

God's Teaching Pictures

Warren Vanhetloo, ThD, DD
Professor, Calvary Baptist Theological Seminary

God has given to man many pictures intended to teach spiritual realities. Man in his sinful condition tends to nullify that which God intends to teach in one of two extremes. Either he leaves out or changes parts of the picture which God has appointed, or he assigns so much importance to the picture that he speaks of it as the reality. Because of this, those who would be true to the revealed Word need to guard lest they add to the appointed pictures or take away from them such that the appointed representation be defaced, and also guard lest these appointed pictures be considered as having some magical power.

Such pictures appointed of God to teach concerning the work of the Lord Jesus Christ before His coming are called an "example and shadow of heavenly things" in Hebrews 8:5. They are the shadows only, not the reality; they are types teaching of coming fulfillment. And to teach correctly, they must accurately portray the reality, "as Moses was admonished of God when he was about to make the tabernacle: for, See, saith he, that thou make all things according to the pattern showed to thee in the mount" (Heb 8:5).

Throughout Scripture the warnings of God concerning His appointed teaching symbols are against these two directions of misuse: instructions are to be followed exactly because the symbols teach of a greater reality, and the symbols are not to be considered as automatically accomplishing the reality. Such errors can be pointed out as different incidents are examined.

Strange Sacrifice on the Altar

Certain sacrifices were appointed to be made in a definite fashion on the altar, and God warned against adding man-conceived sacrifices to the God-oriented practices, calling these "strange" sacrifices (Exod 30:9). Not long after, "Nadab and Abihu, the sons of Aaron, took either of them his censer, and put fire therein, and put incense thereon, and offered strange fire before the Lord, which He commanded them not" (Lev 10:1).

To teach in an emphatic fashion that sacrifices were not to be added to those which God commanded, "there went out fire from the Lord, and devoured them, and they died before the Lord" (Lev 10:2). This sin was so serious in the sight of God that relatives were not to touch the dead bodies nor to mourn for them (Lev 10:4-6). When God appointed the tabernacle sacrifices, He gave complete and accurate instructions; He did not want any man to change them and thus mar the picture of reality.

Similarly, for our day God has appointed a way of performing His work, through the local church; and any strange agencies or man-conceived programs confuse the truth.

Added Action at the Rock

Another important incident is given in Numbers 20. The people in the wilderness were murmuring against God because there was no water, and Moses went before God on their behalf. God instructed him, "speak ye unto the rock" (Num 20:8).

"And Moses and Aaron gathered the congregation together before the rock, and he said unto them, Hear now, ye rebels; must we fetch you water out of this rock? And Moses lifted up his hand, and with his rod he smote the rock twice" (Num 20:10-11).

The water came out abundantly. God answered prayer, and God blessed in a marvelous way. Multitudes saw unusual results, much like in a great city-wide campaign, but God's judgment fell on His appointed servant because he did not obey the commands of the Lord.

God had said to speak; Moses spoiled the symbolism of God by striking the rock twice on this occasion. Before, in Horeb, he was to smite the rock once to picture the future work of the coming Rock, Jesus Christ (Exod 17:6). But Christ was to be smitten but once; Moses now should only speak to the rock. Because this disobedience

was so serious, Moses was forbidden to enter the promised land (Num 20:12).

Both errors are suggested in this passage: Moses changed the appointed manner, and Moses suggested to the people that in some way he or his rod had sacramental power to bring for the water. God had performed many miracles in connection with the rod, but He did not need to use it.

Pagan Practice for the Ark

A third well-known incident occurred when David sought to return the ark to Jerusalem. Instead of following the divinely ordained procedure, "they set the ark of God upon a new cart" (II Sam 6:3), according to the pattern of the pagan Philistines (I Sam 6:7). God had specified that only sons of Aaron were to touch the ark, and even the sons of Kohath who were to bear it on their shoulders were not to touch it (Num 4:15).

Thus, when Ussah put forth his hand to the ark of God and took hold of it, God smote him there for his error (II Sam 6:6-7). Then David realized the importance of finding out the proper way of moving the ark (II Sam 6:9), for it was obvious that the God-appointed pattern was not being followed. Instead they were guilty of trying to do the Lord's work according to the ways of the world, much like many promotional and financial practices of pagan America are sometimes employed in the Lord's work today.

The other extreme, of magical power, seems present, until we recognize that others had touched this ark; when several were touching it there was no magical killing power, but when just one man touched it out where all could learn the lesson, God made it clear that His will was not being followed.

Other Old Testament Examples

Another incident emphasizes the holy respect which God expects of appointed teaching symbols. As a first-fruits offering, God appointed all the spoil of Jericho unto Himself (Josh 6:18-19). When Achan took that which had been designated for God, his sin hindered victory at Ai (Josh 7:11-12). Again, severe punishment followed in order that the people might learn to respect that which God appointed as having special significance. Christians today will see in this a likeness to God's designation of the tithe as His own.

Later in the life of the kingdom, several prophets cried out against the way the appointed sacrifices were being observed. They proclaimed that God was not honored by the number of animals offered up; worship had become just vain ritual, without real meaning (Isa 1:11-14). Again God's two-fold emphasis is the same: do not think that these acts automatically or magically accomplish something; do not consider that they are acceptable to God if their teaching message is not already true of the worshipper. Again, there is an important lesson concerning ritual in worship today.

The same dual emphasis is connected with circumcision. As teaching their special calling and separation from the world, children of Abraham were to be circumcised. That it was just an outward sign of an inward reality was frequently stressed (Lev 26:41; Deut 10:16; 30:6). That it did not automatically qualify a child as a true Israelite was taught by the prophets: "all the house of Israel are uncircumcised in the heart" (Jer 9:26). God's command to be circumcised was to be obeyed for it had an appointed teaching significance, but it was not to be considered as accomplishing any spiritual benefit in itself.

Divinely appointed teaching symbols at the beginning and end of time are interesting. The tree of the knowledge of good and evil in the Garden of Eden (Gen 2:17) had no magical fruit which changed the physical nature of Adam and Eve; it was a symbol of their disobedience, a material representation of a spiritual testing. Nor was the tree of life more than a symbolic representation of eternal life, and thus was not to be available to man in his sinful, fallen state (Gen 3:22-24); however, when man has actually entered into eternal blessedness, then it will be a symbol (not the means) of that life (Rev 22:2).

God's teaching concerning the blood also bears this two-fold warning. It is to be respected because it has been divinely appointed to teach spiritual truth (Lev 17:11, 14); yet in itself no blood ever had any magical qualities to effect spiritual benefits. The pattern God set up consistently taught that without shedding of blood is not remission of sin; but it remained only a shadow of the reality. The fulfillment came when the Lord Jesus Christ shed His blood for the sins of the world on the cross of Calvary.

New Testament Teaching Pictures

Old Testament types point forward to a reality yet to come; New Testament symbols picture that which has happened. In the New

Testament there are two God-appointed teaching actions which Christians are commanded to use: baptism and the Lord's Supper.

In addition to these, there are other indications of appointed teaching relations. For instance, the planting of the seed and subsequent growth (Matt 13) and the relation of husband and wife (Eph 5:32) are used to teach spiritual truth. These were incorporated into the world when God created it in order that through them He might teach greater truths.

These too should be given proper honor as appointed teaching relationships in order that they might teach correctly. The story is told of a boy attending a Sunday School class for the first time who cringed when the teacher emphasized that God is like a father, for his earthly father was anything but loving and kind and providing.

Observance of the Lord's Supper

That God expects the Lord's Supper to be observed properly is clear from I Corinthians 1. Christians in Corinth were subordinating it to a fellowship supper (I Cor 11:21-22). Human sinfulness became prominent, rather than the divine teaching. And God had never taught that it was to represent a communion among believers, but instead a fellowship with the living God.

Paul wrote to them just what had been taught when the Lord Jesus Christ introduced this teaching observance -- these things they are to follow correctly, nothing more, nothing less. Because they had not respected the teaching significance, God had brought sickness and the death among them (I Cor 11:30). Such sickness does not magically follow defacing the symbols, but often may follow in order to teach God's people that He expects them to picture things

Again, as teaching observances, they are not to be considered magical "means of grace" as though in themselves any power is automatically transferred. They represent spiritual truths, but they do not contain any spiritual elements to convey some spiritual benefit. The bread and the cup are but the picture, not the reality.

Administration of Baptism

The same two extremes are possible with baptism. Some go so far as to consider it the means of becoming a Christian instead of the public testimony of having become a Christian, thus making it a magical rite rather than a teaching symbol. They employ "the magic

of the moistened fingers" to convey eternal life. Where they control, they insist that all babies be sacramentally made Christians by application of a little water.

Serious as this is, the other extreme is far more serious. Many have defaced the picture. Instead of following the pattern evident in the New Testament, men have substituted other practices, for convenience and expediency. When God has appointed that baptism should symbolize that "we are buried with Him by baptism into death; that like as Christ was raised up from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life" (Rom 6:4), man has been left no liberty to change the form of baptism such that it no longer can teach what God appointed it to teach.

God expects these teaching pictures to be respected and used correctly to teach eternal truth. The truth is not being taught where man-conceived methods are substituted for God-ordained procedures. In recent years some have gone even further, denying water baptism. They would remove the picture completely and try to teach the truth without the material symbol; such, of course, is both absurd and unscriptural. These are ordinances, commanded of God to be obeyed publicly, and not to be thought of as sacraments, to be set aside when one realizes they do not convey divine power.

Conclusion

Men sometimes ask, "Why does not God strike men dead for every disobedience?" The answer can well be given with another question, "Why should He continue to do so in each new generation when He has given an infallible record of His attitude toward such practices in the Bible?"

God severely punished Nadab and Abihu. God decisively dealt with Moses. God publicly struck Ussah. God disclosed the sin of Achan. God taught through the death of Ananias and Sapphira (Acts 5). God showed His displeasure at Corinth. Are not these enough to impress upon all who read His word that He considers His teaching pictures important? Believers should take seriously these warnings concerning His symbols and neither deface them nor treat them as magic.