

A Prophet for Today

How God Views Religion

Amos 4:1-5:17

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Introduction

In *The Washington Post* on February 2, 2018, Bob Smietana wrote an article titled, “For Tom Brady, Football has Become Religion. No, Really.” He noted that Tom Brady, quarterback for the New England Patriots (at that time), is on a spiritual quest.

Football has become Brady’s religion, said Gotham Chopra, a filmmaker whose latest project is “Tom vs. Time,” a behind-the-scenes documentary series about the quarterback’s preparations for that past NFL season.

“What’s really at the epicenter of it is this devotional love for the game,” Chopra said. “It is his vocation—it’s what gives his life meaning and purpose.”

“I do want to know the whys in life,” Brady said in a version of the spiritual episode, according to the *New York Times*. “I do want to know why we’re here, where we’re going; trying to find that deeper purpose. To live it, through sports in a very authentic way, makes so much sense to me.”

For Chopra, son of best-selling spiritual writer Deepak Chopra and a devoted Boston sports fan, seeing sports as religion makes sense. Both create community, have saints and rituals, and take place on hallowed ground.

And—in a polarized nation—both can unite disparate groups of people, at least for a few hours.¹ At least, that is how Bob Smietana views religion and sports.

One of the great challenges we face is how to worship

¹ See <https://www.preachingtoday.com/illustrations/2018/october/football-is-tom-bradys-religion.html>.

God. All people have an understanding that there is a God and that he is to be worshiped. But because people are in rebellion against God, we tend to want to worship either the god we fashion (like Tom Brady does) or to worship the true God in the way we fashion. And yet God has told us that we are to worship him in the way that he has prescribed in Scripture. We call that the Regulative Principle of Worship.

Amos was sent by God to speak to his covenant people in the northern kingdom of Israel. Earlier in his ministry, Amos had pointed out the problems with the surrounding nations. One could understand how one of God's prophets would speak out against pagan nations. What surprised the people of God is that Amos had a message from God for them—and it was not a pleasant message.

The people of Israel (and Judah) were experiencing tremendous prosperity. And they believed that was a sign of God's blessing on them. As far as they were concerned, God was blessing them because they were very religious. The problem, however, was that they were determining how to worship God. And God was not pleased with their self-determined worship. Let us learn how God views religion.

Scripture

Let us read Amos 4:1-5:17:

**¹“Hear this word, you cows of Bashan,
who are on the mountain of Samaria,
who oppress the poor, who crush the needy,
who say to your husbands, ‘Bring, that
we may drink!’**

²The Lord God has sworn by his holiness

that, behold, the days are coming upon you,
when they shall take you away with hooks,
even the last of you with fishhooks.

³ And you shall go out through the breaches,
each one straight ahead;
and you shall be cast out into Harmon,”
declares the Lord.

⁴ “Come to Bethel, and transgress;
to Gilgal, and multiply transgression;
bring your sacrifices every morning,
your tithes every three days;

⁵ offer a sacrifice of thanksgiving of that
which is leavened,
and proclaim freewill offerings, publish them;
for so you love to do, O people of Israel!”
declares the Lord God.

⁶ “I gave you cleanness of teeth in all your cities,
and lack of bread in all your places,
yet you did not return to me,”
declares the Lord.

⁷ “I also withheld the rain from you
when there were yet three months to
the harvest;

I would send rain on one city,
and send no rain on another city;
one field would have rain,
and the field on which it did not rain
would wither;

⁸ so two or three cities would wander to another city
to drink water, and would not be satisfied;
yet you did not return to me,”
declares the Lord.

⁹ “I struck you with blight and mildew;
your many gardens and your vineyards,
your fig trees and your olive trees the locust
devoured;

yet you did not return to me,”
declares the Lord.

¹⁰ “I sent among you a pestilence after the
manner of Egypt;
I killed your young men with the sword,
and carried away your horses,
and I made the stench of your camp go
up into your nostrils;
yet you did not return to me,”
declares the Lord.

¹¹ “I overthrew some of you,
as when God overthrew Sodom and
Gomorrah,
and you were as a brand plucked out of
the burning;
yet you did not return to me,”
declares the Lord.

¹² “Therefore thus I will do to you, O Israel;
because I will do this to you,
prepare to meet your God, O Israel!”

¹³ For behold, he who forms the mountains
and creates the wind,
and declares to man what is his thought,
who makes the morning darkness,
and treads on the heights of the earth—
the Lord, the God of hosts, is his name!

^{5:1} Hear this word that I take up over you
in lamentation, O house of Israel:

² “Fallen, no more to rise,
is the virgin Israel;
forsaken on her land,
with none to raise her up.”

³ For thus says the Lord God:
“The city that went out a thousand
shall have a hundred left,
and that which went out a hundred

- shall have ten left
to the house of Israel.”
- ⁴For thus says the Lord to the house of Israel:
“Seek me and live;
⁵but do not seek Bethel,
and do not enter into Gilgal
or cross over to Beersheba;
for Gilgal shall surely go into exile,
and Bethel shall come to nothing.”
- ⁶Seek the Lord and live,
lest he break out like fire in the house
of Joseph,
and it devour, with none to quench it
for Bethel,
- ⁷O you who turn justice to wormwood
and cast down righteousness to the earth!
- ⁸He who made the Pleiades and Orion,
and turns deep darkness into the morning
and darkens the day into night,
who calls for the waters of the sea
and pours them out on the surface of
the earth,
the Lord is his name;
- ⁹who makes destruction flash forth
against the strong,
so that destruction comes upon the fortress.
- ¹⁰They hate him who reproves in the gate,
and they abhor him who speaks the truth.
- ¹¹Therefore because you trample on the poor
and you exact taxes of grain from him,
you have built houses of hewn stone,
but you shall not dwell in them;
you have planted pleasant vineyards,
but you shall not drink their wine.
- ¹²For I know how many are your transgressions
and how great are your sins—

you who afflict the righteous, who take a bribe,
and turn aside the needy in the gate.
¹³ Therefore he who is prudent will keep
silent in such a time,
for it is an evil time.
¹⁴ Seek good, and not evil,
that you may live;
and so the Lord, the God of hosts, will be with you,
as you have said.
¹⁵ Hate evil, and love good,
and establish justice in the gate;
it may be that the Lord, the God of hosts,
will be gracious to the remnant of Joseph.
¹⁶ Therefore thus says the Lord, the God of hosts,
the Lord:
“In all the squares there shall be wailing,
and in all the streets they shall say, ‘Alas! Alas!’
They shall call the farmers to mourning
and to wailing those who are skilled in lamentation,
¹⁷ and in all vineyards there shall be wailing,
for I will pass through your midst,”
says the Lord. (Amos 4:1-5:17)

Lesson

Amos 4:1-5:17 shows us how God views religion.

Let's use the following outline:

1. God Views Problematic Worship (4:4; 5:5-6)
2. God Sends Particular Warnings (4:6-11)
3. God Issues Personal Pleas (5:4-6a)

I. God Views Problematic Worship (4:4; 5:5-6)

First, God views problematic worship.

The covenantal people of God in Israel believed that God was pleased with their religious expressions. But he was not.

In Amos' day, religion was focused in three locations. The first location was at Bethel, where Amos began his prophecy against Israel and perhaps conducted most of his ministry (see 7:10-17). Bethel is mentioned in Amos 4:4 and 5:5-6. The second location was Gilgal and it is mentioned in Amos 4:4 and 5:5. And the third location was Beersheba, mentioned only in Amos 5:5. Let's look briefly at each location and see why the worship there was problematic.

First, let's look at Bethel. You may recall that Bethel was associated with the patriarch Jacob. He rested there when he fled from his brother Esau, after cheating him out of his birthright. That night, as Jacob slept he had a dream in which he saw angels ascending and descending on a ladder that reached to heaven. God spoke to Jacob there and restated the previous covenant made with Abraham and Isaac, when he said in Genesis 28:15, "Behold, I am with you and will keep you wherever you go, and will bring you back to this land. For I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you." When Jacob woke up he was impressed that God was in that place and called it "Bethel," which means "house of God." Later, when Jacob returned from Paddan Aram, he visited Bethel again and remembered that it was there "where God had spoken with him" (Genesis 35:15).

Over time, the people of God came to believe that God would meet with them at Bethel. King Jeroboam built a temple in Bethel, set up a golden calf, appointed priests to serve in the temple, and made it the center for a special national festival to be held every year (1 Kings 12:31-33).

This was religion. But it was not the kind of worship that was prescribed by God in his word. So, Amos said sarcastically

in Amos 4:4a, **“Come to Bethel, and transgress.”** Or again, with the inability of anyone to find God at Bethel, he quoted God as saying in Amos 5:4b-5a, **“Seek me and live; but do not seek Bethel.”**

Second, let's look at Gilgal. When the people of God left Egypt and finally entered the Promised Land, the first place at which they stopped was Gilgal. They erected a monument to their crossing and consecrated themselves as God's covenant people. All the males were circumcised there because they had not done so for the forty years that they had been wandering in the wilderness. Also, it was at Gilgal that the manna that God had given them stopped and they began to eat the fruit of the Promised Land (Joshua 5:1-12).

So, Gilgal symbolized possession of the Promised Land. But Amos said sarcastically in Amos 5:5, **“Do not enter into Gilgal... for Gilgal shall surely go into exile.”** Historically, Gilgal was important. However, the people were superstitiously worshiping God at Gilgal, and so religion without reality meant nothing.

And third, let's look at Beersheba. Interestingly, Beersheba was in Judah. Apparently, the people of God used to make pilgrimages to Beersheba. This place was important for it figured prominently in the lives of the three great patriarchs: Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Each patriarch found himself at some point in his life at Beersheba. And each time, God spoke to the patriarch, essentially saying, “I am with you” (Genesis 21:22-23; 26:24; 46:3-4).

But in Amos 5:5, God tells the people not to **“cross over to Beersheba,”** for God will not meet with them in their self-styled worship.

Let us keep in mind the words of The Westminster Confession of Faith regarding the Regulative Principle of Worship,

which states: “But the acceptable way of worshipping the true God is instituted by himself, and so limited by his own revealed will, that he may not be worshipped according to the imaginations and devices of men, or the suggestions of Satan, under any visible representation, or any other way not prescribed in the holy scripture.”²

II. God Sends Particular Warnings (4:6-11)

Second, God sends particular warnings.

God sent many warnings to the covenant people of God. He wanted them to repent and return to him. In Amos 4:6-11, God sent warnings to his people. He sent them famine (4:6), drought (4:7-8), crop failure (4:9), military defeat (4:10), and near destruction (4:11). And each time, there is this dreadful refrain, “**‘... yet you did not return to me,’ declares the Lord**” (4:6, 8, 9, 10, 11).

Every so-called “natural disaster” must be seen as God warning his covenant people to examine their worship. Are we worship God according to his word? Or are we worshipping God in the way we want to worship him?

III. God Issues Personal Pleas (5:4-6a)

And third, God issues personal pleas.

Listen to what God says in Amos 5:4-5, “**For thus says the Lord to the house of Israel: ‘Seek me and live; but do not seek Bethel, and do not enter into Gilgal or cross over to Beersheba; for Gilgal shall surely go into exile, and**

² Westminster Assembly, *The Westminster Confession of Faith: Edinburgh Edition* (Philadelphia: William S. Young, 1851), 113–114.

Bethel shall come to nothing.” Amos reiterates that plea in Amos 5:6a, **“Seek the Lord and live.”**

God wants his people to seek him. He wants his people to have a vital relationship with him. He wants his people to submit to him and his word. He wants his people to do what he says in his word. He does not want his people to decide what they think will be a nice way to worship God.

I shared this illustration before. Suppose it is my wife Eileen’s birthday and I decide that I am going to really spoil her. So, I get her up early and take her to McDonald’s for breakfast. After breakfast, I take her to Lowe’s and buy her a really nice tool set so that she has all the tools she needs for projects in the house. In the afternoon, we go to the football game. That evening, I take her to my favorite restaurant for dinner because, you know, it is her special day.

What is wrong with this picture? I am doing all the things that I enjoy and not what she will enjoy. In just the same way, we think God will be pleased with how we would like to worship him. But, dear friends, he is not pleased. He does not want to be worshiped in “any other way not prescribed in the holy scripture.”

Conclusion

Therefore, having seen how God views religion in Amos 4:1-5:17, let us worship the Lord in the way he prescribes.

Let us pay attention to how we think about worship. Let us pay attention to what we do in worship. It is no trifling matter. Let us “seek the Lord and live.” Amen.

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The Mission Statement of the Tampa Bay Presbyterian Church
is:

*To bring people to Jesus Christ
and membership in his church family,
develop them to Christlike maturity,
equip them for their ministry in the church
and life mission in the world,
in order to magnify God's name.*

Sermons by Rev. Freddy Fritz

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