



Nevertheless

In the Old Testament book of Deuteronomy, we learn that, as the Children of Israel were preparing to enter the land of Canaan, God gave them some very specific instructions. Among these directives was an admonition concerning worship.

You see, the inhabitants of the land whom they were about to replace had certain habits of worship which God was concerned that His people not imitate. Evidently, when the Canaanites noticed a cozy grove of trees or an elevated situation, they would choose these settings to erect their idols. These naturally pleasing, prominent locations became the centers of their idolatrous worship – the “groves” and “high places.”

Concerning these things, God commanded them: “You shall utterly destroy all the places where the nations which you shall dispossess served their gods, on the high mountains and on the hills and under every green tree. ...You shall not worship the Lord your God with such things” (Deut 12:2,4). The Lord made it perfectly clear that they were not free to utilize these locations. He said, “Take heed to yourself that you do not offer your burnt offerings in every place that you see; but in the place which the Lord chooses... there you shall offer your burnt offerings, and there you shall do all that I command you” (Deut 12:13,14).

God had in mind a definite kind of worship for His people. True Old Testament worship was to be centered around a certain, specific place. Again He admonished them saying: “But when you cross over the Jordan and dwell in the land which the Lord your God is giving you to inherit... then there will be the place where the Lord your God chooses to make His name abide.”

“There you shall bring all that I command you: your burnt offerings, your sacrifices, your tithes, the heave offerings of your hand, and all your choice offerings which you vow to the Lord” (Deut 12:10,11).

According to the sacred scriptures, God’s people were not free to pick and choose their own places and means of worship. No one was free to do “whatever is right in his own eyes” (Deut 12:8). Instead, there was a definite, specific limitation placed upon them. Their worship must be done in a distinct, special location (see Deut 12:5-7).

Of course most of you readers will be aware of the fact that the place ultimately chosen by God for this purpose was Mount Moriah in the city Jerusalem. It was there that King Solomon built the temple, it was that “place” which God honored with His presence (II Chron 5:13,24) and it was that location which became the center of all true Jewish worship.

Nevertheless, as with most of God’s other instructions, the Jewish people did not obey this command. Before the construction of the Temple in Jerusalem, the Tabernacle was the designated place of worship. Instead of taking the trouble to journey all the way to where the Tabernacle was erected, they began to utilize the old, convenient Canaanite locations.

Eventually this became the commonly accepted practice (I Kings 3:2). Soon even the leaders, who should have known better, were carried away with this defec-tion. Samuel sacrificed in Ramah and Gilgal (I Sam 7:17; 11:15). Solomon not only worshiped in many different high places including Gibeon (I Kings 3:3,4) but he even went so far as to build idolatrous ones for his foreign wives (I Kings 11:7).

(It is important to understand here that even though the Israelites went to these locations to sacrifice, they were not necessarily worshipping idols. Although the sin of idolatry did occur, it appears that the Jews often frequented these “high places” to seek the true God. Their intentions appeared to be right even though their ac-tions were wrong.)

Now how does such a thing apply to us today? We are told that all scripture is given for our benefit so it stands to reason that this admonition concerning the proper place of worship must have some application to our present situation. In or-

der to understand the answer here, we must realize that many of the Old Testament religious instructions are actually types or shadows of a future spiritual reality.

The lamb offered on the Passover is one of the most obvious examples of this, clearly pointing to the sacrifice of our Lord Jesus Christ. Concerning our present discussion of the proper place of worship, the New Testament also provides us with the fulfillment of this type.

As it was under the old covenant, so it is in the new. God has instructed us concerning a definite place of worship. There is a specific location ordained by our Lord where we must worship if we are to be obedient and therefore be pleasing to Him. This is a very important point. Today also, God has ordained a specific location for true worship to occur. Unless we worship in this place, we are rebelling against God.

Jesus Himself unveiled this truth in His discussion with a Samaritan woman. When she questioned Him concerning the religious center Jerusalem, He replied, “But the hour is coming, and now is, when the true worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and truth; for the Father is seeking such to worship Him” (Jn 4:23).

Here is the location! Here is the spiritual fulfillment of the earthly type! True worship must today be done in the Spirit or it is done in disobedience to Jesus. Paul the apostle confirms this in Philippians 3:3 where he says: “For we are the circumcision, who worship God in the Spirit, rejoice in Christ Jesus, and have no confidence in the flesh.”

Being “in the Spirit” means that we have entered into the presence of God. It means that our innermost beings are yielded to and open to Him. It means that He is the source, content and the leader of what we are doing. It signifies that we are submitted to Him completely and are humbly enjoying His person without barriers.

On the other hand, being in the Spirit does not mean that we have entered into the “mood” of some occasion. It does not denote that we are in harmony with some special ambience, that we are tuned in to some emotional experience or that

we are going along with things which are happening around us. Instead, it means that we have genuinely entered into the presence of God Almighty.

THE HIGH PLACES

If then the city of Jerusalem represents for us the proper place of worship, i.e. the Spirit, how are we to understand the meaning of the warning against the use of the “high places?” The groves and high places are symbolic of the other “locations” in which worship could be done. They are a substitute for the real thing. They are the religious replacements for true spiritual worship.

These are the earthly trappings which provide a “form of godliness” but which are devoid of Holy Spirit power (II Tim 3:5). They offer the Christians of our day a convenient, socially acceptable mode of worship which does not demand that they have an intimate, spiritual relationship with God.

It seems necessary here to take a moment and discuss some of the more common of these present-day “high places” to provide a clearer understanding of our subject. But before we proceed, I must warn you that these things may offend you. Therefore, if you choose to read on, please do your best to be willing to hear from God and to change any of your activities which are shown to be displeasing to Him.

Some of the items which today provide a substitute for spiritual reality in Christian meetings are: liturgies, rituals, forms, pre-planned “services” and human leadership. These things offer men an alternative for being in the Spirit. They are practices which appear religious but do not require that the participants have any real relationship with God, any obedience to His will or any desire to live by the Spirit instead of the flesh.

They are earthly, human replacements for an essential spiritual experience. They are “places” or ways of worship which are common in today’s church, but which are forbidden by God. No other worship is acceptable to Him except that which He has prescribed. True worshippers must worship in the Spirit.

People tend to assume (either consciously or unconsciously) that by approaching God through a particular format, in a special building or according to a clergyman's direction, their relationship with God will be enhanced. In fact, they have often been taught, either directly or by example, that such things are essential for genuine worship. However, the only place in which real fellowship with God is possible is in His presence. And being in His presence requires nothing less than that we be in the Spirit.

When we come to other "places" to worship, we at the same time replace Him with them. We gradually begin to rely upon these practices and performances as our assurance that we are in a right relationship with our Savior. These things then become the supporting structures of our Christianity replacing the necessity of actually walking in daily intimacy with Him. In this way, the urgency of being in the Spirit is subtly superseded by superficial religious practices.

I doubt if anyone would question the fact that people can participate in the above-mentioned practices without even being real believers. What might not be so apparent is that Christians cannot be in these other "places" and be fully pleasing God at the same time.

It is not "O.K. with Him" if we engage in religious formalities which are devoid of the Holy Spirit or which rob Him of His rightful place. To the degree that we "do what is right in our own eyes" and involve ourselves in unspiritual worship, we simultaneously, to the same degree, push God aside. When we worship at these other "places," we disregard His authority and disobey His clear commandment.

TRUE WORSHIPPERS

In order to better understand these statements, perhaps it is necessary here to take some time and investigate true, spiritual worship together. Firstly, in order to worship in the spirit, we must be born of the Spirit. No instruction classes, church rituals or family ties will avail. Only those who have been genuinely born again can engage in true worship.

Secondly, genuine worshippers must be filled with the Holy Spirit. If we are to truly enter into the Spirit, this requires that we open ourselves to be filled with the Holy Spirit.

Thirdly, in order to have true worship, we must be led by the Holy Spirit. This is perhaps the most neglected item in the church of our day. If we claim to be in the spirit, but do not strictly follow the leadership of the Spirit, we are deceiving ourselves. We cannot remain in His presence while rejecting His authority. We must be extremely sensitive to His leading if we are to worship in the place where He has chosen to put His name. Jesus is not the observer of our worship but the leader and High Priest of it.

This last item is precisely where all the other religious “places” of worship fail the test. For example, when the “order of worship” is arranged in advance, God is deprived of His opportunity to lead. When we simply go through rituals and recite certain things, the living presence and authority of Jesus are not given their place.

If we just sit through services, watching others perform various ceremonies and entertainments, His rightful leadership is denied. By engaging in these things we quench the Holy Spirit. We limit Him by our own human practices. In essence we say to our Lord, “We are going to worship here in this way and if You want to manifest Yourself in our midst, You will have to fit Yourself in wherever You can.” We have chosen our own “high places” of worship.

Some may attempt to counter this assertion by insisting that God surely can lead us to arrange some things in advance. For example, He might give one or two of the men a message for the rest. Certainly this is true. God can and does sometimes prepare us in specific ways for our worship together.

But this does not justify the fact that most of Christendom meets week after week, year after year under the same format, using the same liturgy, singing from the same book and passively listening to the same individuals minister. Surely all this vain religion cannot be explained by the simple truth that God can prepare us spiritually before our meetings. It is clearly a case of choosing our own ways and means of worship. Such behavior is a violation of God’s command.

A proper church meeting, one which is in the Spirit, operates something like this: real believers gather together, open their hearts and their meeting to Jesus, and then He comes both to fill them and to lead them in their worship.

In this situation, each one is capable of ministering his or her portion by the Spirit's leading (I Cor 14:26-30). Each one speaks, begins a song or hymn, prophecies, etc. according to His direction. No one is free to do their own thing or dominate the rest with his or her gift or ministry. In this way, what God has revealed to each one and what great things He has accomplished in every life, are shared with all and become the property of all. The supply of "every joint" is essential for the true building up of the body (Eph 4:16).

Yes, there is leadership here. There will always be those more mature and sensitive to the Spirit who can and should help direct such gatherings. In fact, this is essential if the order and purposes of the Lord are to be maintained. But this too must be done by the guidance of Jesus, not by human hands. Everything possible must be done to preserve God's "place" in our meetings. We must worship Him in the Spirit if our worship is to be acceptable. This is the Jerusalem of today. It is the worship which He has commanded.

MANY REVIVALS

In the Old Testament we have a record of many revivals which took place during the times of the Judges and the Kings. As we have already seen, the Israelites frequently departed from the commandments of their God. In order to counter this propensity to fall away, throughout their history Jehovah orchestrated many revivals.

Again and again He raised up men and women who worked to bring the nation back to God and to obedience to His laws and statutes. Among those whom God used to fulfill this task were Ehud, Gideon, Deborah, David, Asa, Jehosaphat, Ahaz, Jehu and Hezekiah.

These individuals were chosen and anointed by God to do works of spiritual restoration. They were His instruments to break down the idols, destroy the sodomites and false prophets and turn the hearts of the people back to their God.

It is thrilling to read through the books of Judges, Kings and Chronicles and see how these people were used of the Lord. Yet at the end of so many of these accounts of revival a certain passage appears. It reads something like this: “Nevertheless, the high places were not taken down and the people still burned incense under the groves” (I Kings 15:14; 22:43, II Kings 12:3; 14:4; 15:4,35).

In spite of the fact that there had been revival, even though some of what was on God’s heart had been restored through the ministry of these individuals, there was almost always one item which remained unfulfilled. There was always this “Nevertheless... nevertheless... nevertheless.” There was inevitably a falling short of a complete return to all that was on the Lord’s heart. God’s people still clung to the natural, human, forbidden ways of worship.

A PROPHETIC HISTORY

As I read these Old Testament accounts, I cannot help but suspect that these stories are like a prophetic history of the Christian Church. So much of what they experienced is similar to what we are going through or have been through since the time Christ died. It appears that Christians, just like their Jewish counterparts, have a great proclivity to fall away from God. They seem to have a deeply ingrained tendency to migrate from the spiritual to the natural, from the heavenly to the earthly. It did not take the early New Testament churches long to fall from the freedom of their glorious beginnings to the bondage of the law and other superficial, religious things.

It is evident from the scriptures that Paul the apostle had to spend a lot of time countering such tendencies. His emphasis upon Christ being the substance, center and fulfillment of all things was always threatened by those who wished to implement outward, superficial ordinances and practices.

This strong tendency is still with us today. We do not have to look long or hard to discover multitudinous modes of worship besides a simple openness toward and obedience to the Spirit of God. The place where our Lord has established His name, the singular location where true worship can be acceptable to Him, has been replaced with many and various types of religious high places.

Oh yes, no doubt people are still worshipping the one true God with their forms and formulas. Perhaps many of them have managed to avoid the sin of idolatry. Because of this, it is often difficult for the undiscerning believers to understand what is wrong with what they are doing.

But for those who know the heart of God such earthly worship is a source of continual grief. In such situations the reality of the Holy Spirit has been pre-empted by empty, earthly methods and practices. These are today's groves and high places.

They are things which have an earthly, natural attraction, but are not what God commanded. They are a substitution for the kind of worship God has ordained.

No wonder so many of our churches today are so weak. No wonder we are turning out spiritual babies instead of mature saints. In view of all this, it is little surprise that the church has not evangelized the world, is filled with sin and appears so powerless against God's enemies.

We have been living in disobedience to God. We have been following our own ideas instead of His. We have chosen our ways and means of worship and supposed that they would produce the same results as Christ's. But God has ordained spiritual worship for a good reason. Only in this way can He be all He wishes to be among His people. And only in this way can they mature into what He desires them to be.

THE REVIVALS IN CHRISTIANITY

The days of the prophets and kings were not the only times of revivals. The Christian Church has had many of her own. A short reading of church history

will readily confirm this fact. Just in recent times we can remember names such as Evan Roberts, Duncan Campbell, Charles Finney, John Wesley, George Whitfield, Andrew Murray, Charles Spurgeon and Dwight Moody just to mention a few.

All of these men, and many others did mighty works for God. They had caught a glimpse of something more than what was commonly practiced and they strove to bring the hearts of the people back to Jesus. God anointed them and used them powerfully to bring a renewed understanding of His love and power to both His church and also to the unbelieving world.

Thousands were saved in these revivals and countless others were touched by the Spirit of God. Yet, in so many instances there was a falling short of His intentions. Again and again there was real revival. Nevertheless... the superficial, human structures were not disassembled and the people still clung to outward religious practices. The other “places” of worship were left intact.

It is true that Martin Luther and other men of God made some progress away from the emptiness and deception of formal religion. Yet almost inevitably, a complete break was not made. The restoration back to God’s heart, back to a purely Spirit-filled, Spirit-led worship was not achieved.

In all fairness, it must be stated that some progress has been made along these lines in recent church history. Many groups have introduced a certain amount of spiritual freedom into their meetings, especially during times of praise and singing. These movements are very commendable. This direction should be applauded and encouraged.

However, it is still extremely rare to find a meeting of Christians where the Holy Spirit is allowed complete freedom and authority throughout. Usually, after a “time of worship,” meetings tend to revert back to following forms and programs or to being dominated by one or two leaders. This results in the authority of Jesus being limited, the Spirit being quenched and limited and the “place” of God’s choosing lost. Such a restoration is incomplete because it still leaves the groves and high places intact.

THE MINISTRY OF JOSIAH

During the reign of the Kings, only Josiah followed the Lord completely in this matter. We read: “Now before him there was no king like him, who turned to the Lord with all his heart, with all his soul, and with all his might, according to all the Law of Moses; nor after him did any arise like him” (II Kings 23:25).

Not only did he remove the idols, burn the wooden images, stop the practice of ritual prostitution and destroy the idolatrous altars, but he also got rid of the high places (II Kings 23:8; II Chron 34:3). Finally God had found a man to do all that was in His heart and carry out His judgments. At last He had found someone who would be pure, completely free of all that took the place of His commandments.

Praise God! No more nevertheless... nevertheless... nevertheless. No more partial restorations. No more half-way measures. Here at last, what God desired was fully accomplished and what He had commanded was completely obeyed. What a blessed time of revival this proved to be. Even the Passover observance was again instituted and the people enjoyed a tremendous time of feasting before the Lord (II Kings 23:22).

Now don't you think that our God might desire something similar to this today? Don't you suppose that a full restoration of true spiritual worship is something which is on His heart? Our God is the same, yesterday, today and forever. His plans and purposes have not changed. He may tolerate the deviant behavior of His people. He may permit a condition of mixture and impurity to continue. He certainly does continue to love us and lead us. But isn't it likely that deep in His heart He desires something much more than that? How He must long to be obeyed and enthroned completely among His people.

Dear friends, new wine does not belong in old wineskins. The fact that God permits us to go our own way and often blesses us even when we are not entirely obedient, does not change what is upon His heart. We cannot excuse ourselves just because what we are practicing is the same as everyone else.

I firmly believe that before Jesus comes again, He would like to purify His people. He would like to cleanse His temple of all things that offend. He would like to establish among us a pure worship which is completely acceptable to Him. Finally,

I would like to suggest that God is right now looking for some who will be fully obedient, some who will rise up and stand for Him. No doubt God is searching for the Josiah's of our day.

By David W. Dyer

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