

“Gimme” That Man-Made Religion

I Kings 12-13; II Chronicles 11-13

Introduction

Gary Graff, a pastor in Lancaster, Minnesota, wrote a story about an acquaintance. The man had gone to shop at a neighborhood mall one day. When he returned to his car, he noticed a rather foul odor coming from under the hood, so he checked the engine. Immediately, upon raising the hood, he discovered a dead cat that was rather mutilated from being caught in the fan belt. The poor cat had sought shelter from the snow and cold and had not realized the danger of resting on the engine block. Fortunately, one of the man’s shopping bags was made of heavy plastic. He emptied its contents into another bag and proceeded to scrape, pull, and push the remains of that cat into the bag. Finally, he got all the grisly remains and slammed the hood down. He tied a knot in the top of the bag and left it on the hood of the car. Then, he walked back toward the mall to wash his hands.

Just as he reached the door leading into the mall, he happened to look back and notice something unusual. A middle-aged woman was walking by his car. He saw her stop, look in both directions rather cautiously, grab the bag, and walk quickly toward the mall. “Well, this is too good to be true!” the man thought, as he laughed at the lady. He decided to follow her and see what would happen next.

The lady went to a restaurant and was seated in a private booth. Once seated, she proceeded to untie the knot and survey her prize. As soon as she opened the bag and saw the dead cat, she screamed and then, fainted. Of course, the management was equally alarmed that a customer had fainted in their establishment and so, they called the paramedics. The woman, in no time at all, was strapped to a cart, ready to be rolled to the ambulance. The man just could not resist. He had taken the bag from the booth and, just as they were putting her inside the ambulance, he ran over and said, “Hey lady, don’t forget your bag!”

As they were closing the ambulance doors, he laid the bag on top of her. He could hear her screams a block away.

Okay, that is not funny, but it sure is great! The woman thought she had gotten away with a prize, but instead, she got a bag of bones.

Today, we begin to work our way through the maze of Israel’s history. We will observe one king after another, as they snatch the throne from each other, believing they have stolen the prize. Instead, they discover their palace is more like a bag containing the remains of what was once life, but is now decay and death.

A Biblical Overview

What happened to give the great and magnificent kingdom of David and Solomon a stench of death and decay? Let us make a quick overview of Israel’s history.

We will start with Saul, David, and Solomon, who each reigned for forty years. The kingdom of twelve tribes was united and strong. God was the only true God of Israel and the people worshiped Him.

However, as we have studied together, Solomon’s later years introduced the beginnings of idolatry in the nation. You may remember his foreign wives and the altars that he built for them. Solomon literally, sowed the seeds of destruction that would bring about a terrible harvest. God’s judgment was clear. Turn in your Bible to God’s condemning words to Solomon, as recorded in I Kings, chapter 11, verses 9 through 13.

Now the Lord was angry with Solomon because his heart was turned away from the Lord, the God of Israel, who had appeared to him twice,

and had commanded him concerning this thing, that he should not go after other gods; but he did not observe what the Lord had commanded.

So the Lord said to Solomon, “Because you have done this, and you have not kept My covenant and My statutes, which I have commanded you, I will surely tear the kingdom from you, and will give it to your servant.

Nevertheless I will not do it in your days for the sake of your father David, but I will tear it out of the hand of your son.

However, I will not tear away all the kingdom, but I will give one tribe to your son for the sake of My servant David and for the sake of Jerusalem which I have chosen.”

God then told an old prophet, named Ahijah, to go and set apart Jeroboam as the king of the ten northern tribes. This was to be acted upon only after Solomon’s death.

What was Jeroboam’s response? He immediately rebelled against Solomon and tried to wrestle the throne from him.

So, what was Solomon’s response? Look at chapter 11, verse 40a.

Solomon sought therefore to put Jeroboam to death; but Jeroboam arose and fled to Egypt . . .

What a mess! Even before the death of Solomon, the initial stench of a disunited kingdom was beginning to plague the air. God’s word was fulfilled, and, following Solomon’s death, the split occurred.

Now, in our last discussion, we observed the drama that led to the revolt of the ten northern tribes. Perhaps you remember the people asking Rehoboam, Solomon’s son and the king-elect, to lighten their tax burden and the forced labor among the men. You may remember what that plastic, imitation arrow, Rehoboam, said to the people, “You think my father Solomon was great, I have more in my little finger than he had in his whole body. He made your yoke heavy; I’ll make it heavier.”

Well, that speech got rave reviews by the press. Notice chapter 12, verses 16 and 17.

When all Israel saw that the king did not listen to them, the people answered the king saying, “What portion do we have in David? We have no inheritance in the son of Jesse; to your tents, O Israel! Now look after your own house David!” So Israel departed to their tents. But as for the sons of Israel who lived in the cities of Judah, Rehoboam reigned over them.

So, the kingdom is divided. The northern kingdom is referred to as Israel and the southern kingdom as Judah. It is easy to get confused as you work your way through I and II Kings, unless you understand that Israel now refers to the ten northern tribes. Samaria will become its capital. The southern kingdom retains its capital as Jerusalem and the two tribes of Judah and little Benjamin remain there.

What the biblical writer, Jeremiah, will attempt to do, over the next several pages, is recount the kings who reigned. He will switch back and forth between the north and the south. And the formula will be repeated over and over again; that is, this king did evil in the sight of the Lord or this king did that which was right. Turn to chapter 15 of I Kings and look at a few examples:

- verse 3a,

He [Abijam] walked in all the sins of his father . . .

- verse 11a,

Asa did what was right in the sight of the Lord . . .

- verse 26a,

He [Nadab] did evil in the sight of the Lord . . .

- verse 34a,

He [Baasha] did evil in the sight of the Lord . . .

Now, if you want to do well on your kings exam after our discussion . . . I am just kidding, but actually you could get ninety-five percent of the answers correct by simply writing beside each king’s name, “He was a wicked king.” All of the nineteen kings of Israel were wicked. Only a few of the twenty kings in Judah were godly.

Remember, however, that Jeremiah wants to teach us a lot more than history. He wants to give us an understanding of this divided kingdom from God’s perspective; that history is His story.

God has things to teach us from the unfolding acts of times, and epochs, and kingdoms. Paul wrote that the story of the Israelite was given to us to teach us through example.

A Biblical Example

So, for the remainder of our discussion today, let us take a look at the first king of Israel (the northern kingdom). While Rehoboam, whom we studied in our last discussion, that plastic arrow, was reigning over the two tribes in the south, Jeroboam was leading the ten tribes in the north. Frankly, if I were an Israelite, it would be hard to choose which king to follow.

This is like Ed Koch, the colorful former mayor of New York City, who was trying to decide which Democratic candidate he would support for the 1984 presidency. He, tongue-in-cheek was quoted as

saying, “If I support Ted Kennedy, I’ll be rewarded with expensive cruises, invitations to jet-set parties, and long summers in the Carribean. If I support Fritz Mondale, I’ll just have a long winter in Minnesota. It’s a tough choice.”

Well, in the promised land, you had Jeroboam or Rehoboam.

Let us follow the spotlight of Scripture, as it focuses on the reign of Jeroboam. Look at I Kings, chapter 12, verse 25.

Then Jeroboam built Shechem in the hill country of Ephraim, and lived there. And he went out from there and built Penuel.

So far so good, he is acting king-like; building cities and fortifying his real-estate. What happens in the next verses, however, provides for us, an incredible description of something that is happening in American culture every day. No, you will not find the name of America in these verses, so stop looking.

Think about this, what would you expect from a man who had been informed by a prophet that he would lead the ten northern tribes as their king, only because Solomon had turned to idolatry. What would you expect from that king? Turn back to chapter 11 of I Kings and look at verse 38, where the prophet of God is speaking to young Jeroboam.

Then it will be, that if you listen to all that I command you and walk in My ways, and do what is right in My sight by observing My statutes and My commandments, as My servant David did, then I will be with you and build you an enduring house as I built for David, and I will give Israel to you.

What would you expect him to do as king? Would he follow God; worship God? Sure! Look at chapter 12, verses 26 through 30.

Jeroboam said in his heart, “Now the kingdom will return to the house of David.

If this people go up to offer sacrifices in the house of the Lord at Jerusalem, then the heart of this people will return to their lord, even to Rehoboam king of Judah; and they will kill me and return to Rehoboam king of Judah.

So the king consulted, and made two golden calves, and he said to them, “It is too much for you to go up to Jerusalem; behold your gods, O Israel, that brought you up from the land of Egypt.”

He set one in Bethel, and the other he put in Dan.

Now this thing became a sin, for the people went to worship before the one as far as Dan.

Five characteristics of man-made religion

Jeroboam, in these verses, provides an incredible example of a false religion and how to create one! While you may not see golden calves in America, Jeroboam will go down in history as the creator of a his own man-made religion which provided an example that is occurring in our culture even today. Let me show, from his life, five characteristics of man-made religion; five ways to detect man-made religion.

Created in the imagination of the heart

1. Characteristic number one is that man-made religion is created in the imagination of the heart.

In other words, false religions and cults alike, are always someone’s invention. Look at verse 26a again,

Jeroboam said in his heart . . .

Look at the middle part of verse 33,

. . . even in the month which he had devised in his own heart . . .

Jeremiah makes it very clear that Jeroboam’s intricate system of worship was his own invention!

Have you ever heard the phrase, “I can worship God anywhere I want”?

Most of the men who say that to me are avid fishermen or golfers. One man told me that he got close to God, that he worshiped Him on the golf course. That is hard for me to understand, because, when I play golf, I do not get close to God, I usually backslide.

Now, granted, there is an element of truth in that statement, you can worship God anywhere. In fact, our hour of worship on Sunday is simply an overflow of our life of worship during the previous week. The quality of your worship on Sunday morning is determined by the quality of your life on Saturday night. But it begs the question, because worshipping as a body of believers, being accountable to a church family, and exercising our gifts for the sake of the body are not suggestions from God, but directives.

So, the Lord warned, through the author of Hebrews, in chapter 10, verses 24 and 25,

and let us consider how to stimulate [or provoke] one another to love and good deeds, not forsaking our own assembling together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another . . .

How do you encourage and stimulate, or provoke, one another? By serving one another. There is a need for people in our church, by the dozens, to step forward, even in the next two weeks. Our *Communiqué* is one large billboard that says, “We need help!” God has brought so many wonderful people to our fellowship, yet there are still too many people who are sitting and not serving. We need people who will provoke and encourage through serving.

I read in our *Communiqué* that nearly a dozen men could be used immediately to direct traffic in the parking lot. Now there is a great place to provoke people! So many people already are!

Another fallacy is this quote that I have often heard, “I can create my own religious beliefs, as long as I am sincere in what I believe.”

The other night I was out taking care of some appointments. The next morning, my wife, Marsha, told me about a television news magazine that she had watched. As hard as it is to fathom, there are thousands of people who believe that, over a period of time, their body cells are going through some sort of metaphysical transformation that will allow them to live forever. The leaders, a middle-aged man and woman have become enormously wealthy off the fees they extract from their sincere followers.

So, what about a devout follower who happens to die? They have an answer for that. That person did not achieve full transformation in time because they lacked the commitment and faith necessary to transform, and thus, they died.

Every one of these followers may be totally sincere, but, one day, they will all die! As recorded in Hebrews, chapter 9, verse 27, God said,

. . . it is appointed for men to die once and after this comes judgment

They are sincere! But, they are sincerely wrong.

An appeal to the independence of the human will

2. Characteristic number two is that man-made religion is an appeal to the independence of the human will.

Notice I Kings, chapter 12, verse 28, again.

So the king consulted, and made two golden calves, and he said to them, “It is too much for you to go up to Jerusalem; behold your gods, O Israel . . .

In other words, “Why make the long journey to Jerusalem to worship, why sacrifice your own convenience, let’s do our own thing!”

I recently read an advertisement for the Universal church, I believe, in the newspaper. The woman writer gave her personal view of the church. She said how wonderful this church was because it allowed her the freedom to pick and choose certain things that she liked from a variety of religions.

A Gallup poll revealed that an amazing eighty-two percent of Americans said, “growing into a deeper relationship with God is important,” to them. Sixty percent said that they were now, “more interested in spiritual things than five years earlier”. Before you get too excited, however, you need to know that sixty percent also rejected the idea that, “a person should be limited to a single faith”.

One author that I read, worded it this way,

Today, everyone’s beliefs must be given equal standing . . . everyone is so right. It doesn’t matter if you’re praying to your inner light, to Sophia, to the Trinity, to whomever. If it works for you, it’s fine.

So, religion in America is increasingly nothing more than a declaration of man’s independence from the God of the Bible.

Cal Thomas, a Christian syndicated columnist, wrote,

Most of the religion that seems to be making a comeback today is nothing more than people who have found permission to explore their inner selves without having to acknowledge the existence of a personal God who might require something from them.

That is really not a new problem. Jeroboam created a religion that was without spiritual reality.

Provides a hidden system that protects its hierarchy

3. Characteristic number three is that man-made religion provides a hidden system that protects its hierarchy.

You need to understand Jeroboam's problem. First of all, he had forgotten that this division in the kingdom was political and social; God did not expect it to become religious. The spiritual center was to remain at Jerusalem. But, if the people returned to Jerusalem every year for the Feast of Tabernacles, the huge national celebration that thanked God for His goodness to them, they might just reconcile.

Jeroboam's solution is given to us in verses 31 and 32a of I Kings, chapter 12.

And he made houses on high places, and made priests from among all the people who were not of the sons of Levi. Jeroboam instituted a feast in the eighth month on the fifteenth day of the month, like the feast which is in Judah, and he went up to the altar . . .

Jeroboam made his feast one month later than the one in Jerusalem. That would be more convenient to the northerners whose crops would come in a month later. Was Jeroboam concerned about thanking God? Is that why he invented his own Feast of Tabernacles? *No!* He was worried about saving his own throne. He wanted the prize for himself, even if he had to steal it from God!

That leads me to the fourth characteristic of man-made religion.

An attempt to appear genuine and holy

4. Characteristic number four is that man-made religion is an attempt to appear genuine and holy.

Notice again, all of the counterfeiting that Jeroboam painstakingly developed:

- verse 31,

And he made houses on high places [little shrines], and made priests from among all the people . . .

- verse 32,

Jeroboam instituted a feast in the eighth month on the fifteenth day of the month, like the feast which is in Judah, and he went up to the altar . . .

- verse 33,

. . . he . . . went up to the altar to burn incense.

It is all there – feasts, sacrifices, prayers, priests, incense, ritual, ceremony. Everything is there, except true worship!

Last month, my family drove through Washington, D.C. on our way back from a trip. If you have been on the beltway that circles Washington, you have probably seen the top of a huge Mormon temple. It has a three-fold spire that stretches far into the sky, implying, falsely, the trinity. In the middle, is a pole that stretches even further into the air, which is topped by the golden form of the angel that supposedly, brought revelation from God. If you were to visit that temple, you would be awestruck by its beauty and form. And, face it, many of us have enjoyed recordings from the Mormon Tabernacle Choir.

False religion, on the outside, is a bag from a fancy department store that is colorfully designed and attractive, but inside, is filled with death.

By the way, as you discern truth from error, remember, the primary distinction between false religion and true religion is Jesus Christ. Is Jesus Christ equal with the Father; is Jesus Christ God?

John wrote in his first epistle, chapter 2, verses 22 and 23,

Who is the liar but the one who denies that Jesus is the Christ? . . .

(God in the flesh),

. . . This is the antichrist, the one who denies the Father and the Son.

(that is, their equality),

Whoever denies the Son does not have the Father; the one who confesses the Son has the Father also.

There are not many paths to heaven, there is only one; that is, the God-man, Jesus Christ.

Disregards the holiness of God and the sinfulness of man

5. Characteristic number five is that man-made religion disregards the holiness of God and the sinfulness of man.

One author wrote,

There are four wrong ways to worship:

1. *worshiping false gods,*
2. *worshiping the true God in the wrong form,*
3. *worshiping God in a self-styled manner,*
4. *worshiping the true God in the right way with the wrong motive.*

We need to remember that today. As believers, we can worship God in the right way, but with purely selfish motives. We forget sometimes that the Lord knows the difference between praise and flattery; between worship and bribery.

A Biblical Directive

In conclusion, just what is the biblical directive?

How to worship God's way

How do we worship God's way?

It involves preparation

1. First, it involves preparation.

Turn to Hebrews, chapter 10, verses 19 through 20 and 22a.

Therefore, brethren, since we have confidence to enter the holy place by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way which He inaugurated for us through the veil, that is, His flesh, . . . let us draw near with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith . . .

There is no need for priests anymore; no need for ritual and sacrifice; no need for fear; no need for one representative to go into God's presence – and that is true now! Jesus Christ is the mediator and His blood paves the path for us to commune with the Father. "This is new," Jesus said, "I am here to introduce an entirely new way to worship God."

This passage also gives us several insightful ways to prepare for worship. Let me point out three ways that provide readiness to worship.

A sincere heart

- Preparation number one is a transparent heart, according to verse 22a.

let us draw near with a sincere heart . . .

We come with a transparent heart; we come as "open books" before God. So, the question that

precedes worship is, "What's the condition of my heart?"

In other words, hypocrisy and worship never occur simultaneously. Pretenders never experience worship.

Full assurance of faith

- Preparation number two is full assurance of faith, as verse 22a also tells us.

. . . in full assurance of faith . . .

We prepare to worship with a confident heart, but confident in what? Ourselves? No, we are worshipping not because of our goodness, but because of our faith in Christ's perfection. Our assurance is in Christ. This is explained fully in the next preparation.

Cleansed hearts and lives

- Preparation number three is cleansed hearts and lives, in verse 22b.

. . . having our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water.

Jesus Christ allows us to worship, not because we are worthy, but because He is worthy. And, because He is worthy, everything about us that is unworthy is cleansed.

Now, this verse is not saying that you must literally, take a bath before you worship, although a Saturday night bath will certainly help the worship of those around you. We come, with faith in Him, grateful that our sins, though as scarlet, have been washed as white as snow.

Now, leave that passage and turn to John, chapter 4. Look at verse 23.

But an hour is coming, and now is, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth; for such people the Father seeks to be His worshipers.

Isn't that wonderful?! Whom does the Father seek? Pastors, missionaries, rich Christians who can contribute large amounts to the church, the talented, the bright, the influential?

No! That is who we would seek. God the Father, however, seeks transparent, confident, grateful worshipers!

Imagine, God longing for fellowship with us! But how selfish we are! We often go to church to see what is in it for us. We ask, "What did you get out of the service?"

We fail to remember that we did not come to get something for ourselves, but to give worship to God!

It involves celebration

2. So, worship requires preparation, but, secondly, it involves celebration.

How do we celebrate communion with God? Look at John, chapter 4, verse 24.

God is spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth.

There are two key phrases in this verse: we must worship the Father in spirit and we must worship Him in truth.

In spirit

- Celebration number one is to worship God in spirit.

What does it mean to "worship in spirit"? First, notice that the "s" on the word "spirit" is lower case. That is because, in the Greek text, the predicate lacks the definite article which would have caused us to translate it as, "The Spirit". That is a reference to the Holy Spirit. The reference in this verse is to the human spirit. That is the immortal, invisible part of you and I that was brought to life when we trusted Jesus Christ (as Ephesians, chapter 2, verse 5, tells us).

Worship then, is that communion; that connection between our spirit and God's Spirit. It is not a matter of being in the right place, at the right time, with the right music, wearing the right clothes, displaying the right formalities, in the right mood, praying the right prayer, singing the right hymn, and hearing the right preaching. All of these may aid in promoting worship, but they cannot produce worship! Worship is created in your spirit, which, like dry wood, is sparked into flame by the fire of communion with the Holy Spirit.

In truth

- Celebration number two is to worship God in truth.

The next phrase says, "worship Him . . . in truth". What does it mean to worship God in truth?

First, worship in truth is initiated by truthful people. Dishonest people cannot experience worship. Remember that pretenders do not worship God. Once again, there is the need for transparency before God.

Secondly, to worship God in truth is to study His revelation. Did you know that the word "orthodox," which is the word that is normally related to correct doctrine, is actually derived from two words: "ortho," meaning "correct," and "doxa," meaning "praise". The word orthodox literally means, "correct praise or worship". When correct doctrine is correctly taught, the result is not a headache, the result is praise!

Let me point out a verse that ties spirit and truth together in one beautiful phrase. Look at Colossians, chapter 3, verse 16.

Let the word of Christ richly dwell within you, with all wisdom teaching and admonishing one another . . .

(that is truth),

. . . with psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with thankfulness in your hearts to God.

(that is spirit).

A couple of months ago, I was visiting in the home of a couple that had come from a Roman Catholic background to our church. Perhaps you can identify with this story. Our church was the first Protestant worship service they had ever attended in their lives. To hear him tell how he described it to his wife, who was home, at that time, very pregnant with their first child, was so funny and so precious to me. He said, "I got to the church and went in the front door. People were friendly; some even said, 'Hello.'"

He probably learned later, that they were the greeters.

"I went into the auditorium and sat down. People next to me said, 'Hello.'"

"I was shocked by the fact that people were talking. I had been raised to say nothing in the sanctuary, unless you whispered."

"Then a man got up and everybody began singing – in English! After a bunch of singing, another guy walks down the aisle and I thought he was the priest, but he wasn't wearing a robe. He got up on the stage and began to teach right from the Bible!"

The man's wife came later and, a few weeks ago, I had the privilege of baptizing them both. They are both new believers; both hungry for the Word; both enjoying worship with our church family.

Ladies and gentlemen, when we explore the Word, we experience worship; when we focus on Jesus Christ, we experience worship; when we serve one another, we participate in worship, not man-made worship, but God-made. We should sing, "Gimme' that God-made religion;" that is what we want and that is what we truly need.