

Acts 7:41

Authorized King James Version (KJV)

And they made a calf in those days, and offered sacrifice unto the idol, and rejoiced in the works of their own hands.

Analysis

And they made a calf in those days, and offered sacrifice unto the idol, and rejoiced in the works of their own hands. Stephen identifies the essence of idolatry—worshiping self-made objects and taking pride in human religious achievement.

Made a calf contrasts sharply with God's creative work. God spoke creation into existence; humans fashion idols from existing materials. The idol represents human projection onto deity—creating gods in our image rather than recognizing we're made in God's image.

Offered sacrifice unto the idol shows religious activity misdirected. The forms looked correct (sacrifices), but the object was false. This warns against externally orthodox worship directed toward false conceptions of God. Reformed theology emphasizes true worship must align with God's self-revelation in Scripture, not human imagination.

Rejoiced in the works of their own hands exposes idolatry's core—self-worship. Pride in human craftsmanship replaced worship of the Creator. This becomes a paradigm for all false religion: taking glory for what we've produced rather than giving glory to God. Paul echoes this in Romans 1:25—exchanging Creator for creation.

Historical Context

The golden calf worship (Exodus 32:4-6) occurred despite direct, recent experience of God's power. They had witnessed plagues, Red Sea crossing, and Sinai's thundering—yet quickly reverted to pagan practices learned in Egypt.

Ancient Near Eastern religions featured visible deity representations. Israel's demand for tangible gods reflected cultural accommodation—adopting surrounding nations' worship patterns. This becomes a recurring Old Testament theme: syncretism, mixing true worship with pagan elements.

Stephen draws a parallel: his audience maintains temple worship and Torah study, appearing orthodox, yet rejects the Spirit's work through Jesus. External religious activity without internal transformation is idolatry—worshipping the works of our own hands rather than receiving God's gracious work in Christ.

Related Passages

Ephesians 2:8 — Salvation by grace through faith

John 3:16 — God's love and salvation

James 2:17 — Faith and works

Hebrews 11:1 — Definition of faith

Study Questions

1. How does pride in religious achievement—'works of our own hands'—subtly replace genuine worship?
2. What forms of modern idolatry involve externally religious activity directed toward false concepts of God?
3. In what ways might our worship, though orthodox in form, actually be self-worship?
4. How does the temptation to create 'manageable' gods reflect resistance to God's sovereign, transcendent nature?

5. What role does cultural accommodation play in diluting authentic Christian worship and practice?

Interlinear Text

καὶ	ἐμοσχοποίησαν	ἐν	ταῖς	ἡμέραις	ἐκείναις	καὶ
And	they made a calf	in	days	those	And	
G2532	G3447	G1722	G3588 G2250	G1565	G2532	
ἀνῆγαγον	θυσίαν	τῷ	εἰδῶλῳ	καὶ	εὐφραίνοντο	ἐν
offered	sacrifice	unto the idol	And	rejoiced	in	
G321	G2378	G3588 G1497	G2532	G2165	G1722	
τοῖς	ἔργοις	τῶν	χειρῶν	αὐτῶν		
the works	hands					
G3588 G2041	G3588 G5495		G846			

Additional Cross-References

Nehemiah 9:18 (Creation): Yea, when they had made them a molten calf, and said, This is thy God that brought thee up out of Egypt, and had wrought great provocations;