

Lesson 9

"Trust Not in Deceptive Words": The Prophets and Worship

The debate within the Adventist church over contemporary worship styles has been going on since the 1980s. The real issue of worship, however, resolves itself around the true character of the God we worship. Is our god "Baal" whose worship caters to self-pleasure; or, the God who reveals Himself in self-denial and the divine-human sacrifice on the cross?

This was ancient Israel's dilemma as well as ours. All the spiritual confusion started when they called God "lord"--Baal. Then they brought in "contemporary" worship. It was "ecumenical." It was good "outreach" to secular people. The Israelites liked it.

Ancient Baal worship was the worship of "self" disguised as the worship of God. It resulted in lawless behavior. Jeremiah pointedly asked: "Will ye steal, murder, and commit adultery, and swear falsely, and burn incense unto Baal, and walk after other gods whom ye know not?" (7:9). Here is the unconscious sin.

The "watchman" is to sound the contemporary alarm.

All sorts of enslaving addictions arise out of the worship of "self": alcohol, cigarettes, drugs, gambling, infidelity, hatred, backbiting, evil-surmising, sharp-dealing, apathy, etc. When God's people lose their agape-love in exchange for eros-kind of faith motivated by self-interest, there is no end to the sins that can arise out of worshipping such a false god. The worship of "self"-idols is a violation of the first commandment: "Thou shalt have no other gods before me" (Ex. 20:3).

What is the cure for worshipping our sin-addictions? The only cure for worshipping false idols is an understanding of the true character of God. "God is love"--agape (1 John 4:8). But one cannot understand love unless he "sees" how God has revealed Himself at the cross.

The "good news" dynamic about God's character is illustrated by the prophet Isaiah's experience when he wandered into the Temple one day. He thought himself fitted for "ministry" until he heard the words, "Holy, holy, holy, is the LORD of hosts," and saw "the whole earth is full of His glory" (Isa. 6:3). The character of God is holy-agape. Here is a "good news" 1888 concept. Isaiah saw God revealed at the cross by going into the Temple. This revelation fills the "whole earth."

Isaiah declared: "Woe is me! For I am undone" (vs. 5). The closer he came to God the more he abhorred himself and his unchristlike character. Said Isaiah, "My heart is polluted in contrast with the righteousness of Christ." Isaiah could never have written his 53rd chapter about the cross of Christ unless he had experienced that self-abasement early on in chapter 6.

Worship that is not cross-centered descends into entertainment which appeals to the ego. When the forms and rituals of worship are not offered by "faith which works by love" (Gal. 5:6), then it is heathenism.

Heathen worship is not inconsistent with the retention of forms and ceremonies instituted by God. God instituted sacrifices as an essential feature of His worship, and it was doubtless from these that all other sacrificial ceremonies were borrowed. "Will the LORD be pleased with thousands of rams, or with ten thousands of rivers of oil? shall I give my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?" (Micah 6:7). The heathen looked no further in their worship than the sacrifice itself, and attributed to it all the virtue of obedience to the Divine instructions. It was this that made them heathen. They lost faith, which looked beyond the form and ceremony to the Lamb of God, in whom alone there was virtue for mankind. Heathenism is simply worship not of faith.

The sacrifices which were intended to point Israel to the atoning sacrifice of the Lamb of God, was perverted when faith dropped out, by the offering of sacrifices in order to appease an angry God. They even went to the extent of offering their own children in order to expiate God's wrath (2 Kings 17:16, 17; 3:27).

When the cross is uplifted in worship it results in repentance, and hardened, self-sufficient hearts are melted by our Saviour's divine compassion. "We are not to entertain the idea that God loves us because Christ has died for us, but that he so loved us that he gave his only-begotten Son to die for us. The death of Christ was expedient in order that mercy might reach us with its full pardoning power, ..." (Ellen G. White, Signs of the Times, May 30, 1895). The 1888 idea is that God gives us the atonement. We are the ones who need it. "God was in Christ, reconciling the world unto Himself, not imputing their trespasses unto them; ..." (2 Cor. 5:19).

It is not alone the proclamation of the law that convicts of sin. In fact, it may even "provoke" sin. To preach to someone that they must obey the law of God when they have not within them the power to obey, creates frustration and tension which can result in rebellion and rejection of God. Who has not seen the wreckage of such old covenant teaching in the loss of souls who go out the back door of the church?

There is a preachment of the law which, without the gospel, descends into self-efforts of obedience that is nothing more than paganism. "As a people, we have preached the law until we are as dry as the hills of Gilboa that had neither dew nor rain. We must preach Christ in the law, ... We must not trust in our own merits at all. ..." (Ellen G. White, Review and Herald, March 11, 1890).

The 1888 message emphasized the union of the law and the gospel just as in the "early rain" on the day of Pentecost. Peter proclaimed: "But ye denied the Holy One and the Just, and ... killed the Prince of life, ..." (Acts 3:14, 15). By this means the Holy Spirit convicted hearts in genuine repentance and conversion (vs. 19), and thousands received the atonement in a day (2:41).

The "latter rain" will be much more glorious in its call to "worship Him that made heaven, and earth" (Rev. 14:7). God's everlasting covenant is given to every earth-bound soul in a clarion call to worship: "Here are they that keep the commandments of God, and the faith of Jesus" (vs. 12). "Keep"; that is, "cherish" the "treasure" of God's promise. "Keep" what God has given you.

"The faith of Jesus," the gospel has been given to all. "God hath dealt to every man the measure of faith" (Rom. 12:3). Let Jesus' faith work out His commandments in you by agape-love.

--Paul E. Penno.