

LIVING WATERS NEWSLETTER

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IDOLATRY IS WHERE THE CHURCH IS

The title of this article is adapted from a book published in 1968 by Shirley Scheibla entitled: *Poverty Is Where The Money Is*. The theme of the book is that wherever you find poverty you will also find an abundance of money. This is seen to be true when you consider the tremendous amount of government money spent to administer the “war on poverty.” In his book *Idols For Destruction* Herbert Schlossberg has a chapter on “Idols of Religion” in which he says “religious institutions become an active agent in promotion of idolatry or even become an idol itself as people confuse the means of worship with the object of worship.” This says wherever you find the church you will find idolatry. Idolatry within the church! This is unthinkable to some Christians. Adultery perhaps, or stealing, false witness, gossip, or coveting, but worshipping idols? Not likely. But if we deny the possibility of idols in the church we should remember the closing words of first John as he wrote, not to pagans, but to believers like ourselves: “Children, keep yourselves from idols” (I John 5:21).

Since idolatry can be found in the church, perhaps the first theme we should discuss is “The Idolatry of Theism.” Webster defines theism as “a belief in the existence of a god or gods, specifically a belief in the existence of one God viewed as the creative source of man and the world who transcends yet is imminent in the world.” We usually define idolatry as being the worship of something other than God or replacing God with a devoted object that becomes a god to us rather than the true God. This is usually not the case. In Ephesians 5:5 we are told that a “covetous man is an idolater” and Colossians 3:5 states that “greed is idolatry.” The Apostle Paul warns the church to not become idolaters as Israel did in the wilderness when they made and worshipped the golden calf while Moses was receiving God’s law at Sinai (I Cor. 10:7-11) Their idolatry was basically redefining God and the true faith. This was not merely the construction of a golden calf; it was their denoting the calf with God’s covenant name. “This is your God, O Israel that brought you out of Egypt” and “tomorrow is a feast to the Lord” (Ex. 32:4, 9). Israel’s idolatry was not that they adopted the faith of their pagan neighbors; rather it was the redefinition of the one true God who brought them out of Egypt. To redefine God and His word from that which He reveals Himself to be and what His standards are is a form of idolatry. Just as the radical nature of what God had delivered through Moses was lost by merging it with the false religions of the surrounding society, so we lose the radical nature of what God delivered through Jesus Christ when we, while believing in the one true God, make Him to be a god other than the God revealed in Jesus Christ. This is the idolatry of theism, believing in the one God, yet believing He is other than what Jesus revealed Him to be. James says, “You believe that God is one. You do well, the demons also believe and shudder” (James 2:19). People who believe that God is one do well, but that limited belief is no better than the belief of demons if it is not a belief in the one God revealed by Jesus Christ, followed by corresponding actions. There are many molten calves being constructed in the church today, all claiming to be the true God. A God of grace, but not law. A God of love, but

not judgment. A God of blessing, but not curses. A God of Heaven, but not of earth. A God of joy but not suffering. A God of happiness but not trial. A God of prosperity but not sacrifice. A God who meets my needs, but makes no demands.. This is the idolatry of theism and this is where the church is and this is where idolatry is.

Theism becomes idolatry when we believe in a God of love and goodness but not a God of judgment and wrath. The apostle Paul tells us to “behold the kindness and severity of God (Rom. 11:22), and again “the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men who suppress the truth in unrighteousness (Rom 1:18). We are not to emphasize the goodness of God alone nor His severity alone, but to contemplate both together. Both are attributes of God. There is a lot of muddleheaded thinking and confusion when it comes to this aspect of faith in God. We have developed a Santa Claus theology of God that insulates Him from any responsibility for anything other than the comfort and well being of man. This denies his omnipotence and lordship over His world and makes the redemptive work of Christ meaningless. It was the wrath and severity of God that nailed him to the cross and punished the sin of the believer. If God is unrelated to heartbreaking and destructive things like cruelty, hardship and physical suffering then His words to Moses “who has made man’s mouth? Or who makes him dumb or deaf, or seeing or blind? Is it not I, the Lord?” (Exodus 4:11) are not true. This shows that God is in control of every aspect of the life of mankind. He again tells Moses that He is “compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in loving-kindness and truth, who forgives iniquity and sin, yet He by no means leave the guilty unpunished” (Exodus 34:6,7) The idolatry of theism believes in only one aspect of the nature of God.

The idolatry of the Gentiles, according to Paul was that they “exchanged the glory of the incorruptible God for an image in the form of corruptible man and of birds and four footed animals and crawling creatures” (Rom. 1:23). The idolatry of theism results in a life that corresponds to one’s concept of the god being worshipped. The Psalmist states: “those who make idols will become like them. Everyone who trusts in them” (Ps. 115:8) and Jeremiah states: “they walked after emptiness and became empty” (Jer.2:5). II Kings 17:15 says that Israel “followed vanity and became vain.” One of the problems Christian people have is they expect God to act as they think He should act. Their concept of God is not based upon His revelation in His son, Jesus Christ, but upon what they conceive God to be. When trouble comes into their lives and they have to deal with situations they cannot explain, or when they see so much suffering and adversity in their lives they ask “How can God let this happen?” or “Why does this have to happen in my life?” It is difficult to understand the contradictions with which people live and with no hesitation reproach God for things they can’t accept. How can people live a life of rebellion, sin and disobedience, and then have the audacity to be angry at God or question His actions? If He were not a good God and a God of grace they would have been judged and destroyed before they had the chance to complain against

Him. This is theistic idolatry. In these instances they become, in the words of the German theologian, Helmut Thielick, “gods of God.” Ravi Zacharias, who has challenged liberal attitudes and made a case for Christianity at Harvard, Princeton, Yale, and other prominent universities around the world, in his book *Deliver Us From Evil* says that “on virtually every campus where I debated the issue of God’s existence, some individual challenged God’s goodness by pointing out all the evil in the world... ‘a plane crashes, and thirty die while twenty live...what sort of God is that?’...the implication was of course, that since God is so arbitrary in His actions, He must be evil.” When this was tossed to him by a female student his answer was: “My question to you, young lady, is this: when you arrogate the right to yourself to choose who may live in your womb and who may die, you call it your moral right, but when God exercises the same right, you call Him evil. Can you explain that contradiction to me?” The explanation is simple: Idolatry of theism.

Closely related to the idolatry of theism is the idolatry of good and useful things. The promise of God to David when he desired to build the temple was that Solomon would “build a house for My name” (II Sam. 7:13). After Solomon built the temple God said, “I have consecrated this house which you have built by putting My name there forever, and My eyes and My heart will be there perpetually” (I Kings 9:3). However, by Isaiah’s time the temple had been converted into an apparatus to the service of idolatry. In a time when Israel had become a desperately wicked nation, the temple worship of the Creator of the universe flourished. They continued with religious sacrifice, prayers and festivals of which God said: “I have had enough of burnt offerings of rams, and fat of fed cattle, and I take no pleasure in the blood of bulls, lambs or goats. When you come to appear before Me, who requires of you this trampling of My courts? Bring your worthless offerings no longer. They are an abomination to Me. I cannot endure iniquity and solemn assembly” (Isa. 1:11-13). From these Scriptures we can see that to quote Schlossberg again, “religious institutions can become an active agent in promoting idolatry or even become an idol itself and people confuse the means of worship with the object of worship.” In his book *No God But God* Oz Guinness quotes Alexander Solzhenitsyn as saying: “Idolatry today is the idolatry of good and useful things from our modern world that, in the form of powerful myths, have been allowed to become distortions of the gospel and substitutes for faith in God. In the biblical view, anything created...anything at all that is less than God and most especially the gifts of God...can become idolatrous if it is relied upon inordinately until it becomes a full-blown substitute for God and thus an idol.”

Hosea 8:4 states “They have set up kings, but not by Me; they have appointed princes, but I did not know it. With their silver and gold they have made idols for themselves that they might be cut off.” This says judgment is inseparable from idolatry. Human actions have moral consequences. There is a principle of moral accountability in the world. For example the love of money (idol of mammon) destroys those who worship at its altar (I Tim. 6:9, 10)...the idol of sex becomes the instrument of plague and death to those who bow before it (Rom. 1:27)...the decision to deny the true God results in a depraved mind (Rom. 1:28)...the beast who is worshipped (Rev. 13:3, 4) enslaves those who worship it (verses 16, 17). Isaiah shows how ridiculous a graven image is (Isa. 44:9-17). When the Psalmist said in Psalm

115:8: “Those who make idols will become like them, everyone who trusts in them” he is saying that human conduct is ultimately governed by what a society worships. This perhaps explains the decay and corruption we see all about us. Modern man has made money, power, leisure, sex and fashion his gods. These gods control his actions and lifestyles. In the light of this it is easy for us to see the idolatry of the secular world but that is not as much a concern as the idolatry in the religious world.

Jim Nelson Black in his book *When Nations Die* makes this statement: “The loss of faith and religious values in a nation is a form of idolatry. When we take down the image of God, we lift up the idol of man.” We do not need statues and images to be guilty of idolatry. Our most evil idol is not something seen, rather something we have developed in our mind. We want to reduce God to something we can handle. So we have developed mental pictures, concepts, ideas, understandings, and traditions of what God is like and what He must do and none of it is according to scripture. Many modern church members have reduced God to an errand boy...to answer at our beck and call. We reduce faith to magic. Even the Lord’s supper can become a magic formula or ritual. Many believe that if we press the right button, confess the right confession, quote the right scripture, think the right thought God will respond. We turn the promise of God that He will sustain us in every difficulty into the demand that we have no difficulty. When self permeates so much of what we do or not do, even in spiritual matters where self is supposed to be denied, it becomes a form of idolatry. When the apostles were with Jesus on the Mount of trans-figuration and the glory of God was revealed to them, Peter said “Lord, it is good for us to be here; if you wish, I will build three tabernacles here, one for you, one for Moses and one for Elijah. Notice what Peter said: “It is good for us! Let us build for you...” If it is good for us we build for him. Religious people are always building something; a church, a movement, an organization, a building, a method. We believe if we can only find the right combination of music, or teaching, or worship, or people, then it will be “good for us.” What Peter did not realize, and what we, too, fail to perceive, is that the glory is in Christ, and not a method, a meeting or a movement, and it is for him, not for us. That which is “good for us” inspires us to “build for you: but how many times have we built something “for” the Lord that really serves our own agenda? This is idolatry of the good and useful things.

David Wells in his book *God in the Wasteland* states: “the heart is an idol factory. Idolatry, ancient and modern alike, consist in trusting some substitute for God to serve some uniquely functions. We have used both our psychological and physical selves idolatrously.” He then quotes Nancy Brewka Clark in *Faith in the Flesh, Secular Society’s Preoccupation With Life* showing what real idolatry is. She says: “the contemporary interest in Physical exercise is not simply a way of achieving or retaining health, but is a kind of secular religion. As churches empty, health clubs flourish, as traditional fervor wanes, attention to the body waxes. In other words, as the baby boomers approach middle age, a yearning toward perpetual youth flares up and denial of the biological takes the form of aerobics.” He then adds: “Fitness is the new path to immortality. The pain of the workout is the new penance; the monk’s hair shirt has been replaced by the modern’s sweatshirt.” This is idolatry of good and useful things.