

ASTONISHING TENDENCY TOWARDS SPIRITUAL FOLLY

The Israelites had witnessed the ten devastating plagues on the Egyptians while they had been spared themselves. The Israelites had done what Moses had told them, and had asked the Egyptians for silver and gold jewellery and for clothing. The LORD had made the Egyptians favourably disposed toward the people, and they had let them have what they asked for. So they had plundered the Egyptians (Ex 12:35-36). Many of the gold and silver ornaments that the Israelites were wearing at Mount Sinai had come to them through the Lord's goodness in this way. God had delivered the Israelites at the Red Sea and was still providing them with water and food. They had recently heard God give His commandments at Mount Sinai, beginning with the prohibition of idolatry and the prohibition for the Israelites to make any kinds of images. They had reverently told God that they would observe His commandments. They were still camping in front of Mount Sinai, and could still see the cloud of glory over the top of Mount Sinai, which should have reminded them of God's constant presence. However, they acted as if they had entirely forgotten all this. They knew that Moses had gone up on Mount Sinai to speak with the LORD. He had done that previously, and returned; but they assumed that they did not know what had happened to him.

Aaron had been with Moses in his confrontations with Pharaoh in Egypt. Yet he, too, displayed astonishing spiritual folly. When he asked the Israelites for their earrings, was he buying time, hoping that Moses would return, instead of remonstrating with the people? He told the Israelites that the bull calf that he had shaped from the Israelites' golden earrings was their god, who had brought them out of the land of Egypt (Ex 32:4). "God" in Hebrew had a plural form, but pronouns, adjectives, and verbs with this plural noun for the true God were always singular. Aaron used the plural pronoun, "These are your gods," although the first commandment had been, "You shall have no other gods in My presence!" Aaron knew better than to say, "These", associating that moulded image with the invisible and spiritual true God. He built an altar in front of the golden calf, and announced, "Tomorrow there will be a festival to the LORD." He identified the golden calf with the LORD and encouraged the people to worship that, as if it were the LORD Himself. He described the festival that the people would celebrate as a "festival to the LORD." When Moses later challenged Aaron about what he had done, Aaron blamed the people: "Do not become angry, my master! You yourself know that this people is inclined to evil. His disingenuousness strains belief. "I told them, 'Those of you who have any gold, tear it off!' So they gave it to me. I threw it into the fire, and this calf came out!" Just like that! When the gold was thrown into the fire, the calf came out fully formed, without any careful moulding and careful touching up by his own hands! Did he really expect Moses to believe that? The idol seems to have been a likeness of the Egyptian god Apis, the chief Egyptian deity, who was worshipped at Memphis under the form of a live ox. Images of it in the forms oxen were very common in Egypt. In the plagues in Egypt, the LORD had shown His power and exposed the inability of the Egyptian gods to protect the people who worshipped them. What an insult, and what folly, to expect that God would accept worship of that as worship of Himself! Did they really believe that human hands could make a god who could go before them to the Promised Land? They fooled themselves that they were still worshipping the LORD, who had brought them out of Egypt, and that they were simply doing it in a different form, more in line with their own preferences. What they did was incapable of explanation. "The crown of wise people is their wealth. The folly of foolish people is only folly" (Prv 14:24). God knew what the Israelites were doing, and was justly indignant.

Human beings continue to be beset with the temptation to become spiritual "boof-heads". They determine in their own minds that certain things are wrong, and ignore God's prohibitions. Spiritual leaders in our falsely ecumenical age must, like Aaron, bear a considerable share of guilt for what is real spiritual folly these days. In 1530 Luther wrote a work about The Keys, in which he included this: "... (I) instead of applying the key to real sins, they use it in the fashion of jugglers on imaginary sins, practising deceit with the command and Word of God, proving themselves thorough fools and knaves. For their binding and loosing extends only to sins against their own laws where money and monks are concerned. These they call the cardinal sins. Murder, adultery, blasphemy, and all sodomy are nothing! But just touch the church's avarice and love of luxury and see how the key that binds flashes and thunders! But on him who leaves his avarice and love for luxury untouched, the loosing key smiles and beams! ... No one ought to comply in practice with the laws of the clergy, as if it were necessary to observe them. One should not become party to their sacrilegious and unjust exercise of power. Since there is no sinning involved here, their binding and loosing turn out to be nothing but jugglers' work and plain tomfoolery. Through them the keys of God are desecrated, and Christians have been troubled without cause, and, indeed, deceived" (AE vol 40, 360-361).

It is not hard to look around us to see lay people too who are spiritual "boof-heads." In saying this, we are not usurping God's judgment on their persons, but disparaging what they think and do. Christ's marvellous redemption is known and proclaimed in all its fullness, but so many people act as if it were negligible. Ho hum! Some people are absent from worship because they are too busy; it is too cold; it is too hot; they don't like the pastor; and the people are not friendly. They may be fooling themselves, but hardly fooling their fellow-Christians. Are they fooling God? They know that they are not, but spiritual folly deters them from even asking that question about themselves.

However, let us not point the finger at others! We are all spiritual "boof-heads" whenever we fail to look into our own hearts. We fool ourselves if we think that we are not idolaters because we do not bow down in front of carved images. Fearing, loving, and trusting other things more than God are also serious forms of idolatry. The things that we treasure most ahead of God are really our gods. The worst forms of folly are found in people's use of the holiest things, God's Word and

the Sacraments. How easy it is to let our minds wander when God's Word is read and preached! How easy it is to forget that true worship is receiving Christ's great benefits to meet our desperate need. If people were told that they could have eternal life in the glory of God by crawling all around the continent on their hands and knees, there would be many takers. However, when the Gospel tells us that Jesus Christ has done all that needs to be done for our salvation and eternal life, many react casually. Like Naaman, they think that the clear waters of Abana and Pharpar near Damascus are much better to heal skin-disease than the muddy waters of the Jordan. How easy it is to say the Lord's Prayer without really praying it! God is not fooled by specious piety.

The LORD told Moses, "I have seen that this people is indeed a stiff-necked people. Now therefore let Me alone, so that My anger may burn against them, that I may consume them!" The image in "stiff-necked" is forgotten these days. The picture was of a bullock that stubbornly refused to let the yoke sit on its shoulders to pull the load. God's wrath still applies to all spiritual folly, and we have to plead guilty of the many ways in which we deserve it.

The Israelites were spared through Moses' intercession. He reminded the LORD that the Israelites were His people, whom He had brought out of Egypt with great power and a mighty hand. It would then have been reasonable for the Egyptians to say that He had taken them out of Egypt to destroy them in the mountains. He called on the LORD to remember His promises to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob to make their descendants very numerous and to give them the land of Canaan for an inheritance. He had sworn to them by His own self. Moses becomes a picture of Jesus Christ's intercession for us. Jesus Christ has wiped out our transgression by fulfilling God's holy Law in our stead, and bearing our guilt as our Substitute. He pleads His own sacrifice as the reason why God should still spare us instead of punishing us for our many forms of spiritual folly. He intercedes with the Father to keep us from spiritual folly. Therefore, may the Lord continue to preserve us from numerous forms of folly and self-deception, so that we repent of them!