

S3: Idols in the Heart; What are They and What can be Done About Them?

Idolatry can be defined as a harbouring (and a putting into practice) of worthless views about God. Important facets of God's character are ignored, whilst others are overemphasised to an unhelpful degree. An idol is often no more than a caricature of the real God – with all of the important pieces missing. During the medieval period, the idol was like the real God minus His love, whereas today it resembles the real God minus His holiness. Indeed, an idol is never more dangerous than when it bears a striking resemblance to the one true God. False, idolatrous gods, like those of Ancient Greece and Rome, eventually became discredited because they were so obviously worthless. In contrast, an idol, bearing some resemblance to the real God can enjoy a popularity spanning a whole millennium. This partly explains why Baal was the most dangerous idol facing ancient Israel. Like the true God, Baal made some pretence at claiming divine sovereignty as '*Lord and Master*' when, in reality, he represented only the usurping sovereignty of Satan.

Briefly, idols fall into two distinct categories. Firstly, there are the earthly (or worldly) Idols, where an earthly object or person is exalted to some pseudo-divine status. Examples could include the various animal gods of Ancient Egypt or Elvis Presley in the modern world. Indeed, there has recently been a television programme expressly designed for the manufacture of '*Pop Idols*.' Secondly, there are the religious (or spiritual) idols, which resemble the real God minus some important attributes. Within the Church these include the false god of liberal theology, (with barely any capacity to communicate God's word to people) and the false god of mysticism (with little ability to challenge people for their sinfulness).¹ Factions within the wider Church may hold to both types of idols simultaneously, e.g. the '*Faith Movement*' where both earthly and religious idols hold sway i.e. the '*pop idolatry*' and the almost hero-worship of the loudmouthed prosperity preacher with his spurious, titillating so-called spiritual experiences.² Those in the Faith Movement may sometimes display plenty of '*faith*' but the problem is that this faith is in the wrong God! Also, they have great difficulty in distinguishing true faith from an arrogant, often emotionally charged presumption.

Such factors explain why the most deadly long-term threat to Christianity will come from inside rather than outside the Church. It seems wholly reasonable to suppose that it will be the Church itself, which will possess the capacity to offer a version of god so like the real one that it could '*deceive the elect if such a thing were possible,*' (Matthew 24:24b). This is not true of other religious groupings holding to very different views of God. The human race may be approaching a time when a hugely subtle, beguiling '*spirit*' will be unleashed through the Church and into the world. The Church will be the spawning ground of a deception, eventually wreaking more havoc than either Communism or Nazism. Its ultimate result will be destruction on a global scale, with piles of charred corpses. In the more immediate future, this deception will deceive those who will have no love for the truth, (2 Thessalonians 2:10-12). One of the main purposes of this incredibly powerful and deceitful false spirit will be to draw together the majority of the world's population into worshipping a god who so very closely resembles the true God, but is not the true God at all. As stated earlier some of the elect will be fooled, if only for a limited time.

The Christian believer really must have the Holy Spirit dwelling within and also possess a working knowledge of scripture in order to withstand the great delusion this other false spirit will bring. Again, it must be stressed that this delusion will not be an obvious one (unlike the Toronto Experience, which even the world could see through) but will be far more subtle.³ Furthermore, it will be impossible to resist this spirit, if the Christian's heart is divided between following Christ and some form of personal idol – whether it be money, sex and power or even a totem pole in a remote forest clearing. One common result of clinging to a personal idol is for the devotee to manifest the kind of ridiculous behaviour that can be associated with those suffering some form of substance addiction. This is because idolatry is a form of addiction that obsesses and possesses people. Through this sin, Satan tries to grieve God by degrading His Creation (as in the case of human sacrifice). To cling onto idols dismantles inner defences against deception. It is analogous to spiritual '*AIDS*' wherein a person is robbed of their immunity to full-scale spiritual harm. Unless believers allow Christ to smash these

¹ Usually, mysticism is far happier to impart '*nice*' experiences to anyone gullible enough to want them.

² Specific examples were documented in Hank Hanegraaff's book '*Christianity in Crisis*,' first published in 1993. See his preface to Part One; '*Once Upon a Time*.' However, his ministry has since been the subject of some very serious allegations having resulted in bitter libel cases in the USA.

³ Those who succumbed to the Toronto Deception will stand no chance whatsoever against this far more powerful and deceptive spirit.

idols, which so readily spring up within the human heart, they are heading straight for spiritual delusion.

Some of the above points were made in a sermon the writer gave to a 'Young Persons Group' at a certain Afro-Caribbean Church on the evening of Tuesday, 14th July 1992.⁴ Records kept concerning this meeting show there were 23, (mainly young people present). At the time, many in the group were being enticed to follow a certain 'white' false prophet from California. The hope is that readers will be challenged by the following message taken from these same sermon notes. (Its lively manner should help balance the more formal style having hitherto pervaded this work. Incidentally, the terms 'personal idol' and 'idol in the heart' are used interchangeably.)

After reading from Genesis 35:1-5, Exodus 20:3, 1 John 5:2 and Revelation 22:14-15 from the King James Version of the Bible, the main sermon began as follows: -

"An idol is anything which is valued more than the Lord Jesus Christ. Seizing first place in one's loyalties, an idol can either be a person, object, organisation and even a philosophical concept. By nature, idols fill a place in the human heart, which should be occupied only by Jesus. As such they represent a substitute for God.

There are a whole variety of idols, the most common being: -

1) Worldly Idols of pleasure, such a 'wine, women and song.' These usually derive from the behaviour of fallen human nature.

2) Demonic Idols of false religion and the occult. These are often drawn from evil spiritual sources.

3) Respectable, 'churchy' idols, which are widely accepted inside Bible believing Christian circles. Deriving from the pride and carnality of believers in Jesus, such idols can include: -

3.1 Famous preachers (attracting 'groupies' and acting like 'pop stars')

3.2 Material possessions

3.3 One's own particular gifting, ministry and organizational affiliation

3.4 Personal security

3.5 Tradition – always doing things in a certain way

Clearly, idolatry is a very subtle problem, occurring amongst Christians when they overvalue something in the place of Christ, their whole perspective having gone awry. In his mercy, God will patiently tolerate a lot of stupidity and even some types of sin amongst His people, but He will never, under any circumstances, tolerate an idol. This is because He wishes to occupy first place in our hearts.

Beyond the effects of inborn sin, exactly why a person clings to some form of idol may be the result of many things, including: -

1) Personal background and experience

2) Temperamental disposition

3) Ignorance

4) A particular church or religious setting where: -

4.1 Large groups attract those keen for more personal security

4.2 Small groups attract those inordinately proud of their own 'personal ministry' whatever that might be

5) The enticements of the world, (through the mass media, particularly advertising)

6) Satan, who tempts a person to idolatry through: -

6.1 False teaching, false religious experiences and false ideological systems like Nazism and Communism

6.2 Compromise with non-Christian belief systems, possibly through some form of inter-faith worship

6.3 A whole array of personal temptations

All this is done with a view to getting people to give most of their time and attention to anything but Christ and His message of salvation.

As with their types and causes, the effects of idolatry for the Christian can also vary widely, the most common being: -

⁴ The writer timed it as lasting from 9.05 – 9.40pm

1) *Ineffectuality; preoccupied with their idol, Christians may become too paralysed to do anything useful for God. As a result they lazily sit around doing nothing. A slapdash approach is adopted toward life.*

2) *Misplaced zeal; having a fanatical enthusiasm for the idol in question.*

3) *A narrow and intransigent attitude – with a harsh stance toward anyone questioning a particular set viewpoint. Idolatrous people can be horribly vicious if they believe their idol is under some form of verbal attack.*

4) *'Works of the flesh'⁵ (particularly divisiveness) predominating. This means that a Christian work becomes: -*

4.1 *Bogged down in endless problems*

4.2 *Clouded by a 'heavy' atmosphere*

4.3 *Dominated by petty rivalries*

4.4 *Useless; the work either disintegrating altogether or becoming yet another embarrassment littering the Christian scene.*

5) *A mixture of self and spiritual deception, resulting in two extremes: -*

5.1 *Laxity – leading to disorderly behaviour.*

5.2 *Legalism – producing an arrogant self-righteousness*

(Incidentally, please note that many heresies or false teachings stem from a persistent determination to cling onto some form of personal idol, with the result that a person is not only wrong, but militantly and dogmatically wrong.)

6) *Love of status, which produces: -*

6.1 *A proud 'don't contradict me' kind of authoritarianism*

6.2 *Affected mannerisms, becoming more 'parsonical than a Parson'*

6.3 *Belligerent discourtesy toward outsiders*

6.4 *'Cover-ups,' allowing problems and sins to fester unresolved for years*

6.5 *'Double standards' with one rule for the leadership and another, far harsher rule, for the congregation*

6.6 *Dogmatic adherence to the non-essentials of the Christian faith, (e.g. a certain Pentecostal minister who was very preoccupied with the colour of the robes worn by his choir. Well, I suppose it takes all sorts!)*

6.7 *Insensitivity to the needs of others*

7) *Reliance upon a 'religious system' with an 'it's always been done this way' mentality, often leading to: -*

7.1 *Cold, formal relationships where the higher the hierarchical status the higher the perceived social value*

7.2 *An inability to change or relate appropriately to others*

7.3 *Large bureaucratic institutions with a stifling of personal initiative*

7.4 *Personal frustration and possible suppressed anger (at having not expressed what has honestly been felt, for so long)*

However, the Bible accepts that good organisation and administration is important. It is the idolization of a particular mode of organisation which is at fault. Pentecostals fall into this trap just as much as members of the more historical churches. Eventually, idols in the heart destroy people because they prevent them from entering God's Kingdom. Moreover, idols tend to get such a grip upon a person's life that nothing else can be seen. Far from controlling the idol in question, the person becomes controlled by it. For the non-Christian there is only ever one remedy for an idol in the heart – to respond to the Gospel of Jesus Christ in repentance and faith. This means trusting Him to give the power to deal with any idols.

8) *For the Christian the following remedies are applicable: -*

8.1 *A willingness to ask difficult questions of themselves; e.g. 'What is the idol in my life?' or 'What could easily become an idol if I allowed it to be?' Indeed, let me now pause and ask you 'What is the idol in your life?' Furthermore, 'Are you willing to allow the Lord to remove it?'*

8.2 *Looking at where this idol is leading in the long-term. By doggedly clinging onto this idol the believer may risk missing out on God's blessings.*

8.3 *Realising a stark choice needs to be made, either Jesus first and the idol second (if it's not harmful itself – otherwise get rid of it)⁶ or the idol first and Jesus absent – no other options exist.*

8.4 *Renunciation, which makes a definite break with the idols in question – allowing for no compromise.*

⁵ These are works that arise out of our old, fallen human nature. As such they don't have the blessing of God.

⁶ This applies to idols like personal talents, friends or family, which are good in and of themselves – but have been given too great a priority. However, innately harmful idols i.e. some form of heretical teaching need to be ruthlessly dumped.

8.5 *Sharing with other believers whose personal influence will help keep things in perspective. Should the believer become isolated from fellowship they are to get 'unisolated' as soon as possible.⁷ Fellowship with other Christians is a 'must' helping ensure a healthy Christian lifestyle.*

8.6 *'Feeding on the Word' and sound Christian teaching through Bible Study, which helps develop a clear order of priorities in one's daily life.*

8.7 *Nurturing a healthy spiritual life of prayer and worship with a view to keeping a close walk with the Lord.*

8.8 *Developing personal gifts and ministries – simply becoming too busy to 'dally' with idols.*

8.9 *Taking 'time out' from Christian service in order to regain a sense of perspective.*

8.10 *Looking toward the needs of others, both inside and outside of one's own grouping. This should prevent any morbid introspection, which can lead to idolatry.*

If anyone desires to be used by God to spread the Gospel, then they must put away all idols. Most certainly, a decisive, no-nonsense approach is needed. As it says in Exodus 20:3 'You shall have no other Gods but me.'

In the name of Jesus Christ our Saviour, Amen"

As the writer finished speaking, the look on people's faces indicated that a deep conviction was present. Nevertheless, over time most of the warnings were to go unheeded, resulting in division within the assembly and immorality among former members. Evidence of spiritual delusion was also present in that participants thought that a major revival was about to take place (which didn't). This group was to demonstrate that the idols followed by many nominally Christian assemblies are there to make their devotees *'feel good'* through the provision of free entertainment and the impartation of *'nice feelings.'* Particularly in Pentecostal settings, the idol in question can barely be distinguished from Bacchus, the Roman God of wine and revelry, the only difference being that the drunkenness produced is of a *'spiritual'* rather than an *'alcoholic'* nature.

From this section it's possible to conclude that: -

1) A personal idol is any loyalty which replaces God in one's innermost being

2) The main types of idols are: -

2.1 Worldly idols

2.2 Demonic idols

2.3 'Churchy' idols

3) The causes of idolatry are: -

3.1 Individual personal weaknesses

3.2 Ignorance of the truth

3.3 Organisational pressures

3.4 The influence of the world or fallen human society

3.5 Satan, working through a variety of temptations and spiritual seductions

4) Some common effects of personal idols are: -

4.1 Ineffectuality in Christian service

4.2 Misplaced zeal

4.3 The *'works of the flesh'* (unregenerate human nature) predominating

4.4 Heightened vulnerability to spiritual deception

4.5 An unhealthy dependence upon a religious system

4.6 Eternal destruction

5) For non-believers the only cure for idolatry is a fully committed faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour

6) Every believer has a responsibility to co-operate with Jesus in the removal of personal idols by: -

6.1 Allowing Jesus to remove any personal idol as soon as it is exposed

6.2 Giving serious thought as to the likely long-term consequences of following an idol

6.3 Accepting that a choice exists between Jesus and the personal idol in question

6.4 Making a definite decision to renounce an idol

6.5 Sharing fellowship with other believers

6.6 *'Feeding'* upon sound Bible-based teaching

6.7 Nurturing a healthy spiritual life of prayer and worship

⁷ Sadly, the gradual decline in the UK Churches, having continued unabated since this message was first given, means that this advice may prove to be more difficult to follow. An increasing number of believers since found themselves in an isolated position through no fault of their own.

- 6.8 Keeping busy, constructively and/or creatively
- 6.9 Taking *'time out'* to rest and to gain a sense of perspective
- 6.10 Looking to meet the needs of others

Questions

- 1) What is an idol?
- 2) What are the causes and effects of idolatry?
- 3) Why might believers be unwilling to allow Jesus to remove an idol from their heart?
- 4) How can we abandon personal idols?
- 5) What blessings may result from the abandonment of a personal idol?