

Extremes in Worship

1 Kings 18:25-29; John 4:24

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Greg L. Price

John Knox, the great Scottish reformer, accurately defined idolatry as,

All worshipping, honoring, or service invented by the brain of man in the religion of God, without His own express commandment, is idolatry (*Works*, Vol. III, pg. 34).

For Knox and the other reformers who followed the Scripture, idolatry is not the mere constructing of an image and bowing down before it. It is not only serving any god other than the Triune God revealed in Holy Scripture (a violation of the First Commandment), but idolatry is also worshipping God in any way that He has not appointed in Scripture (a violation of the Second Commandment). If God has not ordered it to be brought to Him in worship, Paul calls it “will worship” (Colossians 2:23)—worship according to the will of man rather than worship according to the will of God.

We are not to make up our own ceremonies and holy days in worshipping our Creator and Redeemer. When the Jews had introduced certain ceremonies (ceremonial washing of their hands) into their worship of God, Jesus condemned it (Mark 7:7-8).

From our text today, we shall see God’s disapproval of the false worship of the prophets of Baal even though they were obviously very zealous in offering themselves to Baal. Our main points are the following: (1) The Extremes to Which People Go in Worship (1 Kings 18:25-28); (2) God Does Not Regard Worship That He Does Not Command (1 Kings 18:29).

I. The Extremes to Which People Go in Worship (1 Kings 18:25-28).

A. Here are gathered on Mt. Carmel the hosts of Israel. Elijah stands all alone for Jehovah while he is opposed by the 450 prophets of Baal. If the matter of who was the one true God was to be determined by sheer numbers of people gathered that day, Baal would clearly have won the day. But, dear ones, it is not the majority here upon earth that determine what is right or wrong or what is true or false. It is the only true God who created all and rules over all that determines this and has most clearly revealed His truth in Scripture (Romans 3:4).

1. We don’t count heads to determine what is true or what is false (same sex “marriage” or abortion). The majority have often been wrong while the minority have stood courageously for the truth in Scripture—**Noah** against the world, **Joshua and Caleb** against the 10 spies (and Israel), **Gideon** and the 300 against 135,000 Midianites, **God’s prophets** (including **Elijah**) against Judah or Israel, **the Lord Jesus and the apostles** against the Jews and the Romans, **the Protestant reformers** against the Church of Rome (mystery Babylon).

2. Polls do not determine the truth. The shifting, changing views of the majority do not determine the truth. Not even the laws of governments determine the truth. If these were the criteria for determining the truth, the Nazi’s and Communists would have determined the truth in Germany and other nations simply because they were in the majority.

3. The Lord has warned us not to follow the majority because they are greater in number or because it is more comfortable or easy and has less opposition (Exodus 23:2; Matthew 7:13-14).

B. Elijah, already knowing that the Lord will send His fire, offers to the prophets of Baal to go first in choosing a bull, butchering it, placing it on the altar, but placing no fire under it—then to call upon Baal to

send fire down from heaven to consume their sacrifice, which they did from morning to noon (1 Kings 18:25-26). They cried out, “O Baal, hear us.” But we read, “there was no voice, nor any that answered” (1 Kings 18:26).

1. Baal did not answer nor could he answer because he had no life or power to answer. Baal was a lifeless image. We know that Satan can at times work by way of lying wonders to deceive those who will not submit to the Lord God and His Word—the magicians of Pharaoh counterfeited the true miracles of God through Moses (serpent, water into blood, frogs, but failed to bring forth lice from the dust); Deuteronomy 13:1-3; Job 1:16; Matthew 7:21-23; 2 Thessalonians 2:9.

2. I’m sure Satan was dying to send fire from heaven in answer to the pleas of the prophets of Baal. Why didn’t he? Because as we learn from Job (and throughout Scripture), Satan is limited in power, and is restrained by God so that he can only act when the Lord lifts His restraint (Peter). In this case on Mt. Carmel, God restrained Satan, so that He (the Lord God) might clearly demonstrate that He was God alone (Mark 1:23-26).

3. Dear ones, even in this present evil age of hatred for Jesus Christ and His truth, Satan, the evil intentions of rulers, and the wicked designs of those who despise us are under the control of God (Proverbs 21:1). Fear not little flock, your God reigns and controls everything for His glory and your good (just as He restrained Satan and made Baal mute on Mt. Carmel to reveal His power and glory).

4. The false gods of this world are silent in hearing and answering your prayers. The gods that people worship today may not be an image, but may simply be that which they make their treasure in this life, that which they give all their heart to serve, that which they will not give up to serve the one true living God (money, possessions, pleasure, approval of others, work and accomplishments, family and friends, food, health, clothing, sex, TV, music, sports, etc.). These things are not all evil in themselves, but become gods to so many who make them their life and reason for living. People every day cry out (as it were like the prophets of Baal) for these gods to give them peace, joy, contentment, but they no more have the power to hear your cry than did Baal. When you look to that which temporal, perishing, and changing, you will find yourself up one day and down again because you are looking to the creature to bring what only the eternal, ever-living, and unchangeable God to give. Your pleas will fall on deaf ears because they are not God. Come to Jesus Christ who has spoken and has proved that the God of the Bible is the one true living God by His resurrection. Our God hears and answers prayers and only gives us what is good (yes, no, or wait).

C. Then at noon (after 3 hours of urgent pleading with Baal), Elijah begins to mock the prophets of Baal (1 Kings 18:27).

1. Elijah says in effect, “You need to shout louder—Baal can’t hear you.” Whereas our God hears the innermost cries of our heart when there is no word. He puts your tears into a bottle of remembrance (Psalm 56:8). Elijah then teases the prophets of Baal, “He is talking to someone else and cannot hear you”; or “He is pursuing something else presently and doesn’t have time for you”; or “He is on vacation and has closed down shop”; or “He is taking a nap and needs to be awakened.”

2. Elijah is making fun of the vain and empty attempts to call upon a lifeless god that cannot hear or answer prayer; whereas the one true living God sees all and knows all and never slumbers or sleeps. As Jesus slept in the boat to test the faith of His disciples, the Lord God may withdraw that close sense of His presence at times in order to test whether your faith is in your feelings, in your circumstances, in your bank account, in your assurance, or whether your faith is in the Lord Jesus who has promised never to leave you nor forsake you.

3. We read in the pages of Scripture that even God Himself laughs at the vain attempts of wicked rulers to loose themselves from the bonds and fetters of His almighty power and holy law (Psalm 2:2-5).

D. Carefully note the extremes to which the prophets of Baal go in their worship to Baal (1 Kings 18:28).

1. Can you imagine the commotion, and confusion, and the bloody sight on Mt. Carmel as these prophets of Baal seek to show their zeal and urgency all the more by shouting as loud as they could, jumping up and dancing on the altar, and cutting themselves so that they had blood gushing out from their self-inflicted wounds to demonstrate how serious they were in crying out for Baal to hear them. Here we see so clearly that it is not ultimately the zeal that someone has for his/her religion that determines whether a religion is true or false (I've talked to a lot of people who are very zealous for their religion), but is rather the truth that someone has from the one true living God as revealed in Holy Scripture (and is summarized in faithful Confessions, Creeds, Covenants, and Catechisms). Baal worshippers were sincere and zealous, but they were sincerely wrong (Proverbs 14:12).

2. Likewise, it is not those churches that get the most worked up emotionally shouting, jumping around, dancing, and claiming miraculous signs that demonstrate the life and power of God, but is that church where the gospel is faithfully preached and cherished, where the law of God (in doctrine and worship) is loved and obeyed, where the fruit of the Spirit is growing (love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness, and temperance), and where individuals and families are being transformed by the power of the Holy Spirit.

3. I would also relate that it is not the emotional experience that you had when you were converted that saves you. It is the gospel of Jesus Christ that has set you free from the guilt and condemnation of God that you deserved. I have witnessed over my lifetime those who related sensational testimonies about their conversion, and yet fell away into unrepentant sin and by their deeds denied the God they said had saved them. I have also witnessed those who cannot even remember a specific date as to their conversion because they were very young, and yet they know God saved them because they are trusting in Christ alone and they are growing to hate their sin and to love His holiness as the fruit of the Spirit grows in their life. Trust not in an experience to save you. Trust alone in Jesus Christ alone to save you. Your experience may be either a hindrance or a help to you depending upon whether you put your faith in Christ alone or in that experience.

II. God Does Not Regard Worship That He Does Not Command (1 Kings 18:29).

A. The prophets of Baal had spent 3 hours in the morning calling upon Baal, and now we are told they spent 3 more hours in the afternoon (until the time that the evening sacrifice was offered in the Temple in Jerusalem) with even greater intensity and urgency, prophesying with alleged utterances from Baal in order to elevate the expectations of the people (1 Kings 18:29). But we read, "there was neither voice, nor any to answer, nor any that regarded." Not only did Baal not answer or regard their sacrifice, but more importantly God did not answer or regard their sacrifice by sending fire to consume it. Did silence mean approval or disapproval? It meant disapproval. So it is likewise true in our worship of our Triune God (Father, Son, and Holy Spirit). Does His silence in what we offer Him in worship mean His approval or disapproval?

B. There are essentially two contrary ways in which to worship God. **First, what God does not authorize in Scripture, He forbids (the Regulative Principle of Worship).** This principle does not allow any human innovation into the worship of God, but only that which is authorized in the Bible (whether for believers in the Old Testament or for believers in the New Testament). If God is silent, He disapproves. **Second, what God does not forbid in Scripture, He permits (the Normative Principle of Worship).** This principle allows for human innovation into the worship of God, for something that is not expressly prohibited by the Lord may be brought as worship to the Lord. In other words, if God is silent, He approves of that worship. Since the Lord Jesus in the New Covenant has not expressly forbidden holy water, holy days, crosses or crucifixes, candles, incense, uninspired hymns, musical instruments, drama, or dancing (as some examples), many churches would find these as acceptable practices in worship. This is will worship (Colossians 2:23).

1. What if I insisted that you take a straight pen and prick your finger before receiving the Lord's Supper to help you understand that Jesus suffered and shed His blood for all of you who trust Him? My intentions might be sincere, but is such an act of worship acceptable to God? Do I have authority from God in Scripture to introduce what I consider to be profitable into the worship of the Most High God? Such is the rationale for the introduction of many practices into a worship service. This is how will-worship begins and then takes hold within churches. This was why Cain's offering was rejected.

2. We know God will receive as worship the reading of Scripture, the preaching of His Word, prayers, singing of Psalms, Baptism, and the Lord's Supper because these are all authorized by the Lord in the New Testament Scriptures. God has spoken. But what about so many other acts (like pricking the finger) that God has not authorized in the New Testament? He has not spoken. If it is not ordained by the Lord in the New Testament, God forbids it. His silence is not his approval, but is His disapproval. It is exalting man's tradition over God's commandments.

3. God alone is Lord over His own worship. How a church worships the one true living God says much about who that church believes is Lord of that church—whether Jesus Christ or man. Yet, let us not forget that true worship according to Jesus is that which is offered to God "in spirit" and "in truth" (John 4:24). Let us not so focus on the outward ordinances appointed by the Lord that we forget that true worship is spiritual and proceeds from a heart of faith, love, joy, humility, communion with Christ, and hungering and thirsting for Him.

There is a real and graphic contrast between Carmel (and the six hours of suffering by the prophets of Baal to atone for their sins) and Golgotha (and the six hours of suffering by Jesus Christ to atone for the sins of His elect). The suffering of man for his salvation is vanity—not so with Christ.

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