

An Altar of Dirt

By Elder David Pyles

An altar of earth thou shalt make unto me, and shalt sacrifice thereon thy burnt offerings, and thy peace offerings, thy sheep, and thine oxen: in all places where I record my name I will come unto thee, and I will bless thee. And if thou wilt make me an altar of stone, thou shalt not build it of hewn stone: for if thou lift up thy tool upon it, thou hast polluted it. Neither shalt thou go up by steps unto mine altar, that thy nakedness be not discovered thereon. – Ex 20:24-26

This text is contained in the same chapter presenting the Ten Commandments. It conveys a principle that is equally fundamental to divine service. The commandment was that an altar was to be small, simple and unadorned – a simple mound of dirt or common stones. Indeed, the craftsman’s tool could only serve to pollute it. This commandment might take Bible novices by surprise, but will be expected by those who are generally acquainted with the word of God.

Of course, the carnal instinct of man would expect exactly the opposite, or that God would be most pleased with a large, highly-adorned and very expensive altar. This will explain why men have built so many majestic cathedrals, mosques and temples in pursuit of their religions. But the true God is of a very different character than the multitudinous deities that have been fabricated by human imagination. *“For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, saith the Lord,”* (Isa 55:8).

If anyone thinks the majestic temple of Solomon represented an exception to this rule, they should consider that God Himself made point of the fact that He never commanded this building (2Sam 7:7); moreover, He warned Solomon that He would bless it only if the Jews heeded the things He had in fact commanded (1Ki 9:1-9). Then, as one ventures further into the Bible after the times this temple had been destroyed and the second temple was built, they will find that God had a stronger hand in construction of the second than the first, and He declared its glory would be even greater (Hag 2:1-9), yet the older Jews who had witnessed the first were so disappointed with the second that they wept at the sight of it (Ezra 3:12-13, Hag 2:3, Zech 4:10). Many years later, this temple was highly embellished by Herod, so that the disciples of Jesus were very impressed with its huge stones, but Jesus was not so affected. He disdainfully said of it that every stone would be cast down. Clearly, God is not much impressed with the

superficial criteria by which men judge religious buildings. The ultimate example of this was in the greatest of all temples – the one Jesus said He would raise in three days, referring to His own body – of which Isaiah said, *“For he shall grow up before him as a tender plant, and as a root out of a dry ground: he hath no form nor comeliness; and when we shall see him, there is no beauty that we should desire him,”* (Isa 53:2-3).

It should therefore come as no surprise that when Jesus set up His church in the New Testament, not a word was spoken about how to construct a church house. Indeed, there is no evidence that Christians then had any buildings whatsoever dedicated to the purpose of their religion.

Upon deeper reflection, all of this will make sense. The great God of the Universe could not possibly be impressed with anything man might build. Further, beautiful edifices and other humanly-devised supplements to divinely-ordained religion almost invariably serve as distractions from the things that God would actually have at the forefront of service to Him. While a respectable church building is a good thing to have, it is important to keep things in proper perspective. *“For the Lord seeth not as man seeth; for man looketh on the outward appearance, but the Lord looketh on the heart.”* (1Sam 16:7).

2/24/16