

Lifebytes:

32. God's Warning For Today *"The Many Faces of Idolatry"*



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Dear Friends,

We're continuing the theme we began in the previous Lifebyte, **God's Warning For Today: Jeremiah's Call To Repentance**. Our Lord loves His people too much to allow anyone or anything to displace their devotion to Him without sounding a clarion call to repent.

Let's explore the warnings He poured out to Judah and Jerusalem through His beleaguered prophet, Jeremiah, and discover His heart's cry for us today.

The Many Faces of Idolatry

God raised up Jeremiah because His people ***"followed worthless idols and became worthless themselves"*** (Jeremiah 2:5). The Israel of his day and much of contemporary Christianity in the United States are two peas in the same pod.

Like the Israelites of Jeremiah's time, the religious system today has been created by man so that the unrepentant can feel comfortable in the "spiritual compartment" of their life. The different "church" buildings throughout each city are entertainment centers designed to attract the masses and appease their senses of sight, sound and soulish satisfaction.

Let's take a closer look at the forms of idolatry that God recognizes in Christendom today. From our heavenly Father's perspective, idolatry is this:

Having greater devotion to anyone or anything than you have for Him and His Son, Jesus.

YOU Can Be An Idol

An idol doesn't have to be an image crafted by human hands. A person can idolize HIMSELF: ***"The man who loves his life will lose it, while the man who hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life"*** John 12:25).

Do you *love* a life that's pulled toward worldly influence by your sin nature? Are you *clinging* to what you have or *striving* after what you still desire of that which the world has to offer?

If this describes you and you choose *not* to repent and submit to the transformation that sanctification entails, you've made an idol of yourself. No matter what pew you sit in or what house church you attend, you're choosing to *worship yourself* according to the ways of the devil and the world.

And, if you remain a **Hardened, Mocking** or **God-denying fool**, you've made an idol of yourself. [See ***Discussing How To Restore The Early Church: Lesson 10*** for more on fools.]

Paul soberly warns the followers of Jesus in a sin-laden culture similar to ours to flee the idolatry of their sin nature and the lifestyle and motives it produces when it is given reign. Don't be presumptuous enough to think that you can dabble in self-indulgence and still stand firm in obedient trust!

So, if you think you are standing firm, be careful that you don't fall! No temptation has seized you except what is common to man. And God is faithful; He will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted [enticed by your sin nature], He will also provide a way out so that you can stand up under it. Therefore, my dear friends, flee from idolatry (1 Corinthians 10:12-14).

Just remember: Everything about your pilgrimage to salvation and your growth in Christ's likeness is dependent on your *willingness to be changed*. If you still yearn for the goals and ways of the world, you'll miss the glory of being

transformed into the likeness of Jesus:

*In other words, **do not let yourselves be conformed to the standards of this world. Instead, keep letting yourselves be transformed by the renewing of your minds; so that you will know what God wants and will agree that what He wants is good, satisfying and able to succeed** (Romans 12:2, CJB).*

*And we, who with unveiled faces all reflect the Lord's glory, are **being transformed into His likeness with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit** (2 Corinthians 3:18).*

If you yearn to press on into all of the likeness of Jesus you can, you must flee the sin-nature influence of your identity and become “Jesus-in-the-flesh.” His Spirit in His followers makes this possible as our “unveiled faces reflect His glory” in ever-increasing measure by yielding to His Spirit’s transformational work in us.

Consider, however, the example you’re setting for your impressionable children if you choose to balance religious practice with your pursuit of idols, the things the world strives after. When you justify rebelling against God — which is what your idolatry is — you’re encouraging halfhearted acknowledgment of His existence to your offspring. That’s no foundation for a wholehearted relational devotion to Him; apostasy is sure to follow in their lives!

*...Their rebellion is great and **their backslidings many. Why should I forgive you? Your children have forsaken Me and sworn by gods that are not gods. I supplied all their needs, yet they committed adultery and thronged to the houses of prostitutes** (Jeremiah 5:6,7).*

Do you wonder that your children nag you for the things of this world that their peers prize? If you’re never content with that which our Father has given you, what makes you think your kids will be?

And, no matter what you say about Him, if you aren’t living in *daily gratefulness* to God for His unfailing provision of your needs, your children will gratify themselves in any way their flesh sees fit. Their ever-increasing lawlessness will strive to meet the demands of their sin nature, and their lives will reflect the reality that they have neither fear or love for God nor reverence for His Word.

Your Relationships Can Be An Idol

When you’re more devoted to particular people — even to your family! — than you are to God, you’ve made them an idol. Our love for Him must *exceed* that which we have for all others. Otherwise we have not yet grasped Who He wants to be in our lives as Lord and Beloved Bridegroom:

*Anyone who loves his father or mother **more than Me is not worthy of Me; anyone who loves his son or daughter more than Me is not worthy of Me; and anyone who does not take his cross and follow Me is not worthy of Me** (Matthew 10:37,38).*

Remember, God Himself is setting these criteria for us as His people. There’s a death-to-self condition listed by Matthew: dying to the very human desire to put our family above all else. That’s why Jesus warns us of the cost of following Him: we must each take up our cross in order to walk in His footsteps.

What is a cross other than an instrument of death? As with the call to “hate

our lives in this world” (John 12:25) in comparison to our love for Jesus, God is summoning us to die to *everything* and *everyone*, including ourselves, so that we may be transformed into the character and motivation of His Son.

From the biblical Hebraic perspective, loving God in wholehearted devotion means that you eagerly seek Him out and obey His Word. The two go hand in hand. And *collectively*, He calls those who are truly His people to relish a sense of *belonging to* Him and *in* Him that supercedes the worldly sentiment of idolizing others.

Notice the parameters God establishes so that this *connectedness with Him* can flourish:

But this is what I commanded them, saying, ‘Obey My voice, and I will be your God, and you will be My people; and you will walk in all the way which I command you, that it may be well with you’ (Jeremiah 7:23).

If you aren’t willing to *die*, you’ll never live. You’ll never be His outflow of *“streams of living water”*. The relationships you idolize will diminish your devotion to Jesus as you seek to please *them* and hold onto *them*. These individuals may make you feel comfortable about yourself and accepted “just as you are.” But you’ll find yourself becoming a dead cistern of religious practices that are empty of life or power (see 2 Timothy 3:5).

Your Government Can Be An Idol

So many who align themselves with “conservative Christianity” find a false confidence in the current government of this nation. They believe that the United States is basically impervious, that the 9/11 tragedy was a blip on our country’s

well-being radar, and that our military might will keep them safe. They fail to realize that nations rise and fall *based upon the sovereign will of God*.

History is replete with evidence that our God destroys nations which are consumed with darkness. Remember Sodom, Gomorrah, the Canaanites, and even Europe during the Black Plague. The prophecies in the book of Daniel reveal the severe chastisement of our God upon both His beloved Israel as well as the nations.

Remember that Satan was thrown down to the earth in the aftermath of his rebellion. The governments of this globe belong to him. Even Jesus didn’t refute the enemy’s claim to ownership of “all the kingdoms of the world” (Matthew 4:8,9).

Misplaced allegiance to earthly governments and their ability to protect you can be an idol, making you trust more in the systems of this world than in God’s power to intervene and direct according to His purpose.

Despite a world reputation as “the only remaining superpower”, this nation stands only by the will and purpose of God. Surely the sudden downfall of the former USSR is a vivid example of how quickly earthly power can crumble! As our Lord warned through his servant,

Thus says the LORD, ‘Cursed is the man who trusts in mankind and makes flesh his strength, And whose heart turns away from the LORD’ (Jeremiah 17:5).

Reliance on military might is catastrophic. The heathen “*trust in chariots and in horses* [in missiles, tanks and bombs]”, but as the man after God’s heart proclaimed, “***We trust in the name of the LORD our God***” (Psalms 20:7).

Military power is never a source of sure security. ***“Righteousness exalts a nation, but sin is a disgrace to any people”*** (Proverbs 14:34). The nation that walks in sinful defiance and denial of the God of His Word will suffer disgrace.

Do you feel at peace because of your righteous standing with God in your union with Jesus? Or, because you believe nothing can happen to devastate the powerful United States?

Your Religious Practice Can Be An Idol

We encourage you to read **Discussing How To Restore the Early Church, Lesson 14. “The Church Encounters a Curse”**. Horrific anti-Semitism permeated the Church in the second and third centuries. Based upon our research, we contend that God responded to this persecution of Abraham’s kin by inflicting Christendom with centuries of domination by the demonic principalities of **Hellenist syncretism** and **Roman organization**.

Most of the religious practices found throughout most of western Christendom today are derived from these two demonic sources. In essence, much of what Christendom holds dear in its religious practice is idolatrous, having a *form* of godliness but lacking the power and presence of the Holy Spirit.

Only now as our Lord keeps His promise to restore the Jewish people to Israel as a “banner to the nations” (Isaiah 11:12) is He showing mercy to us Gentiles by revealing the Hebraic foundations of His applied Word.

Idolatry can be found in those who put their confidence and loyalty in religious systems. For example, you may know “Christians” who are more devoted

to their denomination or to the “church they attend” than they are to a vibrant loving-trust relationship with God.

Whenever you hear someone say, **“I’m a Catholic”, “I’m a Baptist”, “I’m an Evangelical”**, and so forth, you are hearing *idolatry*. You are witnessing allegiance to one of the 23,000 man-made divisions in Christendom.

Through that label you’re telling everyone where you feel comfortable in your religious expression. That sort of identification may seem good to you, but it’s unacceptable to God. His whole command for *unity as family* through the indwelling Spirit of Christ is being violated by that kind of segmentation.

In light of the need for the *purity of the true Gospel* to go forth to the nations, we want to share a quote from *Mission Frontiers* July-August 2006, entitled: *What DNA Are We (Really) Producing?* by Fran Patt:

It is all about spiritual DNA: who does the American evangelical look like? Does he or she resemble Jesus in his focus, values and mission? Our analysis has concluded that *Jesus is not the spiritual father of our Evangelical culture.*

Our evangelical world is more about peculiar cultural values and what we like and dislike rather than a reflection of Jesus. If we take a hard, objective look at the Gospels, we will see a great similarity between our Evangelical values and the values of the Pharisees rather than the values of Jesus. (emphasis added)

We concur with Mr. Patt’s assessment. And this indictment applies to far more than today’s Evangelicals. Western Christendom as an institution has lost touch with Jesus. Yet just like the reli-

gious leadership of Jeremiah's day, any rebuke or questioning of the system status quo is met with antagonism. With hearts that refused to repent and change, the prophet's listeners justified their religious practice and plotted to discredit God's messenger:

They said, 'Come, let's make plans against Jeremiah; for the teaching of the law by the priest will not be lost, nor will counsel from the wise, nor the word from the prophets. So come, let's attack him with our tongues and pay no attention to anything he says' (18:18).

The organized system has failed to reflect Jesus and His purposes. Fearful to offend by preaching repentance and the righteous transformation the Spirit makes in His indwelt people, the religious system serves itself: artificial order is maintained, the status quo between professional and laity is preserved, and the weekly "audience" is appeased. The values of western Christendom and Corporate America are blending as one.

If you've embraced the true Gospel, your only acceptable identity is, **"I am a follower of Jesus, my Lord."** And, make sure you are! The Spirit in you enables you to retain this identity and make it real to all who know you.

Keep in mind *how* people become idolatrous:

- **When they hold onto their sins and fail to repent.**
- **When they become complacent in their religious enactment and no longer love God and serve His purposes on earth. In effect they become leaky cisterns of stagnant mire, reeking of the world's ways and values.**

Idolatry produces **spiritual blindness** — lacking the vision Jesus shared. Only by *confronting sin* through a *repentance that brings forgiveness and relational intimacy* does spiritual cleansing come. Then a person is "free indeed", set free by the Son (John 8:36).

This *freedom* for individuals to love and serve God is what keeps denominations from letting go of their idolatry and urging people to become followers of Jesus.

The Judaizing Stream of Israel practiced rule-keeping without relating to God in the manner He required. The "blind guides" of Jesus' day refused to see the One in their midst Who offered true freedom. Instead, they attacked Him! They were satisfied with self-righteous self-justification as they judiciously kept the many man-made rules and traditions their forefathers had added on to God's Word (see Matthew 23).

Through spiritual blindness they supported corrupt practices that made God's house of prayer a "den of thieves". Yet they deceived themselves into a complacent satisfaction that they were, after all, the "apple of God's eye."

Jesus, however, punctured the religious bubble of idolatry of those who prided themselves in their ethnicity. He revealed that their murderous thoughts and lying self-service evidenced who they really served:

If God were your Father, you would love Me; for I proceeded forth and have come from God, for I have not even come on My own initiative, but He sent Me.

Why do you not understand what I am saying? It is because you cannot hear My word.

You are of your father the devil, and you want to do the desires of your father. He was a murderer from the

beginning, and does not stand in the truth, because there is no truth in him. Whenever he speaks a lie, he speaks from his own nature; for he is a liar, and the father of lies.

But because I speak the truth, you do not believe Me (John 8:42-45).

You may think that pointing out the deceitful responses of religious practitioners 2000 years ago doesn't apply to you. But, as we mentioned earlier, there are now 23,000 competing denominations in Christendom. NONE of them has their roots in the relational, love-grounded obedient trust of the earliest Church.

These diverse fragmentations have formed as a result of revisionist Church Councils over the years. Council decrees ignored the relational "family of Jesus" in favor of Roman hierarchy and Hellenistic practices. But was there a call for individuals to be *streams of living water*, pouring out grace and truth and power on a daily basis? No, these councils continued to construct their own new cisterns — all broken. [See ***Discussing How To Restore The Early Church: Lesson 18*** for more on revisionism and Church Councils; see also 2 Timothy 3:5.]

As we got ready to leave Jerusalem to carry this prophetic message back to the United States in 1994, we were warned by our Israeli Christian friends, "You're going back to the hardest place on earth for this message to be received. Christians there ***don't need God*** and they ***don't need each other.***"

Over the years of doing seminars and through numerous other contacts, these words have proven painfully true. The Nicolaitan system of religion and the

individuals who rule it have become a idol unto themselves.

Rather than demonstrating and encouraging people to be flowing streams who cling in loving obedient trust to Jesus and live to fulfill God's purposes on earth, our church culture is steeped in *religious organization and institutions*. Most of the effort in these religious establishments is devoted to using people's time, energy and finances to keep the system running.

How tragic that history has to repeat itself! Jeremiah so earnestly warned his contemporaries to *heed and obey God's words* and *turn away from the soulish gratification* of "following the dictates of their own stubborn hearts" (see 13:10).

The visual representation of the linen sash Jeremiah wore in the presence of the people and then ruined by God's command to bury it by the Euphrates was another means for God to get the people's attention. Yet still they refused to repent.

God's intention for Israel and Judah was that just as a sash clings to the loins of a man, His people would *cling to Him* "for renown, for praise and for glory" — wonderful plans for us now as the followers of His Son! But sadly, then as now, "they would not hear" (13:11).

Institutional efforts can appear "successful" even when the fruitful vitality of Jesus isn't in their midst. Institutionalism deceives you into *feeling good about yourself* even after your responsiveness to God has ceased.

A dear friend of ours was teaching in a congregation several years ago when he asked the people this question: "***If Jesus Christ were dead, how long would you keep on doing what you're doing here?***"

The people were convicted as they realized and admitted that their services and programs would go on just as they always had. The *institution* provided all that they needed or wanted to fulfill their social and religious needs.

There are many man-centered “nets” in the organized religious system, none having to do with a loving, obedient trust in Jesus. Like fishermen who use different size openings in their nets to catch specific types of fish, the abundant varieties of Nicolaitan expressions do the same.

For instance, you can find the **lively worship net**, the **orthodox doctrine net**, the **liturgical celebration net**, the **fundamentalist practices net**, the **best youth group in town net**, the **“seeker-friendly” (but don’t-mention-sin) net**, and so forth.

Each Nicolaitan net has a particular emphasis to catch their targeted “fish”. Nicolaitan nets help people feel comfortable about their religiosity. The spiritually negligent can put in their time:

- “doing God a favor” by attending a weekly, entertaining service;
- reaping an emotional “soulsh high” that costs them nothing in spiritual holiness;
- hiding out amid the throng hoping desperately that someone will reach out to them, yet fearful of what that interaction might demand of them.
- getting a weekly “spiritual fix” like a ravenous baby bird so they can plod wearily through another week until the next “feeding” comes.

That’s what is so deceptive about religious systems: You think you’re pleasing God for all your activity and what *you* may be getting out of it. Yet beneath the

programs and entertainment lies an emptiness and leanness of soul that few will admit.

What has enabled western Christendom to forsake loving dependence on God?

- **The religious system has become “New Testament only” in focus.**

Several sinister influences of Hellenism have impacted much of Christendom of today. The Older Testament — the bedrock from which Jesus, Paul and all the writers of the Gospel accounts and the epistles drew their teaching — is virtually ignored, greatly downplayed, or completely set aside. In general, the Hebrew Scriptures are only used now as a basis to rationalize the clergy system as a modern interpretation of the terminated Levitical priesthood!

Do you grasp how tragic it is that the Hebraic foundations of the Gospel as well as the relevance of so many prophetic truths have for the most part been minimized these past centuries?

Several decades ago the *Good News Bible* came on the scene containing only the Newer Testament. (The chapel of the base at which we were stationed distributed them for free.) It seemed innocent enough, as they wanted to make it convenient to introduce people to Jesus.

But the neglect of the character and ways of God as so vividly depicted in the *Older Testament* has brought about a counterfeit “Christianity” that is both man-centered and law-less. The *example and warning* of God’s interaction with His people Israel that are meant to admonish the people of Jesus today (see 1 Corinthians 10:5-12) are generally disregarded.

Ignorant of our Lord’s freedom and boundaries as they’re so clearly intro-

duced in the Hebrew Scriptures and expanded by Jesus, man fills the void by rationalizing “grace” to appease his flesh.

What amounts to denial of the text to which Jesus gave *fullness of meaning* devalues both the prophetic fulfillment of our Lord as Messiah and our own responsibilities and privileges of walking in His Lordship. For instance, to trust Jesus as Lord in the way He commands is founded on the *Older Testament*. [For more on this topic, see our Hebraic article: ***The Gospel of the Covenant is the Pilgrimage to Salvation.***]

Jesus promises that those who trust Him “as the [Hebrew] Scriptures have said” (John 7:38,39) will be conduits of the living water of His Spirit. With the vast majority of U.S. citizens claiming to be “Christian”, where are the streams of living water in this nation?

The *Christ-like fruit* of transformed lives determines whether the branch is truly connected to the Vine, and the spiritual barrenness of American culture is a religious desert.

Ask yourself: are you and your family vitally connected to the “wind of the Spirit” so that you’re available to “blow” whenever and wherever He directs? *“The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit”* (John 3:8).

The earliest Church — spiritually powerful and relationally intimate — did not spring up in a vacuum. To truly understand and walk in these Spirit-empowered dynamics, you need to plumb their foundations in the Older Testament as the first disciples did.

All of the faith practices we see enacted in the Newer Testament were *already* part of the Hebraic Stream of Judaism

before the coming of Jesus. For example: Many rabbis from the Hebraic Stream at the time of Jesus were already teaching that “you must be born from above”, that is, experience *spiritual birth*. And men who gathered together in the synagogues already served as apostles, evangelists, elders and deacons!

Do you understand the influence that the *purification* of immersion in the *mikveh* waters had on the early Hebraic believers as they realized their need for the *baptismal* immersion? Do you really comprehend *why* Jesus insisted that John baptize Him in the Jordan “so that all righteousness might be fulfilled” (Matthew 3:15)? [For more on this topic, see our newsletter: ***2001/03 Family Of Melchizedek.***]

The *Older Testament* formed the basis for the Newer Testament writers’ understanding of the foundations, the practices, and the sense of family interconnectedness of the Church. Don’t be ignorant of that which was so vital to our spiritual forefathers!

• **Too many “Christians” fail to love God.**

Over the years we’ve talked with leaders of a number of major ministries in the U.S. Many acknowledge they know nothing about *loving God*. Since their ministries emphasize the Newer Testament as an isolated spiritual text, they fail to see how love is developed through a thorough understanding of its precedent and pattern, the Older Testament.

Wholehearted love for our mercifully gracious Lord is manifested by those who esteem the precious and penetrating value of the Older Testament in making clear their own *sinful depravity*. If you fully understand just how utterly sinful you are, you’ll readily perceive God’s

grace in the atonement and lovingly appreciate the sacrifice of Jesus on your behalf. Your overwhelmed, grateful heart will cry out in amazement: “This Holy God loves a sinner like *me*?!!”

Trevor McIlwain of New Tribes Missions has gotten phenomenal response by teaching native peoples the Bible in *chronological order*, from Genesis to Revelation. When they complete the *Older Testament* portion, they fully grasp the *depth of their own sin* and their *inability to pay the penalty* for those sins.

***Then*, when they hear about the atonement of Jesus *on their behalf*, they are overwhelmed and grateful to respond in love for His sacrifice on the cross. Out of *love for God* they’ll cling to Jesus through any trials they might face.**

Those who recognize *without doubt* their own perverse, innate sin nature from the Older Testament won’t need to be propped up in their faith as so many who embrace counterfeit gospels do. People who are forever leaning on others for assurance that they’re “Christians” have never come to grips with their own depravity and need for forgiveness. Nor have they fully grasped with loving hearts what Jesus did on their behalf to reconcile them with their Most Holy Father so that His Spirit might dwell within them.

If you have *no loving gratefulness* for the forgiveness and reconciliation and intimate Spirit-indwelling our Lord offers according to His Word, you’ll follow a gospel of your own design, a god who is not the God of the Bible. After a while you’ll revert to the vomit of your old sinful lifestyle, since your false god has no power to transform you into Christ’s likeness.

• **Worship without the need for a righteous life has become the norm.**

“User-friendly churches” rely on misapplication of the Newer Testament for their religious framework. Instead of reaching out to the lost *in* the world, they use any worldly means to attract people into their services. Their aim is for those who don’t know Jesus to feel accepted and comfortable in “worship”.

Paul warned the Corinthians against allowing the world to influence their set-apart relationship with God:

***Do not be bound together with unbelievers; for what partnership have righteousness and lawlessness, or what fellowship has light with darkness?* (2 Corinthians 6:14, NAS).**

Those who live outside the boundaries and freedoms of God’s Word — those who are “*law-less*” — can entice into darkness those who are seeking to walk in His Light. “Worship” becomes a means of blurring the lines between the holy and the profane.

However, using as His foundation the laws His Father made clear in the Hebrew Scriptures, Jesus deepened their meaning so that the *heart issue* of spiritual circumcision couldn’t be missed. True worship was a matter of a person’s heart yielded in *obedient trust* to the God they love.

The grace of His atonement in no way nullified the holiness of His Father’s ways and standards! But, walking in the uprightness of Jesus as light in a perverse dark culture has taken on a negative brand: “legalism”. Those who love to please our Father and walk in His Spirit *according to His commands* are chastised by many within Christendom for “trying to earn salvation.”

Our relationship of reconciliation and sonship with our Father is *not* dependent on slavishly adhering to His laws in order to be accepted. However, *abandoning* His boundaries under the misinterpretation of “grace” as *freedom from His standards* has become the woe-ful consequence of disregarding the Older Testament.

Using the rationalization that “I’m *already* forgiven”, many who call themselves “Christian” live according to the desires of their lawless sin nature and the ungodly standards and values of the world. They *presume* upon God’s grace and live as though He has *done away* with His commands.

As God’s mouthpiece, Jeremiah addressed a similar complacency among those who saw *no need* to walk righteously. When confronted by the prophet that God was commanding *each person* to “*turn from his evil way and and make his ways and his doings good*” (18:11), the people *excused* their willful disobedience. They refused to even *make an effort* to walk according to God’s commands:

It’s hopeless! For we are going to follow our own plans, and each of us will act according to the stubbornness of his evil heart (Jeremiah 18:12).

Does your heart grieve as ours does when you tune into a “Christian” radio station and hear sensuality oozing from the singers? Do you find yourself turning off the radio because you can’t tell from the lyrics that it’s *Jesus* they’re singing about? We figure that if the words could be referring to some human lover and pass for a pop song, it isn’t worship of the Most High God!

Like corporate America, though, the modern religious system looks at people

as *potential customers*. Therefore there’s no biblical distinction between the righteous and the unrighteous. And, like the corporate world, the religious system will use any means possible to get people into the pews to perpetuate and prosper itself.

An article appeared in our local Christian newspaper that highlights this discussion. It addressed a poignant topic: ***Have we begun to worship worship rather than God?*** The author reveals through personal testimony that the “**worship of worship**” is exactly what is happening in so many congregations:

“They were being *totally manipulated, body, mind and soul, into conjuring up a false state of worship. At that instant, the still, small voice of the Holy Spirit pointed out to me how very easy it is to control individuals with music. It is also very obvious that this is not the direction God is pleased with.*” (italics added)

Mike: Over the past 20 years I’ve been at many “lively” worship services in which a “worship leader” was trying to cajole or manipulate people into performing according to his or her direction. As this person urged and encouraged the congregation to clap or shout or dance or raise their hands, the Holy Spirit would often speak to my heart with sorrow and holy indignation:

“The Father will not be conjured up like the priests of Baal tried to conjure up their god!”

Have you noticed during the past few decades how congregational “worship” has ever-increasingly copied cultural/pop-music styles to try to work up a soulful mood in people? We’ve studied some of the writings of the major leaders in the “lively worship” movement. Since they’re unable to cite biblical precedent

for imitating worldly rhythms and styles, they justify their approach with, “It appeals to the people!”

But isn’t this the motive of corporate American advertising? “Sell the sizzle!” “Sell how “cool” worshipping Jesus is!” We both love to worship in Spirit and in truth. But He’s given me a prophetic gift, and like so many of you with similar gifting, I get spiritually nauseous from the odor of unrepentance around me from those who claim to follow Jesus.

As with many of you, I’d rather worship with a few like-hearted lovers of our Lord and please our Father than stand in an assembly that’s reveling in a soulish, self-gratifying high.

Several years ago a pastor of one of the larger congregations in Connecticut [I’ll call it XYZ church] came on a personal retreat to our center for a few days. I was interested in how biblical processes operated on such a large scale so I asked him, “How do you get people to participate in such a large congregation?”

“We don’t *want* participation,” he answered. He added, “As the church grows we hire new staff.” He informed me that they currently had 21 paid staff.

I asked him one more question: “How do you deal with *sin* in a church that’s so large?” His reply: “I’m unaware of any sin among our people.”

A few weeks later a friend who was pastoring a congregation near the retreat center called me for some advice. “Mike, a young man who use to attend my church when he was a college student now attends XYZ church. He’s been living in fornication with their worship leader for over three years, and now the Holy Spirit is convicting him that he can’t stay in this relationship. What should I tell him?”

My reply? “Send him back to the pastor of XYZ Church. I’m sure *he’d* like to know there is some sin there!”

• **Other unbiblical religious practices have seeped into popular acceptance.**

A number of followers of Jesus have recognized certain demonic influences which infiltrate when the Older Testament is neglected or nullified. A sampling of the combined impact of Hellenist syncretism and anti-Semitism may surprise you:

- **Christmas** (not observed by the earliest Church, but developed as a conglomeration of pagan cultural practices that center around the winter solstice with its drunken celebrations of the “reborn” sun);
- **Easter** (a substitute for the Jewish Passover, often incorporating pagan spring rituals and practices that obscure the sacrifice and resurrection of Jesus);
- **Treating the day of rest that was given to mankind by our loving Father like any other day, except for time spent at services;**
- **Blaming the Jews as “Christ-killers” when it’s *our sins* that cost Him His life, as prophesied in the Hebrew Scriptures.**

Currently the anti-Christ spirit in Hellenism offers people lively worship and a myriad of religious social activities that keep them self-focused. But that same spirit hinders millions from walking in the *loving, obedient trust* our God demands.

People who have been influenced by an anti-Christ spirit may acknowledge the existence of Jesus as a great prophet and teacher. However, they’re filled with doubt about the faithfulness of God to fulfill His prophetic Word in Jesus as

fully God and fully man.

Satisfied to promote a “tolerance” that many roads lead to a universal deity, these people peer through the frosted glass of acknowledging that there is indeed a God. But they never move over to the door of repentance to cross over the threshold into His presence by trust.

How to Respond Today

Your spirit came from God and would like nothing more than for you to return to your Creator when your race has been run. Your pilgrimage to salvation is much like a salmon returning to its spawning grounds. The salmon’s journey is fraught with so many obstacles: dammed-up river rapids, killer whales, bears, wolves, eagles, not to mention man.

But the eager and relentless pursuit of the salmon to return to its home is what we need as those who love our Lord and Master! We need to be **desperate** to ensure that our spirit reaches His heavenly home. Just as the salmon can’t be satisfied until they return to their home of birth, so we need to eagerly live as those who will come home to the Source of our spiritual rebirth!

Whatever He reveals to you to walk in as His obedient and trusting child, DO so! Train up your heart to respond with *desperate eagerness* to live IN Jesus with even greater earnestness to see Him face to face at your earthly end. Be as eager as the faithful prophet:

My soul yearns for You in the night; in the morning my spirit longs for You (Isaiah 26:9).

Don’t be complacent in your life journey, and don’t make an idol of anything or anyone by desiring that more than you do your Lord. The *lasting* you is

your spirit being prepared for eternal life in heaven — or eternal death in hell.

Please prayerfully consider these points. Don’t just read them.

First, make sure your heart is clean of any underlying anti-Semitism that has spiritually blinded much of Christendom for so many centuries. Then you can relish your pursuit of the Hebraic foundations in the Older Testament — the same source on which the Newer Testament writers relied.

[For more on God’s plans for the Jewish people, see our Hebraic Article: ***Fulfilling Biblical Prophecy: Israel and the Jewish People Today.***]

Second, make sure your faith and way of life flow as a stream of living water and not the stagnant seepage from a broken cistern. Jeremiah mourns that His people *forsook the fountain of living water* (2:13). Ponder this for a moment: What do you think “living water” means? It must be important to God, since Jesus stresses living water as the outflow of the indwelling Holy Spirit!

‘Whoever puts his trust in Me as the Scripture says, rivers of living water will flow from his inmost being!’

(Now He said this about the Spirit, whom those who trusted in Him were to receive later — the Spirit had not yet been given, because Jesus had not yet been glorified (John 7:38,39; see also John 4:10; Revelation 7:17).

A certain fluidity and vitality and flow distinguish a stream from a cistern’s stored, lifeless water. The ‘*in motion*’ aspect of a stream is reinforced in Jesus’s conversation with Nicodemus about the

refreshing mobility of a “*born again*” person: “*The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit*” (John 3:8).

People of the Spirit don’t establish religious systems. That kind of focus is man-centered and culturally entrenched. Instead, throughout the day indwelled followers of Jesus seek the Spirit’s guidance and flow with Him as He guides and empowers them. They discern the presence of the Spirit in other Jesus-followers and serve one another according to His prompting and His Word.

This is the way to stay out of idolatry! Who better to know our Father’s will than the Spirit of God in you and in your family in Jesus?

Third, make sure your life is *dependent* on our Father. If you have no dependence on Him, then something has become an idol in your life. Humble yourself in the Holy Spirit and ask our Lord to reveal your idols. Having both the *desire* and the *need* to depend on our Father to answer your prayers is a compelling and trust-filled motive for you to remain repentant and righteous in how you live!

Fourth, make sure you are fulfilling *His* purposes here on earth and not your own. Don’t become *useless* to our Lord by turning aside from Him to strive after your own interests (see Romans 3:9-12).

Do you remember the parable of the master who, knowing he’d be away awhile, entrusted his servants with different sums of money, each according to his ability (Matthew 25:14-30)?

One of them *wasted* the resources with which he’d been entrusted by hid-

ing it away where it gained nothing to bless the master. This servant could have, through even minimal effort, obeyed the command he was given — but *his heart was not in it*. He was lazy and wicked in his attitude to his master, choosing to rationalize his disobedience rather than humbling himself to ask forgiveness for his waywardness.

And did the master pat him on the head and say, “That’s okay. You did it *your way*?” Of course not! In righteous anger the master responded, “*Throw that worthless servant outside, into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.*”

You have a pilgrimage to complete for your spirit to reach your heavenly home. Don’t squander *your* life by idolizing your sin nature and “doing it *your way*.”

Fifth, if you fellowship with those who call themselves Christian but refuse to turn from their sins, you are sinning. They are *out of fellowship* with God, and your Lord commands you to not fellowship with darkness (2 Corinthians 6:14; 1 John 1:6).

Taking action to flee those who “fellowship in communal darkness” may indeed bring repercussions of angry accusation against you. But don’t allow your heart to be distressed over this. Focus on your relationship with God and what He’s calling you to do to walk in His light.

This warning is an apt reminder: “*Fear of man will prove to be a snare, but whoever trusts in the LORD is kept safe*” (Proverbs 29:25).

Final Encouragement

We can assure you from our research that all of you who are reading this Lifebyte have been taught lies in the past

about your faith practices! We certainly walked in earnest ignorance ourselves!

Examine your heart closely. If you're honest with yourself, you'll confess that you know more about being a **broken cistern** than a **stream of living water**.

But something is happening inside many of His called-out ones. You want to be conduits of "*living streams*", and God has led you to the Hebraic foundations to fulfill that yearning.

You may need to become *dis-illu*sioned about some of your past beliefs, because they were the *illusions* of men's minds as guided by Satan rather than by God's truth.

And, don't look at anybody else to see what *they're* doing! Don't be afraid to admit you bought into a lie. Instead, as for you and your household, confess your sin and press on into God's truth. The Spirit of Truth will verify and confirm your response of love-grounded obedient trust!