

PRESENT TRUTH

A Teaching Letter from Lifestream Teaching Ministries

Wherefore I will not be negligent to put you always in remembrance of these things, though ye know them, and be established in the present truth. (2 Peter 1:12 KJV)

Volume 5, Issue 9

September 2007

Vain Worship 2

Art Nelson

Introduction

In the August issue of “Present Truth Teaching Letter” we looked at the subject of “vain worship” and its relationship with the doctrines of men. While conversing with the Pharisees about this matter, Jesus quoted Isaiah:

Matthew 15:8-9 NKJV 'THESE PEOPLE DRAW NEAR TO ME WITH THEIR MOUTH, AND HONOR ME WITH THEIR LIPS, BUT THEIR HEART IS FAR FROM ME. (9) AND IN VAIN THEY WORSHIP ME, TEACHING AS DOCTRINES THE COMMANDMENTS OF MEN.' "

As we saw in our last issue, when Jesus was talking with the Samaritan woman at the well, she asked Him about the place where we were to worship—on the mountain as her forefathers told her or in Jerusalem as the Jews said. Jesus said neither place. Now is the time that a new place was being established, a place in the Spirit and in truth and that place is the only place for true worshipers.

John 4:21-24 NKJV Jesus said to her, "Woman, believe Me, the hour is coming when you will neither on this mountain, nor in Jerusalem, worship the Father. (22) You worship what you do not know; we know what we worship, for salvation is of the Jews. (23) But the hour is coming, and now is, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth; for the Father is seeking such to worship Him. (24) God is Spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth."

Jesus also told the woman at the well that the Samaritans didn't know what they worshiped. Last issue we looked at the development of the system of worship used by the Samaritans. How it was developed out of the heart of Jeroboam, but, was patterned after the worship in Jerusalem.

Jeroboam created a false place of worship where golden idols were worshiped as the God,

Jehovah, who had brought them out of Egypt. He created false priests, false feasts, false sacrifices, false rituals, false blessings, and a fully false religious system. We applied this to the Church when Constantine officially recognized Christianity and the pagan idols, rituals, priesthood and other trappings were brought into the “official” Church.

This issue will look at how our vain worship arose from within the Church. First, let's refresh our memory about the meaning of “vain”. Webster's electronic dictionary defines “vain” in this manner: “**VAIN**, a. [L. vanus; Eng. wan, wane, want.] -- Empty; worthless; having no substance, value or importance; unsatisfying; false; deceitful; not genuine; spurious; not effectual.”

After telling the woman at the well that the Samaritans didn't know what they worshiped, He told her that salvation is of the Jews and they knew what they worshiped. In other words, the Jews had a true knowledge of God and worshiped the true God, not an idol called by His name. However, even their way of worshiping would have to change if they were to be true worshipers that would please the Father.

The Rise of the Synagogues

We saw in the last issue that the Northern Kingdom went the way of idols when Jeroboam let them into false worship. Judah, the Southern Kingdom, maintained the worship procedures of the Temple in Jerusalem, but the people all did wickedly before the Lord and He brought judgment in the form of King Nebuchadnezzar who took them captive and carried them to Babylon.

2 Kings 24:14 NKJV Also he carried into captivity all Jerusalem: all the captains and all the mighty men of valor, ten thousand captives, and all the craftsmen and smiths. None remained except the poorest people of the land.

God spoke through Jeremiah that they would be in captivity in Babylon for 70 years.

Since Jerusalem was now out of their reach, the Temple was not accessible for worship. (Now, keep in mind that this was a direct result of God's judgment on them for their disobedience.) The Rabbi leaders came up with a plan that would allow them to “worship” without having to go to the Temple. This plan was probably intended (maybe) to be temporary until God turned their captivity and they could return to Jerusalem and the Temple. However, this did not turn out to be the case. The synagogue system was put into place and has continued to this day.

Even after the work of Ezra and Nehemiah and the Jew's release from captivity, most remained in Babylon with only a remnant returning to Jerusalem. The returning ones brought with them the synagogue system that had been developed in Babylon and instituted it in Jerusalem. Many of the Babylonian Rabbis who stayed in Babylon continued to be a driving force behind the synagogue system and the Rabbinical interpretation of Scriptures thus giving a Babylonian flavor to even the synagogues in Jerusalem with standardized services and prayers.

Because of the Jewish dispersion during the captivity, the synagogues were set up so that could exist in any area where there were at least ten Jewish men. As a consequence, the synagogue system created multiple synagogues wherever there was a Jewish population that had diverse interests. Some synagogues were created by these who had come from a particular area or

province; others by those of similar trades, such as artisan synagogues or merchant synagogues. A diverse number quickly came into being even though they all followed a standardized building program and service and prayer order. *[Information throughout this lesson concerning the synagogue was taken from articles in the 1901-1906 Jewish Encyclopedia and the 1911 Encyclopaedia Britannica]*

[As we go through the description of the building and order of services, pay attention to how similar they are to our modern Institutional Church buildings and services]

The synagogue building, wherever possible, was built so that the congregation would be facing toward Jerusalem. In the building was a chest, called The Ark, representing the Ark of the Covenant. It was positioned so that when the congregation was turned toward the Ark they would be facing Jerusalem. The Ark contained the Torah Scrolls, the Jewish Old Testament Scriptures.

The building interior contains a large raised platform from which the Scriptures are read and the services are conducted. There is a pulpit facing the congregation for the use of the Rabbi and a pulpit facing the Ark used to lead the prayers. There is a continuously lit lamp commemorating the Menorah and a special candelabrum, which was lit during the services commemorating the full Menorah.

The structure and order of services was directed by the “ruler of the synagogue” who would call upon fit persons to read, pray and preach. Alms offerings were taken by two or more “collectors”. The “minister” had charge of the sacred books and other ministerial duties including teaching the children to read. Congregational discipline was enforced by excommunication, temporary exclusion, and even scourging. Power was held by a “senate of elders”.

The principles service was held on the Sabbath morning. It included reciting the *shema* (a proclamation from Deuteronomy 6:4-9 “Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one ...”), *prayer*, *lessons* from the Law and prophets, a *sermon* based on the lessons, and a *blessing* from the priest or invoked by a layman.

There is not a tremendous difference between the synagogue system and our Institutional Church system in structure, function or order of service. The synagogue system was created by men during an act of disciplinary judgment by God to provide a substitute “worship” system since the God-established, God-ordained place and order of service was not available to them. While this might be allowable, or even acceptable to God, while they were in captivity, once they returned to Jerusalem God expected them to re-establish His ways and methods of worship. Instead, they maintained the synagogue system and the Temple too.

The Synagogue System and the Early Christians

I don't really know why, but, previously in my thinking, I assumed that there was only one synagogue in Jerusalem during Jesus' day. Maybe it was because it was referred to in the singular or because there was only one Temple. In my hazy thinking, I kind of blurred these two together. I could not have been more wrong.

Depending on which source you use, the Babylonian Talmud or the Jerusalem Talmud, there

were between 394 and 480 synagogues in Jerusalem at the time of Jesus. That is almost as many synagogues in Jerusalem as we have major churches in a typical city. And just like the synagogues were formed around common interests, trades, or provincial roots, we have done the same things. There are cowboy churches, motorcycle churches, and every other banding together of same or similar interest groups. This even gives rise to the banding together of those who refuse to believe things like homosexuality are sin; thus, giving rise to gay churches.

Where is God in all of this? Where is the oneness of the Body? Does anyone really believe that Jesus is pleased with a cowboy church group or a motorcycle church group or any other group that divides His people? Or, that He is pleased with those who band together under a common sin and declare themselves to be a church?

It is interesting to note how the Gospels speak of the activities of Jesus as they relate to the Temple and to the synagogue. Everything that related spiritually to God and Jesus occurred at the Temple.

1. Zacharias was serving in the Temple when the angel Gabriel appeared and told him that he and his wife, Elizabeth, would have a son to be named John. (Luke chapter 1)
2. Simeon was waiting for the appearing of the Messiah and the Holy Spirit revealed that he would not die before seeing the Christ. He went to the Temple by the direction of the Holy Spirit and found Jesus being brought by His earthly parents to be circumcised on the eighth day according to the Law. (Luke chapter 2)
3. Anna, a prophetess and 84 year old widow, who did not depart the Temple, came at the moment when Simeon was speaking over Jesus and she prophesied to all about the coming redemption. (Luke chapter 2)
4. When Jesus was 12 years old and the family had gone to Jerusalem for the feast, Mary and Joseph left without Jesus and traveled a day before realizing it. They returned to look for Him and found Him three days later speaking to the learned ones in the Temple. (Luke chapter 2)

In all of this activity at the direction of the Holy Spirit, the Temple is prominent as the place of this activity and the synagogue is prominent by its absence.

Jesus drove the money changers from the Temple. He frequently taught and healed at the Temple. He and the disciples would bless God and pray in the Temple. Eventually, He spoke judgment against the Temple because of the rejection of the Jews. This judgment was completed in 70 AD with the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple.

However, the Scriptures record a much more limited interaction with the synagogues. Jesus taught in the synagogues, healed, cast out demons and proclaimed the Kingdom of God in the synagogues. Jesus never entered the synagogue as a spectator but as an active proclaimer of the Kingdom of God.

The synagogue system is an enemy of the purposes of God. Jesus repeatedly told His disciples that they would be cast out of the synagogues, scourged in the synagogues, and hated by the rulers of the synagogues.

Jesus pronounced judgment on the Temple but did not say anything of the synagogues. Why?

Because the synagogue system was already under judgment because it had not been ordained by God to begin with. It was created by men.

Now, we find ourselves in the same predicament. We have created “churches”, which are man-made systems of the same nature as the synagogues. We have neglected the New Testament Temple, which is being built out of living stones. And it is in our “churches” that we find the greatest resistance to the God-ordained methods of worship. Those who are seeking the Kingdom of God find themselves at odds with the “rulers of the churches”, without a voice, without participation unless one can compromise what the Lord has said.

Our “church system” has become a substitute “worship” system just like the synagogue system is a substitute for the Jews. A substitute is not the real thing; therefore, we have developed our own “vain worship” system and we present it to the people as “the church that Jesus built”.

The Church that Jesus is building is not made with hands. It is constructed of living stones and is being built as a habitation of the Spirit of God. It is within the walls of the living stones that the Spirit of God brings forth in us true worship, born of spirit and truth. If we follow the way of the vain, the methods of the vain, the assembly of the vain, how can we ever experience and participate with the Holy Spirit in the true?

© 2003-2007 by Art Nelson and [Lifestream Teaching Ministries](http://www.lifestreamteaching.com)

Previous issues of Present Truth are on the website: www.lifestreamteaching.com

For comments or questions contact Art Nelson at this address:

artnelson@lifestreamteaching.com

You have permission to copy and distribute these materials provided:

1) no changes are made to the content, and, 2) they are not sold.

Removal instructions:

This is a free newsletter, without cost or obligation. If you have received this newsletter in error or if you desire not to receive "Present Truth" teaching newsletter please reply with "remove" in the subject area.