

eDevotions for Growing Christians

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2 Kings 17:30-33 ³⁰The men from Babylon made Succoth Benoth, the men from Cuthah made Nergal, and the men from Hamath made Ashima; ³¹the Avvites made Nibhaz and Tartak, and the Sepharvites burned their children in the fire as sacrifices to Adrammelech and Anammelech, the gods of Sepharvaim. ³²They worshiped the LORD, but they also appointed all sorts of their own people to officiate for them as priests in the shrines at the high places. ³³They worshiped the LORD, but they also served their own gods in accordance with the customs of the nations from which they had been brought.

2 Kings 17:39-41 ³⁹Rather, worship the LORD your God; it is he who will deliver you from the hand of all your enemies.” ⁴⁰They would not listen, however, but persisted in their former practices. ⁴¹Even while these people were worshiping the LORD, they were serving their idols. To this day their children and grandchildren continue to do as their fathers did.

The Subtle Sin of Syncretism

Introduction:

Syncretism is the fusion of different forms of practice or belief. Syncretism is not a sin when biblical truth and moral standards are not involved. The fact that Mexican culture and American culture are so intertwined that tacos are just as American as Mexican is syncretism, but it is not sinful syncretism. The fact that baseball is just as much Japanese as American and the martial arts are now as American as Asian is syncretism, but it is not sinful syncretism. However, when vestiges of pagan religions and unbiblical beliefs and practices are mixed in and fused with the gospel of Jesus Christ, it is not only syncretism—it is sinful syncretism.

Sinful syncretism is subtle. It doesn't happen overnight. Changes usually occur slowly and insidiously. Little by little the culture drifts away from God and His standards. This is exactly what happened in the 8th century B.C. when the northern kingdom of Israel was conquered by the Assyrians. The sinful syncretism that resulted is a lesson from history for growing Christians today.

Background Notes:

King Hoshea was the last of the 19 kings who ruled over the northern kingdom of Israel. After assassinating King Pekah in 732BC (2 Kings 15:28), Hosea reigned from the capital city of Samaria until 722BC, when the northern kingdom fell to the Assyrian Empire.

In 2 Kings 17:2 we read that King Hosea “did evil in the eyes of the Lord, but not like the kings of Israel who preceded him.” This does not necessarily mean

that Hoshea was more righteous than the other 19 kings of the northern kingdom. It may mean that he couldn't promote the calf worship (which was established 200 years earlier by Jeroboam I) because the calf idol had already been removed from Bethel by the Assyrians. This had been predicted by the prophet Hosea back in the days of prosperous King Jeroboam II. (See Hosea 10:5-6.)

Shalmaneser V of Assyria forced Hoshea to pay annual tribute or taxes (v3). After making a treaty with Egypt, however, Hoshea refused to pay the tribute to Assyria. This treaty failed to provide protection for Israel, and Shalmaneser invaded and besieged the heavily fortified capital for 3 years (725-722BC). The city of Samaria finally fell to Sargon II, Shalmaneser's successor. According to Assyrian records which were found by archaeologists, Sargon carried 27,290 Israeli captives into exile and resettled them in Assyria. They never returned from captivity.

Doctrinal Points:

1. **Rebellion against God leads to captivity.**

Verses 17-23 explain why God allowed the downfall and captivity of the northern kingdom of Israel. Instead of getting rid of all the pagan practices that had infiltrated the land given to them by the Lord, Israel adopted the idols, the pagan rituals, and the false gods behind them. They broke all the commandments of the Mosaic covenant. They “sold themselves” to the worship of the golden calves (v16). They became involved in astrology, sorcery and other occult practices. They even practiced the horrible pagan ritual of sacrificing their children “in the fire” to false pagan

gods (v17).

In His grace, God sent warnings to His people to forsake their evil ways. He allowed foreign powers to plunder and afflict them. He sent prophets to speak His message and plead with His people to repent, forsake their false gods, and turn back to Him. But they “persisted in all the sins... and did not turn away from them... so the people of Israel were taken from their homeland into exile in Assyria” (v22-23). Rebellion against God leads to captivity.

This truth is just as true today as it was in 722BC. People think that they can gain personal fulfillment by ignoring or “reinterpreting” God's moral standards in order to free themselves of any restraint. But ironically, the very opposite is true. Unwittingly, people who rebel against God become captives to their sin and to Satan.

Ephesians 2:1-3 makes an unbeliever's situation very clear: unbelievers are **dead in sin** and **captives of Satan**. “You were dead in your trespasses and sins, in which you used to live when you followed the ways of this world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient. All of us also lived among them at one time, gratifying the cravings of our sinful nature and following its desires and thoughts. Like the rest, we were by nature objects of wrath.”

However, even **Christians** who rebel against God become captives of the enemy in certain areas of their lives! Christians can gradually stray away from the Lord into sin in the areas of false doctrine, or undue emphasis on worldly security, or various types of immoral sexual practice. It's possible

that both unbelievers and rebellious believers are in view in 2 Timothy 2:25-26, where Paul urged Timothy to instruct these people, “in the hope that God will grant them repentance leading them to a knowledge of the truth, and that they will come to their senses and escape from the trap of the devil, who has taken them captive to do his will.” Rebellion against God leads to captivity.

2. Rebellion against God leads to syncretism.

Syncretism is the fusion of different forms of belief or practice. In 2 Kings 17:24-41 we read that the Assyrians not only took some of the people of Israel away to Assyria as captives, but they repopulated the land with peoples from other areas of the Assyrian Empire. Intermarriage took place, and this mixed race became known as the “Samaritans.” This was the origin of the Samaritan people, who are mentioned in the New Testament at the time of Christ and the apostles, and who are still in existence today in north central Israel.

The fusion that took place between the people of Israel and the foreign settlers was not just the physical fusion of intermarriage. A fusion of religion took place as well. The Jewish people who were left in Israel **should** have returned to the Lord and taught the Law of God to the new residents. Instead, they joined in the worship of the foreign gods that the new settlers brought to the land.

Because of Israel’s worship of false gods, the Lord allowed lions to come down from the hills and kill some of the new residents of Samaria. When the king of Assyria heard this, he decided to placate the “god of the land” by ordering that one of the priests who had been taken captive be sent back to teach the people what “the god of the land requires” (v27). Unfortunately this “priest” had most likely been a priest who had served at the golden calf shrine established by Jeroboam I at Bethel, and thus was neither willing nor able to teach anyone what the Law of God required.

As a result, religious syncretism took place. “They worshiped the Lord, but they also appointed all sorts of their

own people to officiate for them as priests in the shrines of the high places. They worshiped the Lord, but they also served their own gods” (v32-33). This was a direct violation of the First Commandment: “Thou shalt have no other gods before Me.” Rebellion against God leads to sinful syncretism—then and today.

In many countries around the world today we can find religious syncretism—a fusion of Christianity and vestiges of pagan religions. Why? Because of rebellion against the First Commandment. Other gods were not completely removed. For example, festivals for pagan gods or seasonal revelries were “christianized” to allow “traditional” or “ethnic” sinful celebrations to continue. This is the subtle sin of syncretism at work.

Practical Application:

Watch out for syncretism in your own life!

Syncretism has a “ripple-down” effect. What’s forbidden in one generation is tolerated by the culture in the next generation and becomes acceptable and part of the culture in the following generation. The negative aspects of syncretism become less noticeable, and a practice which is not acceptable to the Lord becomes more acceptable by Christians as time goes by.

Let’s take a familiar example. What does Christmas mean to you? Is it a profusion of gifts and Christmas trees and parties and decorated homes—**and also** a celebration of the birth of Jesus Christ? Are you practicing a form of syncretism?

Let’s ask ourselves what our words and actions signal to our children and grandchildren and our unsaved friends. Are we reflecting a message of truth, or a mixed and confusing message? Is the birth of Jesus Christ and the astounding truth of the Incarnation fused with the materialism of our culture? While gift-giving and holiday decor are not wrong in themselves, excess in these areas can drown out the message of “Immanuel,” that is “God with us.” We must be clear in our own minds so that we are able to pass on the unadulterated truth to the next generation, and give a clear witness to our friends and

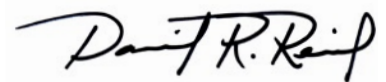
colleagues.

Another example of syncretism is the insidious fusion of Christianity with the “culture of success.” Satan has effectively used the “success syndrome” to undermine Christians in our country. It’s easy to rationalize our desire to be “successful.” Our culture says, “If you’re not prosperous and affluent, you’re a nobody, and who wants to listen to a nobody?” Or, “the more money you have, the more you can give to the Lord.” And a variety of TV preachers tell us that “God wants His children to be healthy and wealthy.”

However, 2 Timothy 6 teaches that “people who want to get rich fall into temptation and a trap and into many foolish and harmful desires that plunge men into ruin and destruction. For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil” (v9-10). And notice that these verses don’t apply to **unbelievers** only! Look at the end of verse 10: “Some people, eager for money, have wandered from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs.” In Matthew 6:24, Jesus very pointedly taught that mixing God and materialism is impossible. “You cannot serve both God and Money.” What “god” do I serve?

We need to ask ourselves—what message am I communicating to my neighbors? To my coworkers? To my family? Are the desires and goals for my life any different than an unbeliever? What are my aspirations and goals for my children? Is my emphasis on financial security and desire for personal possessions sending a mixed message of syncretism to the next generation? How will the ripple-down effect of syncretism in my life affect the next generation?

Spiritual syncretism is insidious and disastrous. Watch out for syncretism in your own life!



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From the Netherlands:

“Keep up the good work...”

From California:

“I feel as if I have struck gold. I have been saved for 5 years now, and have always desired to go to Bible college. With a full time job, family, and ministry, it would be hard to do. But today, my search hit gold! I have sat in my office/room and have started studying with you guys on the book of Hebrews, and I think the teachings are great. Thanks much”

From the Philippines:

“Thank you for giving us an opportunity to read more about your publications. Please send the following...”

Family News



*Ingrid (9) and Kirsten (7), with their dogs,
October 2005*



Callie (13) and Connor (10), in Maine, August 2005



*Hockey fans Jon (6) and Dave (just turned 3),
January 2006*

Dave & Margie

“So then, just as you received Christ as Lord, continue to live in Him, rooted and built up in Him, strengthened in the faith as you were taught, and overflowing with thankfulness.” - Colossians 2:6-7