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THE BIG LIE

We tend to like shades of meaning. Take automobiles as an example. Once there was the automobile. Then came the distinction of the coupe. Somewhere along the way the station wagon came along, which commercials are now calling the first SUV. At one time there were the standard, the compact, and the subcompact. The van became divided into the full-sized and minivan. (Does the minivan qualify to park in a compact only parking space?)

We make similar grade differences with lies. There is the little white lie. Has anybody ever heard of a little black lie or a big white lie? There is the run of the mill lie. And there is the whopper, often called a fish story. While God doesn't recognize these differences, there is one lie we use in the church that could be called The Big Lie.

Before identifying what that lie is, let us look at what the scriptures say about lying. Most people start with the Ten Commandments, which prohibit judicial lying, commonly called perjury. "Thou shalt not bear false witness against thy neighbor." (Ex 20:16) While this is a form of lying, the commandment only prohibits a limited circumstance. That is not to say that God allows lying outside of court.

These six things doth the LORD hate: yea, seven are an abomination unto him: A proud look, a lying tongue, and hands that shed innocent blood, An heart that deviseth wicked imaginations, feet that be swift in running to mischief, A false witness that speaketh lies, and he that soweth discord among brethren. (Prov 6:16-19)

Paul made a prohibition against lying. His was not in the context of court; rather it was about lying to other Christians. "Wherefore putting away lying, speak every man truth with his neighbour: for we are members one of another." (Eph 4:25)

Some accuse the Qur'an from condoning a Muslim lying to an infidel. Others make the same claim about the Jews. It seems that even among non-Christians the idea of lying to a brother is unacceptable. And yet, that is where the Big Lie comes in.

What is the Big Lie? It takes several forms, but the most common is, "I'm fine." When some people

respond to the question of how they are doing with "I'm fine," they are telling the whole truth. With many Christians, though, "I'm fine" is the Big Lie. They may not be feeling well. They may be depressed. They may be struggling with all sorts of sins. Their world may be falling apart around them. But they smile and say, "I'm fine."

There may be several reasons for this. Some are ashamed. Particularly if "not fine" carries a stigma, we don't want to admit to it. This may include problems with alcohol or drugs, or pornography. They may be dealing with feelings for another person's spouse, or someone who is not their own spouse. Shame keeps them from admitting to these problems, which simply perpetuates the problem.

Others think, "I can handle this on my own." In America especially, we live in a society where self-reliance is prized. To admit that we have a problem or a sin that we cannot deal with ourselves makes us unamerican, and to some people that makes them also unchristian.

Still others may, rightly or wrongly, feel that they will be judged by others if they admit to some struggle. If it is the latter, then there may be a problem that the elders need to rectify.

"Bear ye one another's burdens, and so fulfil the law of Christ." (Gal 6:2) Admitting the truth to each other allows us all to fulfil the law of Christ. What law is that? "A new commandment I give unto you, That ye love one another." (Jn 13:34) Bearing another's burden is a way of saying, "I love you." Perpetuating the Big Lie is a way of denying each other the opportunity to love.

CONTENTS

The Big Lie	1
Baal, Asherah, Molech	2
It's Your Birthday	4

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BAAL, ASHERAH, MOLECH

When God told the Jewish people “you shall have no other gods before me,” it is clear that He was aware that there were other gods. Not only that, the Jewish people would have a propensity to worship the gods of the people where they lived.

For mine Angel shall go before thee, and bring thee in unto the Amorites, and the Hittites, and the Perizzites, and the Canaanites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites: and I will cut them off. Thou shalt not bow down to their gods, nor serve them, nor do after their works: but thou shalt utterly overthrow them, and quite break down their images. (Ex 23:23-24)

Nor was God disappointed in his expectations. From the Exodus until the Babylonian captivity, the Jewish people have a long history of turning to other gods, sometimes while even continuing to worship the God of the covenant. Sometimes we read about these gods with little understanding of what they represented. Sometimes

Baal remained silent, and Gideon went on to judge Israel forty years.

we might even be prone to worship what they represented, even if we don't worship the idols themselves.

Baal

Of all the Canaanite gods, it seems the Israelites had the biggest problem with Ba'al (or Baal). In either the singular or plural forms, Baal is mentioned 80 times in the Old Testament, from the second chapter of Judges until the Babylonian captivity. A look at the god himself might, at least in part, explain their fascination.

The word itself simply means lord. As such it may be associated with any number of deities, such as the Baalberith (Jdg 8:33, 9:4) or the lord of Hammon (wealth) (SOS 8:11). The title appears in the name Beelzebub (Matt 12:24 et al), lord of the flies. It also appears in personal names, perhaps indicating they were followers of Baal, such as Belshazzar (Dan 5) or Jezebel (Isabella) the wife of Ahab (1 Kings 18).

To the Canaanites, Baal was associated with storms and fertility. While to some that may seem a strange combination, one must remember the geography of Canaan. Unlike Egypt, where agriculture was dependent on the annual flood of the Nile river, Canaanite agriculture, and later Israelite agriculture, was dependent on the “early and late rains.” (Joel 2:23; Jas 5:7) A god who was associated with rain would also be associated

with fertility. If the storms did not come in their seasons, there would be famine. He was also associated with the sun, and later incorporated into the Greek god Zeus.

Baal was often portrayed as a bull or a ram. As such, the Israelites made idols to Baal. The first such instance came shortly after the giving of the Law of Moses. When Moses spent forty days on Sinai, the people begged Aaron to make them gods. He took their earrings and made a golden calf. (Ex 32) Although the passage does not mention Baal, that god had gained prominence both in Egypt and Phoenicia, and may have been “your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt” as referenced by Aaron. Later, Jeroboam set up golden cattle as the gods of the northern tribes of Israel, probably a further example of Baal worship.

While Baal is mentioned frequently throughout the Old Testament, three incidents stand out. The first involved Gideon. God told him to destroy his father's altar to Baal, which he did at night, for fear of the people of the town. When what he did was discovered, the townsfolk demanded that Gideon be killed. Gideon's father replied, “If he is a god, let him contend for himself, because his altar has been broken down.” (Jdg 6:31) Because of this saying, Gideon thereafter was called by the name Jerubbaal, or “let Baal contend.” Needless to say, Baal remained silent and Gideon lived on to fight a famous battle against the Midianites and to judge Israel for forty years.

The most famous incident involving the priests of Baal can be found in 1 Kings 18. Elijah proposed a contest between himself (and God) and the 450 prophets of Baal and 400 prophets of Asherah employed by Jezebel. The terms of the contest were that each side would build an altar and call on their god to bring down fire to burn the sacrifice on the altar. In spite of everything the prophets of Baal could do (shouting, cutting themselves, enduring the sarcasm of Elijah), Baal remained silent. Elijah built his altar, had the wood and stones well-soaked with water, and prepared his sacrifice. Almost immediately on being called, God burnt the sacrifice, the wood, and even the altar. He then had the 450 prophets of Baal executed.

What many miss about this incident is what happened before and after. Israel was in the throes of a long drought. After the prophets of Baal were killed and his altar destroyed, a huge rainstorm came, effectively ending the drought. The whole point of the contest was that the God of Heaven was more powerful than the rain god of the Phoenicians.

The third incident came a number of years later, as recorded in 2 Kings 10. Jehu had assassinated his master, King Jehu, who was a son of Ahab. Then he had Jezebel killed. Then he said, “Ahab served Baal a little,

but Jehu will serve him much.” (2 Kings 10:18) This was a ruse. He declared a worship at which all the prophets, priests, and worshipers of Baal were to attend. They all assembled in the temple to Baal. If the worship of Baal was so prominent, one wonders that they could all be gathered together, except that the temple complex to Baal in Ugarit was said to cover 10,000 acres, or 15.6 square miles. When everyone was gathered, he ordered the people to make sure that there were only Baal-worshippers present. Jehu stationed eight armed men outside. After the sacrifice was made, he ordered the soldiers to enter the temple and kill everyone in it. He then destroyed the altar and the building, and made it into a sewer.

While Baal is associated with fertility, his mother is more frequently mentioned in that respect in the Bible. She went by the names Asherah, Astarte, or Ishtar.

Asherah

There is debate among scholars whether the word Asherah refers to a goddess or just a cult object. It appears that she was the mother goddess to the Canaanites. Over time, however, her significance was absorbed by Baal, but the altars to Baal were often accompanied by an object known as an Asherah.

Sometimes the Bible refers to the goddess or an image as being carved to represent the goddess. As seen earlier, Jezebel employed 400 prophets of Asherah. Manasseh went so far as to make a golden image of the images by the altars (2 Kings 21:7) and placed it in the Temple in Jerusalem. Asa deposed his mother from the title of Queen Mother because she made an image to Asherah (2 Chron 15:16). Because the word may also be translated grove, it is possible that she just set up an idol in a grove of trees.

The translators of the King James Version used the word grove, while most modern versions transliterate it as if it is a name. Several translations use the phrase “Asherah poles,” while others simply refer to asherim (in the plural).

Because Asherah was a major fertility goddess, later incorporated into the Baal cult, the usual representations were groves of trees. Some or all of these trees may have been carved into images of the goddess. In the case of the groves, a tree carved in the image of the goddess may have served as a living idol. Sometimes a tree may have been cut down and carved and then erected as a pole. “You must never set up a wooden Asherah pole beside the altar you build for the LORD your God.” (Deut 16:21) (The King James Version follows the more accurate translation forbidding the planting of trees near the altar.)

Frequent mention, for example in 1 Kings 14:23 and 2 Kings 17:10, of the Asherim were associated with “every high place... and green tree.” This may indicate the extent of God’s view of the sin. Not only were carved images involved, but he had ordered that they were to worship in one location. “But in the place which the

LORD shall choose in one of thy tribes, there thou shalt offer thy burnt offerings, and there thou shalt do all that I command thee.” (Deut 12:14) By setting up places of worship on all the high hills, and practicing the prostitution associated with the goddess there, the people were appropriating to themselves the right of determining where they worshipped. They were telling God that they knew more about worship than He did.

Molech

Of all the gods worshipped by the Israelites, Moloch/Molech may have been the cruelest. The name is a corruption of the Hebrew word for king. Baal may have been lord, but Molech was king of the gods.

A tree carved in the image of Asherah may have served as a living idol.

Solomon erected a high place for Molech, “the abomination of the children of Ammon.” (1 Kings 11:7) Later it is clear that the god was worshipped at a place called Tophet in the Valley of Hinnom which ran beside Jerusalem. The valley was noted as a garbage dump and a place of perpetual burning. In this environment, the kings set up a special place of fire, called Tophet. Here they worshipped Molech in a cruel manner.

Human sacrifice was part of the worship of Baal, but not to the extent that it was practiced for Molech. Some scholars try to soften the idea, claiming that causing children to “pass through the fire to Molech” simply meant lighting two rows of fire and having the children pass between them. This is clearly not the view of Jeremiah.

And they built the high places of Baal, which are in the valley of the son of Hinnom, to cause their sons and their daughters to pass through the fire unto Molech; which I commanded them not, neither came it into my mind, that they should do this abomination, to cause Judah to sin. (Jer 32:35)

If sacrificing the children were not involved, then why would God tell Jeremiah that it was an abomination that even he could not conceive. Earlier he had used that same phrase concerning offerings to Baal which were clearly child sacrifices. (Jer 19:5)

The worship of Molech (and Baal) shows that man may even think up abominable things that God never considered. That makes one wonder whether in our pursuit of modern idols, or even in our corruption of worship in the church, whether we may come up with ideas that God would consider unthinkable abominations. Let us hope not.

IT'S YOUR BIRTHDAY

Many people look forward to one particular day of the year. As others get older, they would rather not remember it. Secretly, though, they probably appreciate it when people wish them a happy birthday. Birthdays are special holidays. They are not unique, but in a way they are. Even those people who know another person who shares their birthday have a certain affinity toward each other. Some of us grew up trying to find what famous people shared our birthdays. That was a harder pursuit in the days before the internet searches. It was disappointing if all you could find was George Westinghouse, the inventor of the air brake. It's much more interesting knowing you share a birthday with anthropologist Thor Heyerdahl, actors Jeremy Sisto, Carole Lombard, and Janet Gaynor, or a great opera singer like Jenny Lind.

The Bible does not often mention birthday parties, but makes two exceptions. One is in the Old Testament and one is mentioned twice in the New Testament.

Joseph was in prison. He interpreted dreams for the cupbearer and baker of Pharaoh's court, who had been thrown into jail with him.

And it came to pass the third day, which was Pharaoh's birthday, that he made a feast unto all his servants: and he lifted up the head of the chief butler and of the chief baker among his servants. (Gen 40:20)

Exactly as Joseph had interpreted, he lifted up the head of the cupbearer and restored him to his position. Also as predicted, he lifted the baker's head off his body.

The other birthday party was thrown by Herod. "And when a convenient day was come, that Herod on his birthday made a supper to his lords, high captains, and

chief estates of Galilee." (Mk 6:21) It was a fateful party, because "when Herod's birthday was kept, the daughter of Herodias danced before them, and pleased Herod." (Matt 14:6) Herod made a rash vow which resulted in his birthday being the death day for John the Baptist.

Some people have noted that both of these mentions of birthdays were for unbelievers. They say Christians should not celebrate their birthdays because the only examples in the Bible were pagans. This is not exactly true, however. While Herod was technically an Edomite (Idumaeon), he was King of Judea. He was a believer in God, although an imperfect one. (OK, a highly imperfect one.) We cannot deduce God's reaction to birthday celebrations from these two instances.

What we can deduce may or may not make much of a difference to most of us. It is notable that these birthdays were kings' birthdays. In a time when there was no universal calendar, time was often measured from the birth of a particular king. Thus we find, "in the fifth year of king Rehoboam," (1 Kng 14:25) or "in the twentieth year of Jeroboam" (1 Kng 15:9) It would be expected that a king would celebrate his birthday, because that meant another year on the calendar. They would hope for many birthdays.

The other thing to notice is that these kings threw their own birthday parties. In American society we hope that somebody cares enough to plan a party for us. If they don't, we just don't have a party. Maybe we should learn from Pharaoh and Herod. If nobody throws a party for you, just throw your own. It might be wise, though, to let your guests know that nobody will be beheaded.

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