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A Preacher's Concern Regarding the Formal Worship of God

Ecclesiastes 5:1-7, Walk prudently when you go to the house of God; and draw near to hear rather than to give the sacrifice of fools, for they do not know that they do evil.

- 2 Do not be rash with your mouth,
And let not your heart utter anything hastily before God.
For God is in heaven, and you on earth;
Therefore let your words be few.
- 3 For a dream comes through much activity,
And a fool's voice is known by his many words.

- 4 When you make a vow to God, do not delay to pay it;
For He has no pleasure in fools.
Pay what you have vowed—
- 5 Better not to vow than to vow and not pay.

6 Do not let your mouth cause your flesh to sin, nor say before the messenger of God that it was an error. Why should God be angry at your excuse and destroy the work of your hands? 7 For in the multitude of dreams and many words there is also vanity. But fear God.

Concern over Baalism in Our Day

Jeremiah 2 indicts God's people because they transformed the worship of God into a vehicle of self-indulgence. Recall, they adopted NOT the religion, BUT the religious practices/the liturgy of the Canaanites. Through this they transformed the worship of the only true God into a Baalistic ritual in which the child of God gathered no longer to adore the Lord, but

1. To have an encounter with the divine!
2. To feel and so be moved!

When this occurred, it was believed that true worship had taken place.

Revelation 2-3; 17 make it clear that such an inclination would be the primary religious preference of the latter days- a religious preference to which God's people would adhere! And we see this inclination today. Twenty years ago a bulletin announcement of a prominent church in Colorado Springs which gave itself to Baal. They are but one of thousands that have made the switch. We also see it in the music that is being chosen today in worship. Recall that the contrast here is NOT between contemporary vs. traditional, BUT music that is chosen to stir the heart. This is what Ezekiel called a "sensual song" (Ezekiel. 33:32)! We also see the influence of Baalism in architecture, ceremonies, and rituals which are designed to create a tactile and visual experience.

In fact, listen to the "spirit of Baalism" as it is reflected today in a popular Christian song called, "More Like Falling in Love"¹- I call it "An Ode to Baal".

Give me rules, I will break them; show me lines, I will cross them,
I need more than a truth to believe.
I need a truth that lives, moves, and breathes to sweep me off my feet.

*It's gotta be **more like falling in love**, than something to believe in,
More like losing my heart, than giving my allegiance.
Caught up, called out, come take a look at me now,
It's like I'm falling in love.*

Give me words, I'll misuse them, obligations, I'll miss-place them.
'Cause all religion ever made of me,
Was just a sinner with a stone tied to my feet; it never set me free. (*Chorus*)

Love, love, deeper and deeper, it was love that made me a believer.

In more than a name, a faith, a creed,
Falling in love with Jesus brought the change in me. (*Chorus*) (Gray, 2011)

Such blatant Baalism should concern you. It concerns me. It should be a concern for the youth of our church. It should be a concern for all church leaders and their congregations. The changes that we are seeing in worship in the broad Evangelical church today have and will continue to dramatically alter the landscape of Christianity.

So what are we to do? We need to warn the church so that we might know not only how NOT to worship, but more importantly, how to worship! And that is exactly what Solomon did so many years ago when he penned the book of Ecclesiastes.

Ecclesiastes 1:1, "The words of the Preacher, the son of David, king in Jerusalem."

There is little doubt that "the words of the preacher" in this book are the words of Solomon. As a preacher concerned for the people of God, Solomon addresses the various and sundry things in life to which we tend to give ourselves and yet are vanity. In our text this morning, he records his concern regarding the formal worship of God.

Ecclesiastes 5:1, "Guard your steps as you go to the house of God..."

The basic idea behind the word for "guard" in the Bible is "to exercise great care over." It is a covenant expression which calls for the careful attention that must be exercised concerning the obligations of the covenant relationship. It is in this context that we understand the word means having been chosen by God and given a standing and an inheritance amongst the people of God, we have been given a call to worship and to be a worshipping people! Recall the Exodus and Moses' request of Pharaoh:

Exodus 7:16, "The Lord, the God of the Hebrews, sent me to you, saying, 'Let My people go, that they may serve Me [worship] in the wilderness...'"

Truly, the essence of any call of God on the part of the believer is worship (cf. Philippians 3:3)! That is our covenantal obligation and privilege! Because of this, the preacher/Solomon exhorted the people of God regarding this obligation and their approach to the formal worship of God!

Ecclesiastes 5:1, "Guard your steps as you go to the house of God..."

Take much care and concern when it comes to the worship you offer to God. This covenant right demands an ongoing vigilance lest we compromise our faithfulness at any point.

This is a timely exhortation for the people of God of this generation. Let us never forget that unlike Baalism (whose worship revolves around self-expression), biblical worship involves entering into the presence of a Divine Being/a Person. As such, we must always keep in mind

the protocol that God has given us when it comes to His worship!

Now, one does not waltz into the presence of a king or head of state. Nor would you expect the freedom of self-expression because you interact with king's best "in an atmosphere of open joy, devotion and expression."² Fellowshiping with a King involves strict rules of protocol- some of which are referenced in our Ecclesiastes 5. Let us examine the preacher's concern beginning with the call.

The Call

Ecclesiastes 5:1b, "Guard your steps as you go to the house of God, [How?] draw near to listen rather than to offer the sacrifice of fools; for they do not know they are doing evil."

In his explanation of what it means to "guard your steps as you go to the house of God," Solomon says that as we enter into God's presence we must do so NOT to experience, give, rejoice, or celebrate. RATHER we must come with the intention (first and foremost) of "listening" to God! Anything else, according to this passage, is "the sacrifice of fools."

So what does it mean to come and "listen"? Does not this reflect a "mystical" approach to God where we "listen in our hearts" for an impression from God? Absolutely not! The Hebrew word is שָׁמָע (*šāma*) means to "pay attention to," to "hear critically" and so "obey." It does not denote a passive idea at all, but that of diligence and effort. The idea is that of listening attentively and responding positively to what is spoken (cf. Luke 8:18).

From this we derive our first order of protocol when entering into the presence of God in worship. First and foremost we are called NOT to act, BUT to respond to the Person and work of our Lord! Did you get that? Biblical worship isn't a time to come and do what you want before the Lord. It is not a time to offer what you think He would like. It is not a time to "celebrate Him" using your language and your worship preferences. No, it is a time to respond to God (His person or His work) and to what He calls us to do! Ecclesiastes 5:7 essentially repeats the exhortation:

Ecclesiastes 5:7b, "For in many dreams and in many words there is emptiness. Rather, fear God."

This verse is a summation of all that Solomon has been teaching in this passage. The "many dreams" of v. 3 and the "many words" of vv. 4-6 by themselves are empty and worthless. What is of paramount importance when it comes therefore to the worship of God is that we reverence His name!

Biblical worship is NOT determined by how we feel or our sincerity when we express our love to Christ. Biblical worship is about coming before God as one who has been moved by His greatness and paying homage to Him. Again, the Anglo-Saxon root is "worth-ship." Therefore, what God is after when it comes to His worship is that His people bow before Him, reverence

Him, and respond appropriately to His Person and work. This is the idea behind “fear God”! True biblical worship is:

1. About approaching God on HIS TERMS and then responding to Him with integrity and genuineness.
2. Any sense of reverence, awe, love, or appreciation must therefore be generated NOT by a vaulted ceiling, incense, a tune, or a moving story, BUT by gazing at Him as He is revealed to us in His word and responding accordingly!

Christ’s Teaching on Worship

When Christ was perceived to be a prophet by the Samaritan woman, the focus of the conversation shifted to an age-old dispute between the Samaritans and the Jews: The proper place of worship.

John 4:19-22, “The woman said to Him, ‘Sir, I perceive that You are a prophet. Our fathers worshiped in this mountain, and you *people* say that in Jerusalem is the place where men ought to worship.’ Jesus said to her, ‘Woman, believe Me, an hour is coming when neither in this mountain, nor in Jerusalem, shall you worship the Father. You worship that which you do not know; we worship that which we know, for salvation is from the Jews.’”

From this we see a fundamental error into which the Samaritans and the Jews fell: They focused on the “WHERE?” of worship to the neglect of the “HOW?”! Samaritan worship neglected the truth: “You worship that which you do not know” (v. 22a). The Samaritans were not pagans nor were they false believers. They were servants of God who were rejected by the rest of Judaism because they intermarried with Gentiles in the 7th Century BC. A peculiarity of their religion is that they only accepted the Pentateuch as coming from God. Thus their knowledge as it pertained to God was/is limited. In Christ’s day they had enough to know the Lord, BUT they lacked the full revelation of God so as to know how to worship Him as He desired. As such, their worship was genuine, but it lacked content.

In fact, Samaritan worship is that way even today! Though their temple was destroyed in 125 BC, Samaritan worship is still going on today. If you were to go to Mount Gerizim on one of their holy days, you would see them slicing up animals exactly as it was done during the time of Moses.

Now in contrast to Samaritan worship there was Jewish worship. Jewish worship had the truth, but they lacked genuineness/integrity in their worship. They had and accepted all 39 books of the Old Testament and had the whole revelation of the teaching of salvation available in Christ’s day. However their worship was rote, heartless, and hypocritical. Christ said:

Matthew 15:7-8, “You hypocrites, rightly did Isaiah prophesy of you, saying, ‘This people honors Me with their lips, but their heart is far away from Me.’”

The contrast between Jewish and Samaritan worship WASN'T between the worship of genuine believers and false believers, BUT how God ought to be worshipped by His children! Again, both groups were servants of the Lord. The Samaritans had genuineness/integrity, but lacked truth. The Jews had truth, but lacked this genuineness/integrity!

So when it came to the Jewish/Samaritan debate regarding the "Where?" of worship, what it is that Christ said? *"You are both wrong! The issue again isn't 'Where?', BUT 'How?'"!*...

John 4:24, "God is spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit [with genuineness/integrity] and truth [according to God's word]."

This is the call that Solomon gave in Ecclesiastes 5! When we gather for worship, do NOT enter into God's presence with an attitude of "sit back Lord, relax, and let me bless you!" RATHER, our call is to come with the anticipation of gazing upon the Lord in His word and then responding to Him appropriately! The distinction is clear: worship is not about emotion, BUT the devotion of God in giving Himself to us! Accordingly, the focus in worship is NOT on our spontaneity before God, BUT His work on our behalf and the call for us to respond to that work! Hughes Oliphant Old wrote of John Calvin's view of worship:³...

What Calvin has in mind is that God is active in our worship. When we worship God according to his Word, he is at work in the worship of the church. For Calvin the worship of the church is a matter of divine activity rather than human creativity. (George, 1990, p. 234)

Solomon gives us a twofold caution. The first is that one must prepare for worship.

Prepare for Worship

Ecclesiastes 5:2, "Do not be hasty in word or impulsive in thought to bring up a matter in the presence of God. For God is in heaven and you are on the earth; therefore let your words be few"

When we approach worship as though God is the privileged One, as if we took time out of our busy week to adore Him! Or this morning we woke up and chose to attend! Realize that we have reversed the way it really is. God is the King of kings and Lord of lords! We did not choose to be here, God invited us! As such, we are entering into the presence of an awesome God before whom sinless angels fall down and worship in amazement over His otherness (cf. Isaiah 6)!

Now you must take this seriously, and worship will never be an after-thought! In fact, the word for "hasty" in this passage, בָּהֵל (*bāhal*), expresses the idea of being confronted with the unexpected resulting in rash acts or haste. It is the epitome of being unprepared! Similarly the

word for “impulsive,” מָהָר (*māhar*), carries the idea of swiftness, speed and so is used here of a mindless reaction. In both cases the idea is that of just reacting- arriving at a worship service unprepared and simply doing what you’re supposed to do with little or no thought. And so as a vehicle to “guard their steps” in worship, Solomon says it begins with thoughtful preparation, “Do NOT be hasty in word or impulsive in thought to bring up a matter in the presence of God.” Rather, prepare to enter into the presence of the Lord; know what you are going to do and say. In fact, to show the importance of this, Solomon quotes a proverb:

Ecclesiastes 5:3, “For [as] the dream comes through much effort, [so] the voice of a fool through many words”

The first half of this obviously was a Hebrew proverb well-known in Solomon’s day. When a person is filled with all sorts of concerns, burdens, and activities, their sleep is restless and so they dream a lot. Accordingly, like in our day when a person has a bizarre dream they might say, “No more pepperoni pizza before bed!”, in Solomon’s day if a person woke up from a night of dreaming, they might say, “I’ve got to simplify my life; I’m obviously too busy!” That was the Hebrew proverb: *Many burdens, many dreams!*

From this Solomon produced another proverb, but here relating to worship: *Many words, a mighty fool!* If you come to worship unprepared, you will be apt to say more than you ought, agree to something you don’t know, and so engage in that which you later might regret. That is how the Gentile worships.

Matthew 6:7, “And when you are praying, do not use meaningless repetition, as the Gentiles do, for they suppose that they will be heard for their many words.”

Gentile worship is the mindless worship of an individual who does what is necessary in order to placate or manipulate the deity, as we’ve seen in Baalism. It is unprepared, extemporaneous with the bottom line being the sincerity of the worshipper. Again worship is not about us or our needs, wants, desires, tastes, and preferences are irrelevant. What is relevant is God’s wants, desires, and preferences. If we are to “guard our steps” as we approach the Lord in worship, Solomon says, “Prepare! Give thought as to:

- What you are going to say; why you are saying it; how you are going to say it.
- What you are going to give; what is implied by your giving.
- How you are going to listen to His word; how are you going to respond.
- Why are you taking the Lord’s Supper; how ought you to take it.

The worship of fools is the worship of spontaneity! Biblical worship calls upon the worshipper to enter into God’s presence prepared! Notice the second caution, one needs to be deliberate and mindful in his worship.

Deliberate/Mindful Worship

Ecclesiastes 5:4, “When you make a vow to God, do not be late in paying it, for *He takes* no delight in fools. Pay what you vow!”

“Vows” were a small part of worship in Bible times, but as a case-study they were a perfect example for Solomon in his exhortation here. It is important when we make a vow that we don’t hastily consider the content at the time they are made, and then quickly say “Yes!”⁴ (we might do this because we don’t want to hinder the worship service). If you are going to vow, it is imperative that we mean what we say and do that to which we commit!

Ecclesiastes 5:5, “It is better that you should not vow than that you should vow and not pay. Do not let your speech cause you to sin and do not say in the presence of the messenger of *God* that it was a mistake.”

This clearly has reference to vv. 4-5 and Solomon’s caution as it relates to being deliberate or mindful in worship. If we mindlessly engage in a dialog with God (which is what worship is) and say things that we either don’t intend or have no intention of fulfilling, we will transform that which is intended to be a good thing (God’s worship) into sin! For example, In Bible times when one worshipped God a particular Sabbath Psalm 73 was one of the songs which you sang to the Lord. By singing this song to the Lord, you will have made a twofold commitment

- To rely upon the Lord in all that you do and not yourself, the work of your hands, a king or governor, etc., and
- To speak of the Lord that week in all that you were doing.

Psalm 73:23, “But as for me, the nearness of God is my good; I have made the Lord God my refuge, that I may tell of all Thy works.”

Worship is not a private thing. The ministers and officiates, your neighbors, also were in attendance and they heard you make such a commitment. If you engaged in the worship of God mindlessly such that during the week you completely forgot about the Lord as you got wrapped up in living, moving, and having your being, these kind neighbors most likely are going to call you on it.

“Bob, you aren’t doing what you said you were going to do this past week in worship. You made a commitment to God to speak of Him in all that you do; everyone heard you! Yet since you’ve been home, you’ve talked about everything but God! You’ve been pre-occupied with your family, your business dealings, and your health. What gives”

Surprised, you’d most likely say, “What are you talking about? I made no such commitment!” To which they would say, “Yes you did, when you sang Psalm. 73!”

What would you say? “Well, that was a mistake! I never intended to say that!”

That is the idea of Ecclesiastes 5:5. Truly, the call in all of worship is to engage with the mind; there can be no mistakes when it comes to what we say in worship, the commitments we make, or the love expressed! This not only is the biblical standard (Deuteronomy 23:21-23), but it is sound advice.

How foolish it would be to go through a service of worship mindlessly, make a variety of commitments in the name of piety, leave, and then break all the commitments we just made. Indeed! When a vow is made, it is imperative at the time when the promise is given that the person is mentally present and that they understand what they are saying so that they can uphold the vow after they leave! So it ought to be in all of our worship. We must be mentally present and participate with our mind! We must NOT zone out and make statements, promises, or commitments we have no intention or remembrance of making.

You say, “Who would do such a thing?” We do it all the time. For example in our worship service each person told God that they plan on rejoicing in His character every day of their life.; hymn 57, the fourth stanza does this. They promised the Lord that they would fight the fight of faith as the faithful men and women of old who suffered so much for the cause of Christ and yet remained true and faithful to the Lord. They made that commitment when they sang hymn #358, the third stanza. They offered themselves to the Lord to do whatever He wants to do with them, that’s a blank check of service and submission (Hymn #688). And following the Lord’s Supper, they made a commitment to God to make His redeeming grace the theme of their life (Hymn #253)!

We gather to worship a Being! He is not an impersonal force, but a Person! If you were going to go before a king with the anticipation of spending two hours dialoguing with him, don’t you suppose you’d arrive prepared? How much more so as we gather each week to worship the Lord? That is why we put the next weeks hymns in the bulletins, so that you can be prepared. That is why we make the next week’s service, including the confession of sin available for download on our web site. This is why we’ve taught quite a bit about worship during study hour. We are not here to experience the divine, BUT to worship our living Lord and Savior, Christ Jesus!

So if you want to “guard your steps as you go to the house of the Lord” come not only prepared, but with the intention of participating fully with your mind in every facet of the worship! Otherwise, we may actually sin against the Lord unwittingly which obviously was a major concern of the Preacher (cf. v. 1). Now if we are habitually guilty of such a sin, what will be the result?

The Consequences of Sin

Ecclesiastes 5:6, “...Why should God be angry on account of your voice and destroy the work of your hands?”

If I came to your house and made a commitment to help you on Wednesday afternoon at 3:00, and you in turn called the hired-man and told him his services weren't needed, and then if I simply didn't show up, don't you suppose you'd be a little put out, especially when you called me at 3:30 saying, "Where are you?" and I said, "What are you talking about? I never made such a commitment?" The words you speak to God in a worship service, including the commitments, were real. They were not worthless promises made in a context of religious fervor, but honest to goodness commitments which God not only heard, but will hold you to. Recall the words of Christ:

Matthew 12:36, "And I say to you, that every careless word that men shall speak, they shall render account for it in the day of judgment."

Now if we lie to God habitually, what do you suppose God is going to do on account of His love? As our Father, He is going to discipline us. This is the point of Matthew 12:36. This is NOT because He is an offended deity on high who has been moved to anger, BUT because He loves us and is committed Himself to our growth and welfare!

Oh Christian! In the context of worship: say what you mean and mean what you say! Understand that when you became a Christian you entered into a love-relationship with a Person, the Lord Jesus Christ. He is not harsh or mean. But He, like anyone of us expects that if we say we are going to do something, we do it. So, worship with your mind and prepare adequately for this high and holy privilege, and when you are here. Participate in the worship of God at all times, don't zone out or mindlessly engage!

These are but a few of the implications that arise from worshiping a person, rather than a force! In fact, if the church kept the words of this "Preacher" in mind, much of the Baalism as it exists in the church today would be gone!

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End Note(s)

¹ Written and sung by Jason Gray whom Christianity Today claims is "Christian music's best kept secrets."

² From the bulletin announcement I shared two weeks ago.

³ *John Calvin & the Church: A Prism of Reform*, p. 234.

⁴ As we'll see, this is the focus of v. 6.

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Feel free to visit Bethel Presbyterian Church when in Broomfield, Colorado. Bethel Presbyterian Church meets at Broomfield High School, Eagle (10th Street) and Main, Broomfield, Colorado. The telephone number of the church is 303-469-6912. The worship services are at 9:30 a.m. and 6:00 p.m. each Sunday. Bethel Presbyterian Church is a member of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church.

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About the Preacher

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