

Introduction

My wife and I watched the movie “The Conclave” a few weeks ago. The movie begins with a pope’s death and Rome’s College of Cardinals convening to elect a new pope. In this fictional account there are four leading candidates. What we found so interesting was how familiar the effort to elect a man seemed. It felt very political. While some reviewers question the realism of the fictional account, the entire process seemed quite *political* and *familiar*. There were machinations behind the scenes and posturing. There were efforts to derail other candidates.

At the very least the movie highlights the human tendency to seek to accomplish God’s purposes with means that are contrary to God’s purposes. You see men who were quite ambitious, men who were not at all ambitious, and men whose ambition was mixed. They desired to serve for the sake of service, but also a little for themselves. It was an accurate depiction of *humanity*.

We see this same syncretism in Micah. He pays attention to the form of religion while doing so entirely for himself and his own prosperity. With the silver he stole from his mother that was given back to him when he confessed, he sought to worship the Lord, but to do so by making idols and household gods to bow before, and by making one of his sons into his own personal priest. Our text picks up as we learn more of Micah’s ambition. It seems Micah’s worship of the Lord was a means to an end, rather than an end in itself. We’re in verse 7 of Judges 17.

Jdgs 17:7 Now there was a young man of Bethlehem in Judah, of the family of Judah, who was a Levite, and he sojourned there. ⁸ And the man departed from the town of Bethlehem in Judah to sojourn where he could find a place. And as he journeyed, he came to the hill country of Ephraim to the house of Micah. ⁹ And Micah said to him, “Where do you come from?” And he said to him, “I am a Levite of Bethlehem in Judah, and I am going to sojourn where I may find a place.” ¹⁰ And Micah said to him, “Stay with me, and be to me a father and a priest, and I will give you ten pieces of silver a year and a suit of clothes and your living.” And the Levite went in. ¹¹ And the Levite was content to dwell with the man, and the young man became to him like one of his sons. ¹² And Micah ordained the Levite, and the young man became his priest, and was in the house of Micah. ¹³ Then Micah said, “Now I know that the LORD will prosper me, because I have a Levite as priest.”

Judges 17:7–13

A Young Levite

In verse 7 we read about a “young man”, who was from Bethlehem in Judah, of the family of Judah, and was a Levite. There are several significant points being made here. First, he’s from the tribe of Levi. Jacob had twelve sons. These twelve sons would grow and multiply in number and would make up the Twelve Tribes of Israel.

One of these twelve sons was Levi. Levi himself had three sons: Kohath, Gershon, and Merari. The tribe of Levi was set apart to serve the Lord and the entire nation. From the Levites would come the priests. Specifically, the priests would come from the Kohathites. Moses himself was a Kohathite from the tribe of Levi, but God narrowed it more than this: the priests would descend from Aaron, his brother. Only the Kohathites who descended from Aaron would serve as priests to the Lord.

The other Levites would serve the Lord as well, as assistants to the priests in their priestly functions, but also would serve the nation. There were two primary ways the Levites would serve the Israelites. They would function as teachers of the Torah, instructing the people of Israel about the Lord, and they would function as judges, settling disputes among the people.

Because the Levites were set apart for these things, they did not receive a territory of their own. Instead, they received 48 cities throughout the land of Israel, with pasturelands outside those cities. These lands would not be enough to sustain them, especially because they had plenty of other work to do, so the Lord provided for them through the tithe. All Israel would pay a tithe to the Levites, to provide for them in their work among the people.

The author indicates this particular Levite was a young man. The emphasis on “young” indicates he’s probably less than 30. In Numbers 4 Moses instructed the Levites they could serve the tabernacle between the ages of 30 and 50. That this man is “young” indicates he is not yet of the age he can serve in the worship of the Lord at the tabernacle.

While he is a Levite, the author says he was from Bethlehem and Judah. Bethlehem was not one of the 48 Levitical cities, however. Why is this young man living in Bethlehem? The author actually says he *sojourned* in Bethlehem. He didn’t have roots there. He wasn’t really living there. He was *staying* there.

Then one day he decided to go elsewhere. He leaves Judah and ends up in Ephraim. The text says he was trying to “find a place”. He was looking for some place to go, and looking for something to do. Here we see an incredible breakdown in the society God was creating. The young man *had* plenty to do. He was born with a calling to serve God and his nation. Why is he hanging out in Bethlehem? Why does he leave there in search of adventure? Why is he looking to earn a living doing who knows what, when the people as a whole are supposed to provide for him while he does the work God has already given him to do?

Remember verse 6. Everyone was doing what was right in his own eyes. This young Levite thought it was right to drift, to wander around aimlessly. Rather than respond to God’s call to serve his people as a Levite, he’s just wandering. He was wandering when he ended up in Bethlehem, and he’s wandering again. Why doesn’t his family call him to task for this? His family were all Levites. They knew what he should be doing. Instead of his calling, he’s doing what is right in his own eyes.

An Opportunity

As we saw last week, in Ephraim there was a man named Micah. The Israelites were, at the time, still quite wealthy from the exodus from Egypt. When they left Egypt they “plundered” Egypt. They entered the land of Canaan immensely wealthy. Still, Micah stole from his mother. After she uttered a curse on the thief, he confessed, hoping she would reverse the curse. She tried to, by pronouncing a blessing from the Lord.

She then dedicated the silver to the Lord by giving it to a silversmith who made a carved image and a metal image for her. Micah placed them in his house, ordained one of his sons—an Ephraimite!—to be his personal priest, made a linen ephod for him, and made other household gods to go into his personal shrine. Micah and his mother are truly doing what is right in their own eyes.

The young Levite finds himself wandering by Micah’s home. Micah engages with him and asks where he’s from. He says he’s a Levite from Bethlehem in Judah. As any Israelite should know, Bethlehem is not a Levitical city. It is not one of the 48 cities given to the tribe of Levi. This should have been a red flag to Micah. Something is wrong if a Levite is living in a non-Levitical city. He further says he’s looking for *a place to stay*.

There’s no commitment in this declaration. He’s looking for something to do, anywhere he finds it. He’s looking for a place in this world, though a place has already been given him by the Lord. He’s looking for something to do in this world, though a job has already been given him by the Lord. He is doing what is right in his own eyes, however.

Upon learning this, Micah decides to give him an opportunity. Remember he already has a priest. He ordained one of his sons to be his personal priest. He says to the Levite, “Stay with me, and be to me a father and a priest and I will give you ten pieces of silver a year and a suit of clothes and your living”—essentially, room and board. What an offer! He would be given a full-time salary, plus expenses, as well as the appropriate clothing to wear. Further, he would be a father and a priest to Micah and his household.

Surely he showed Micah his shrine, with the carved image and the metal image, along with the linen ephod and the household gods. This is where Micah would be working, after all. Micah, for his part, knew enough of the law to know a Levite as priest was better than an Ephraimite, since the law limited the priesthood to the Levites. Surely the young Levite knew even more of the law! Surely he knew what his role was in this situation! Surely he knew what was written in Deuteronomy 13!

There Moses instructed all Israel that if a family member or a close friend were to entice them to worship other gods, they were to bring the accusation against them and the person was to be stoned. God hates idolatry. He gave the land of Canaan to the Israelites so they would root out idolatry from the land. When Micah presents an opportunity to this young Levite to participate in Micah’s idolatry and false worship, surely Micah knew what he was supposed to do! The problem is the young Levite also did what was right in his own eyes, and that ten pieces of silver a year plus that really nice linen ephod—which he knows he would never otherwise wear, not being descended from Aaron and all—plus the expense account, and serving a wealthy household, well, that sounds really, really right in his eyes.

A Rejection

In verse 12 the text simply says, “And Micah ordained the Levite”. The first priests were ordained by Moses: Aaron and his sons, Nadab, Abihu, Eleazar, and Ithamar. Their sons would inherit the priesthood, and they would be ordained by priests who came before them. Moses laid out the ritual for ordaining new priests and the ritual required ordained priests—not an Ephraimite.

Micah, an Ephraimite, did what was right in his own eyes and he, not the priests, ordained this young Levite who was too young to be a priest and as we will discover in chapter 18, was not descended from Aaron and was not, therefore, qualified to be a priest. This young Levite also did what was right in his own eyes and accepted this false ordination.

In a further twist, the young man Micah invited to become like a father to him and a priest became like one of his sons, indicating just how young he was. That he *could* be a father figure was absurd. That he could be a *priest* was just blatantly false. Both Micah and the Levite did what was right *in their own eyes*.

Again, Micah knew enough that a *Levite* was more legitimately a priest than an *Ephraimite*. We see this in his pronouncement in verse 13:

Jdgs 17:13 Then Micah said, “Now I know that the LORD will prosper me,
because I have a Levite as priest.”
Judges 17:13

Notice Micah’s religion here: the Lord *will* prosper him because he has a Levite as a priest. The Lord did, in fact, promise to prosper his people. As we’ve seen, God’s default disposition is to bless. Sin interrupts God’s blessing. The way to receive God’s blessing is not by offering God something, as if he lacked anything. The way for Israel to receive God’s blessing is to continue trusting him. To trust him is to obey him.

Micah isn’t interested in the relationship YHWH God of Israel offered them. The young Levite isn’t interested in the relationship YHWH God of Israel offered them. Both rejected the blessing of knowing YHWH and being known by YHWH in favor of a financial arrangement that suited them. Micah would prosper for having a Levite as an illegitimate priest, and the Levite would prosper for having a secure income, nice clothes, and an expense account. Given how early this is in Israel’s history, we see Israel’s apostasy is everywhere.

Not even those set apart by God to serve him and the nation in their corporate worship of him were spared from this apostasy. Surely there were some who remained faithful, yet it is clear just how far Israel has fallen, and how quickly. Knowing the Lord and being known by him was no longer enough for them. They wanted more. Even though he offered them incredible blessings, they wanted more. Even though the covenant promised material prosperity, they wanted more.

What Israel failed to see is that by wanting more than the Lord, they wanted nothing, for nothing is more than the Lord. By rejecting him they were rejecting life itself. By pursuing material prosperity over true worship, they pursued death, for death is separation from God.

The Fall

In Micah's offer to the young Levite we see the enormity of his theft. He offered to pay the Levite ten pieces of silver a year, plus clothing and expenses. He stole 1,100 pieces of silver—enough to pay this Levite for more than a century! Might this be where the remaining 900 pieces of silver were to be used? His mother dedicated all 1,100 pieces to the Lord and then gave 200 pieces to the silversmith to make into a carved image and a metal image. Micah then made other household gods and the linen ephod that no doubt is worn by this Levite now.

It seems they both are participating in this false worship, indicating just how far Israel has fallen, and how quickly. We were told how quickly they fell in the opening pages of the book.

Jdgs 2:6 When Joshua dismissed the people, the people of Israel went each to his inheritance to take possession of the land. ⁷ And the people served the LORD all the days of Joshua, and all the days of the elders who outlived Joshua, who had seen all the great work that the LORD had done for Israel. ⁸ And Joshua the son of Nun, the servant of the LORD, died at the age of 110 years. ⁹ And they buried him within the boundaries of his inheritance in Timnath-heres, in the hill country of Ephraim, north of the mountain of Gaash. ¹⁰ And all that generation also were gathered to their fathers. And there arose another generation after them who did not know the LORD or the work that he had done for Israel.

Judges 2:6–10

The generation who were adults at the time of the exodus from Egypt all died in the wilderness, except for Joshua and Caleb. For their faithfulness they were allowed to enter the land. The generation that entered the land stayed faithful during the lifetime of Joshua and the elders who outlived him. Joshua entered the land when he was 70–80 years old, having wandered with Israel those 40 years in the wilderness. The elders who outlived him lasted another 20 or 30 years. Then a new generation—*their children*—did not know the Lord. What is the immediate result of this new generation who did not know the Lord?

Jdgs 2:11 And the people of Israel did what was evil in the sight of the LORD and served the Baals. ¹² And they abandoned the LORD, the God of their fathers, who had brought them out of the land of Egypt. They went after other gods, from among the gods of the peoples who were around them, and bowed down to them. And they provoked the LORD to anger.

Judges 2:11–12

The events in our text take place in this first generation who did not know the Lord. These are the *grandchildren* of those who experienced the exodus firsthand. They were the children of those who saw the miracles involved in taking the land. They heard the stories of the plagues. They heard the stories of the Red Sea parting. They heard the stories of the manna in the wilderness. Their parents told them stories of the walls of Jericho just falling down when Israel faithfully marched in circles. They heard the stories of God's faithfulness

in battle, over and over again. In spite of their upbringing, of hearing of God's never-ending faithfulness, they turned their backs on him and worshiped other gods.

Even their priesthood and their Levites rebelled against God. Their task in the land was to cleanse the land of its idolatry, to *Israelize* the land and its people. Instead, they themselves were *Canaanized*, becoming just like the people of the land.

It is staggering to see just how quickly Israel fell.

False Religion

When God gave the priesthood to Israel, he was providing a way for him to dwell among his people. The exodus from Egypt was about the tabernacle. That is, the purpose of God bringing them out from Egypt and into the land of Canaan was to provide a place for God to dwell among his people. It was always about the tabernacle, the one place on earth that would be set apart—made *holy*—for God's presence. The rules and regulations about who can enter the tabernacle and the walls around the tabernacle were for the protection of Israel. They could be close to God—but not *too* close.

The priesthood was both a protection for Israel and a blessing to Israel. They could know the Lord and worship him. The priest would represent the people before the Lord and the people of Israel would be blessed by the Lord's presence among them. In Exodus 33 the people worshiped the golden calf and God was angry. He told Moses he would give Israel the land of Canaan, and would offer them all the blessings of the covenant he had just made with them—except for one particular blessing: God would not go with them.

Israel heard this “disastrous word” and repented. Moses pleaded with the Lord about this and said that the only thing that makes Israel God's people is God's presence among them. What made them a distinct people is the *tabernacle*, the place where God's presence was manifest on earth. In response to Moses' intercession for the people God relented and said he would go with them and would dwell among them.

This is what the people of Israel were rejecting when they worshiped other gods. When they bowed down to the Baals and the Ashtoroth, they were rejecting YHWH God of Israel, the very one who was dwelling among them in the tabernacle. When they worshiped Dagon and Molech, they were rejecting YHWH God of Israel. But just as much, when they corrupted the worship of YHWH God of Israel, they were rejecting YHWH God of Israel. They were worshiping a god of their own design, a god who could be controlled and manipulated: just give 'em what he wants and he will give you everything you *really* want, and that ain't him.

Micah seems to have some regard, some measure of concern about right worship. He ordains one of his sons, but recognizes the Levites were set apart to be priests. When the opportunity to have a Levite as priest comes along, he gladly takes it, casting aside his son in favor of another. Though God never indicated a particular salary for the priests, it was good and right for Israel to support the Levites through their tithes and offerings. Micah twists this and *hires* a Levite for a job, rather than the work given him by God.

God had given Israel a system of sacrifices and offerings to be used in worshiping him. Micah embraced this but distorted it by hiring his own personal priest and “ordaining” this false priest himself. Micah was focused entirely on trying to get the details right, the rituals,

the *outward form* of worship right, but he could only produce false worship. Even if he got every detail right, God would not have been pleased.

After Solomon's death the nation split into two, with Judah to the south and Israel to the north. Jeroboam led the northern tribes and feared the people would return to the king of Judah since the temple was in Judah. He set up two golden calves, one at Bethel and one at Dan—the new Dan that we'll see in chapter 18.

Recent excavations at Tel Dan have revealed the northern kingdom's worship site. I had a professor in seminary who is an archaeologist who often works at Tel Dan. His work has revealed how precisely this worship site outside of Jerusalem closely mirrored that of the temple. The details were incredibly precise, including the layout of the sacred space used for sacrifice. The priests at Dan walked up to the altar in the same direction. It was built on a foundation and was quite large.

The location where the ashes were deposited after being removed from the altar exactly mirrored the position of the temple in Jerusalem. Where the animal bones were placed after slaughter mirrored the precise location relative to the altar. The barriers erected to prevent non-priests from coming too close mirrored that of the temple in Jerusalem. It's like they had a copy of the blueprints! Archaeologists have even discovered an altar kit—bronze bowls and shovels and even an iron fork—in the remains of a room connected to this worship site, and they're just like those used in Jerusalem.

To say this another way, the dimensions, the path of the priests during their ritual service, the location of ash and bone deposits, everything seems to have been an exact replica of the temple in Jerusalem. The *form* of worship was precise. It was exactly what had been prescribed for God's temple. And yet, here's what God had to say to the northern kingdom of Israel through the prophet Amos.

Am 5:21 “I hate, I despise your feasts, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies. ²² Even though you offer me your burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them; and the peace offerings of your fattened animals, I will not look upon them. ²³ Take away from me the noise of your songs; to the melody of your harps I will not listen. ²⁴ But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.

Amos 5:21–24

Like the southern kingdom of Judah, they performed the rituals correctly. They offered burnt offerings and grain offerings as required by Moses. They offered fattened animals on the altar as required by Moses. They had professional singers singing praise to the Lord. What does the Lord say about this exact and precise attention to detail? “You made it all up; you were really worshiping yourselves.” He *hates* their proper form. He *despises* their attention to ritual details. He *refuses to accept* their concern for getting the details right. He will not *listen* to their songs, no matter how skillfully they are played and sung.

What does God desire more than the outward form of worship? The inner heart of worship. Instead of feasts and burnt offerings God wants justice to roll down like waters. God wants righteousness flowing out of his people's hearts. God wants a worship that comes from a transformed heart, from love for the Lord. Anything else, any “worship” that focuses primarily on the form and does not come from a heart of faith is *false worship*, and God *despises* false worship.

True Religion

When we come to the New Testament, to the new covenant God promised his people, a covenant that centers on the presence and activity of the Holy Spirit in the lives of his people, we come to a very different experience. Rather than strict rules and rituals governing the form of worship, the Spirit of God is written on the hearts of his people, transforming them from the inside out. Rather than a prescribed ritual or a prescribed liturgy, worship in the new covenant takes on a very different form—the very form God was after *the entire time*.

Rom 12:1 I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. ² Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.

Romans 12:1–2

Notice the connection between spiritual worship that is holy and acceptable to God and the inner transformation brought about by the Spirit of God. Micah and the priesthood and those false priests at Dan could all make some level of claim to doing it *right*, to having the right form of worship. God despises their offerings, however, because as Isaiah the prophet said, they as a people honor the Lord with their lips, but their hearts are far from him.

In John 4 we see Jesus enter into a debate about the right form of worship, only instead of choosing sides—while still acknowledging a “right” side—he clarifies why he had come. The woman at the well was a Samaritan. Her ancestors were from the northern kingdom of Israel who had been taken into exile and who then intermarried with other people. When they returned to the land and when the people of Judah returned from exile, they rejected such folk as not being “pure” enough so they were excluded from temple worship. The Samaritans then excluded themselves and built a temple on Mount Gerizim, and this temple lasted for a few hundred years. Even today Samaritans will sacrifice lambs on Mount Gerizim for Passover!

The debate in the first century came down to the form of worship. Where, specifically, should sacrifices be made? Here’s that interaction.

Jn 4:19 The woman said to him, “Sir, I perceive that you are a prophet. ²⁰ Our fathers worshiped on this mountain, but you say that in Jerusalem is the place where people ought to worship.” ²¹ Jesus said to her, “Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem will you worship the Father. ²² You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews. ²³ But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father is seeking such people to worship him. ²⁴ God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth.”

John 4:19–24

Jesus acknowledges the Jews had the truth. God determined the temple would be in Jerusalem, not on Gerizim. At the very least, they had the right *form* of worship. Jesus

knew, however, true worship was never about the form. The form prescribed by Moses was to protect the worshiper, lest the worshiper get too close to holiness. The time was coming when the worshiper would be *made holy*, however, and so such restrictions would no longer be necessary.

This is why the author of Hebrews declares Jesus is greater than Moses. While Moses and the Torah he gave *enabled* worship, the worshiper had to remain at a distance. Jesus, after offering himself as the final sacrifice, calls his people to enter in behind the veil, referring to the veil that separated the Most Holy Place in the temple. Christ sat down because he completed his priestly work. Therefore the work of keeping the people close but not too close had been fulfilled, and God's people enter in fully and completely. The *form* of worship was fulfilled by the *Person* who is worshiped.

Application

Church, God is calling us to worship him in spirit and in truth. This means our worship is not our outward form. We have some flexibility with how we do things. Some use vestments and incense and such. Some do not. This is not what matters. What matters is whether justice and righteousness flow out of us. What matters is whether we fulfill the law of Moses and as Paul declares, love is the fulfillment of the law. We fulfill the law, including the rituals prescribed by it, when we worship God in spirit and in truth.

This means we must be a people who pursue justice and righteousness. This means we must turn away from idolatry, from the things that promise us fulfillment and an identity that satisfies. The problem is those promises are lies. The only true fulfillment comes from the identity that is ours in Christ. The only true worship that flows from a heart filled with justice and righteousness is that worship that is a response to the True Priest who has gone into the Most Holy Place and made a way for us to enter in.

Jesus came to make *us* holy. This is why Paul could tell the little church in the city of Corinth that they were *the temple of the Holy Spirit*. They were the place on earth where God himself resides. They were that temple because they had been made holy, made into a dwelling fit for God himself.

We can observe Lent. We can celebrate Easter. This Friday we have a Tenebrae service, a worship service with our brothers and sisters from Fourth Church that is utterly unlike our regular worship services. We can do this because it isn't the form that matters. What matters is the True Priest who welcomes us into the very presence of God.

True worship is a life centered around the True Priest, the one who grants us entrance into the presence of God. A life centered around Jesus is not a life that gives him Sunday mornings but keeps the rest to self. A life centered around Jesus is a life that lives for him and his glory, a life that gladly surrenders to him in every decision, every desire, every action. A life centered around Jesus is a life that recognizes that worship is an end in itself, for God is worthy.

The truth is we can say something similar to what Micah said. While he thought the Lord would prosper him because he had a priest, we know the Lord does, in fact, prosper us because we have a priest—a True Priest. We have the Lord Jesus who gives us all things. No, this doesn't mean we have a life free of pain. This doesn't mean you and I will all be

rich in this life. It means we have the greatest gift the Lord can give, for he comes to dwell with us.

He doesn't prosper us because we have the right "form" or because we do the right thing. He doesn't prosper us because of our righteousness or because we have anything offer him. He gives us all things in Christ because he is worthy of worship. His gift of himself shows us he is worthy of a life built around him.