

DISCERNING BETWEEN THE HOLY AND THE UNHOLY

By Tom Finley

Introduction

Brethren, do we discern the difference between the holy things of God and those things that are unholy? This is a great matter before God. Consider that three times in the Old Testament God expressed great concern that His priests distinguish between the holy and the unholy.

“Then the Lord spoke to Aaron, saying, ‘Do not drink wine or intoxicating drink, you, nor your sons with you, when you go into the tabernacle of meeting, lest you die. It shall be a statute forever throughout your generations, **that you may distinguish between the holy and the unholy**, and between the clean and the unclean, and that you may teach the children of Israel all the statutes which the Lord has spoken to them by the hand of Moses.’” (Lev. 10:8-11)

“Her priests have violated My law and profaned My holy things; **they have not distinguished between the holy and the unholy**, nor have they made known the difference between the unclean and the clean; and they have hidden their eyes from My Sabbaths, so that I am profaned among them.” (Ez. 22:26)

“No priest shall drink wine when he enters the inner court. . . . **and they shall teach My people the difference between the holy and the unholy**, and cause them to discern between the unclean and the clean.” (Ez. 44:21-23)

The first passage quoted above is from a portion of the law, where God gave instructions concerning the offerings and the service of the priesthood unto Him.

The second passage was written by Ezekiel while he is in exile in Babylon. Here God expresses one of the reasons for His judgment upon Judah that led to the fall of Jerusalem and the exile. The practice of the priests, in not distinguishing between the holy and the unholy, led to a shocking and unbelievable result – God Himself was profaned (made to appear unholy) among them. What could be more serious than this – the person of God being debased?

The third passage looks forward to a future temple in Israel, probably in the millennium.

Let us see what we might learn from these potent passages, including their application to us as New Testament believers.

A graphic lesson from Leviticus chapter ten

The instructions for the priesthood noted in the first passage above were preceded by, and precipitated by, the dramatic story of God's judgment upon Nadab and Abihu. We see below how the story and the instructions are tied together.

Then Nadab and Abihu, the sons of Aaron, each took his censer and put fire in it, put incense on it, **and offered profane fire before the Lord, which He had not commanded them.** So, fire went out from the Lord and devoured them, and they died before the Lord. And Moses said to Aaron, "This is what the Lord spoke, saying:

'By those who come near Me I must be regarded as holy, and before all the people I must be glorified.'"

So Aaron held his peace. Then Moses called Mishael and Elzaphan, the sons of Uzziel the uncle of Aaron, and said to them, "Come near, carry your brethren from before the sanctuary out of the camp." So they went near and carried them by their tunics out of the camp, as Moses had said. And Moses said to Aaron, and to Eleazar and Ithamar, his sons, "Do not uncover your heads nor tear your clothes, lest you die, and wrath come upon all the people. But let your brethren, the whole house of Israel, bewail the burning which the Lord has kindled. You shall not go out from the door of the tabernacle of meeting, lest you die, for the anointing oil of the Lord is upon you." And they did according to the word of Moses.

Then the Lord spoke to Aaron, saying: **"Do not drink wine or intoxicating drink, you, nor your sons with you, when you go into the tabernacle of meeting,** lest you die. It shall be a statute forever throughout your generations, **that you may distinguish between the holy and the unholy,** and between the unclean and the clean, and that you may teach the children of Israel all the statutes which the Lord has spoken to them by the hand of Moses." (Lev. 10:1-11)

It seems evident that Nadab and Abihu offered something unholy to a holy God – the profane fire. Because of that failure, the Lord set up a statute for the priests that they should not drink wine when they entered the tabernacle, so that they would have discernment while serving God. This discernment was to be between the holy things and the unholy, and also between the clean and the unclean. The reference to **holy and unholy things referred to the service in the tabernacle** covered in Lev. 1-9, whereas the clean and the unclean referred to the instructions about personal cleanliness given in Lev. 11-15. Some Bible teachers feel there is a strong indication here that Nadab and Abihu were probably drunk when they offered the profane fire. I concur with this thought.

Just prior to Nadab's and Abihu's failure, fire had come out from God to consume the burnt offering on the altar (Lev. 9:24). That act of God with fire was a statement of His

acceptance of the offering. The instructions concerning the offerings were given in Leviticus chapters one through seven. In chapter eight the priests were ordained and in chapter nine the priests began to offer sacrifices for the people. At this point, the Bible records: “Then the glory of the Lord appeared to all the people, and fire came out from before the Lord and consumed the burnt offering and the fat on the altar.” (Lev. 9:23b-24a). God was pleased with the offerings because they were performed in accordance with all that He had prescribed.

The fire from God was still burning on the altar after God consumed the burnt offering because the ordinance was that this fire was not to go out (Lev. 6:13). This **fire from God** was then available for all future offerings. However, Nadab and Abihu chose to procure fire from another source. This was not in accordance with God’s command. “Then Nadab and Abihu, the sons of Aaron, each took his censer and put fire in it, put incense on it, and **offered profane fire** before the Lord, **which He had not commanded them.**” (Lev. 10:1)

All of these details give us some strong indications for understanding the discernment between the holy and the unholy.

The holy and the unholy

An object, place, season or person was considered holy in the Old Testament if it was **set apart from common use and dedicated to God**. The tabernacle and all its furnishings and utensils were considered holy (Num. 4:4-15). The offerings were holy (Lev. 2:3; 6:25; 7:1). All of the priests were consecrated in holiness (Ex. 39:30; Lev. 8:9, 30). The Sabbath day was holy (Ex. 20:8).

A key factor, however, was that **only those things which God designated to be holy, according to His word, could indeed be holy**. The Scripture notes that God commanded the laws of the various offerings (Lev. 9:7, 10, 16). Thus, they were holy, consecrated to God, because God so ordered them. Herein lies the problem with the profane fire offered by Nadab and Abihu. “Then Nadab and Abihu . . . **offered profane fire** before the Lord, **which He had not commanded them.**” (Lev. 10:1) All of the tabernacle objects and the priests were holy because they were separated unto God in accordance with His command, which reflects His will. God’s word, then, proved to be the validation of their holiness.

A second aspect of holiness in the Scriptures, seen especially clearly in the New Testament, has to do with the ethical quality of something, the quality of purity and godliness. As God alone is holy, so His very element must be involved in something in order for that thing to be holy. The items for service in the tabernacle were holy in being set apart for God, but they were also anointed with the anointing oil, symbolizing that God’s Spirit was upon them, constituting the vital holiness of the object (Lev. 8:10, 30).

In this regard, we should remember that **the fire** God wanted Nadab and Abihu to use **had God as its source**. The fire had fallen from God upon the altar in Lev. 9:24. The vital energy of the fire was of God Himself.

If we have spiritual insight, we can see that only those things which are in accordance with God's word, and which have their source and energy from God's Spirit, can be holy.

We need to be absolutely clear about the matter of "holy versus unholy." We are not talking about "good versus evil." The Bible is making the distinction between what is **OF** God and what is **NOT OF** God. In the service of the tabernacle, the priests were failing their duty, the people were not being properly taught, and God Himself was being profaned –all because the priests could not make this distinction (Ez. 22:26). This matter is of the utmost importance if we are to serve God!

For something to be holy then, it must pass a two fold test. Firstly, does it line up with the word of God? Secondly, is the anointing of the Spirit upon it?

Someone may offer something - some worship or service perhaps - **to** God. But, if it is not **OF** God, in accordance with His word and from His Spirit, then it cannot be holy. It is only common. It is only of man and of the world. It will be an unholy offering, like the fire offered by Aaron's sons. **Nothing can be holy simply because it is offered to God.**

The terrible result of no discernment

We have already seen what happened with Nabab and Abihu when they offered something to God without discernment. Now, let's look at the situation in Jerusalem in Ezekiel's day. The setting is at the time of the Babylonian rule over Jerusalem (beginning in 605 B. C.), which culminated in the actual siege and fall of Jerusalem to its captors in 586. B. C. During this period, here is what Ezekiel says of the priests who were in charge of the temple and its service:

"Her priests have **violated My law and profaned My holy things; they have not distinguished between the holy and the unholy**, nor have they made known the difference between the unclean and the clean; and they have hidden their eyes from My Sabbaths, **so that I am profaned among them.**" (Ez. 22:26)

What does the Scripture mean here when it says that the priests "**profaned My holy things?**" The holy things refers to God's house (the temple) and all the furniture, instruments, garments, priests, etc. involved in the service of the house (Lev. 8:30; Num. 4:4-15). What had the priests done to profane the things in God's house? If we search the Scriptures, we can see that some terrible things were going on right in the temple of God.

Here are the passages that show us these profanations in the temple:

“Therefore, as I live’, says the Lord God, ‘surely, because **you have defiled My sanctuary with all your detestable things and with all your abominations**, therefore I will also diminish you; My eye will not spare, nor will I have any pity.’” (Ez. 5:11)

“For the children of Judah have done evil in My sight,’ says the Lord. **‘They have set their abominations in the house which is called by My name to pollute it.’**” (Jer. 7:30). (Jeremiah was a contemporary of Ezekiel. He also prophesied concerning the evils taking place in Jerusalem at that time.)

He stretched out the form of a hand, and took me by a lock of my hair; and the Spirit lifted me up between earth and heaven, and brought me in visions of God to Jerusalem, to the door of the north gate of **the inner court**, where the seat of **the image of jealousy** was, which provokes to jealousy. . . . So I lifted my eyes toward the north, and there, north of the altar gate, was **this image of jealousy** in the entrance. Furthermore He said to me, **“Son of man, do you see what they are doing, the great abominations that the house of Israel commits here, to make Me go far away from My sanctuary?** Now turn again, you will see greater abominations.” So He brought me to **the door of the court**; and when I looked, there was a hole in the wall. Then He said to me, “Son of man, dig into the wall”; and when I dug into the wall, there was a door. And He said to me, **“Go in, and see the wicked abominations which they are doing there.”** So I went in and saw, and there – **every sort of creeping thing, abominable beasts, and all the idols of the house of Israel, portrayed all around on the walls.** And there stood before them seventy men of the elders of the house of Israel, and in their midst stood Jaazaniah the son of Shaphan. Each man had a censer in his hand, and a thick cloud of incense went up . . . So He brought me to **the door of the north gate of the Lord’s house**; and to my dismay, **women were sitting there weeping for Tammuz . . .** So He brought me into the **inner court of the Lord’s house**; and there . . . were about twenty-five men with their backs toward the temple of the Lord and their faces toward the east, and **they were worshipping the sun** toward the east.” (Ez. 8:3-16)

The priests had brought idols and images from the nations into the very sanctuary of God. All kinds of idolatrous worship was taking place right in the temple itself! The priests had **profaned the holy things** of God’s house **by the presence of unholy things** from the nations. This was against God’s law, which not only forbade idols, but also carefully prescribed what things were to be set apart for God for the priestly service in His sanctuary. Therefore, we can clearly understand God’s charge against the priests: **“they have not distinguished between the holy and the unholy.”** (Ez. 22:26)

The priests had **mixed unholy things with the holy things** due to their terrible lack of discernment. The final and most devastating result of this act, according to God, was: **“I am profaned among them.”** (Ez. 22:26) This means that the holy God, with His unique holiness of character, was made to appear unholy, quite common.

The great mistake of today's believers is to think that **anything** that is done **for God** will be a benefit to His kingdom. So, for example, the world's ways of promotion, advertising and entertainment are utilized, instead of God's way of fervent prayer and waiting upon the working of the Spirit. And, for example, man's natural ingenuity and ability in planning, organization and execution are used apart from the leading, control and power of the Holy Spirit. The result of these choices may bring a larger crowd to a meeting, but, in the process, **a holy God is made to appear quite common, very much a part of this world system and its human ways**. When a person drives down a street in America and sees a "church" building, what is his or her impression? Is the person struck with the thought of a holy God among His people, or does the person just see an institution of human society? If that person goes inside to a meeting, how strongly will he or she be struck with the holiness of God versus the atmosphere of a humanly organized religious meeting, fueled by man's energy?

To make God appear common (unholy) does not seem to be a consideration at all by those who would use worldly and fleshly means to carry out the service within God's house. Yet, if we have spiritual insight, this is a great offense to our holy God.

The test of the word of God

Today in Christendom there is a lot of activity. There are many programs, conferences, organizations, ministries, and churches of various types. How many of their ways and their doings are holy? How many are just of man, thus unholy in God's eyes? Can you discern between the holy and the unholy things there?

The test concerning whether the Spirit of God is behind and upon any supposed Christian work may be somewhat subjective. Even if there is true fruit (such as conversions) this does not mean everything in the activity is indeed holy. God may always honor His word when it is presented (Is. 55:11), and He will always meet any seeking heart.

The test of the word of God, however, is much more objective and sure. There are significant practices today in Christendom which are contrary to the word of God. Yet, for the great majority of God's people, including "leaders", there seems to be **no discernment** of this fact. "Her priests have **violated My law** and profaned My holy things; **they have not distinguished between the holy and the unholy . . .**" (Ez. 22:26a) Notice that this verse from Ezekiel indicates that the priests in Jerusalem had **violated God's law** (His word). This is what gave ground for the unholy things in the temple to come in. And this is what gives ground for unholy practices to come into the church of God today – a disregard for God's word.

Here are some examples:

The use of titles for "clergy." The word of God says: "But you, do not be called 'Rabbi'; for One is your Teacher, the Christ, and you are all brethren. Do not call anyone on earth

your father; for One is your Father, He who is in heaven. And do not be called teachers; for One is your Teacher, the Christ. But he who is greatest among you shall be your servant. And whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted.” (Matt. 23:8-12) In context, Jesus was addressing the problem of exalting religious leaders above the people by the use of titles. But the use today of titles, such as Reverend, Father, Pastor, etc., is very common. And, this practice is only a part of a larger unscriptural practice, the clergy-laity system. Is this practice of God or of man? Is it holy or unholy?

Denominationalism. The word of God says: “For you are still carnal. For where there are envy, strife, and divisions among you, are you not carnal and behaving like mere men? For when one says, ‘I am of Paul,’ and another, ‘I am of Apollos,’ are you not carnal?” (1 Cor. 3:3-4) Denominationalism is the practice of forming a group with a standing narrower than the whole body of Christ, and naming it in accordance with a particular doctrine, practice or person. This practice divides the body of Christ and separates believers. Today, we have: “I am a Lutheran. I am a Wesleyan. I am an Episcopalian. I am a Baptist. I am a Pentecostal.” Is the forming of denominations of God or of man? Is it holy or unholy?

Christian holidays. The word of God says: “And He took the bread, gave thanks and broke it, and gave it to them, saying, ‘This is My body which is given for you; **do this in remembrance of Me.**’” (Lk. 22:19) The Lord Jesus gave us a clear word on what to practice in order to remember Him. Is there any hint in the Bible that we should celebrate holidays or seasons like Christmas, Easter and Lent? Paul feared that the Galatians would turn back to weak and bankrupt rituals through the celebration of special days (Gal. 4:9-11).

Then where do the Christmas and Easter holidays (derived from “holy day”) come from? Both traditions started hundreds of years after the apostles. The Roman Catholic Church, in its efforts to bring in heathen converts, adopted pagan festivals and labeled them as belonging to Christ. In the case of Christmas, a drunken pagan festival in celebration of the winter solstice (celebrated as the birth of the sun god) was absorbed and relabeled as Christ’s birthday. Easter derived from a celebration in honor of Ishtar, the goddess of spring and fertility, which accentuated her quality of fertility with eggs and rabbits. From the beginning these holidays were a mixture of unholy things with holy things. Is the celebration of these days of God or of man? Is it holy or unholy?

Let us think for a minute how these three examples act to profane God, to make Him appear unholy or quite common. In the case of clerical titles, a hierarchy is erected in the realm of God’s church, displaying His assembly as just another worldly organization with one or more layers of superiors who have higher ranks and titles, give the orders, and perhaps have special privileges. Jesus pointed this out when He stated: “The kings of the Gentiles exercise lordship over them and those who exercise authority over them are called [by the title] benefactors.” (Lk. 22:25) This thought is in utter contrast to the reality of Christ’s life and the way of service to one another in His body. Jesus went on to say: “But not so among you; on the contrary, he who is greatest among you, let him be

as the younger, and he who governs as he who serves. For who is greater, he who sits at the table, or he who serves? Is it not he who sits at the table? Yet I am among you as the One who serves.” (Lk. 22:26-27) Rather than special title, rank and privilege, the elders are not to be lords over others, but examples of godly living and serving. And, they are to serve willingly, not for the purpose of monetary gain for themselves, but for the benefit of those served (1 Pet. 5:2-3; Acts 20:32-35).

Now let us think about the forming of denominations. All the people of the world are divided from one another by culture, race, class, etc. This is simply the reality of fallen humanity. But the one new man in Christ is completely different. It does away with all differences and natural divisions (Gal. 3:28; Col. 3:10-11). The body of Christ is one (Rom. 12:5), and God desires that the world see this oneness (Jn. 17:20-23). God is glorified (His holiness is expressed) when Christians assemble in a testimony of oneness (Jn. 17:22-23). Any divisive standing, practice, or attitude is condemned by the word of God (1 Cor. 1:10-13; 3:1-4; 11:17-19). Therefore, when we divide from another by taking a name for some exclusive grouping, we profane God (make Him appear common, natural and worldly) by our way of assembling. The wonderful testimony of oneness accomplished by the work of Christ is lost, and the world just sees another example of man’s divisive ways.

In the two major Christian holidays of Christmas and Easter we see a great debasing of God. Many Christians long for Christ to be wonderfully testified by these times, and they may even look upon these times as “positive”, in spite of all the “non Christian” holiday trappings, because Christ’s name is put forth in public. Yet, I beg you to see God’s perspective. Because these days have been, from their beginning, filled with unholy things such as partying, drinking, and decorations having demonic and idolatrous meanings, instead of God being exalted by being mentioned, **He is debased by being associated with these unholy things.** A holy God is brought down to days of revelry, fleshly indulgence, Santa Claus, symbols of sexual fertility and the like. And, sad to say, the spirit of fleshly fun and indulgence is strongly present even among God’s people in these celebrations. All of this is offensive to a holy God. Brothers and sisters, God wants holiness and purity, not a mixture of Himself with the things of the flesh and the world.

These are only three examples. There are other practices in Christendom that call for discernment and scrutiny. Those Old Testament priests serving in the tabernacle and the temple had no discernment. Now, we are the New Testament priests serving in the house of God, His church (1 Pet. 2:5; 1 Tim. 3:15). **If we would serve in a way that pleases a holy God, then we must learn to distinguish between the holy and the unholy. In our service, we should only serve in ways that are holy before a holy God.**

We must realize that there are many TRADITIONS OF MEN which contradict THE WORD OF GOD. This is a basic problem with the unholy practices that exist today in Christendom.

“He answered and said to them, ‘Well did Isaiah prophesy of you hypocrites, as it is written, “This people honors Me with their lips, but their heart is far from Me. And in

vain they worship Me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men.” For laying aside the commandment of God, you hold the tradition of men.”” (Mk. 7:6-8a)

Spiritually speaking, any tradition we will not give up that violates the word of God is really an idol. An idol does not have to be something tangible carved out of wood or stone. There is also idolatry that is just a matter of the heart, where the person worships something in his heart, which thus becomes an idol (Ezek. 14:3). It is here that we begin to touch the real principle of idolatry. An idol replaces the true and living God for us (Ex. 20:3-5; 1 Thess. 1:9). An idol replaces God by competing with God for our devotion. An idol can be anything that competes with the honor, the love, the devotion, the allegiance, the attention or the service that belongs to God alone.

Given this spiritual understanding of idols, we may say that one of the most common idols is religious tradition. Man made traditions exist today that are unsupported by the Bible, yet these are permitted and followed with devotion by Christian churches. If one tries to point out that a tradition is unscriptural, you can be assured that most probably such a correction will be met with resistance or outright antagonism. No one may dare touch these revered idols! They hold a sacred place in the hearts of their adherents.

May the Lord open our eyes to this matter of traditions. May we see how offensive unbiblical traditions are to a holy God. To mix unscriptural traditions with scriptural practices in the house of God is one example of a New Testament equivalent of what the priests in Ezekiel’s day did by placing idols in the sanctuary.

Now we turn to the fundamental reason why those Old Testament priests had no discernment.

"Do not drink wine . . . when you go into the tabernacle of meeting." (Lev. 10:9)

It seems most probable that Nabad and Abihu lost their discernment due to drinking intoxicating wine or drink. Thus we have God’s command concerning the priests, that the priests should not drink wine or intoxicating drink when they were to enter the tabernacle to serve. But what about the priests in Ezekiel’s day, those who were serving in Jerusalem during the time of Babylon’s rule over the city? Why had they lost their discernment, as we have noted in Ez. 22:26?

To answer this question we must turn to the prophet Isaiah, who prophesied 100 years or somewhat more before the final fall of Jerusalem to the Babylonians in 586. B. C. Here is what Isaiah prophesied concerning the priests:

“But they also have erred through wine, and through intoxicating drink are out of the way; the priest and the prophet have erred through intoxicating drink, they are swallowed up by wine, they are out of the way through intoxicating drink; they err in vision, they stumble in judgment.” (Is. 28:7)

“They also” in this verse, according to commentators, speaks of the spiritual leaders in Judah. Isaiah either had insight into the condition of the priests at the time he spoke, or he foresaw the situation in future days. In either case, we can see that God’s word emphatically tells us that there was a real drinking problem with the spiritual leaders in Jerusalem, and this led to their lack of judgment. Therefore, we can conclude that most probably the failure of the priests in Ezekiel’s day to distinguish between the holy and the unholy things was again caused by drinking intoxicating drink. **Lack of discernment by the priests seems to have a definite cause in Scripture: drunkenness with wine.** Even in the future temple these matters are again placed together (Ez. 44:21-23).

There must be a spiritual lesson here for New Testament application. Spiritually speaking, it must mean that spiritual leaders, or any New Testament believer as a priest to God, can be under some intoxicating influence that causes them to lose discernment concerning the holy and the unholy things. We can see from the three examples in today’s church given above that this lack of discernment, and thus the drunkenness, is quite prevailing.

What is this strong intoxicating influence that seems to have universal effect?

The answer lies, I believe, in the book of Revelation:

Then one of the seven angels who had the seven bowls came and talked with me, saying to me, “Come, I will show you the judgment of **the great harlot** who sits on many waters, with whom the kings of the earth committed fornication, and **the inhabitants of the earth were made drunk with the wine of her fornication.**” (Rev. 17:1-3)

The great harlot here has this name on her forehead: “Mystery, Babylon the Great, the mother of harlots and of the abominations of the earth.” (Rev. 17:5). This final form of Babylon, at least in part, is a spiritual counterfeit of God’s kingdom, the New Jerusalem pictured in Rev. 21 and 22. The theme of Babylon stretches across the pages of Scriptures, and develops over time. It is a great theme full of significance. To understand some of its significance, one must look at the origin of Babylon in Scripture. The seeds of beginnings in Scriptural topics always give us light.

Babylon had its beginning as outlined in Genesis 11. The original Semitic name of the city was Bab-il, which meant “gate of God.” This name certainly means that the focus of the city was religious worship. History tells us that ancient towers or terraced ziggurats were built for the worship of pagan deities. The tower at Babel was most surely one of these temple-towers.

When God confused the languages there, He called the place Babel, which was a word play on the original name, because the Hebrew word Babel sounded similar to Bab-il. However, the word Babel meant “confusion” in reference to the confusion of the languages by God. This noun derives from the root word *balal* (Strong’s #1101), which

means to mix, and it was used for a thorough mixing of oil with flour in the meal offering (Lev. 2:4-5). According to the dictionary, the idea of confusion involves the mixing of things together so that it is difficult to discern the individual elements. **Thus, the cardinal principle of Babylon (the Greek name for Babel) is that of mixture. Mystery Babylon, as seen in Revelation 17, is a religious system where things of God are mixed together with things not of God.**

This system is a “great harlot.” She is not the wife of Christ, but this is part of her pretension by claiming to be God’s church. She is dressed outwardly as a queen, being “arrayed in purple and scarlet, and adorned with gold and precious stones and pearls.” (Rev. 17:4). The gold and precious jewels denote things of God (Rev. 21:18-19), such as some Bible truths. Yet, **she is not pure, but a mixture**, because in addition to her outward adorning of jewels she holds “in her hand a golden cup full of abominations and the filthiness of her fornication.” (Rev. 17:4)

Many Bible commentators note her connection with Rome because of the seven mountains on which she sits (Rome was famous for its location upon seven hills), as well as her dominance at the time of John’s revelation (Rev. 17:9, 18). However, this false religious system, although manifested in the Roman Catholic Church, is not limited to that system. The great harlot is called “Mystery, Babylon the great, the mother of harlots and of the abominations of the earth.” (Rev. 17:5). This harlot is the mother of all false and idolatrous religion. Portrayed in Revelation 17 in her consummate form at the end of this age, she includes outward Christendom.

This great harlot has fornication with the kings of the earth (Rev. 17:2). The Roman emperor Constantine the Great united his worldly empire with the emerging Roman Catholic Church. He presided over the first ecumenical council at Nicea in 325 A. D. This illicit union (the “fornication” with the kings) continued later under the Holy Roman Empire, which began when Pope Leo III crowned Charlemagne as emperor in 800 A. D. The mixing of the affairs of the Roman Catholic Church with the affairs of the Holy Roman Empire continued for centuries. **The fornication of this harlot is simply her communion with the world, its rulers and its ways.** This harlot as a religious system is not a chaste virgin for Christ, as the church in its reality is (2 Cor. 11:2), but **she is a harlot in union with this world system.**

The product of the harlot’s illicit union with the world is “the wine of her fornication.” **This wine is the intoxicating influence of the mixture of this religious system.** The mixed system does not try to sort out the things of God from those not of God. It mixes them all together into one confusing mass. This mixture influences all people on the earth in the realm of religion. **All people, including genuine Christians, are put into a stupor, being unable to discern the pure truth concerning knowing, serving and following God.** They are influenced by the teachings, and the natural and worldly philosophies, ways and practices of this religious system, Babylon. **As a result, people cannot distinguish between the holy and the unholy.**

Significantly, Jesus prophesied this very mixture within Christendom: “And again He said, ‘To what shall I liken the kingdom of God? It is like leaven, which a woman took

and hid in three measures of meal till it was all leavened.’” (Lk. 13:20-21). Jesus was here describing that aspect of the kingdom of God which would be the outward appearance of God’s kingdom, not the kingdom viewed in its spiritual reality. Leaven always represents some evil in the Bible. In Matt. 16:11-12 it speaks of false doctrines. In Lk. 12:1 Jesus said plainly that the leaven of the Pharisees was hypocrisy. Paul pointed out that the leaven of sin in the Corinthian assembly would contaminate the whole assembly if tolerated (1 Cor. 5:1-8). He also warned that legalistic doctrines were leaven (Gal. 5:9). So, in this prophetic parable in Luke 13 Jesus was indicating that various evils would be so mixed with the meal (representing the purity of Christ; Lev. 2:1-3), that the whole system would be corrupted by the mixture. Note that a woman is said to have caused this mixture. This figure of an evil woman corrupting God’s church is seen twice in Revelation (Rev. 2:20; 17:1-6).

Christendom today contains much mixture of the holy and the unholy. Consider some of the mixtures: believers are mixed with unbelievers; man made traditions are mixed with the word of God; truth is mixed with error; entertainment is mixed with worship and church activities; worldly promotion is mixed with evangelism and service; business is mixed with ministry; human organization is mixed with the body life; psychology is mixed with preaching and counseling. Of course, the most basic problem is that the energy of man’s flesh is mixed with the Spirit of God. Most appallingly, the great majority of believers and “leaders” do not sense the mixture at all. They are drunk with the wine of Babylon. They have no discernment between the holy and the unholy.

The call to the genuine priesthood

God desires believers to be New Testament priests, serving Him in His house, the church, and building up the body of Christ (1 Pet. 2:5; 1 Cor. 14:12, 26). Yet, He surely wants us to discern the difference between the holy things and the unholy things in our work of building up:

According to the grace of God which was given to me, as a wise master builder I have laid the foundation, and another builds on it. **But let each one take heed how he builds on it.** . . . Now if anyone builds on this foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay straw, each one’s work will become clear; for the Day will declare it, because it will be revealed by fire; and the fire will test each one’s work, of what sort it is. (1 Cor. 3:10-13).

God desires us, His people and His servants, to affirm and embrace the holy things in our worship and service to Him. He most certainly wants us to reject the unholy things – all the ways, practices, traditions, doctrines and philosophies that come from men or this world system.

God is indeed calling His people to come out of this mixture. “And I heard another voice from heaven saying, ‘**Come out of her [Babylon], my people**, lest you share in her sins,

and lest you receive of her plagues. For her sins have reached to heaven, and God has remembered her iniquities.” (Rev. 18:4-5).

For us to fulfill this priestly calling necessitates that we be spiritually sober, as well as willing to pay the price of discipleship. We need to acknowledge the influence that the great harlot, Mystery Babylon, can have over believers, even us, with her stupefying mixture. Then, we must be willing to repent of any unholy thing that we have allowed in our Christian practice. We must seek the Lord’s light and test everything we do by the word of God. The word of God must become supreme for us. We must submit to it and be willing to cast aside any tradition that contradicts it. If we do this, God will use us to build His church in spiritual reality, not in the appearance of outward glamour, numbers, fame and success. Your path may be lonely at times, for few will travel the narrow way of strict obedience (Matt. 7:13-14). Be assured that when you follow the Lord in building this way you will be misunderstood and perhaps rejected by those who practice the way of mixture. This is to be expected as a disciple of Jesus. “Yes, and all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will suffer persecution.” (2 Tim. 3:12). Rejection and persecution may even come from our brothers in Christ.

A key verse concerning our effectiveness in building up God’s house is found in Isaiah:

Thus says the Lord: “Heaven is My throne, and earth is My footstool. Where is the house that you will build for Me? And where is the place of My rest? For all those things My hand has made, and all those things exist,” says the Lord. “But on this one will I look: on him who is poor and of a contrite spirit, and who trembles at My word.” (Is. 66:1-2)

To be poor means that we realize we are destitute of resources within ourselves to do anything for God. One who is “poor” is inwardly reaching out to God for His supply of grace for every step and every task. To be contrite means that we are sorrowful over anything we do that offends God. This is why such a saint trembles at God’s word. He fears doing anything that might offend a holy God.

God will look upon us, and God will use us to build His house, if we humble ourselves before Him with a contrite spirit and honor His word in obedience. Recall that the holy things of tabernacle were holy because of two factors: (1) they were in God’s tabernacle for service because He had so ordered them by His word; and (2) they were anointed with oil, symbolizing the presence of God’s Spirit. We can be holy priests unto God, discerning and choosing only the holy things, by these same two factors. First, we ourselves need God’s Spirit, His anointing, to be holy. His anointing Spirit comes to us when we are inwardly poor and have a contrite spirit before Him. Take note of the following beautiful verse in the Amplified version:

For thus says the high and lofty One Who inhabits eternity, Whose name is Holy: **I dwell in the high and holy place, with him also** who is of a thoroughly

penitent and humble spirit, to revive the spirit of the humble, and to revive the heart of the thoroughly penitent – bruised with sorrow for sin. (Is. 57:15, AMP)

Then, secondly, we need the greatest reverence for the word of God in our ministry unto Him. We need an ear to hear what the word says and how it applies to our situation. Then, we need to faithfully follow His word, regardless of how different our actions are from those of others.

Finally, let us be always mindful that Christ will evaluate how we build the church on that coming day when we appear before Him at His Judgment Seat (1 Cor. 3:12-15; 2 Cor. 5:10). Therefore, let us reject service unto Him in the way of mixture, as this way profanes the Lord and dishonors Him. Let us pursue building up the church only in the way of holiness, so that He will be glorified in our midst. If we serve the Lord Jesus in this way, then we will be rewarded on that day with His commendation: “Well done, good and faithful servant; you were faithful over a few things, I will make you ruler over many things. Enter into the joy of your lord.” (Matt. 25:21)

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