

Dear Friends,

"What's wrong with?" "Why can't we do X?" Contemporary pastors likely hear such questions frequently from people in their church. In Romans 6:17, the word "form" was translated from a Greek word that describes a mold or a "Form" a builder will make for a cement work. You precisely build the form or mold to the exact size and shape of the cement work you want. Then you pour the cement into the mold and smooth it and give the surface the texture it needs to serve its purpose. Effectively, Paul described the gospel as a mold, a fixed form and shape that God has given His truth and His gospel. He doesn't give us the raw material and tell us to shape the form as we wish. He gives us the completed form and commands us to "Fit" our lives into this mold. Israel, the name the northern kingdom under Jeroboam took when he led the rebellion from Rehoboam and the southern kingdom, tried to make a new form for the worship of God. In every way imaginable Jeroboam reversed God's ways to His people in the southern kingdom and in the temple in Jerusalem. Instead of Levites as priests, he appointed the lowest character of men to be priests. He instituted the common symbol of pagan worship among surrounding people to his form of worship, the bull. We see an indirect reference to this symbol in Amos 4:1. The people of the northern kingdom, not only the women, Amos referred to as the "Kine of Bashan." Cows in a herd follow their bull. Eventually the northern kingdom fell wholly into Baal worship.

Such is the plight of those who choose to ignore God and His ways in favor of their own opinions and wishes. Old or New Testament, God promises great blessings to His people who joyfully learn and follow His ways, as well as great judgments against His people who reject His ways in favor of their own ideas and ways. Which path shall we choose?

Lord give us wise grace,
Joe Holder

Ignored and Misunderstood Scriptures (Amos 4:12) What Preparation?

Therefore thus will I do unto thee, O Israel: And because I will do this unto thee, Prepare to meet thy God, O Israel. (Amos 4:12 KJV 1900)

This verse is often isolated from its context and used as an invitation for sinners to save themselves in decisional salvation preaching. Sadly, decisional salvation teaching focuses on the wrong person and the wrong decision. Biblical salvation emphasizes God and the work of Jesus. This view ignores multiple hermeneutical principles of sound Biblical interpretation.

To whom did Amos address these words? He wrote them to "Israel," to the northern kingdom, to God's rebellious and sinful people. The whole fourth chapter of Amos contains a solemn warning to God's people in the northern kingdom. Following their separation from the southern kingdom, Judah, the northern kingdom, under the name "Israel," ran deliberately further and further away from God's way into pagan idolatry. Despite this growing failure, the Lord sent a number of His prophets to warn them and to call them back to God's way. We can't forget Elijah and Elisha, both sent specifically to the northern kingdom, along with Amos and Hosea.

Jeroboam's revolt from the southern kingdom is dated from 931-928 BC. It is believed that Amos issued most of his prophecies to Israel, the northern kingdom, in the mid-eighth century BC, around 760-750 BC. And the northern kingdom finally fell and was permanently eliminated by the Assyrians around 721 BC. Thus, Amos wrote these words of final warning around 30-40 years before the fall of Israel.

In the context of the full chapter, God reminds Israel of the many judgments that He sent against them over the years to warn them of their sins and to call them to repentance. In addition to those judgments, He sent them at least four devoted prophets with His accompanying power and message. They had seen the prophets, they had seen the judgments. Now the Lord speaks His final warning. They shall now see Him, meet him in personal judgment. Are they ready for this?

In effect, with Amos' warning, God gave Israel around thirty years to repent. At the end of that time with no repentance, they would meet the Lord in His personal judgment in the form of the Assyrian invasion. The Assyrians had a creative habit in their dealings with captured nations. They would observe the people to single out those who had the greatest influence or leadership. Over time, they would remove these people from their homeland to a wholly different region of their empire where they had no influence at all. By this forced intermingling of people within their empire, they eliminated the leaders most likely to create problems for them. And they also effectively forced intermarriage between one captured people and another, further merging alien cultures into their own. Over a few generations, the people of Israel would be so intermarried with other people that they would wholly lose their identity. They abandoned their faith and their God. In His personal judgment, God left them to a people who would also destroy their personal identity and culture. It is generally believed that the Samaritans of the first century were the remnants of that amalgamation of Israel with other people by the Assyrians. Yes, they were part Jew, but they had lost their identity as "Israel" completely.

We cannot doubt; God gives voice to the depth of His unhappiness with Israel's forsaking Him and His ways. Despite their sins, He sent them good and faithful prophets to call them back to Him. Instead, they knowingly chose their own ways, a choice that led them directly to the final warning of judgment in Amos 4.

What might we learn from this lesson? The Lord consistently commands His people in Scripture to be a separate people, wholly devoted to Him, His ways, and His teachings. If we obey Him, we shall focus our studies on Scripture more than on the latest trends or the ideas of the most popular or influential pastors or preachers of the day. Instead of trying to find ways to compromise and "Fit into" the religious trends of the day, we shall immerse our minds in New Testament teaching and seek to learn God's way and God's truth from Scripture, teaching and striving to practice His ways alone.

How many times do pastors hear the question regarding a contemporary trend or belief, "What is wrong with X?" And God's answer in Amos is clear. "Nothing if you want to lose your Christian race and face the Lord in judgment." God fully reveals in Scripture His will and way for us to serve and to worship Him, individually and collectively in church.

That the man of God may be perfect, thoroughly furnished unto all good works. (2 Timothy 3:17 KJV 1900)

There is a logical “Negative” approval. “If I don’t prohibit it, you are free to do it.” However, this verse in no remote way defines negative approval. In fact, it affirms the mirror opposite, positive commandment. Within the writings of our New Testament, God provides positive examples and commandments that lead to Paul’s conclusion in this verse, “...*perfect, thoroughly furnished unto all good works.*” Somewhere in the New Testament, God fully “Furnishes” us with His way and truth. Mounce’s Expository Dictionary of New Testament words defines the Greek word translated “furnished” in this verse as “to equip or furnish completely.” God clearly rejects the negative approval concept in this verse. “I don’t see anything wrong with X.” But God didn’t consult you or me regarding what New Testament believers should do to honor Him in our lives. He decided those questions long before you and I were born, and I find no indication in Scripture that He has changed His mind. The idea of following our own ideas should frighten us as much as Jeroboam’s ideas deviated from God’s ways which the Lord commanded His priests and people to maintain.

God tolerated and repeatedly sent prophets to remind His people in the northern kingdom from around 930 BC to 720 BC, roughly 210 years. But even God’s long-suffering has its limits. Eventually, as Amos warns in our study chapter, Israel would meet their God in judgment. “I thought” or “I didn’t see anything wrong with it” would fail. Israel and Jeroboam chose their own way which always results in “Meeting” the Lord in judgment. We never negotiate God into changing His will or ways to ours. (Romans 3:1-2)

A study of the northern kingdom from its beginning with Jeroboam’s rebellion from Rehoboam, Solomon’s son and rightful heir to the throne of Israel, affirms the Lord’s righteous judgment fully. In every way imaginable Jeroboam worked to make the worship and culture of the northern kingdom different from God’s way in the temple in Jerusalem. Instead of Levites, he appointed the lowest character of men to the priesthood. He set up a place of worship in the north of the kingdom, as far away from Jerusalem as possible. It was not long, about fifty years, till Ahab and Jezebel set up full Baal worship as the official religion of the north.

When interpreted in the contextual setting of Amos and of this chapter, our study verse is not at all about salvation and where we shall spend eternity. It is about the Lord’s righteous judgment against His own sinning people in Israel, the northern kingdom. To isolate this one verse from its context, and to ignore that context, applying the verse to salvation is a sad example of wrong hermeneutics, wrong interpretation.

How should a church choose to order its public worship and activities today? What criteria should guide its decisions? If you research what happens, public opinion surveys, what will “Sell” to popular opinion, or draw the largest crowd are offered as commendable guides. The idea of looking to the New Testament and how the church functioned in the first century alone is unknown and unacceptable to the “Modern” Christian mind.

During my last years of secular work, over a decade ago, I subscribed to a pastor’s help program sponsored by Dr. James Dobson. They would send a cassette tape (Tells you how long ago this happened) monthly that contained various reports or messages of interest to pastors. On one occasion, the monthly tape included an extensive report of a national survey of Christian churches. At the time, based on that survey, all “Conservative” churches, churches that tried to follow New Testament teaching, were consistently losing numbers, regardless their denominational identity or beliefs. Only “Mega” churches

and aberrant groups were growing. At the time the average church size in the US was around a hundred members.

This survey affirms my point. The prevailing “Opinion” of professing Christians in our culture today is more inclined to go with personal preference or what they perceive as the popular trends of the day than going to the New Testament and striving to follow its teachings alone for church conduct and faith. I sadly observe that today’s Christian culture in our country more imitates Jeroboam’s strategies or the Book of Judges than the New Testament record. The last verse in the Book of Judges summarizes the whole book.

In those days there was no king in Israel: every man did that which was right in his own eyes. (Judges 21:25 KJV)

From beginning to end, Judges reports the Lord’s people choosing to ignore the Lord and His teachings for what “**was right in his own eyes,**” personal opinion over God and His way. Consistently, the Lord sent judgment, the people superficially repented, always only briefly, and the Lord blessed, reinforcing their right conduct. But soon they forgot past experience and went right back to their own ways, only to face the Lord in another season of judgment.

Judges, as well as Jesus’ teaching in the New Testament, clearly teaches us that popular opinion or “What I like” is not the Lord’s way and will never result in His blessings. Study Jesus’ lesson in the Sermon on the Mount regarding the broad and the narrow way. (Matthew 7:13-14) Do not miss Jesus’ conclusion, “**...few there be that find it,**” the “strait” (Difficult) gate and the narrow way.

Today, for our personal life, as well as for our church decisions, which path shall we choose? What I want, what seems good in my eyes, or the Lord and His way? Will we demonstrate the path of Israel in Judges with the same results? Or will we discover the good way that follows Jesus and results in His blessings? Judges and Amos solemnly remind us. God has not changed His mind or will, and He is not mocked.

Elder Joe Holder