



# MINISTRY OF THE WORD

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## Apostasy on Trial, Part 6

Jeremiah 2:20-25, “For of old I have broken your yoke and burst your bonds;  
And you said, ‘I will not transgress,’  
When on every high hill and under every green tree  
You lay down, playing the harlot.

- 21 Yet I had planted you a noble vine, a seed of highest quality.  
How then have you turned before Me  
Into the degenerate plant of an alien vine?
- 22 For though you wash yourself with lye, and use much soap,  
Yet your iniquity is marked before Me,” says the Lord GOD.

- 23 "How can you say, 'I am not polluted,  
I have not gone after the Baals'?  
See your way in the valley;  
Know what you have done:  
You are a swift dromedary breaking loose in her ways,
- 24 A wild donkey used to the wilderness,  
That sniffs at the wind in her desire;  
In her time of mating, who can turn her away?  
All those who seek her will not weary themselves;  
In her month they will find her.
- 25 Withhold your foot from being unshod, and your throat from thirst.  
But you said, 'There is no hope.  
No! For I have loved aliens, and after them I will go.'

In Jeremiah's day the "Sin De Jour" was Baalism. Throughout Jeremiah's entire ministry we find the prophet battling against this wicked religion. For example, At the start of Jeremiah's ministry (627 BC), during the reign of Josiah, the prophet indicted the people of God because they were:

- Burning incense to Baal (Jeremiah 7:9; 11:13, 17).
- Swearing by his name (Jeremiah 12:16).
- Prophesying by Baal (Jeremiah 2:8).
- Offering human sacrifices to Baal (Jeremiah 19:5).

Then toward the end of Jeremiah's prophetic ministry (587 BC), during the reign of Zedekiah, we find the prophet still indicting the people because of Baalism:

- In Jeremiah 32:29 we read of them burning incense to Baal.
- In Jeremiah 32:35 we read that many of Jeremiah's countrymen were offering their children as sacrifices to the pagan god, Molech.

Throughout his ministry, (and in the book) Jeremiah continued to confront the Baalistic tendencies of the nation!

Now, this could be written off as "academically fascinating" if it weren't for the fact that according to Revelation 17, the "Sin De Jour" of the last days, the days in which we live, also will be Baalism/Mysticism/the religion of Babel! This sin will attach itself to God's people in the last days. This is the very sin Jeremiah is battling against! Thus the lawsuit that God filed against His people in this passage is as fresh and applicable today as when it was first given. What does God think when it comes to the church's love affair with neo-Baalism? We need not wonder or guess. God gives us His assessment.

Jeremiah 2:13, "For My people have committed two evils: they have forsaken Me, the

fountain of living waters, to hew for themselves cisterns, broken cisterns, that can hold no water.”

The issue before Jeremiah was not so much the content of what God’s people professed, but how they approached God when they worshipped Him or what we would call their liturgy! If we travelled back to Jeremiah’s day, very few in Judah would have thought there was anything wrong with their religion. When Jeremiah accused his countrymen of Baalism, they strongly objected, “I am not defiled. I have not gone after the Baals” (Jeremiah 2:23b)! While they had not gone after the Baals in their formal theology *per se*, but they had gone after the Baals in their liturgy or the way they worshipped God. This had infected every part of their daily living!

While no one formally modified their formal confession of faith, nevertheless the nation had become Baalists through and through. Truly they had “exchanged the glory of God for Baal” (Jeremiah 2:11)! Now as the saying goes, “He who would ignore the past is bound to repeat it,” let’s continue to examine the lawsuit which God filed against His people so that we can look to ourselves lest we too be tempted. Accordingly, consider with me the Implications of Judah’s rebellion in Jeremiah’s day and in our own.

## A God Of Our Own Imagination

A church engaging in neo-Baalism will replace God’s worship with one that is according to their own imagination.

Jeremiah 2:20, “For long ago I broke your yoke *and* tore off your bonds; but you said, ‘I will not serve!’ For on every high hill and under every green tree you have lain down as a harlot.”

Prior to the building of the temple, recall that God’s people were “allowed” to worship at various and sundry high places throughout Israel.<sup>1</sup> We read of God’s people at the start of Solomon’s reign.

1 Kings 3:2, “The people were still sacrificing on the high places, because there was no house built for the name of the Lord until those days.”

In fact, go back in your mind to the time of Samuel.

1 Samuel 7:15-17, “Now Samuel judged Israel all the days of his life. And he used to go annually on circuit to Bethel and Gilgal and Mizpah, and he judged Israel in all these places. Then his return *was* to Ramah, for his house *was* there, and there he judged Israel; and he built there an altar to the Lord.”

One of the duties of Samuel as a prophet/priest was annually to inspect the worship which was being offered to God at primarily three religious high places; Bethel, Gilgal, and Mizpah. And

yet, we know that there were more of these cites (minor in comparison) scattered throughout Israel where a Jewish family could worship the Lord under the supervision of a priest.<sup>2</sup> In fact, when the monarchy was established and the temple built, one of the duties/jobs of the king now was to remove these high places. We read of this duty when we read of King Asa and Jehoshaphat:

2 Chronicles 15:17, “But the high places were not removed from Israel; nevertheless Asa’s heart was blameless all his days.”

2 Chronicles 17:6, “And he [Jehosaphat] took great pride in the ways of the Lord and again removed the high places and the Asherim from Judah.”

Now as these “high places” early in the history of God’s people were frequented by the people of God for the purpose of worshipping the Lord with a peace offering (which recall involved the offering up of a lamb which was then eaten by the entire family and the priest signifying that “peace had been restored”), large shade trees were planted at these sites so that God’s people could enjoy the worship of God in the cool of the shade.

It was these “high places” and “trees” that is referenced in Jeremiah, “...for on every high hill and under every green tree you have lain down as a harlot.” Places that used to sport the worship of Yahweh had become shrines dedicated to the worship and service of Baal So, instead of one saw unspeakable sexual acts being performed in the pursuit of “ecstasy.”

Jeremiah 2:21, “Yet I planted you a choice vine, a completely faithful seed. How then have you turned yourself before Me into the degenerate shoots of a foreign vine?”

The word for “degenerate shoots” speaks of a sexual perversity of the first kind. As the founder of the Canaanites, the sexually deviant Ham<sup>3</sup> so the Canaanites created a religion which revolved around the physical act between a man and a woman. A couple of the primary tenants of this religion are these:

- It begins with the recognition that in Mysticism/Baalism, the deity is a force- like electricity- that you plug into (~ Star Wars).
- The vehicle/portal by which you accessed the deity typically was one or a combination of the following (depending upon the deity being worshipped)...
  - Wine.
  - Music.
  - Dancing.
  - Repetitive chants.
  - Human/child sacrifice.
  - Drugs.
  - In the case of Baal, the physical act between the man and the woman.
- The goal was to “experience” the deity in an emotional frenzy called ecstasy; which in Baalism was not an adjective, but a noun. “Ecstasy” wasn’t a description of a feeling,

but the formal, altered state into which the worshipper ascended via their worship. It was personal; not corporate, subjective; not objective, private; not public. When the mind, heart, and soul of the worshipper was joined to the deity, it was hoped that the religious euphoria would influence the deity to act, give, or provide something that was sought after.

Now you must see that Baalism posed a constant threat to the people of God. And this is why the Lord charged His people in the Conquest to remove completely from the land the wicked people and culture of Baal, (Genesis 15:16; Leviticus 18:24-28). Yet God's people did not obey the Lord; the Canaanite religion remained. This meant that always before God's people was the constant allure/temptation of Baal. Consider the allure. The worship and service of God has three principles that we must always keep in mind.

- First, it is the worship of a Person/Being and not that of a force. This is important! Because we can't see God or hold an in-time conversation with Him we tend to relegate Him to the realm of the mystical/untouchable. Yet this is a mistake. Let us never forget that while He is transcendent, nevertheless He is a person who in salvation has condescended to our level and so is always and ever near! He walks with us and so is with us at all times!
- Secondly, as it is the worship and service of Person/Being, the worship that is offered understandably is given according to the desire of the One being worshipped! For example if it is your mother's birthday and you want to honor her do you propose activities that you want to do (go fishing, watch the game, work out in the yard) or that which you know your mom would want? Is the event about you or your mother? If it is about me, then my feelings and desires are of the utmost concern. If it is about my mom, then her feelings and desires are that which must be my concern. Brothers and sisters, God is a Being/Person who calls us to worship Him. And so, just like with the birthday of a loved one, the manner of our appreciation is set by God and the genuineness of our expressions of love and adoration is NOT tied to how we feel.
- Third, the worship we offer necessarily will be objective (verses subjective) and determined by God (verses ad-libbed or extemporaneous). The gauge will NOT be how the individual worshiper feels, BUT on whether or not God is pleased! Eugene Peterson put it this way:

Yahwism established a form of worship that was centered in the proclamation of the word of the covenant God. The appeal was made to the will. Humankind's rational intelligence was roused to attention as it was called upon to respond as a person to the will of God. In Yahwism something was *said*- words that called men and women to serve, love, obey, act responsibly, decide.

In contrast to Baalism, Yahwism exerted continuous pressure to elevate worship into the sphere of conscious intelligence and clearly defined concepts. (Peterson, 1992, p. 181)

It is just the opposite in the worship of Baal. As the focus is Ecstasy (that is, ascending into mystical communion with the deity/force) that which was “king” in the worship of Baal was the personal taste preferences of the individual worshipper; not the word or will of God! Accordingly, that which determined the worship that was offered (both its content and the amount) was the individual. Think of it, if we are the ones being elevated, we are the only ones in a position to say what elevates us from one level of excitement to the next. So the goal of every service (in fact the service didn’t conclude until the goal was met) was the emotional, sensational high of the worshipper.

In this context, there is no comparison when it comes to the pleasure, fun, or experience of the worship of Yahweh and the worship that occurred with Baal. To go from God to Baal was to go from that which was seemingly “cold” and cerebral to that which was incredibly emotional. And to go from the worship service of Baal to a worship service of God would raise the question if any worship had taken place at all! Peterson further describes this:

The distinction between the worship of Baal and the worship of Yahweh is a distinction between approaching the will of the covenant God that could be understood and known and obeyed, and the blind life-force in nature that could only be felt, absorbed, and imitated. The sexual-orgiastic complex that was bound up with the magic and divinization of nature was always a temptation and frequently a snare... (Peterson, 1992, p. 182)

Thus we read of God’s complaint against His people:

Jeremiah 2:20a, “For long ago I broke your yoke *and* tore off your bonds; but you said, ‘I will not serve!’...”

We understand what was going on. Again in the mind of the people of God, Israel hadn’t rejected the worship and service of Yahweh (cf. v. 23). So what had they rejected? They had rejected the worship and service of God on God’s terms! We could read the complaint in this verse, “I will not serve on God’s terms... according to God’s word!” That was the issue! In Baalism, worship is rooted to the individual and so to his personal taste preferences! In Christianity, worship is governed by the covenant will of God! So do you see that God’s people no longer offered the worship God wanted, but the worship that most excited them? Which in this case was the “degenerate” practice of cult prostitution...

Jeremiah 2:20b, 21b, “...For on every high hill and under every green tree you have lain down as a harlot... How then have you turned yourself before Me into the degenerate shoots of a foreign vine?”

How does this apply to the modern scene? Sadly, the worship practices of Baal are alive and well today in the church. Recall how God described the church that will dominate the landscape at the end time.

Revelation 17:4-5, “And the woman [that is, the whore of Babylon, the false church of the last day] was clothed in purple and scarlet, and adorned with gold and precious stones and pearls, having in her hand a gold cup full of abominations and of the unclean things of her immorality, and upon her forehead a name *was* written, a mystery, ‘BABYLON THE GREAT, THE MOTHER OF HARLOTS AND OF THE ABOMINATIONS OF THE EARTH.’”

As we saw last time, the “whore of Babylon” is a reference to the false religion which will captivate the nations and so the world in the last day.<sup>4</sup> In fact, it was alive and well in Paul’s day.

Ephesians 5:18, “And do not get drunk with wine, for that is dissipation, but be filled with the Spirit.”

The primary deity associated with the city of Ephesus in Christ’s day was Bacchus, the god of wine (in Canaanite religion, Bacchus was Hadad). Thus, the main portal through which a devotee entered into communion with this deity in Ephesus was wine.

Now it is obvious from Ephesians that though the believers in Ephesus loved the Lord, nevertheless the tendency in their worship was to attempt to “commune” with God by getting drunk, ascending through the portal of wine. In other words, their background of mysticism was rearing its ugly head. Accordingly Paul warned them, “[In your worship], do not get drunk with wine, for that is dissipation [that is NOT how you worship God!], but be filled with the Spirit [that is, be driven and so governed by God’s word (cf. Colossians 3:16-17)!].”

It was the religious system of Baal that tempted the people of God in Jeremiah’s day. It was the same religious system which Paul warned the saints to guard against in Ephesus. It is this religious system of ascendancy that has and will continue to make great inroads into the church in the last days. How will it be manifested today in the church? How will it express itself amongst a people who know nothing of Baal or Zeus or Bacchus, but only the Lord Jesus Christ? Paul’s exhortation in Ephesians 5 gives us the answer. Clearly the temptation in Ephesus was to relate to God NOT by responding to His word, BUT by making an appeal to an emotional component by which the worshipper could ascend into the presence of the divine (just as in Baalism) which is why Paul said, “And do not get drunk with wine, for that is dissipation, but be filled with the Spirit”!

Now thirty years ago Eugene Peterson began warning Christendom about Baalism and the growing threat it posed to the church. At the time, he gave two ways in which neo-Baalism manifests itself today, he wrote this:

Pastors are subjected to two recurrent phrases from the people to whom they give spiritual leadership. Both are reminiscent of Baalism, enough so as to earn the label ‘neo-Baalism.’ The phrases are: ‘Let’s have a worship experience’ and ‘I don’t get anything out of it.’ (Peterson, 1992, p. 183)

Now rather than “re-invent the wheel,” I want to use Peterson’s work to bring this home to us. Consider the first neo-Baalistic expression common today:

*“Let’s Have a Worship Experience”*

Listen to Peterson’s words as it relates to this statement:<sup>5</sup> ...

The phrase ‘let’s have a worship experience’ is Baalism’s substitute for ‘let us worship God.’ The difference is between cultivating something that makes sense to an individual [Neo-Baalism] and acting in response to what makes sense to God [Biblical worship]. In a ‘worship experience,’ a person sees something that excites interest and tries to put religious wrappings around it. A person experiences something in the realm of dependency, anxiety, love, and a connection is made with the ultimate. Worship is a movement from what a person sees, or experiences, or hears, to prayer or celebration or discussion in a religious atmosphere. Subjectivity is encouraged.

But neither Bible nor church uses the word ‘worship’ as a description of experience. Pastors hear this adjectival usage in sentences like, ‘I can have a worship experience with God on the golf course.’ That means, ‘I have religious feelings reminding me of good things, awesome things, beautiful things nearly any place.’ Which is true enough. The only thing wrong with the statement is its ignorance, thinking that such experiences make up what the church calls ‘worship.’ The biblical usage is very different. It talks of worship as a response to God’s word in the context of the community of God’s people. Worship is neither subjective only nor private only. It is not what I feel when I am by myself; it is how I act toward God in responsible relation with God’s people. Worship, in biblical sources and in liturgical history, is not something a person *experiences*, it is something we *do*, regardless of how we feel about it, or whether we feel anything about it at all. (Peterson, 1992, pp. 183-184)

So how is Baalism manifested today? It has transformed the liturgy of the worship of Christ’s church into an experience in which the emotions of the worshipper are manipulated to give the individual a growing sense of ascendency into the presence of God. Where this manipulation is taking place, the people of God are worshipping Baal, “hav[ing] exchanged the glory of God for that which does not profit!”

*“I Don’t Get Anything out of it.”*

Peterson’s treatment of this included the following:

The other phrase of ‘neo-Baalism’ is ‘I don’t get anything out of it.’ When it refers to participation in the Christian community [that is, the worship service] it is accepted as a serious criticism and a valid excuse from further engagement in something that personal experience testifies is irrelevant and uninteresting.

The assumption that supposedly validates the phrase is that worship must be attractive and personally gratifying. But that is simply Baalism *redivivus* [reborn], worship trimmed to the emotional and spiritual specifications of the worshiper. The divine will that declares something beyond or other than what is already a part of the emotional-mental construct of the worshipper is spurned off as obscurantist.

And so the one indispensable presupposition of Christian worship, the God of the covenant who reveals himself in his word, is deleted. A Freudian pleasure principle is substituted and worship is misused to harness God to human requirements. Worship is falsified into being a protective cover for self-seeking. That the self-seeking is in the area of the psychic rather than the sexual does little to improve the results over the old Baalism. We may be entertained, warmed, diverted, or excited in such worship; we will probably not be changed, and we will not be saved. Our feelings may be sensitized and our pleasures expanded. But our morals will be dulled and our God fantasized. (Peterson, 1992, pp. 184-185)

So how is Baalism manifested today? It has exchanged the standard for what constitutes worship from God's word to individual preference. Now that which determines what we do in the context of worship is NOT the covenant will of God, BUT the appetite, preference, and tastes of the individual. When this standard is in place, the people of God are worshipping Baal, "hav[ing] exchanged the glory of God for that which does not profit!"

Now does this mean that there ought to be no emotion in worship? Absolutely not! It is that any emotion and excitement must come as a response to the Person and work of our Covenant God.

In light of this, if biblical worship is not exciting to you, then you are not listening, not attending, and so not responding to what you hear! For example, our liturgy brought these things to light:

Jeremiah 2:20a, "For long ago I broke your yoke *and* tore off your bonds..."

There was a time when we were enslaved in our trespasses and sins! Yet God in His great love with which He loved us, powerfully, tore off these bonds! How could any genuine child of God meditate upon this and NOT be moved to emotion!

God is sovereign and has revealed the "glory that awaits us" in heaven, BUT right now He is working all things in our lives to enable to be there with Him on that day! He is our guide!

If these truths don't evoke emotion in your heart, it is either that you are not saved, you are not thinking, or that your senses have been dulled on account of the neo-Baalism of our culture. You shouldn't need a tune in worship to excite you (what Ezekiel called a "sensual song"<sup>6</sup>). Neither should you need a rousing story to get your blood pumping; not should you need drama or the background accompaniment to stir you to an emotional state.

Christian there is NOTHING boring or plain about

- The cross.
- God's covenant love.
- God's plan and will for you in Christ today.
- The riches of God's glory.
- Adoption.
- Sanctification.
- Glorification.

These are the sound basis of the church's doxology both in time and eternity (cf. Psalm 48:9-10a); not a tune, a sound, a motion, a drama, or skilled speaker. If these truths aren't enough to rouse in you emotion, you ought to take a closer look at what you consider worship to be!

## Works Cited

Peterson, E. H. (1992). *Five smooth Stones for Pastoral Work*. Grand Rapids, MI: W. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company.

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## About the Preacher

Greg Thurston preached this sermon on June 23, 2013. Greg is the preacher at Bethel Presbyterian Church.

## End Note(s)

<sup>1</sup> Prior to the conquest, the Lord exhorted His people to destroy the high places when they entered the Promised Land (cf. Num. 33:52). Yet God's people clearly did not do this. Accordingly, through His condescending grace, the Lord obviously allowed His people to worship at these "high places." Such worship is what we see in the coming verses...

<sup>2</sup> For example, we read of "high places" which obviously were used by God's people in the worship of Yahweh in 1 Sam. 9:5, 22-24; 10:5; 1 Kings 3:2, 4.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Gen. 10:22-23.

<sup>4</sup> Historically, during the Reformation, Rev. 17:5 was taken as a reference to the false system of Roman Catholicism. However, the implications of this designation not only were harsh and

severe, but rather limiting. Clearly the “whore of Babylon” is pictured in Scripture as something much bigger than a single denomination. Accordingly, the pendulum swung in the opposite direction by which many commentaries suggested that the “whore of Babylon” was a designation of a civil government. The only problem with this view is that the term for “whore” or “prostitute” in Scripture is never used this way. It always is used in reference to the people of God in their religion. Accordingly today, the pendulum seems to be swinging back to the middle ground of taking the “whore of Babylon” as the default religion to which the secular state will cling. For example, a proponent of this view is John MacArthur who made this observation, “Because false religion is so much a part of this fallen world, it is no surprise that it will play a major role in the end times... Only religion can unite the world in the most compelling way. Politics, economics, even military force are unable to overcome the world’s cultural diversity. Only religion, with its appeal to the supernatural, can transcend the physical, geographical, historical, economic, and cultural barriers to world unity. Chapter 17 reveals the spiritual nature of Antichrist’s kingdom; chapter 18 follows with its material aspects.” (*Revelation 12–22*, MNTC, p. 157)

<sup>5</sup> *Five Smooth Stones of Pastoral Work*, p. 183.

<sup>6</sup> cf. Ez. 33:32. The word for “sensual” (**עֲגָב** [‘āgāb]) comes from the word translated as “lust” in the Bible (**עַגְבָּה** [‘āgab]). Accordingly, a “sensual song” is a song which arouses strong emotion in an individual. D. I. Block<sup>6</sup> likens it to “entertainment” saying that his utterances, “...facilitated escape from reality” (*The Book of Ezekiel, Chapters 25–48*, NICOT, pp. 266–267). Keil & Delitzsch<sup>6</sup> define it as that which is “according to their taste” (*Commentary on the Old Testament*, Vol. 9, p. 286). And J. B. Taylor<sup>6</sup> described it as a music which “...move[s] its hearers only fleetingly” (*Ezekiel*, TOTC, p. 213). That has always been the music associated with Baalism!