

LIVING WATERS NEWSLETTER

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MAGIC, NICEA, AND THE TRUTH

There is an unknown danger that worshippers can be easily lured into without being aware of it; that is, substituting magic for faith. An example of this is found in Numbers 20:7-12. "And the Lord spoke to Moses saying, 'Take the rod, and you and your brother Aaron assemble the congregation and *speak* to the rock before their eyes, that it may yield water. You shall thus bring forth water for them out of the rock and let the congregation and their beasts drink.' So Moses took the rod from before the Lord, just as He had commanded him; and Moses and Aaron gathered the assembly before the rock, And he said to them, 'Listen now you rebels; shall we bring forth water for you out of this rock?' Then Moses lifted his hand and *struck* the rock twice with his rod; and water came forth abundantly, and the congregation and their beasts drank. But the Lord said to Moses and Aaron, 'Because you have not believed Me to treat Me holy in the sight of the sons of Israel, therefore you shall not bring this assembly into the land which I have given them.'"

Magic is using ritual to get things done. Moses acted as a magician. He did not regard God's word as authoritative, rather it was God's word *plus* his striking the rock with the rod. He added a ritual of his own to the word of God. Magic is substituting ritual for faith and it is using ritual to get things done. Moses did not believe the word of God. He had to add more than what God had said. In celebration of the Passover there was to be only one lamb offered. "Your lamb shall be without blemish, a male of the first year; ye shall take it from the sheep or from the goats" (Ex. 12:5). Only one animal was to be offered. If anyone thought that if one offering did a good job, then two offerings would do more, it would become a personal sacrifice beyond what God required and would be a declaration that man was able to pay God out of their own assets. This would be magic on man's part. We are not to try to placate God by our own acts He does not require. When the Passover lamb was offered there was no more that could be done to enhance the sacrifice.

There is not much thought given to magic in the church today. However, it is dealt with many times in the Old Testament and is also a problem in the New Testament, especially in the book of Acts. Witchcraft is mentioned five times in the Old Testament and sorcery twelve times, Divination twenty times in the Old Testament and one time in the New. Magi or magician is used three times in the New Testament referring to their visit to the baby Jesus (translated "wise men" in KJV) and once in Acts 13 referring to Elymas. A word very similar to the word "magi" with the same meaning is used by Paul in II Timothy 3:13 translated "imposters." Kittel's *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* states: "This word in the strict sense is 'magician' and is used for a 'false magician.' The only distinction between *magos* (Magi) and *goas* (imposter) is that the latter is mostly used for the lower practitioner." Writer Nathaniel Schiffman in his book *Abracadabra* asks the question: "How does a magician stand up there on stage and fool an entire audience? How can one person deceive a whole room full of people?" A more important question is "How does a preacher stand up behind the

pulpit and fool a whole church full of people?" Or, "how does one person, or a group of people deceive religious people for generations to come?" The answer is Satan has always used deception (magic) to influence people and has always had imposters (magicians) to do his deceiving work.

Both the Old and New Testaments warn against adding to the word. God warned Israel: "You shall not add to the word which I am commanding you, nor take away from it, that you may keep the commandments of the Lord your God which I command you" (Deut. 4:2). "Whatever I command you, you shall be careful to do; you shall not add to nor take away from it." (Deut. 12:32). "Do not add to His words or He will reprove you, and you shall be proved a liar" (Prov. 30:6). Jesus accused the Pharisees of vain worship because they taught as doctrine "the precepts of men" and "neglecting the commandment of God, you hold to the tradition of man....you are experts at setting aside the commandments of God in order to keep your tradition" (Mark 7:8-9). The Apostle Paul wanted the Corinthians to "learn not to exceed what is written" (I Cor. 4:6). The closing words of the book of Revelation are applicable to the whole Bible: "If anyone adds to the prophesy of this book, God will add to him the plagues which are written in this book; and if anyone takes away from the words of the book of this prophesy, God will take away his part from the tree of life and from the holy city" (Rev. 22: 18, 19).

The failure of most religious teaching today is that it has been "religious" instead of "scriptural." The most amazing thing we have encountered in over 65 years of ministry is the amenability of religious teachers to assume things to be true, when the silence of the Scripture is deafening concerning these very things upon which they build elaborate theological systems. Moses, although he had been educated in all the treasures of Egypt (Heb. 11:26), did not realize he was acting as a magician when he did not speak to the rock as God commanded him. God's word was not enough, he had to strike the rock. We think it incredulous that a great man such as Moses would add his own word to the word of God. The penalty for his action was severe (Num. 20:12). However, history is replete with religious teachers that have repeated the example of Moses and been revered and held in honor by the religious system.

First, notice the magical appearance of the Nicean Creed. During the first three centuries after Jesus' crucifixion, the idea that the Savior was separate from God and subordinate to Him was not particularly shocking. To patriarchal Romans, the very titles Father and Son implied a relationship of superiority and inferiority. Two of the most brilliant and influential of the Eastern "Church Fathers," Origen and Dionysius of Alexandria, had taught that Jesus was inferior to God. And the idea of a hierarchy of power and glory in heaven matched what people saw on earth, as well as what they read in the Gospels. There was no doctrine of the trinity taught or believed in the early church, because it was not found in Scripture. However, in the year 319 some of the prominent teachers in the church (having acquired the position of "Bishops") and evidently did not believe the Scripture when it stated: "Hear, O Israel! The Lord is our

God, the Lord is One!” (Deut. 6:4; Mark 12:28, 29). Some believed this and others believed that Jesus was God also. They “struck the rock twice” and the council of Nicea came out as follows: The quarreling and contentions among the two arguing sides erupted into physical battles and persecutions came to the attention of Emperor Constantine, the first “Christian” emperor, who decided in the year 325 to put an end to the controversy by convening a council of Bishops. The small town of Nicea was chosen and it was Constantine’s aim to not only put an end to the quarreling but to establish a standardized creed which would bring about some unity of faith in the church. According to Norman P. Tanner in *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils* “the council of 318 ‘Bishops’ opened on June 19th in the presence of the emperor, but it is uncertain who presided over the council. The aim of Constantine to present a creed that would foster unity of the faith did not work out as planned. From the beginning of the session of the developers of the creed there was much division over the statements of the creed. The Emperor Constantine had ordered the council at Nicea to resolve the difference in theology on the Godhead. This council developed into a heated battle that ended in victory for the Trinitarians. The Trinitarian position was then strengthened by a new Nicene creed that was carefully worded to prohibit any belief that was not Trinitarian scripture and to strengthen the Trinitarian conceptions, no other views were allowed.” St. Augustine, a century later, developed this teaching into a doctrine of the trinity, in which all three persons were separate personalities, all co-equal and co-eternal. Thus, we have the addition to the Scripture that introduces the doctrine of “God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit.” It is sad to see a belief held so sacred today by the majority of Christians was actually given birth by quarreling “Bishops,” a questionable creed and a Roman Emperor who worshiped the Sun god and knew little about the teaching of Scripture. This was magic in the extreme.

Another example of religious magicians is their adding to and taking from the word of God. In a word, neglecting the truth revealed in the Word. This was Moses’ problem; he simply did not listen to the voice of God. God said “speak” to the rock. Moses added to that command and unknowingly resorted to magic and “struck” the rock twice. When Jesus faced the problem of the religious traditions of the Jewish elite his answer was quoting from the prophesy of Isaiah: “Rightly did Isaiah prophesy of you hypocrites, as it is written, ‘This people honors me with their lips but their heart is far from Me. But in vain do they worship me, teaching for doctrines the precepts of men.’ Neglecting the commandment of God you hold to the tradition of men...you set nicely aside set aside the commandment of God in order to keep your tradition” (Mark 7:6-8). The Apostle Paul shows how deadly these traditions can be when he warned the Colossians to “see that no man takes you captive through philosophy and empty deception, according to the tradition of men, according to the elementary principles of the world, rather than according to Christ (Col. 2:8).

John Stott wrote in *Authentic Christianity*: “It is when we are brave and humble enough to allow the Spirit of God through the word of God to radically call in question our most cherished opinions, that we are likely to find fresh unity through fresh understanding.” There are many points at which the problem between tradition and the truth expresses itself. There is one particular area that must have the attention of every honest believer. It has to do with the relationship between the Scriptures and the Church. The important question today is: What is the

church’s attitude toward the truth revealed in the Word of God? Modern man is no longer ready to listen to the voice of the one living and eternal God, but prefers rather the changing sands of human opinion, modernity and tradition for the foundation upon which to build the Christian life. The tragedy the church is facing today which is seldom seen or recognized, is that in hundreds of our pulpits there is a determined avoidance of the truths of the Scriptures. On Sunday after Sunday there are preachers that stand up before eternal beings, without a shred of evidence from truth, nothing relating to the Divine revelation in Scripture and nothing concerning the great transforming truths revealed in the word of God. One wonders what these men were taught in the Bible Colleges and Seminaries. The Apostle Paul stated: “Woe is me if I preach not the gospel” (I Cor. 9:16). He said this because “it is the power of God unto salvation” (Rom. 1:16) and is called “the truth of the gospel” (Gal. 2:5, 14). Jesus defines truth in these words as he prays to the Father: “Thy word is truth” (John 17:17). He said he was the truth (John 14:6), and if men believed in him, they would come to know the truth and the truth would make them free (John 8:32).

For the most part truth has been abandoned because the Word has so small a part to play in the church’s worship and in the minister’s preaching. Wilber M. Smith in his classic work on apologetics *Therefore Stand* which was published in 1945 has the following statement concerning preaching which is as relevant today as it was when he wrote it. “What I am now going to say will probably shock many people; it is so contrary to everything that is being expressed in this age of an anemic toleration of every conceivable kind of heresy, in this age when people are so glibly advocating a spineless universal religion, and fearful of offending anyone by our own religious convictions. Let me put it frankly in one brief sentence: what we need today is some downright, manly courageous intolerance in the church, of all those tendencies and humanistically-derived theories which, while they may encourage the pride of man, are wholly destructive of anything bearing resemblance to New Testament Christianity.”

When we consider the path the church has taken today in the massive building programs, the expenditure of resources, programs and religious activities, we wonder if all this is commensurate with what we really accomplished for God. The Satanic powers of magic, paganism, sensuality and idolatry were not peculiar only to the early church, but despite all the deceivable forms of evil power is used today to disguise them, they are alive and active today. God could easily dispose of all these evil powers aligned against the church, but He has given that task to man and through centuries man has not been capable of dealing with them. God had prophesied that it would be “the seed of the woman” that would bruise the head of Satan (Gen 3:15), and this prophesy was not fulfilled until the word became flesh and dwelt among us. It was Christ who defeated Satan (I John 3:8; Heb.2:14) and fulfilled the Genesis prophesy. In so doing he “in himself created one new man’ (Eph. 2:15), that is the church in which God “has committed to us the word of reconciliation. Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ as though God were entreating through us; we beg you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God” (II Cor. 5:19, 20). The church has taken the place of Christ in the world and instead of being here physically he is here in Spirit and the church is the physical representative of Christ. This is a great responsibility God has given the church. There is no room for the practice of magic, yet many pulpits today are filled with practicing magicians.