

When the Center Cannot Hold

The wheel is a wonderful invention that involves several laws of physics. The bicycle wheel is especially inventive in the way it has reduced weight without compromising necessary strength.

[Project Bike Wheel image]

But how many spokes are really necessary? In other words, would it really matter if you removed one spoke? How about three or five or ten? How many spokes would have to be compromised before the wheel would collapse?

In times of war, it seems as though the spokes of the wheel of society are being compromised. The Irish poet, William Butler Yeats, wrote a poem describing what that kind of uncertainty felt like in the aftermath of World War I. He wrote:

Things fall apart; the center cannot hold;
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere
The ceremony of innocence is drowned;
The best lack all conviction, while the worst
Are full of passionate intensity. ¹

The Israelites were in the Promised Land less than 50 years before everything started to fall apart. The next period, the period of the Judges, lasted almost 350 years with the prophet Samuel being the last judge. Under the leadership of Moses and Joshua, though there were events of rebellion against God, like the Golden Calf incident and the ten Unfaithful Spies Fiasco, there still was basic order in the society. That order was assured by three institutions that remained healthy and operational. Those institutions were the home, the religious institution of the Tabernacle and the government (which in that period was first Moses then Joshua). So, the early Israelite culture was like a three-spoke wheel [show 3 spoke wheel image] those three spokes being Home, Tabernacle and Government. Then, what was the condition of these institutions in the next period, the period of the Judges? As we examine these Scriptures, we sadly see that there was...

I. Confusion in the Home, Tabernacle and Government.

In Judges 17, we're introduced to the home life of Micah. It would be almost laughable, if it weren't so serious. What we understand from the narrative is that Micah was living with his mother. Apparently he had several grown sons but there's no mention of his wife. Also, the family seems to be practicing some sort of weird, superstitious religion because, when he hears that his mother had spoken a curse against whoever had stolen her silver, Micah comes forward and admits that HE was the one who took it. (What does this tell you about the stability of this family?)

Then, his mother's response is just as weird as their superstitions. She says:
...**"The LORD bless you, my son!"** (Jdg. 17:2)

Now, is she blessing him because he confessed his sin? Because he didn't really say he was sorry. It seems like he was returning the silver because he was

afraid of the curse more than anything else. But then the next thing out of his mother's mouth is even more bizarre. She says:

I solemnly consecrate my silver to the LORD for my son to make a carved image and a cast idol. (Jdg. 17:3)

Dr. Wiersbe notes:

The son didn't honor his mother; instead, he stole from her and then lied about it... Thus he broke the fifth, eighth, ninth, and tenth commandments, and he broke the first and second commandments by having a shrine of false gods in his home. According to Prov. 30:8-9, when he stole the silver, he broke the third commandment and took the name of the Lord in vain.

Breaking seven of the Ten Commandments without leaving your own home is quite an achievement! ⁱⁱ

Which leads us to the condition of the Tabernacle. By "condition" I don't mean the physical condition, I mean the philosophical condition. What priority did the Tabernacle have in the people's lives? The answer is that it had a very low priority. First of all, this family is spending money on idols and doing it in the name of the LORD. Secondly, Micah puts one of his sons in the position of priest of his "homemade tabernacle." Verse 5:

Now this man Micah had a shrine, and he made an ephod (a priestly robe) and some idols and installed one of his sons as his priest.

Okay, so now we see that this family isn't just off the reservation, they're living in the Land of Oz! This has all the classic traits of a "false religion." False religion is described by the apostle Paul as "*having a form of godliness but denying its power.*" (II Tim. 3:5) In this man's mind, he undoubtedly considered himself a very religious man. He had all the symbols of "inclusive religion."

What about us? Seventy percent of Americans, according to Gallup, consider themselves moderately or very "religious." Seventy percent! But here's the problem: it doesn't matter two wits what you consider yourself. After you die, whom will you stand before to be judged – yourself? No, there's only one Person's opinion about your spirituality that matters. That's God's opinion. What does HE think of American religion?

The arrogance of this man Micah is breathtaking, isn't it? And he's not the only one living this way. The next verse describes the whole culture when it says:

In those days Israel had no king; everyone did as he saw fit. (Jdg. 17:6)

This phrase is repeated four times in the last five chapters of Judges. Could that phrase be applied to us today? I'm not talking about us politically, I'm talking about the 70% of Americans who say that they are religious. Even for those who say that they are Christians, the question is, "Which Christ are they following?"

How about you, which Christ are you following? For instance, what's your favorite name for Christ? He has many legitimate names like – Shepherd and Friend and Suffering Servant and Bread of Life and The Way, The Truth, The Life. But do you acknowledge today that He is also the King? Do you acknowledge Jesus Christ as more than your buddy, more than a mentor, more than a servant who wants to meet your needs? Do you acknowledge that Jesus Christ is the supreme authority in your life so that, no matter what He says you should do, you will do it?

There are whole denominations today who call themselves Christian, who have weekly worship services, who are appointing priests and teaching people that if they will become members of their “church” they will go to heaven; but these religious leaders and their organizations are as confused as this man Micah. Their religion has a “form of godliness” but zero power. Why? Because they are not submitting to the authority of Jesus Christ! They’re editing the Word of God to suit their own opinions. They don’t have a biblical definition of a family or a biblical definition of a priest. They’ve made up their own definitions. So, they’re not worshipping God; they’re worshipping themselves. There’s only one opinion regarding our spiritual condition that matters and that’s God’s opinion. So, what’s His opinion of your spiritual condition today? We’re going to come back to that question in a moment, but first, we must also see...

...the condition of the government in Micah’s day. In essence, there was no government in Micah’s day. Why? Because there was no king and everyone did as he saw fit. So, in chapter 18 we see the tribe of Dan do exactly what Micah did – they ignored God’s authority and pulled a Frank Sinatra: “They did it their way!”

God had assigned a district of land for the tribe of Dan to conquer and live in. But the people on that land were the Philistines who were mighty warriors. Remember Goliath? He was a Philistine! But instead of saying to God, “Help us Lord! We can’t do this ourselves! We need you to help us accomplish Your will!” - instead of that, they ran! They just moved north, found a group of peace-loving people, wiped them out and took their land. Was that God’s will? No! It was Danite will and it was sin. And because the tribe of Dan did not wipe out the Philistines as God had directed them to do, what happened? The outcome was that the Philistines were a plague to the nation of Israel for the rest of their history in the land.

And what happened in the territory they took over in the north? When the nation split in two, the northern kingdom had two centers of counterfeit worship. One was in Bethel and the other was in the city of... Dan. So, if Dan had faithfully followed God’s will, Israel would’ve been spared the attacks of the Philistines of old and the rockets from Gaza today. Instead, Dan’s reputation is one of rebellion and of leading people away from God. If they had obediently followed God’s instructions, the tribe of Dan would’ve been a “hero tribe.” Instead, they’re the goats of history.

So, God’s plan for Israel was to build the Promised Land Society on a three-spoke foundation: a Godly Home, a Biblical Religion and a Trustworthy Government. When all three of those spokes were broken, their society was thrown into chaos because ‘the center could not hold.’ This is called, “The Cycle of History.”

[Show Diagram: “The Cycle of History”]

This cycle continued for the whole period of the Judges – 350 years. When they entered the period of the Monarchy, it still operated in a sense depending on whether the king was a godly king or an ungodly king. So, what does this have to do with us? A lot, because individuals can get caught in this cycle as well. Instead...

II. If We Obey Christ, Our Center Will Always Hold.

For 350 years, Israel repeated this cycle. I know individual Christians who have done the same thing all their lives. They were real children of God but they were seemingly trapped in this cycle of disobedience. Do you know anyone like that? Have you ever been caught in that cycle? What’s the way out?

At our Annual Meeting I spoke about how our Elders have been studying a book by Dr. Henry Blackaby. The book is called *Experiencing God*. As we have been asking God to show us His will for our church, the teaching of Dr. Blackaby has been amazingly relevant and helpful. We are still studying this book. In the lesson this past week, Dr. Blackaby gave this teaching which answers the question, “How do I break the cycle of disobedience?” Listen to what he says:

God has always been at work in our world. He is now at work where you are. God always takes the initiative to come to you and reveal what He is doing or what He is about to do. When He does, this will be His invitation for you to join Him in His activity. (Now, listen to this...) Joining Him will require you to make major adjustments in your life so He will accomplish His will through you. When you know what God has said and what he is about to do and when you have adjusted your life to Him, there is yet one remaining response to God that is necessary. To experience God at work in and through you, you must obey Him. When you obey Him He will accomplish His work through you, and you will come to know Him by experience. ⁱⁱⁱ

This is the way to get off of the Cycle of History or the Cycle of Disobedience.

[Show double diagram that includes: “The Person Experiencing God”]

Instead of living selfishly and constantly looking for ways to fulfill MY desires, I have a new focus. I’m looking for what God is doing. THAT’S A WHOLE DIFFERENT ORIENTATION! What’s God doing in my community? What does He WANT to do? How could I join Him?

When I see what that is, when He opens my eyes, that’s my invitation to join Him. This is the exact process we used to develop the Grace & Mercy initiative. For over a year we prayerfully asked, “Where is God working in Connecticut?” We began to see He was working in the northwest corner, blessing our daughter churches, planting more churches and calling us to join Him. So, we are with our Multi-Site effort! His revelation was our invitation.

Next is a big step – making life adjustments. What does this mean? Dr. Blackaby explains it this way:

Many of us want God to speak to us and give us an assignment. However, we are not interested in making major adjustments in our lives. Biblically, that position is impossible. Every time God spoke to people in the Scripture about something He wanted to do through them, major adjustments were required. They had to adjust their lives to God.

- Noah could not continue life as usual and build an ark
- Abram could not stay in Ur and father a nation in Canaan
- Moses could not stay in the desert herding sheep and stand before Pharaoh
- David had to leave his sheep to become king
- Jonah had to leave home and overcome major prejudice to preach in Nineveh
- Peter, Andrew, James, and John had to leave their fishing businesses to follow Jesus

- Saul had to completely change directions in his life to preach the gospel to the Gentiles

Once the adjustments were made, God accomplished His purposes through those He called. ^{iv} [Show the double diagram again and leave up to end of sermon]

Once the adjustments are made, we're ready to obey because now our hearts are in the right place. In thinking about spiritual warfare, consider this: Jesus never debated with Satan. He just kept quoting what His Father had told Him to do. Our greatest weapon in spiritual warfare is obedience to God's Word. ^v

Finally, then, when we've recognized what God is doing, when we've made the necessary adjustments to our lives and priorities, when our hearts are in full trusting mode with Him, then He will use us to accomplish His work. That's the Cycle, that's the reality of Experiencing God. And when we're experiencing God, when we're in THAT cycle – we won't have any interest in spinning around in the cycle of disobedience.

So, which "cycle" are you moving through today? Let me go back to an earlier question because it's really not our own analysis of the situation that's important. Which cycle does God say you're moving in today?

Let me tell you about a person who asked that. Her name is Kristen. She grew up in a religious family. She says, "I tried to live a good life and do what everyone expected of me... However, as I grew older, I began to feel as though I was missing something. I was going through the motions of religion, but it was not making any difference in my life."

So, Kristen gave up religion and began looking elsewhere for happiness and satisfaction in life. Religion had left her empty. But despite throwing herself into activities and relationships she thought would make her happy, none of them did. Finally, someone challenged her to go directly to God, to start reading His Word for herself. She did. Somehow she found her way to the Ten Commandments. As she looked at them, she had to admit that she had broken almost all of them. She wrote:

"Though I might have thought I was good person, God clearly had a different view of me. The Bible also says in James 2:10, 'For whosoever shall keep the whole law, and yet offend in one point, he is guilty of all.' Other verses said that after I die, I will be judged by God. This scared me; I knew that I would be guilty in that day because I had broken God's law... Thankfully, [the Bible also said that] God did not want to leave me in my guilty, condemned state... The Bible also told me that God had provided a remedy for my sins. God had sent His Son Jesus [to die for me]."

Kristen discovered that religion isn't the way to know God. It's through a relationship with Jesus that we can know God. So, after growing up in the church, Kristen finally became a Christ Follower by reading God's Word. She now says, "Life has not become easy, and I still face difficult times... The difference is now that God helps me through those difficulties and has given me a peace and joy that no difficulty can take away."^{vi}

Are you trapped in the Cycle of Religion? There's a way out. Christ wants to set you free so that you can truly experience God. Why don't you do it today? Let's pray...

ⁱ William Butler Yeats, "The Second Coming," lines 3 – 8; from *Michael Robardes and the Dancer* (Chruchtown, Dundrum, Ireland: The Chuala Press, 1920)

ⁱⁱ Warren Wiersbe, *Be Available* (Colorado Springs: David C. Cook, 1994), p. 154, 155

ⁱⁱⁱ Dr. Henry Blackaby, *Experiencing God – Workbook* (Nashville: LifeWay Press, 2007), p 180

^{iv} *Ibid.*, p. 157

^v *Ibid.*, p. 195

^{vi} Lehigh Valley Baptist Church website, "Would I Trust Christ or Not? The Choice was Mine!" by Kristen Nadaskay