirit of God dwells in you?” In the days of the prophets, the earthly temple in Jerusalem was looked upon as the symbol of the divine presence. The Jews went to Jerusalem to worship, for the temple was the place in particular where such worship was proffered. Paul, therefore, is teaching that the church—a relationship, not a geographical location—is the place for divine worship in this age. **The children of God in Christ Jesus constitute a divinely authorized worshipping society.** The apostle Peter corroborates this conclusion by affirming to Christians that “you also, as living stones are being built up a spiritual house, a holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ... But you are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, His own special people, that you may proclaim the praises of Him who has called you out of darkness into His marvelous light” (1 Pet. 2:5, 9). In Rev. 1:6, John says that Christ “has made us kings and priests to His God and Father.”

Under the first covenant, the Levitical priesthood was ordained to minister in the temple, to offer gifts and sacrifices for the people, to function in their behalf in the matter of divine worship. If you will, they were the only authorized worshippers (in a direct sense) in behalf of the people. Under the new covenant, this distinction between priest and people has been discarded, and the people of God, all of them, together make up this “holy priesthood” and every Christian individually is a priest in his own right. However, still only priests can scripturally perform the divine service.

These washed, sanctified, and justified people are the only ones who *now* may properly worship their God. Peter said that the ones who should proclaim God’s praises were those who had been “called out of darkness into his marvelous light” (1 Peter 2:9).

This principle which distinguishes the qualified worshipper from the unqualified one was continually missed by the Israelites in the days of the prophets. They thought that as long as they followed the external rituals of the law and regularly offered such worship to God, He would accept both them and their worship in spite of their ungodly and grossly immoral lives. The prophets were sent repeatedly to warn them that nothing could be further from the truth, and that they were following the path to certain destruction. Yes, God desires to be praised and adored by His creatures, but only by those who come to Him out of a pure heart and who are characterized by holy living, for, says Jesus, “The Father is seeking such to worship Him” (John 4:23).

## The Right Attitude

This third characteristic of acceptable worship is closely associated with the one just considered, for, certainly, if one does not possess the right attitude, he is most assuredly not the right subject. Paradoxically, then, one might be characterized generally by a life that is upright and respectful of divine law regardless of whether he be an Israelite under the first covenant or he is a Christian under the second covenant, and yet in the *exercise* of worship itself be lacking in the right attitude. **Men always find it easier to do than to be.** Like rivers we tend to follow the course of least resistance rather than to expend the necessary mental effort that must always accompany true worship. Consequently, almost without fail, **ritual evolves into an end within itself.** W. Robertson Smith, as quoted by John Paterson, has written, “What in one generation is a living truth becomes in a later generation a mere dead formula, part of **the religion learned by rote**” (151).

Nowhere is this more pronounced than in the acts of worship. That which in earlier days had been a *meaningful* exercise of faith becomes with the passage of time and generations a *meaningless* exercise of automation and futility! Also, the continual repetition of a rite, if not closely watched, may lead to a dulling of one’s spiritual sensitivity so that, like driving down the interstate highway, we put it **on “automatic” without engaging the mind.** This routinization of the vital was a constant problem among the Jews, and when Jesus walked among them, the “tithing of anise and cummin” and the cleansing of “the outside of the platter” had come to constitute the essence of their religion. They had learned through experience that **an external religion was much easier than one that always involved the heart or soul, i.e., the depths of one’s inner being.** Like committed singles, they did not want to become “emotionally involved.”

Such worship or religion leads to a largely unconscious change in one’s attitude toward God in which His sovereign will and one’s continual obligation to conform every facet of one’s life thereto are forgotten. Instead, one comes to regard Him much as the idolater of old did his god, i.e., as one to be appeased, bargained with, yea, manipulated with certain minimal requirements. This is formalism or legalism at its worst.

Jesus spoke to this problem in the fourth chapter of John, “But the hour is coming, and now is, when the true worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and truth; for the Father is seeking such to worship Him. God is Spirit, and those who worship Him must worship Him in spirit and truth (John 4:23, 24). The phrase “but the hour is coming, and now is” is transitional and denotes **the removal of the old system, the worship of which had largely degenerated into empty externalism. Thus, this system was to be replaced by the worship of a spiritually renovated people who would offer the sacrifices of “a broken and a contrite heart”** (Psa. 51:17). His statement is somewhat reminiscent of Jeremiah’s when he says:

“After those days,” says the Lord, “I will put My law in their minds, and write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be My people. No more shall every man teach his neighbor, and every man his brother, saying, ‘Know the Lord,’ for they all shall know Me, from the least of them to the greatest of them.” (Jer. 31:33, 34)

**To worship God “in spirit” is to worship Him *with* the spirit, which is the same as the mind, the soul, or the heart. Since God is Spirit, and man also is a spirit clothed in flesh, the human spirit, in true worship, reaches out and communes with the Spirit of spirits. The outward forms or rites of worship are but the means or instruments by which the human spirit contacts the divine one. So, without the activity and participation of man’s spirit, no actual worship ever takes place, for the form does not worship God, but the spirit that employs the form.**

In referring to two forms of worship, praying and singing, the apostle Paul teaches that both should be done “with the spirit” (1 Cor. 14:15). The same apostle, further, says of singing that it should be offered “with grace in your hearts to the Lord” or with the “making (of) melody in your heart to the Lord” (Col. 3:16; Eph. 5:19). The most incisive passage in the New Testament on the necessity of heart-involvement in worship is 1 Corinthians 11:27–30, which reads:

Therefore, whoever eats this bread and drinks this cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of the body and blood of the Lord. But let a man examine himself, and so let him eat of that bread and drink of that cup. For he who eats and drinks in an unworthy manner eats and drinks judgment to himself, not discerning the Lord’s body. For this reason many are weak and sick among you, and many sleep.

Two things are learned from this passage in addition to the fact that God finds heartless worship repugnant. First, **the worshipper who lacks the right attitude actually does himself great harm in the very act of worship.** Paul says in this instance that he “eats and drinks judgment (condemnation, FV) to himself.” No wonder he that, in assembling, they were coming “together not for better but for the worse” (v. 17).

God had long ago declared through Isaiah and Amos that he “hated,” “despised,” and looked upon as an “abomination” ritual without reverence or form without fervor. This kind of profanation or sacrilege, undoubtedly, hastened the day of God’s judgment upon Israel. The Christian should not think that he will fare any better when he is guilty of the same conduct.

Second, the effect that mere formalism in worship has upon the worshipper’s spiritual life and vitality is to kill them off. The worship of God was designed not only for the glory of God but also for the good of man. Every act of worship which Jehovah has ordained, whether in the days of the prophets or in this present dispensation, has in mind the strengthening and upbuilding of man before his God. When, however, man ravages these acts by robbing them of his heart, he obliterates any, and every, benefit which otherwise would have accrued to his soul. We may be guilty of [not discerning] even when surrounded by quietness and apparent reverence and with a very serious look upon our countenance. Without the right attitude our worship is for naught!

## The Right Form

The fourth and final constituent of true worship is the right form. Jesus stated that God was to be worshipped **“in spirit and truth.”** Generally, we have understood the Lord to be setting forth two requirements here: one, **the right attitude; and the other, the right form.** Some, however, have contended that only one requirement is actually mentioned in the passage, and that He is merely saying that we should worship God in spirit and in fact or genuinely. <sup>1</sup> John 3:8 is adduced as an example of this particular meaning of the expression “in truth” where John exhorts, “Let us not love in word or in tongue, but in deed and in truth.” We are told that if Jesus had meant to say in John 4 that we are to worship God upon the basis of truth or according to truth, He would have used the preposition “epi,” which means “on the basis of,” instead of the preposition “en.”

Now, this all may be true, but something else is also undeniably true, and that is that acceptable worship must be offered in the form revealed in the word of God. **The forms or outward expressions of true worship have always been determined by God, never by man. Worship does involve ritual or the performance of a rite. That is what is meant by an “act” of worship. But God always tells man what “act” to perform in the worship of Him.** Paul said, “And whatever you do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus” (Col. 3:17). In failing or refusing to do *what* God requires in worship, men repudiate the essence of worship, namely, showing honor and respect to God! How can a man show true reverence for God if in the very act he employs for worship, he goes beyond or outside the will of God?

In worship, as in other areas, man tends to resist any limitations or restrictions imposed upon him by God. Some years ago Pat Boone recorded a song that included the words, “Me and Jesus have our own thing going.” This was the thrust of the entire song, and it was an effort to justify individual freedom of expression and nonconformity in religious matters.

Cain “had his own thing going” when he changed the form of worship from the sacrifice of an animal to the offering of vegetables! Nadab and Abihu “had their own thing going” when they “offered profane fire before the Lord, which He had not commanded them” (Lev. 10:1) and thereby altered the form or outward expression of worship divinely authorized! King Saul “had his own thing going” as well as they when he changed the right form of worship by presuming to act in the capacity of a priest in offering a burnt offering (1 Sam. 13). Saul sought to justify his action in the absence of Samuel by saying, “I felt compelled, and offered a burnt offering” (v. 12). And what were the results of such nonconformity and freedom of expression? Cain’s offering was rejected; Nadab and Abihu were devoured by a fire that “went out from the Lord; and Saul lost his throne! There seems to be a lesson here somewhere.

Thus, in rejecting the forms of true worship ordained by God or in adding to them, we engage in a kind of idolatry in that we have elevated our will and desires above His and such corruption of the right form may well lead even to further and more overt forms of idolatry. Remember that you do not have to say, “I am worshipping an idol,” to be worshipping an idol! You might say you are worshipping God and even believe that to be so while in fact you are worshipping an idol.

Formalism and false religion were indeed problems that were faced and dealt with by those Old Testament troubleshooters of God. And though we live in terms of time so far removed from them, we still owe a great debt of gratitude to these godly men who at great cost to themselves boldly enunciated principles that are as much needed now as they were then. Their stern rebukes and sobering warnings are as timely today as when first uttered nearly three millenniums ago. As long as men fail to respect the sovereign will of God concerning the proper object, subject, attitude, and form of worship, these problems will work their spiritual havoc and ruin. May we as God’s people today be alert to these dangers—all of them—and recommit ourselves to always, and only, being “true worshippers” of our great God.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Vinson, F. (1989). [Formalism and False Religion](#). In M. Curry (Ed.), *Minor Prophets for Every Man* (pp. 177–188). Temple Terrace, FL: Florida College Bookstore.