Liturgical Lessons from the Decalogue: Idolatry

By Nicholas Zork

"You shall not make for yourself an image in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below. You shall not bow down to them or worship them" (Exodus 20:4, 5a)

The most effective way to exclude ourselves from Scripture's most sweeping commands is by limiting their scope to a manageable scale that stops short of unearthing root issues. This tendency is nowhere more evident than in the popular discourse surrounding the Second Commandment. If you've spent much time in Evangelical worship services, you've likely heard numerous warnings about contemporary "idols." Technology, money, power, fame and entertainment in various forms are the usual suspects -- things we purportedly "worship" instead of God. This interpretation, of course, has validity. There are certainly "temples" (shopping centers, performance halls, stadiums) in which such things are exalted and, in a sense, "worshipped." But this hermeneutical leap from ancient worship practice to twenty-first century "secular" culture skips over of a site of even more immediate relevance: our own worship practices.

It's interesting how often we talk about the Second Commandment -- a liturgical commandment -- and fail to consider its implications for our liturgy. Are there no "idols" that we cling to in our liturgical gatherings? Are there no "images" of our own creation that we put in the place of God?

The "idols" that are most common in our worship celebrations -- those that most often compete with God for our allegiance -- are generally of two sorts: theological propositions and community identity. The propensity to worship our own theological formulations and identity traits is equally prevalent in conservative and liberal camps; and it neither requires nor is particularly facilitated by certain styles of worship. As with all idolatry, these "images" are a means of self-worship, which is a universal human inclination.

We have previously discussed two biblical priorities that are not sufficiently emphasized in the liturgical life of many Christian communities: justice and lament. The song "Hands and Feet" brings together both themes, lamenting our failure to address the pressing needs of our world. Particularly insightful is the way the lyrics speak of serving "the least of these" -- those with whom Jesus
The idolatry of theology is insidious and often difficult to discern because theology also serves an important function. Theological language is an essential part of understanding the mystery of God and God's will. Moreover, theological words, especially when rooted in the biblical Word, can point us toward and facilitate an encounter with the Living Word, Jesus Christ. But our theological formulations can also become ossified "images" of our own creation -- lifeless in their disconnect from the mysterious, transcendent God and idolatrous in the absolute status we attribute to them. Dissatisfied with a God who is beyond our control, we put theological constructs that we can manage in a position where only God belongs. Are there any specific theological idols you can identify?

The idolatrous privileging of community identity above God takes many forms. And nearly all them involve the pervasive, subtle and alluring notion of supposed superiority. We see glimpses of this "idol" in self-descriptions of our denominations or congregations as being more enlightened, more sophisticated, the only true followers of Jesus, the only ones who really understand the Bible, the only ones who will be saved, more welcoming than everyone else, more faithful, more inclusive. I've listed a fairly diverse set of self-descriptions, but the challenge that attends each is the same: the temptation to elevate a comparative identity trait above the God in whom the identity of the entire human race is grounded.

A friend at a church I have visited a few times articulated clearly what had so inspired me as I had participated in their worship gatherings. We don't worship the fact that we're inclusive, she explained. We worship the God who is more welcoming that we can ever hope to be, and God transforms us into a welcoming community.

Whatever theological convictions or identity traits define our worshipping communities, may they never be privileged above a radical focus on the mysterious, omnipotent and gracious God of all people, who alone is worthy of worship and able to transform us and this world.

Over the next few issues of Best Practices for Adventist Worship, we will discuss further implications of the Ten Commandments for our worship practices. Your participation in the conversation will be greatly valued.

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Featured Media

The Effects of Liberating Worship: "Here I Am. Send Me!"

Click here to watch Pedrito Maynard-Reid's closing presentation at the 2013 Andrews University Music and Worship Conference.[1] Unpacking the inspired writings of the Hebrew prophets, Maynard-Reid offers insights on the important issue of how Christian worship relates to the biblical vision of justice. After watching the video, please share your thoughts in our Facebook dialogue.

Hands and Feet

For all the strides we've made
For all of our blessings
We've fallen far away from truth
Turning our face away from this hurting race
We turned our face away from you

For every broken heart
For every widow
For those without shelter from the rain
We lift our eyes to you looking for answers
When we have been called to ease the pain

We want to be your hands your feet
Without words will let our actions speak

Here we are
Words can only go so far
Draw us closer to your heart
Bring us back to you

To the Point

"One of Saint Paul's best-known exhortations is that we present ourselves as a sacrifice to God. He writes: 'I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God which is your spiritual worship.' (Rom. 12:1) What if we were to read this verse with this small change of wording: 'I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your
The Effects of Liberating Worship: 'Here I Am. Send Me!'"

[1] Views expressed by all presenters are not necessarily those of the North American Division, Andrews University or event sponsors.

Worship Planning

The Humanity

By Jose Bourget

Should we come to worship barefoot? God did ask Moses to remove his sandals in recognition of the holy ground. So why don't we leave our shoes at the church door? "No," said Peter, "you shall never wash my feet." (John 13:8)

In the Gospel of John, Thursday night of Passion week is important. Through these final moments God shares in the most simple of family traditions, a meal together. You see them all there -- the beloved, the outspoken, the coward, the philosopher, the doubter, the practical person, the dreamer, the young, the old, and the betrayer.

They eat together because God needs to eat. This isn't the first time God demonstrates His humanity. The disciples had already seen God be so tired that He nearly slept through a storm. Once God even got really excited and flipped tables. Another time God felt pain and sorrow that made Him weep. God obeyed His mother and turned water into wine for a wedding party. They saw God touch those who were untouchable and allow a single woman to bathe His feet with really expensive perfume. Now they would see God experience another human expression.

The Alpha, the Omega, the Lamb Who is Worthy, the Creator who spoke the world into existence, and breathed life into humankind, would now take the well known and common posture of a lowly servant by washing their feet. Why? To tell them how much He loved them. Awesome God? Indeed! The basin and towel communicate that our Holy God had become Emmanuel; that God left the majesty of heaven clothed in humanity because he loved bodies as a living, sacrificial work of art? True, we don't usually think of ourselves as works of art. But why not? Are we not among the greatest works of art that God -- the ultimate artist -- has created? Without doubt. God's agency is what brings us into being; as the psalmist reminds us, 'it is he that has made us, and not we ourselves' (Ps. 100:3 KJV). However, Paul goes on in verse 2 to say, 'Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God -- what is good and acceptable and perfect' (Rom. 12:2).

People will certainly disagree as to the extent of God's agency in shaping us, but clearly Paul is indicating that we are very much involved in this process. That is, God has created each of us and now calls us to help shape and mold what he has created.
Peter’s declaration, however, reminds us that we understand the dignity of God in a different way. This image of God, is so frightening to us, that we still insist that He not wash our feet. How? When we suggest that the recognition of the holiness of God requires stripping ourselves of the common things of the human experience. In reality, the acts of worship that have transcended cultures, languages, and time are the most common parts of the human experience responding to the divine initiative: birth, relationships, death, and resurrection. You might call them baptism and communion.

When we involve common human expressions as part of our worship to an Uncommon and Holy God, we are picking up a basin and towel. That is, we are taking a posture that is commonly understood in order to communicate a message of the Agape love God has for us. In other words, the more people worship through familiar forms, the more likely it will communicate God’s love in a way that transcends culture, language, and time. Worshipping Emmanuel means He accepts our common humanity.

Leaving your shoes at the door isn’t about stripping away our common humanity to become acceptable before God. Rather, walking barefoot through the doors is preparation for Him to wash our feet. It’s admitting that He is the only One that makes us acceptable in His presence.

The absence of inclusivity in our corporate worship experience is to deny the nail-pierced hands of grace from washing all of our feet. For example, song selections that are only familiar to a select few -- whether the select few be the organist and preacher or the worship band -- can become exclusive and narrowly significant. It isn’t about balancing the same number of “old” song and “new” songs. Instead, follow in His steps and become familiar with group of people who’ve gathered at this spiritual meal. Who is there? The beloved, the outspoken, the coward, the philosopher, the doubter, the practical person, the dreamer, the young, the old, or the betrayer? Are their feet calloused from a long journey? Are they Jew, Samaritan, Greek, or Roman? Do they have big feet or little feet? What path did they take to get here? Pick up the basin and towel. Only then can you co-create a worship journey from week to week that celebrates how Emmanuel is still with us, all of us.

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cuenta el contexto musical secular y sacro del siglo XIX y principios del siglo XX. La segunda sección es más extensa, pues examina en particular la declaración: "Habrá vocerío acompañado de tambores, música y danza" (ZMS 41) que implica lo ocurrido en las iglesias de Indiana entre 1899-1901. Mi objetivo fue descubrir cuál fue el impacto de la música en los campestres del año 1900. Para ello, hice una investigación en los periódicos que reportaron sobre lo que pasó en el campestre de Muncie, Indiana, donde se utilizaron estos "tambores."

El capítulo argumenta que la declaración sobre los "tambores, música y danza" ha sido utilizada de forma equivocada para condenar y prohibir la batería y la percusión en la música Adventista hoy. Aquí cito una de las conclusiones más importantes del capítulo:

"El hecho ineludible es que la hermana White no condenó de forma irrevocable los tambores en la música de Indiana, así como no rechazó permanentemente el uso de los violines ni las trompetas ni el himnario ni la música que se utilizaron allí. Además, no existe en ninguna parte de sus escritos una "condenación" a un instrumento musical. Fue en el contexto del culto ruidoso, donde había música, oración, canto congregacional y gritos, que Elena G. de White dijo: 'Es mejor no mezclar nunca el culto a Dios con música, que utilizar instrumentos musicales para realizar la obra que en enero pasado se me mostró que tendría lugar en nuestras reuniones de reavivamiento...' (En Espíritu y en Verdad, 42)

En la próxima Newsletter, abordaremos el capítulo "La Música y la Adoración."


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