

Misdirected Worship

By Ryan Smith

Recently I performed at a pastor's installation service in one of our community's oldest churches. The commissioning pastor based his sermon on 1 Chronicles 12:32 concerning "the sons of Issachar, men who understood the times, with knowledge of what Israel should do." He not only exhorted the pastor to minister effectively within the church's changing cultural context, but he also urged the congregation to follow their new shepherd's lead. An older gentleman, feeling threatened by the prospect of change, indiscreetly muttered, "If these young people try to change the way we collect offerings, it will be World War III!"

What a terrifying proposition, I thought. Financial support is necessary for each congregation to function, but Scripture is silent on the best mechanisms used to collect the offering. In my judgment, that changing a particular (and admittedly unusual) method of gathering the offering could be so volatile revealed a miscalculation of priorities.

I suspect that other churchgoers have witnessed fellow brothers and sisters in Christ cherish a religious tradition until it grew into an object of worship. Perhaps this tradition was once a valuable tool of worship and ministry, but it became an idol in a subconscious effort to memorialize or perpetuate prosperity.

A striking biblical account of this phenomenon begins in Numbers 21. The Israelites earned a reputation for complaining about their rescue from Egypt through the wilderness. They disliked the food, water, and accommodations God provided them, often favoring the predictability of slavery in Egypt. Yet when they were forced to fight off their enemies, they

were often successful because of the Lord's favor toward them, not because of their military brilliance.

After a victory in which God delivered the Canaanite king of Arad over to them, the Israelites discovered that His patience had limits. Along their journey they grumbled to Moses and God, "Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? For there is no food and no water, we loathe the miserable food." Infuriated with their ingratitude, God sent fiery serpents, striking death on countless men and women. Yet even in God's wrath, He offered mercy for those who repented.

"So the people came to Moses and said, 'We have sinned, because we have spoken against the Lord and you; intercede with the Lord, that He may remove the serpents from us.' And Moses interceded for the people." Then the Lord said to Moses, "Make a fiery serpent, and set it on a standard; and it shall come about, that everyone who is bitten, when he looks at it, he will live." And Moses made a bronze serpent and set it on the standard; and it came about, that if a serpent bit any man, when he looked to the bronze serpent, he lived. (Numbers 21:7-9)

This fiery serpent hoisted above on a pole represented the very curse that besieged Israel. The Lord delivered those who, by faith, looked upon the symbol of their curse.¹

Once the snakes no longer threatened Israel, the bronze serpent served as a souvenir reminding the nation of God's mercy. Several generations after Israel settled in Canaan and lived under the monarchy, however, the bronze serpent became an idol. The Israelites began burning incense to it (2 Kings 18:4) as though the serpent, not God, was responsible for delivering them from the plague of snakes. The very tool for deliverance from one act of punishment became the enemy's vehicle for Israel's subsequent waywardness.

¹ This serpent foreshadowed Christ. "Just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up; that whoever believes may in Him have eternal life" (John 3:14). The fiery serpents threatened the physical life of Israel; sin prohibits man's spiritual and eternal life. Looking upon the bronze serpent in faith in God's promise to deliver resulted in salvation from the snakes' venom. Looking in faith to Christ, hoisted on a cross as He bore man's sin, results in salvation from the eternal penalty of sin against a holy God.

Eventually a godly king, Hezekiah, ascended to the throne. In contrast to many of his predecessors, it was said that “he did right in the sight of the Lord.” As evidence of this statement, the Scripture says that Hezekiah took the initiative “to break into pieces” the bronze serpent because it became idolatrous. Although it was such a powerful symbol in Israel's redemptive history, Hezekiah destroyed the bronze serpent when it became a distraction from worshipping the Lord alone.

Imagine the shock that tremored through Israel when the nation discovered the new king's decision to break a national symbol of deliverance. Many resented Hezekiah's courage, just as many today confuse other leaders' interventions with audacity. America's reaction would be comparable if the Statue of Liberty were dismantled by a president disgusted by people paying homage to it while owning slaves or practicing other forms of oppression. Similarly, there was a great disparity in the function for which Moses created the bronze serpent and its new role in Israel. The confusion requires the courage and obedience of a godly leader to dismantle the idol.

Worshipping anything that God provides us is misdirected worship, a subtle form of idolatry. Whether it is offering plates, seating arrangements, or even worship services, any aspect of our religious practice bears the potential to become an idol. Consequently, these have to be removed whenever they become barriers to our relationship with God or our effectiveness in ministering to an ever-changing world.

Both in a corporate and personal context, we must be mature enough to surrender those things which, although in themselves are innocuous, prevent us from achieving the intimacy that God desires to share with us. Church leaders must be willing to make hard decisions and

break down cherished idols in their congregations. Congregants must likewise be humble and submissive when a leader makes this type of decision out of obedience to God. It is for our good and the glory of God. Most importantly, each of us must evaluate his own heart and ask God to search him for idols that are leading us astray.

The story behind the 'Heart of Worship' song

This extract is taken from Chapter 8 of 'The Unquenchable Worshipper' by Matt Redman, Kingsway Publications.

Used by permission.

A few years back in our church, we realised some of the things we thought were helping us in our worship were actually hindering us. They were throwing us off the scent of what it means to really worship. We had always set aside lots of time in our meetings for worshipping God through music. But it began to dawn on us that we'd lost something. The fire that used to characterise our worship had somehow grown cold. In some ways, everything looked great. We had some wonderful musicians, and a good quality sound system. There were lots of new songs coming through, too. But somehow we'd started to rely on these things a little too much, and they'd become distractions. Where once people would enter in no matter what, we'd now wait to see what the band was like first, how good the sound was, or whether we were 'into' the songs chosen.

Mike, the pastor, decided on a pretty drastic course of action: we'd strip everything away for a season, just to see where our hearts were. So the very next Sunday when we turned up at church, there was no sound system to be seen, and no band to lead us. The new approach was simple - we weren't going to lean so hard on those outward things any more. Mike would say, 'When you come through the doors of the church on Sunday, what are you bringing as your offering to God? What are you going to sacrifice today?'

If I'm honest, at first I was pretty offended by the whole thing. The worship was my job! But as God softened my heart, I started to see His wisdom all over these actions. At first the meetings were a bit awkward: there were long periods of silence, and there wasn't too much singing going on. But we soon began to learn how to bring heart offerings to God without any external trappings we'd grown used to. Stripping everything away, we slowly started to rediscover the heart of worship.

After a while, the worship band and the sound system re-appeared, but now it was different. The songs of our hearts had caught up with the songs of our lips.

Out of this season, I reflected on where we had come to as a church, and wrote this song:

*When the music fades,
All is stripped away,
And I simply come;
Longing just to bring something that's of worth
That will bless Your heart.*

*I'll bring You more than a song,
For a song in itself
Is not what You have required.
You search much deeper within
Through the way things appear;
You're looking into my heart.*

In the chorus I tried to sum up where we were at with worship:

*I'm coming back to the heart of worship,
And it's all about You,
All about You, Jesus.
I'm sorry, Lord, for the thing I've made it,
When it's all about You,
All about You, Jesus.*