

San Juan Church of Christ

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What Does God's Word Say About... Idolatry and Ritualism in Worship

Religious idolatry is excessive admiration and devotion to any man, angel, object, or image, that is worshiped contrary to the "true God." Ritualism is using the same ceremonial acts collectively in the observance of a public worship that is contrary to the pattern of behavior set forth in the scripture.

"At the hands of the apostles many signs and wonders were taking place among the people," (Acts 5:12). While Paul was preaching in Lystra, a man who was lame and had never walked, was healed by Paul. When the crowd saw what Paul had done, they raised their voice, saying "The gods have become like men...But when Paul heard of this he said, 'Men, why are you doing these things? We are also men of the same nature as you.'" Paul instructed them to "turn from these vain things [worship of men] to the living God," (Acts 14:8-11, 15).

When Peter went to preach the gospel to Cornelius, and all of his household, who were gentiles, Cornelius met Peter "and fell at his feet and worshiped him. But Peter raised him up, saying, "Stand up; I too am just a man," (Acts 10:1, 25-26). The apostles understood that men were to "worship" God and not to bow down to men.

The apostle John, when he received a vision from an angel, "fell at his feet to worship him" and the angel said to him, "Do not do that; I am a fellow servant of yours and your brethren who hold the testimony of Jesus; worship God," (Rev. 19:10; 22:8-9). Paul wrote that "God highly exalted Him [Christ] and bestowed upon Him the name which is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee will bow, of those who are in heaven and on earth and under the earth and that every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord," (Phil. 2:9-11).

There are religions today where the worshipers bow down to objects and images in churches and cathedrals and worship what they represent, (Romans 11:4). Many Muslims travel thousands of miles, spend untold sums of money, to ceremoniously walk around the Kaabah and kiss the Black Stone, believing this will give them innumerable blessings. This brings to mind the ritual of Roman Catholics who make the sign of the cross, recite beads, and pray at the feet of the statues of their saints. Ritualism can include such things as reciting "There is no god but Allah and Mohammed is his Prophet." This also includes five congregational prayers in a day, facing towards Mecca. When Paul was in Athens he observed that the city was full of idols, to which he exclaimed, "I was examining the objects of your worship...and you worship in ignorance...The God who made the world and all things in it, since He is Lord of heaven and earth, does not dwell in temples made with hands; nor is He served by human hands," (Acts 17:23-25). What Paul is claiming is that no building is sacred, for it is not in the building God dwells, but in the hearts and lives of His people. Listen to Jesus on this subject of worship when He instructed the Samaritan woman at the well: "Woman, believe Me... but the hour is coming, and now is when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth," (John 4:21-23). Since God is spirit and immaterial, He requires worship of a similar nature. In other words, He requires "spiritual worship" [with the heart]. And NOT material worship. Mecca, Medina, and Jerusalem, or objects and images, are not sacred to God. It is not the place, the building, or the geography that is important to Him. A "true worshiper" must worship in "spirit and truth" as instructed in the New Testament.

Please send any comments, questions, or requests for a Bible study to:
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