Editorial
by Nicholas Zork

Liturical Lessons from the Decalogue: Vain Worship

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(Exodus 20:7 NASB)

When we think about the prohibition against taking "the name of the LORD your God in vain," we tend to imagine settings like a soccer match, ostensibly "secular" events or situations in which the divine may be inappropriately invoked. I've been enjoying a very entertaining and intriguing FIFA World Cup. And I've been surprised how often players reference God during a 90-minute match. Thrilling and
sometimes elusive goals are perhaps the most frequent precursors to praise. I imagine missed chances have inspired less positive references to God as well. Concerns about such references -- especially the latter -- are valid, but I'm more unsettled about events in which our sensitivities to vain God-talk are dulled -- events in which invoking God's name can seem appropriate even when it isn't: namely, Christian worship.

There are three ways in particular that we "take the name of the LORD your God in vain" in worship -- often quite inadvertently: Read more

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by Cheryl Wilson-Bridges

Steward or Worshiper: Which One Are You?

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Cheryl Wilson-Bridges
accompany his or her worship set, most leaders would naturally turn to the book Psalms. Some may turn to the New Testament. But few, if any, would consider Genesis as a resource for worship leading. Yet I have found that there are many golden principles that can be found in the book of Genesis.

In the beginning when God created the world, he designed Adam to be its first worship leader. On the sixth day God created Adam and gave him dominion (Gen. 1:28). Then God rested and sanctified the seventh day for all Earth's worship and praise (Gen. 2:2). From the beginning, God intended leadership and worship to be partnered. Adam and Eve walked together in the Garden in the freedom of holy fellowship. Read more

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Journey to the Heart of Worship: Transitioning from Chorister to Worship Leader
I was eight years old when I led my first song service. I remember how nervous I felt, hoping the congregation would be happy with what I did. Of course, I can't remember the songs we sang, but I do remember that most, if not all, of my focus went into trying to please the congregation. I've learned over the years that there is a difference between leading in the singing of random favorites and actually leading worship.

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Anthem Rising: Introducing New
Worship Songs

Rick Anderson discusses principles and strategies for introducing new worship songs in your congregation.

Anthem Rising: Introducing New Worship Songs (Ep. 2)

Liturgical Lessons from the Decalogue: Vain Worship

by Nicholas Zork

"You shall not take the name of the LORD your God in vain..." (Exodus 20:7 NASB)

When we think about the prohibition against taking “the name of the LORD your God in vain,” we tend to imagine settings like a soccer match, ostensibly “secular” events or situations in which the divine may be inappropriately invoked. I’ve been enjoying a very entertaining and intriguing FIFA World Cup. And I’ve been surprised how often players reference God during a 90-minute match. Thrilling and sometimes elusive goals are perhaps the most frequent precursors to praise. I imagine missed chances have inspired less positive references to God as well. Concerns about such references—especially the latter—are valid, but I’m more unsettled about events in which our sensitivities to vain God-talk are dulled—events in which invoking God’s name can seem appropriate even when it isn’t: namely, Christian worship.

There are three ways in particular that we “take the name of the LORD your God in vain” in worship—often quite inadvertently:

1. One way we may frequently take God’s name in vain is by trying to speak on God’s behalf. The temptation to speak for God is constant in worship gatherings. And our intentions may be positive: wanting to assure people that God loves them, expressing God’s welcome, or even offering a needed critique. But attributing our words to God creates more problems than it solves. With regard to our present discussion, such attributions tend to be vain in both senses of the word: vain in failing to take God seriously and vain in taking ourselves so seriously we think we can speak for God. Additionally, speaking for or even about God distracts us from what we are truly called to do in worship: hear God and respond to our Creator and Redeemer.

2. Even when we don’t explicitly try to speak on God’s behalf, we often take God’s name in vain as a means of legitimizing and blessing proceedings which may have little to do with worshippers God. We use God’s name vainly—again, in both senses—as a way of talking about ourselves. It is interesting that so many Adventist congregations avoid setting aside specific Sabbaths on an annual basis to celebrate Jesus’ birth, ministry, death or resurrection; and that some of these same congregations have established annual Sabbath services that celebrate various ministries of the congregation, groups within the congregation, nationalistic allegiance and military service, and important civic holidays. There is not space here to outline all the challenges regarding the relationship between Church and State and the implications of patriotic worship. Suffice it to say, we are often eager to “divinely” sanction human activity; and it is shocking how often such vain use of God’s name goes unchecked.

3. Perhaps the most common way that we take God’s name in vain in our worship ministries is in how we discuss and plan worship. Whether we are evaluating a recent service or planning an upcoming one, we tend to talk about encountering God and God’s activity in worship as though God is not presently in the room. For good or bad, we talk differently about people when they’re not there. But we forget that there is no such thing as God-talk behind God’s back. Perhaps if we discussed and planned worship with a greater sense of God’s presence, we would worship God with a greater sense of God’s presence. Perhaps we would be less cavalier in referring to God and more humble in referring to ourselves. Perhaps we would more fully recover a sense of God’s mystery—the mystery of a God who graciously meets us when we gather in Jesus’ name, a God who loves us all in the midst of our brokenness and vanity.
Whenever I’ve encouraged a worship leader to find a scripture to accompany his or her worship set, most leaders would naturally turn to the book Psalms. Some may turn to the New Testament. But few, if any, would consider Genesis as a resource for worship leading. Yet I have found that there are many golden principles that can be found in the book of Genesis.

In the beginning when God created the world, he designed Adam to be its first worship leader. On the sixth day God created Adam and gave him dominion (Gen. 1:28). Then God rested and sanctified the seventh day for all Earth’s worship and praise (Gen. 2:2). From the beginning, God intended leadership and worship to be partnered. Adam and Eve walked together in the Garden in the freedom of holy fellowship.

Now I know that the Bible never mentions Adam playing the harp or bursting into song. But worship leadership is more than mere music. Worship leadership is the purposeful and grateful response of someone who has encountered the magnificence of God and desires to lead others into His presence. Adam’s duty was to obey God’s command not to eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil (Gen. 2:17). When Eve was tempted and sinned, Adam also fell. Now Adam had to offer an animal sacrifice to engage in open praise.

After the fall, Adam again had to follow God’s instructions. I imagine he taught his boys Cain and Abel how to build an altar to offer God a sacrifice of praise. But there was more trouble in paradise. Cain and Abel had different opinions on how to offer true worship. Although they were both taught by their father the same way to worship God the boys brought two very different offerings—an animal sacrifice and fruit. This difference of opinion resulted in God’s rejection of Cain’s offering. Then ended in a fatal fight between the boys over which kind of worship was most appropriate.

Many of us believe that Cain’s offering of fruit was unacceptable to God solely because it didn’t include a blood sacrifice. But the book of Genesis lets us know that God made a deeper distinction. The Bible describes Abel as a keeper of sheep and Cain as a tiller of the ground (Genesis 4:2). A keeper means, “A person charged with the responsibility for the preservation and conservation of something valuable.” [1] Abel was a steward. Abel lived his life understanding that everything he managed belonged first to God.

But the Bible describes Cain differently. Cain was a tiller. The word tiller is the Hebrew term abad, which means, “To work, to serve, keep in bondage, worshiper.” [2] Cain ultimately worshiped the ground given to him by God for his care. Cain was so captivated by his talented ability to create that he began to worship the fruits of his labor. Cain offered his worship preference instead of seeking God’s Holy presence. His ability to produce fresh fruits clouded his judgment and desire to offer God praise.

If you were asked are you a steward or a worshiper, most of us would naturally chose worshiper. But in true worship, only God is the audience. God is the focus of our praise; therefore He determines what is acceptable. Sadly it was Cain’s angry, unrepentant mind and heart that convinced him to offer God what he thought was best and not what God required of him in worship.

In many churches today, the contention between Cain and Abel rages on. We sacrifice an atmosphere of sacredness as we endlessly bicker about our opinions on music. Some of us have become so engrossed in our talents, that we are easily angered or offended when others share opposing beliefs. Worship is not music. If we are not careful the fight that ended the life of Abel will fuel our worship wars and become fatal to church growth.
It is time for us to ask ourselves daily am I a steward like Abel or a worshiper like Cain? When God’s Word guides us then bickering and worship wars will end. We will offer praise as a preview of paradise that reflects our heavenly home.

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I researched over 300 Bible verses that had direct reference to worship in an attempt to find out what the worshippers actually did. It soon became evident that when the Bible talks about worship, it refers to an action of response. Whether translated from the Hebrew or Greek, the word “worship” is always an action verb. The responses varied in three ways: responses of respect, responses of real life service and responses of ritual at a specific time and place. In most accounts the worship, responses were made directly to God (first person).

This broadened my paradigm of only trying to please the congregation. Now I prayerfully develop a journey through song with a twofold purpose: 1) to engage the congregation in a journey of worship in the presence of God, and 2) to present an offering of worship to God, in song, that represents an authentic response.

The songs I now select are designed to first tell a story or paint a picture of who God is and what He has done and continues to do (third person). Then, I select songs that are designed as a response from the heart (first person). The journey of worship varies in style and tempo, but the focus and purpose remains the same: God!