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Apostasy on Trial, Part 8

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 what is now a famous quote, years ago Martin Luther wrote this:

If I profess with the loudest voice and the clearest exposition every portion of the truth of God, except precisely that little point which the world and the devil are at that moment attacking, I am not confessing Christ, however boldly I may be professing Christ. Where the battle rages, there the loyalty of the soldier is proved, and to be steady on all the battle-fields besides is mere flight and disgrace if he flinches at that point.” (Chuck Mclhenny, 2000, p. 85)

A battle is raging today on the very field on which Jeremiah fought so long ago. There is no question that the world in which we live is moving toward Baalism/mysticism in its endeavors and entertainments (cf. Revelation 17). And any church that would seek to keep in step with this trend cannot be anything but guilty of leading the people of God to Baal! This is one battle where there is very little room for compromise.

Now the Baalism of which Judah was guilty in Jeremiah’s day and which threatens the body of Christ today was/is not the formal theological system of the Canaanite religion, just its liturgy; the way they approached their deity! In Baalism the quality of worship was determined by how the worshipper felt. What in biblical worship is viewed as a by-product and therefore inconsequential to worship, our feelings, was the focus and pursuit of the religion of Baal. Eugene Peterson describes it this way:

While the prophetic accusation of ‘harlotry’ had a literal reference to the sacred prostitution of the Baal cult, it extended its meaning by metaphor into the entire theology of worship. It referred to worship that sought fulfillment through self-expression, worship that accepted the needs and desires and passions of the worshiper as its raw material. ‘Harlotry’ is worship that says, ‘I will give you satisfaction. You want religious feelings? I will give them to you.’ (Peterson, 1992, p. 181)

Sadly today, that is the definition of most evangelicals when it comes to worship: it is a feeling, a sense of euphoria for having been in the presence of God. Take away the feeling and you will have compromised their worship.

Contrast this to biblical worship! Peterson contrasts true worship with false this way:

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, p. 183)

Biblically speaking, he is right. Worship is the ascription of God's worth, in accordance with His word, in the context of the formal gathering of the people of God. Recall that the Anglo-Saxon root is, "Worth-ship." The focus in the Bible when it comes to the individual is NOT on how they feel, BUT on whether or not he/she means what they are saying! That is what Christ was getting at when he called us to worship "in spirit and in truth" (John 4:24). Our worship is to be with integrity according to God's word!

This was not the worship that Jeremiah's generation offered to God. They came and certainly felt good about God, but recall that they did so with "dirty hands" and "bloody garments!" Now you must see that the question of one's worship is crucial. What you are today is determined by who or what you worship.

Psalm 115:4, 8, "Their idols are silver and gold, the work of man's hands... Those who make them will become like them, everyone who trusts in them."

If your God is a gracious and loving, then you too will become gracious and loving. But if your God is selfish, mean, and cruel, then you will take on this demeanor in your life. In fact we have been considering the implications that Baalism has in the life of a Church. If we worship at the altar of Baal, our lives most certainly will be affected!

An Appearance of Godliness

A church engaging in neo-Baalism may have the appearance of godliness, but it will have denied its power.

Jeremiah 2:26-27a, "As the thief is shamed when he is discovered, so the house of Israel is shamed; they, their kings, their princes, and their priests, and their prophets, who say to a tree, 'You are my father,' and to a stone, 'You gave me birth.' For they have turned *their* back to Me, and not *their* face..."

Notice two things here. First, in the Covenant, God makes us servants of His will. In Baalism, God becomes the servant of our will! Baalism turns every aspect of biblical worship upside down! In fact to demonstrate this,



Jeremiah purposely confuses the Canaanite deities. The “tree” referenced here was the Asherah pole (the phallic symbol) which represented the female deity of Athirat. And the “stone” referenced here (pictured at the right) was the *maṣṣēbâ* which in Canaanite religion represented the male deity of Molech/Dagon. Yet what God’s people were saying to the female deity, “You are my father!” And to the male deity they were saying, “You gave me birth.” God’s people were confused! They adopted the Canaanite religion, but their worship would have been viewed as a joke to the outsider!

And yet as laughable as this may seem, it sadly was horribly tragic. For notice secondly the word “shamed”; references a formal, outward humiliation which was the present deterioration of the kingdom which eventually culminated in exile.¹ Truly, because of their Baalism, they held the appearance of godliness, but suffered greatly individually and as a nation.

Jeremiah 2:27b-28, “But in the time of their trouble they will say [to God], ‘Arise and save us.’ [And the Lord’s response?] But where are your gods which you made for yourself? Let them arise, if they can save you in the time of your trouble; for *according to* the number of your cities are your gods, O Judah.”

In essence, God says that because of their apostasy, in the time of trouble God’s people no longer would have His Covenant resources! Yet this wasn’t the first time God’s people forfeited these blessings. Zechariah, reviewing both the past history of God’s people during the era of Elijah and Elisha wrote this:

Zechariah 7:12-13, “‘And they made their hearts *like* flint so that they could not hear the law and the words which the Lord of hosts had sent by His Spirit through the former prophets; therefore great wrath came from the Lord of hosts. And it came about that just as He called and they would not listen, so they called and I would not listen,’ says the Lord of hosts.”

Wow! If in our selfishness we turn our back on God, in the time of need we only will have ourselves as a refuge and support! Gross rebellion disqualifies the Christian from the Covenant blessings of God. When God’s people in the wilderness preferred meat over God, we read what the Lord did:

Psalm 106:15, “And He gave them their request [they got meat]; but sent leanness into their soul.”

This is what Jeremiah is talking about in our passage! Paul also tells us that this will happen to many in the church in the last days:

2 Timothy 3:5, “...hold... to a form of godliness, although they have denied its power.”

That is exactly what Jeremiah is prophesying with regard to his generation. Because of their Baalism, God’s people rejected the Lord for false gods. And as a vehicle of discipline, God

would leave His people to their false gods when trial and difficulty came upon them. It is as we've seen in Proverbs:

Proverbs 5:22, "His own iniquities will capture the wicked, and he will be held with the cords of his sin."

From this we behold another sad result of Baalism in the life of a church: the forfeiting of the Covenant Blessings of God! The people of God in these churches will by all means know euphoria and excitement when they gather for worship, but they will be left with "leanness of soul" all the week! The emotional high of Sunday will do little for them when they are confronted with the harsh realities of life on Monday! At this time their religion will be shown for what it truly is, "a broken cistern which can hold no water!"

Personal Preference

A church engaging in neo-Baalism will relegate this entire discussion to personal preference.

Jeremiah 2:31, "O generation, heed the word of the Lord. Have I been a wilderness to Israel, or a land of thick darkness?..."

God is referencing the Exodus and that time when He delivered His people from slavery and brought them into the wilderness for protection and preservation. At this time God's people did not go without; rather they enjoyed the diet of a king! They ate manna! To them the wilderness wasn't a wilderness at all! "The valley of Baca had become a spring!" (Psalm 84:6) Talk about grace, yet that is not all! Notice further that while the land of Egypt lay in "thick darkness" as the angel of death passed through it, God's people feasted, for the first time in who knows how long, on a lamb whose blood placed on the door posts protected them from death!

So far from darkness, God's people enjoyed life! This is what a covenant relationship with God is all about! It is about living in a "wilderness" and yet not knowing spiritual want! It is living through hell on earth, and yet in "this darkness" knowing the rich and abiding fellowship of the Lamb of God! It is as Paul put it, "...though our outer man is decaying, yet our inner man is being renewed day by day" (2 Corinthians 4:16)!

And so far from "being a wilderness" to the people of God or "thick darkness," the Lord gave them life, health, and peace! Now amazingly, God's people so undervalued this that they forgot it!

Jeremiah 2:32, "Can a virgin forget her ornaments, or a bride her attire? [according to Jewish tradition, when a woman was married she received "ornaments/jewelry" AND a "sash/girdle" which proclaimed her status as a married woman; these things would be precious to her unto death- so important they were in Judaism!] Yet My people have

forgotten Me Days without number.”

Here is another complaint. God had been nothing short of Savior to His people, yet in their Baalism God’s people had forgotten their Lord. Contrary to what was natural, for example in marriage, God’s people in Jeremiah’s day had forgotten that they were the prized possession of the only Wise God!

You say, “*Wait a second! I thought that Jeremiah’s generation still considered themselves to be worshippers of Yahweh (cf. Jeremiah 2:23)?*” That is correct. This means their rejection of God had to have been subtle!

Jeremiah 2:31b, “Why do My people say, ‘*We are free to roam; we will come no more to Thee’?*”

The idea is that God’s people were saying that worship was simply a matter of personal preference. They could do what they wanted. They were free to experiment because “the heart of the matter is the matter of the heart!” They believed that God does not care what we do, so long as we do it from the heart!

It was this mindset that they believed that it didn’t matter how Israel approached God; all that mattered was how they felt in the process! And so if a generation arose and said, “We no longer want to worship God like our fathers- ‘we will come no more to Thee *like them’!*” what’s the big deal... as long as they are moved in their worship?!”

Another consequence of Baalism amongst the people of God is that they relegated worship to a matter of Personal Preference. This is the trend that we see in the church today. For example, years ago I collected a bulletin from a prominent church containing an announcement of their plans to go down the slippery slope of Baalism (of course they didn’t see it that way, but listen to the announcement):

Today! BEGINNING OF A CHANGE IN OUR WORSHIP SERVICES.

9:10: “Bright and Traditional” - A bright service that blends old and new hymns in a quieter, more stately atmosphere... This service should stir those who are motivated by the majesty of God and the rich heritage of the faith... and who enjoy celebrating both warmly.”

10:45: “Light and Contemporary” - A lively service that combines new music, informal atmosphere, and active participation... This service should be most helpful to those who meet God best in an atmosphere of open joy, devotion and expression.”

“In short, the services will have the same message; different music, different atmosphere. WHY? To better serve the church family. We have all ages, we come from many backgrounds. We meet God in different ways...”

At first this approach to worship is hard to argue with. On the surface it sounds O.K. But when we come to biblical worship and realize that, just as with a birthday party, the invited guests feelings are irrelevant. Worship is not about how you feel. The worship of God requires genuineness of the appreciation that is meaningful!

Yet with Baalism worship is relegated to a feeling. This use of feelings transforms the worship of God into a discussion of personal preference. *I don't enjoy worshipping God with that tune! That form doesn't stir me!*

Leader in Sinning

A church engaging in neo-Baalism will eventually become a leader in sinning.

Jeremiah 2:33, "How well you prepare your way to seek love! Therefore even the wicked women [the prostitutes] you have taught your ways."

Judah had become skilled at sinning. Does this mean that a cursory look at Judaism at this time would have revealed gross, aberrant sin? No!² It simply is to say that Judah had become sophisticated in her sin. The Northern Kingdom of Israel fell into horrible sin such that God wiped this nation out via exile. And yet Judah not only emulated her older sister, but surpassed her.

Jeremiah 3:8, 11, "And I saw that for all the adulteries of faithless Israel, I had sent her away and given her a writ of divorce, yet her treacherous sister Judah did not fear; but she went and was a harlot also... And the Lord said to me, 'Faithless Israel has proved herself more righteous than treacherous Judah.'"

In what way did Judah's sin surpass that of her sisters? Because of Baalism, the worship of God had become so popular that there weren't enough vestal virgins to service the demand of God's people. Accordingly, and as the passage indicates, local prostitutes were employed and trained in the worship of God. What did this do for these prostitutes? In the words of Christ, it made them "twice the son of hell" (Matthew 23:15). What does this mean?

We all agree that fornication is sin! Yet to fornicate in the name of Christ is even worse and this is what God's people employed the local prostitutes to do. In this way, Judah became a teacher in wickedness. The morally depraved became more depraved on account of them!

And so it is in churches given over completely to Baal. If one records a TV worship service you will notice that in most churches the feelings are all that count. The pulpit is transformed into a pep-rally speech and the cross of Christ is obscured! The participant becomes religious and so is "schooled" in Christianity. Yet without Christ, they are without hope and so more culpable before God on account of their church attendance!

But you did not learn Christ this way! You know that your acceptance before God is NOT based on how devoted you feel, the tears you cried, or the warm fuzzies you felt. Rather you are received into the presence of God on account of the righteousness of Jesus Christ alone! God is a Being and as such He determines how He should be worshipped, adored, and appreciated. Accordingly, preeminent to worship therefore is NOT how we feel, BUT whether or not we are worshipping “in spirit [with integrity] and in truth [according to God’s word].”

God is concerned for the whole person, every day, all day. Therefore to live as a devil six days a week and then come and put on a show of tears before Him on Sunday is to receive the declaration God gave His people throughout redemptive History, “...rend your heart and not your garment” (Joel 2:13)!

In the Garden the Kingdom of God was destroyed and that from Genesis 3:15 onward the Lord has been working out His plan to restore His Kingdom to this Earth. As such the focus of the Lord is NOT confined to the present, BUT encompasses eternity. Accordingly, a Biblical worldview will reflect this eternal view such that the child of God will not live for today, but for tomorrow. In the words of Paul, “Therefore we do not lose heart, but though our outer man is decaying, yet our inner man is being renewed day by day. For momentary, light affliction is producing for us an eternal weight of glory far beyond all comparison, while we look not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen; for the things which are seen are temporal, but the things which are not seen are eternal.” (2 Corinthians 4:16-18)

And finally, you know that God calls us weekly to gather in this place for covenant renewal whereby the corporate people of God are confronted with the greatness of God, His claim on their life, His sustaining grace which is found only in the Person and Work of Christ, and so the calling to respond to the Lord with, “All that the Lord has said we will do; we will be obedient” (Exodus 24:3, 7). The focus therefore is not our emotion, but devotion, that of Christ toward us and then ours towards Him!

Works Cited

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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 Notes

¹ According to TWOT, “As these parallels suggest, the force of *bôš* is somewhat in contrast to the primary meaning of the English “to be ashamed,” in that the English stresses the inner attitude, the state of mind, while the Hebrew means “to come to shame” and stresses the sense of public disgrace, a physical state.”

² Although to cult prostitution we’d have to say, “Yes!”