

What's the Difference Between True and False Worship?

[Hosea 8](#)

Hosea, Day 17

Set the trumpet to your lips!

One like a vulture is over the house of the Lord,
because they have transgressed my covenant
and rebelled against my law.

To me they cry,

“My God, we—Israel—know you.”

Israel has spurned the good;
the enemy shall pursue him.

They made kings, but not through me.

They set up princes, but I knew it not.

With their silver and gold they made idols
for their own destruction.

I have spurned your calves, O Samaria.

My anger burns against them.

How long will they be incapable of innocence?

For it is from Israel;

a craftsman made it;

it is not God.

The calf of Samaria

shall be broken to pieces.

For they sow the wind,

and they shall reap the whirlwind.

Because Ephraim has multiplied altars for sinning,

they have become to him altars for sinning.

Were I to write for him my laws by the ten thousands,

they would be regarded as a strange thing.

As for my sacrificial offerings,

they sacrifice meat and eat it,

but the Lord does not accept them.

Now he will remember their iniquity

and punish their sins;

they shall return to Egypt.

For Israel has forgotten his Maker

and built palaces,

and Judah has multiplied fortified cities;

so I will send a fire upon his cities,

and it shall devour her strongholds.

- Hosea 8:1-7, 11-14, ESV

In 1923, J. Gresham Machen wrote *Christianity and Liberalism*, a classic work that was based on a very simple premise: Christian churches that deny the virgin birth and bodily resurrection of Jesus, that deny the reality of miracles and question the reliability of the Bible, and that preach a moralistic do-goodism instead of the Gospel of Jesus Christ are not actually Christian churches. Instead of calling themselves

Christian, they should drop the name as an inaccurate and dishonest label and call themselves something else.

In Hosea's day, the people of the northern kingdom of Israel, the ten tribes who followed Jeroboam and broke away from Jerusalem and the House of David, called themselves worshipers of Yahweh, the covenant people of God, heirs of the promises made to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. And yet, they worshiped golden calves at Bethel and Dan, they called on the gods of the surrounding nations, they did not have Levites teaching the law to the people, and they engaged in rampant immorality. And so Hosea told them they could no longer consider God to be their God and should no longer expect any protection or blessing from Him as His people. In short, though they called themselves the people of God, they were not. They were "Not My People."

Yet the people of Israel called upon the name of the Lord. The golden calves Jeroboam set up in Dan and Bethel were not representations of foreign gods; they were ways of worshiping Yahweh, the one true God. Jeroboam set them up because going to Jerusalem to worship at the Temple would have drawn his people's hearts back to the House of David, his rivals for the throne. It was politically expedient to give the people new places to worship, and it was culturally relevant to set up statues. After all, the other nations worshiped their gods with statues, so why not Israel?

When we understand this background, Hosea 8 then becomes for us a good test to evaluate whether our worship of God is truly honoring to Him and accepted by Him or not. Could we be guilty of false worship? How do we know?

1. True worship is based on God's commands, and false worship is based on people's ideas. God's commands regarding worship had become strange and unknown in Israel:

*Were I to write for him my laws by the ten thousands,
they would be regarded as a strange thing. - v. 12*

Most evangelical Christians today probably don't even know that God commands certain elements in worship:

- The public reading of Scripture
- Preaching of the Word
- Prayer
- Singing of psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs
- Confessing our faith
- Taking up tithes and offerings
- Baptism
- The Lord's Supper

These elements can all be understood as either prayer or proclamation: We are praying to God, sometimes in song, or He is speaking to us. (You can [read more here](#).) Other clever ideas may be entertaining or fun things to do, but they are not Biblical worship.

2. True worship is faithfully offered to God alone. Israel was condemned because they transgressed their covenant with God and they sought the help of other nations. This usually involved worshipping the gods of these foreign nations, as a sign of loyalty to them.

Whenever we are tempted to find our security or identity in things other than God, we are being drawn to idolatry. We are giving our worshipful trust to something other than God - politics, education, wealth, acceptance by the culture, etc. Each of these things can at times ask us to violate our covenant with the Lord, to break His commands. We must remain loyal to Him and reject their false promises and our heart's idolatrous ways.

Conclusion: To be God's holy people is to be called and marked by Him for Him alone. We cannot look to the world for patterns of worship or church life, and we cannot trust in the competing gods of the world. Our worship must be based on God's word and offered to Him alone, for He alone is worthy!