**Making Spiritual Things Carnal**

*by Jeremiah Cox*

If we wish to please our Creator, we must first understand that, *“God is Spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth”* (John 4:24). A lion’s hunger cannot be satiated with a bale of hay, nor can a cow’s with a juicy piece of meat. God cannot be pleased with mere motions of outward religion which are absent from the inner man – for God is Spirit. God requires our heart, soul, and mind (cf. Matthew 22:37). How sad and ironic it is that many men receive a revelation that is spiritual in nature, yet view it through a carnal lens. This was especially true with the Israelites:

*“With what shall I come before the Lord, and bow myself before the High God? Shall I come before Him with burnt offerings, with calves a year old? Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams, ten thousand rivers of oil? Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul? He has shown you, O man, what is good; And what does the Lord require of you but to do justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God?”* (Micah 6:6-8).

Israel sought reconciliation with God, but how? They had sinned, and sin is a spiritual thing. It is a transgression of a spiritual law (cf. 1 John 3:4). It is a form of selfishness. It is self-service, and disregard for God. It is an expression of love for the world, and not for God. Ergo, physical offerings cannot please God. It is not that God had not commanded sacrifice for sin, but that His desire is for the heart, soul, and mind. If the heart, soul, and mind are far from God, such worship is vain (cf. Matthew 15:8-9). David understood such, and wrote in his penitent psalm after his sin with Bathsheba, against Uriah, and most devastatingly, against God, *“For You do not desire sacrifice, or else I would give it; You do not delight in burnt offering. The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit, a broken and a contrite heart—These, O God, you will not despise”* (Psalm 51:16-17).

The requirements God has given to us have a spiritual connotation. If we are not careful, we can miss the point, and view spiritual things through a carnal lens. We must give time to introspection (cf. 2 Corinthians 13:5). Do we grasp the essence of God’s requirements? Do we *“worship in spirit and truth”* (John 4:24)? There is a danger of **Making Spiritual Things Carnal.**

**Worship in Song**

When we worship in song, it must be *“done decently and in order”* (1 Corinthians 14:40). Songbooks and song leaders are used to ensure this command is fulfilled. If everyone is singing a different song there will be confusion, not edification (cf. 1 Corinthians 14:26). If everyone is singing a different melody, or at a different pace, there is a cacophony of noise instead of harmony. Disorder instead of order. It is necessary to give attention to the melody. However, it is possible to over emphasize the melody. Music is enjoyable, and we have our favorite songs which have beautiful melodies. Yet, that is second tier in the importance of song worship. Paul said, *“understand what the will of the Lord is…be filled with the Spirit, speaking to one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody in your heart to the Lord”* (Ephesians 5:17-19). The emphasis of the songs is the message. We are edifying one another as we convey to each other the will of the Lord in the message of the song. The melody Paul emphasized is in the heart of man. It is not the shiver we get from the beautiful sound of the song, but praise and thanksgiving that bursts forth from the inner man who is built up by the wonderful message of God’s word. When our main focus is on the melody, and not the message, we make the spiritual act of worship in song carnal.

**Gospel Preaching**

What is a preacher’s duty? Paul told Timothy, *“Preach the word! Be ready in season and out of season. Convince, rebuke, exhort, with all longsuffering and teaching…do the work of an evangelist, fulfill your ministry”* (2 Timothy 4:2, 5). When a preacher is fulfilling his work, he is proclaiming the whole counsel of God (cf. Acts 20:27). He is emphasizing the simplicity of the message, and refuting error (cf. 2 Corinthians 11:3-4). He is appealing to the power of God to save souls, and not to any ability that he might have (cf. 1 Corinthians 2:1-5). He is planting and watering, understanding that God gives the increase, and making that a point of emphasis in his preaching (cf. 1 Corinthians 3:7). Are these things on our mind when we commend a preacher to another? Is this the description of the type of preacher we would want to come hold a meeting for our local congregation? Ironically, gospel preaching is one of the facets of God’s truth which is easiest to distort with carnal thinking? Consider the problem in Corinth – *“For when one says, ‘I am of Paul,’ and another, ‘I am of Apollos,’ are you not carnal?”* (1 Corinthians 3:4). Paul and Apollos preached a message which promoted and demanded unity, but due to societal influence and carnality, the Corinthians divided among men as if they were mere worldly philosophers. The modern term for this we sometimes use is, “preacheritus.” When preachers and preaching are judged according to eloquence, humor, secular education, good story telling, charisma, and not according to whether the truth was preached in powerful simplicity, a spiritual thing has been made carnal.

**Identifying with a Local Congregation**

Scripture makes it abundantly clear that the duties a Christian has as a member of Christ’s church cannot be fulfilled unless he joins himself to a local group of believers (cf. Acts 9:26-30). Pure and undefiled religion is not idle, but active (cf. James 1:21-27). Many of the precepts given to us by our Lord cannot be fulfilled without placing membership with a local congregation. When we place membership somewhere, we do so in an act of faithful obedience. We join a local work in the Lord’s kingdom. Yet, many do not seek a congregation where there will be plenty of work with which they can be involved, but instead seek the group where they will be needed the least. We are to join a group to participate, and contribute to the work of the Lord. Some view the decision to place membership with a local group in a carnal way. The questions about a congregation which arise often do not concern spiritual soundness in doctrine, unity, and practice, but whether they have a large group of young people, or people of a similar age, or whether they do much socializing outside of the four walls of the building. The local church is not designed to cater to social wants and needs, but to bring glory to God (cf. Ephesians 3:21). It is not a man-made institution, but a God-made one (cf. Matthew 16:13-20) with a spiritual focus. It is vital that we understand these things when considering joining a local group of believers.

*“God is Spirit”* (John 4:24), and those begotten of Him are spiritual beings. He has given us a spiritual message to save our souls (cf. 1 Corinthians 1). We must be careful to avoid considering, and carrying out that spiritual message in a carnal way.