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Idolatry

Editorial

Gordon Matties

In "Worshipping Mr. Loh," Steve Wilson perfectly captures the spirit of our age.[1] He writes, "Since my wife and I both rejected the religions we were brought up with; since faith is now a matter of convenience rather than calling: Cathy and I have decided to ignore the existing religions altogether and worship our own personal deity. His name is Mr. Loh," and he is "a 76-year-old Chinese guy." They came to thank Mr. Loh for all manner of good fortune: finding a parking spot, purchasing a home, getting into graduate school, conceiving a child. Wilson confesses, "Mr. Loh provided a focal point for hope and decision, gave us a receptacle for anxieties, and, ultimately, got results." Although the real Mr. Loh and the Mr. Loh they worship are not identical, the author affirms: "Whatever he is, he serves our purpose and helps us through times of stress." Whether the actual source of these results is an "astral deity or . . . improved attitude or just good luck," Wilson confesses, "I don't care. What we've got works for us, and that is what counts."

Idolatry today has as many names as it did in the ancient world. And for the most part we make up our idols. All—from private gun idolatry to militaristic nationalism, from the ubiquitous claw of the market to *American Idol*—echo the King of Babylon, whom Isaiah quotes as saying, "I will make myself like the Most High" (14:14). Every one of them, like Mr. Loh, "serves our purpose." We know that in spite of Isaiah's insistence that idols are nothing (44:6-8; 45:20–22), and Paul's assertion that "no idol in the world really exists" (1 Cor. 8:4; NRSV), the persistent command to reject idolatry echoes throughout scripture. Deuteronomy calls Israel to serve God alone and to repudiate all other allegiances. Paul asserts that the Corinthian believers ought to "flee from the worship of idols" (1 Cor. 10:14). The first letter of John ends with this appeal: "Dear children, keep yourselves from idols" (5:21).

Ironically, the call to reject idolatry is mostly addressed to Israel, and to the church. The Lord proclaims, "I am, and there is no one besides me," to Israelites who have fallen victim to Babylonian power and might (Isa. 47:8, 10) and who might well be tempted to substitute power for truth and wealth for the beauty of the Lord. Oddly, Isaiah's polemic against the gods is grounded in the fact that the gods cannot save. They tend to benefit those who already have power and wealth. But for the poor, the weak, the needy, and the exiled, they can do nothing. They are great pretenders whose gifts dissipate into disillusionment.

The promises of the gods are nothing but the ultimate domestication of the divine. Such gods, religious though they may be, end up being—as the Metallica song puts it—"the god that failed." Still, Bob Dylan had it right; no matter who you are, "you're gonna have to serve somebody." Or as Stanley Hauerwas and William Willimon suggest, "We appear to have been created to worship, and worship something we will."[2] Moreover, the biblical writers assume that "we become what we worship,"[3] or as James K. A. Smith puts it, "we are what we love."[4] In the book of Exodus the same Hebrew word can be translated "serve" or "worship." Whom we worship shapes both identity and vocation.

To flee idolatry, then, is to discover our hearts becoming rightly oriented and our loves reordered. The articles and poetry in this issue of *Vision* are bound to encourage us to let go of counterfeit allegiances, misplaced desires, quick-fix solutions, and the illusions of market demands, and to empower us to pledge allegiance only to the kingdom of God, where we find true freedom and life abundant.

Notes

[1] Steve Wilson, "Worshipping Mr. Loh," *Utne Reader,* May/June, 2004; http://www.utne.com/2004-05-01/WorshippingMrLoh.aspx.
[2] Stanley Hauerwas and William Willimon, *The Truth about God: The Ten Commandments in Christian Life* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1999), 36.
[3] G. K. Beale, *We Become What We Worship: A Biblical Theology of Idolatry* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2008).
[4] James K. A. Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom: Worship, Worldview, and Cultural Formation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2009), 25.

About the issue editor

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Sequencing allegiances
Idolatry and the one God

James E. Brenneman

Is it blasphemous to worship a sandwich? That question confronted me on a tabletop ad for Jimmy John's #9 Italian Night Club sandwich, filled with Genoa salami, Italian capicola, smoked ham, and provolone, topped with lettuce, tomato, onion, and mayo, with homemade Italian vinaigrette. This playful invitation to a divine encounter in a sandwich has marketing appeal, precisely because we "get it": we understand that the rhetorical question elicits our yes, and precisely for that reason we want to try the sandwich. If "becoming what we worship" is one definition of idolatry,[1] and if "we are what we eat," then Jimmy John's ad masterfully zeros in on an Eden-like temptation to "become like god" by eating the forbidden fruit. In this case, the forbidden sandwich.

God appears in a burning bush, in the bread and cup of communion and other mediated ways—including ultimately in human form in Christ—all of which heightens the layers of ambiguity between sacramental iconography and pure iconoclasm.

On the other hand, the ad works because we also know in a primal way that we are created in God's "image and likeness" (Gen. 1:26–27). We sense that in some high and holy way, we are nearly god-like even in our humanity. But whatever else the word *image* might mean, an early Hebraic meaning is "icon"—a material, contingent representation of a divine king. The semantic slippage between *image*, *icon*, and *idol* suggests just how easily we humans fall prey to the age-old temptation to idolatry, worshiping our own likeness and image (or the things we make, like sandwiches), in place of the One of whom we are, like moons to the sun, mere reflections. But it is this fine distinction between holy image and iconic worship that we must explore.

Between holy image and iconic worship, a continuum

When we trace the move from a polytheistic, cosmotheistic, nature-oriented mythological world of prehuman and early human cultures, into what Jan Assmann calls the "Mosaic distinction" of exclusivist monotheism, we realize that our beliefs often lie on a continuum, and we can never settle in to stay in the one spot that's exactly right.[2] No matter how much we claim to worship one God and one God only, we seldom, if ever, get it just right.

Indeed, I believe the standard of pure monotheism is so high, so unwavering, so total, that ever adhering unequivocally to its exclusive demands is humanly impossible. Because unwavering obedience to the one God is impossible, we need to construct gradations of obedience, if not a whole set of nuanced qualifications about the nature and object of divine worship. Besides the semantic minefield surrounding what it means to be created in God's image and likeness as it relates to defining idolatry, several factors testify to the harshness of pure monotheism and its nearly impossible requirements.

First, when the entire canon of Holy Scripture decries idolatry in all its permutations, yet remains remarkably elastic in its divine-human interactions, we see how difficult it is for biblical people, people of God—indeed, any people—to live life in worship of one God and one God only. The Bible provides ample evidence of the fluidity of terms, gradations of belief, theophanic expressions, and modes of divine conveyance, en route from a polytheistic worldview to that of a more or less exclusive monotheism. God appears in a cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night, in a burning bush, in a still small voice, in the bread and cup of communion and other mediated ways—including ultimately in human form in Christ—all of which only heightens the layers of ambiguity between sacramental iconography and pure iconoclasm. This evolutionary progression has sometimes been described as a series of "monotheistic moments" along a historical trajectory climaxing in the radical exclusive monotheism of the late exilic period and beyond.[3]

Second, the attempt by scholars and others to create a taxonomy of monotheisms (exclusive monotheism, inclusive monotheism, henotheism, summodeism, cosmotheism, one-godism, Trinitarianism, "Jesus-only"-ism) argues for the near impossibility

of absolutizing any monotheistic claims or claiming that one's own monotheism is the absolute and only one. Such confessional claims may be true but are terribly difficult to prove beyond a reasonable doubt, because they are seldom lived out in practice. We all fall short.

Third, in everyday parlance and in confessional terms, we almost always acknowledge our inevitable fallibility by defining idolatry in terms that allow for some slippage in our practice. For example, G. K. Beale expands Martin Luther's definition of idolatry by adding one word. Idolatry, says Beale, is "whatever the heart clings to or relies on for [*ultimate*] security."[4] In other words, under the monotheistic burden or blessing we almost always acknowledge the need and the reasoned ability to sequence our set of allegiances, as long as they are topped off by the one and only God. Thus, if we are honest, our arguments are often about a whole set of allegiances, ranked with respect either to their prioritization in relationship or to their true or false witness to the one and only God we worship.

The three gods that Deuteronomy warns against are the gods of militarism, materialism, and moralism, each with their various forms of worship: power, wealth, and self-righteousness.

If "we become what we worship," then Beale is acknowledging, perhaps without meaning to, the near-blasphemous claim the title of his book would be, if we *could* become gods or divinities by worshiping the one and only God. In effect, in a truly exclusive Mosaic monotheism, we cannot really become what we worship and still adhere to the first commandment.

Idolatry has sometimes been defined as making absolute the radical contingency of all that is not God, including humanity, nature, ideas, and all other possible categories of distinction.[5] In effect, then, pure monotheism is as much a theoretical construct as a lived reality. In a sense, the best we, who wish to be identified as biblical monotheists, can claim for ourselves is that like our ancient ancestors, we too are always en route to keeping the first commandment.

Allegiance in the book of Deuteronomy

No other book in the entire scripture comes closer to affirming the "Mosaic distinction" of exclusive monotheism and condemna-

tion of idolatry than the book of Deuteronomy. Some twenty-five explicit references in one form or another condemn the worship of other gods, including idols of those gods and images of the one God, Yahweh.[6]

The structure of the book of Deuteronomy roughly coincides with much older covenant treaties made in the world of international diplomacy of their times.[7] In a sense, the book of Deuteronomy is poised as a covenant treaty rivaling other such treaties between rival sovereigns, including rival gods. Immediately following the opening prologue (chaps. 1–4), a summary set of laws providing historical background are proclaimed; these include a revised set of the Ten Commandments (chap. 5), followed by commentary on the most important of those commandments, the first commandment, which warns against idolatry (chaps. 6–11).

The first commandment is sobering and negative: "You shall have no other gods before me. You shall not make for yourself an idol, whether in the form of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. You shall not bow down to them; for I the LORD your God am a jealous God, punishing children for the iniquity of parents to the third and fourth generation of those who reject me" (5:7–9). However, in commenting on this commandment, Moses offers a more positive spin in what has become known as the great *Shema* in Jewish ritual (6:4–5), "Hear, O Israel: The LORD, our God, the LORD *alone*," or equally possible in translation, "Hear, O Israel: The LORD, our God, the LORD is *one*." Followed by the affirming directive, "You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might."

The ambiguities of the translations, whether in the first commandment itself in chapter 5, or in the commentary that follows in chapter 6, seem to allow for the possible existence of other gods, but to place the emphasis on the people's loyalty to Yahweh (Israel's God) alone among the alternative temptations (compare 32:8–9).[8] In almost all periods of Israel's history, the worship of more than one god, whether as an idol or not, was a temptation. Up until at least this second sermon of Moses in Deuteronomy, various names or titles of God or the gods were used, including God of your fathers, God of various locales, *El Roi*, *El Shaddai* and

so on.[9] Later, in Canaan, gods who were rivals to Israel's God came with names like El, Dagan, Baal, and Asherath.

It is tempting to want to identify by name the possible rival gods Deuteronomy worries will be a threat to Israel's allegiance to Yahweh. It is tempting to focus on the above-named rivals, including gods related to cults of the dead, and also Assyrian, Babylonian, and Egyptian deities. All the more remarkable then, that the book of Deuteronomy does not identify these competing gods by name, not in the sense of specifically named deities that ancient Israel might have been tempted to worship. Instead, as Dennis Olson points out, Deuteronomy focuses on three more insidious and less culture-specific gods or idols that remain formidable rivals for our *ultimate* allegiance.[10]

For Olson, the three gods that Deuteronomy warns against and that demand allegiance in every generation are the gods of militarism, materialism, and moralism, each with their various forms of worship: power, wealth, and self-righteousness. In chapter 7, to worship the god of power politics backed by military might, or to trust in nations mightier and more numerous than emergent Israel, is to polytheize (7:17). This chapter stresses the singular power of Yahweh, who alone is warrior and defender of the little David, Israel, among the Canaanite Goliaths round about them. Chapter 8 warns against making material possessions objects of devotion and allegiance. One must not elevate even good and necessary things such as water and food too high in the pantheon of belief, since "one does not live by bread alone" (8:3). Indeed, while the people wandered in the desert some forty years, didn't God provide sandals that did not wear out, food to eat, water when needed, and clothes for their backs? If some day the people are to become wealthy in the promised land of plenty, they must not imagine that their prosperity is a result of their business savvy and acquisitive power (8:17). Theirs must be worship of the Giver not the gift. Chapters 9 and 10 warn against communal self-righteousness, against defining one's own cultural identity, particularity, image of God–ness, as morally superior to

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others'. Indeed, to imagine that their own moral decency, inherent goodness, or doctrinal purity was the reason they had received a homeland from God would be idolatry of the worst kind (9:3). For fifty-two verses, Moses engages in a harangue intended to take the pride out of his people, lest they imagine themselves to be gods worthy of self-worship. Like a capstone, chapter 11 repeats the language of the *Shema*, underscoring the positive call to love the LORD with all one's heart, soul, and might.

Sequencing our allegiances

If the book of Deuteronomy serves as our guide for determining criteria for idolatrous temptations, inclinations, and practices, few if any of us emerge with a clean slate. If we with confidence stand assured that we do not bow down to military might, are we equally free of idolatrous commitments to material gain? If we proclaim our nonallegiance to military power and also manage to restrain our desire for wealth, have we done so without a hint of self-righteous moralism? Life under Mosaic monotheism can be burdensome indeed. We are more polytheist in practice than we care to admit. We create gods and idols of our own, though we seldom call them that. Perspective matters.

A Jewish or Muslim monotheist might wonder about the apparently idolatrous nature of the Christian faith. He might see Christian claims of monotheism—using Trinitarian doctrine and singing hymns to Jesus Christ—to be like so many pre-Copernican machinations for describing an earth-centered universe. A poor Latina immigrant, who works two jobs and has prayed to God for patience to stand in line for fifteen years in order to become a citizen of the United States, might wonder how a wealthy, educated, US-born citizen could possibly interpret her pledge of allegiance to her new country as idolatry. A pacifist Christian in his attempt to follow Jesus in refusing to kill another human being—even to save the life of an innocent victim—might wonder why a just-war Christian would question such ideological commitment as idolatrous. And so the throwing of stones begins.

A singular, unified view of reality over which the one and only God rules can invite a totalizing, totalitarian temptation to defend one's god (belief), violently, or for that matter, nonviolently but arrogantly. The arguments about idolatry are often disguises about

claims to truth over against accusations of falsehood. History is replete with examples of such ruthless defense writ large. My God versus your god. On the other hand, if God is the one and only, then to claim God exclusively as one's very own is the height of self-regard and clearly under condemnation according to Deuteronomy's criteria of idolatry. The beauty of a monotheistic worldview is that reality is imbued with a coherence, an integrity, a wholeness, a purpose—and at the same time it is also relativized by the one and only God, so that any projection of one's own narrow, parochial, denomi(national) god onto the universe comes perilously close to disobeying the first commandment.

We who call ourselves Christian, a people of the Book, stand under the burden and blessing of Mosaic monotheism. As we have seen, for a lot of reasons, some not of our own making, it is nearly impossible to obey the first commandment with absolute consistency. And perhaps that is why God gave it to us. Evidence within and outside scripture shows how people then and now are ceaselessly tempted to devote our lives to myriad aims, things, ideas, beliefs, and transcendent projections, as if they had ultimate claim on our lives. Ironically, it took the inclusion in scripture of the book of Job to relativize the retributive justice of the book of Deuteronomy that had all but assumed its own divine status above the one and only God it so wonderfully proclaimed and nearly displaced. In dethroning the Deuteronomic ideology, the book of Job warns us never to confuse even the most sacred and holy and biblical faith claim with the one and only Claimant deserving our worship. For Mennonite Christians, Job may caution against placing the peace of Christ above a relationship with Christ, or reifying pacifism above Christ, our Peace. In the end, sequence matters.

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Earlier I suggested that idolatry is "whatever the heart clings to or relies on for *ultimate* security."[11] This definition of the nature of idolatry allows us to negotiate in the spirit of humility a sequence of allegiances, bearing in mind our ultimate commitment to the one God over and above and in us all. It is perilous indeed to

suggest that other believers are somehow idolatrous when they differ from us on this or that sequence of allegiances, under the same sovereign domain of the one and only God.

If the *Shema* invites us to defend God's unique status as God, to work out a sequence of allegiances befitting such a God, it equally invites us to defend the only or ultimate feeling worthy of God, the feeling of love (Deut. 6:5): "You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might." Indeed, describing our relationship with the one and only God as one of love is a defining contribution of the book of Deuteronomy. When approached by scribes arguing over what the greatest commandment in scripture might be, Jesus simply quoted the *Shema*, in effect arguing that to love God is the greatest commandment of all (Mark 12:28–34). In the end, it is a comfort to know that God's love ultimately overshadows God's anger against idolatry by a factor of five hundred to one (Deut. 5:9–10). Such audacious love is the antidote to the work of fine-tuning and the inevitable falling-short of living up to whatever sequence of allegiances we create.

Notes

[1] See G. K. Beale, *We Become What We Worship: A Biblical Theology of Idolatry* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2008).

[2] Even if one sets aside this evolutionary sequence for that of an originating monotheism that succumbs to a fallen polytheism or paganism recovered by an Abrahamic then Mosaic exclusive monotheism, the difficulties of defining idolatry and the practice of a recovered monotheism are in no way diminished.

[3] Jan Assmann coined the phrase the "Mosaic distinction" to describe an early version of monotheism borrowed from Egypt that continued to influence subsequent iterations of monotheism in Israel (Jan Assmann, *The Price of Monotheism*, trans. Robert Savage [Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010]). In *God in Translation: Deities in Cross-Cultural Discourse in the Biblical World* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2008), 10, Mark S. Smith says such a "Mosaic distinction" could only ever be fully claimed during the late biblical and postbiblical canonical formation period.

[4] Beale adds the word *ultimate* to Luther's definition. See Beale, *We Become What We Worship*, 17.

[5] Adapted by Brian S. Rosner from Reinhold Niebuhr's definition, in "The Concept of Idolatry," *Themelios* 24, no. 3 (May 1999): 24.

[6] Deut. 4:15–35; 5:6–10; 6:4, 14–15; 7:2–5, 16, 25–26; 9:12–21; 11:16, 28; 12:2–3, 30–31; 13:1–15; 16:21–22; 17:2–3; 18:9–14; 20:17–18; 27:15; 28:36; 29:17–18, 25; 30:17; 31:16–20, 29; 32:16–21.

[7] For what follows, see James E. Brenneman, *On Jordan's Stormy Banks: Lessons from the Book of Deuteronomy* (Scottdale, PA: Herald Press: 2004), 17–18.

[8] See Dennis T. Olson, *Deuteronomy and the Death of Moses: A Theological Reading*,

Overtures to Biblical Theology (Minneapolis: Augsburg/Fortress, 1994), 50–51, esp. n3. I am not persuaded by Tracy J. McKenzie's argument in *Idolatry in the Pentateuch: An Intertextual Strategy* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2010), 115–17, that the Pentateuch as a whole, and Deuteronomy in particular, portrays the rival gods of the nations as nondeities, mere images and false idols. Mark S. Smith, *God in Translation*, 146–47, argues otherwise.

[9] Mark S. Smith, *God in Translation*, 157–65. See also Irving Zeitlin, *Ancient Judaism: Biblical Criticism from Max Weber to the Present* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 1984), 58–59.

[10] For much of what follows, see Olson, *Deuteronomy and the Death of Moses*, 52–61.

[11] See n4 above.

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The first commandments of the Decalogue and the battle against idolatry in the Old Testament

Waldemar Janzen

Early in World War II, Britain sent the battleships *Prince of Wales* and *Repulse* to stop the Japanese advance into Malaya. Although lacking air cover, this force set out confidently on its first mission in the South China Sea. An American war correspondent aboard the *Repulse* noted with surprise how confidently the British dismissed the danger from air attacks. Statements like "Those Japs can't fly" were common. The correspondent said to one naval officer: "You British . . . always underestimate the enemy. . . . It seems to me the best thing is to figure the enemy is twice as good as you are and twice as smart, and then you make preparations in advance." Soon the Japanese planes attacked, and in a matter of hours the proud British capital ships lay at the bottom of the sea.[1]

North American Christians tend to take the struggle against idolatry lightly. They are therefore vulnerable to the onslaught of idolatry on their Christian faith.

Don't underestimate the enemy

North American Christians, unfamiliar with the significance and power of idols in the form of images of gods in wood, stone, or metal in Israel's ancient Near Eastern context and elsewhere, tend to take the struggle against idolatry equally lightly. They are therefore as vulnerable to the onslaught of idolatry on their Christian faith as that British naval force was to Japanese air attacks.

The Old Testament, by contrast, tells us of Israel's intense struggle against idol worship through many centuries. Idolatry is the main form of covenant breaking in the Old Testament, and therefore the greatest threat to Israel's central relationship to God. We need only remind ourselves of the archetypal story of the golden calf (Exod. 32); the pattern of idolatry, judgment, and repentance in Judges (for example, Judg. 3:7–11); the religious decline under Solomon (1 Kings 11:1–13); the "sin of Jeroboam,"

that is, the introduction of heterodox worship involving calf images, continued by his successors (for example, 1 Kings 12:28–32; 14:14–16; 16:25–26); Elijah's contest with the priests of Baal on Mt. Carmel (1 Kings 18); and the understanding of Israel's and Judah's defeat and deportation by the Assyrians and Babylonians as a result of their history of idolatry (see, for example, 2 Kings 17:7–23; Jer. 25:4–11).[2]

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Only after the Babylonian exile (sixth century BC) did monotheistic worship of Yahweh/the LORD gradually become the increasingly unchallenged faith among returned exiles and of orthodox Judaism.[3]

In the forefront of this struggle stand the preexilic and exilic prophets. But what about their frequent, apparently simplistic ridicule of idols, as for example, in Habakkuk 2:18–19?

> *What use is an idol*
> *once its maker has shaped it—*
> *a cast image, a teacher of lies?*
> *For its maker trusts in what has been made,*
> *though the product is only an idol that cannot speak!*
> *Alas for you who say to the wood, 'Wake up!'*
> *to silent stone, 'Rouse yourself!'*
> *Can it teach?*
> *See, it is gold and silver plated,*
> *and there is no breath in it at all.*[4]

Yet to see here a naive confidence that underestimates the threat seriously misunderstands the prophets' intent. The text quoted, for example, stands in a cycle of alas/woe oracles announcing divine judgment on various perpetrators of grave crimes, such as cruel oppression, exploitation, and bloodshed, who will become the objects of taunt and ridicule (Hab. 2:6). That idolatry stands last in this series may indicate its special gravity. Here and in similar prophetic taunts we have a battle cry, not a confident pronouncement about the harmlessness of idols.[5]

The foundational Decalogue texts

The foundational texts for the Old Testament's imageless worship of God/Yahweh alone are, first of all, the first two commandments of the Decalogue (Hebrew: "Ten Words") in Exodus 20:2–6 and Deuteronomy 5:6–10.[6] While the Exodus and Deuteronomy versions of the Ten Commandments diverge at some points, they are virtually identical in the verses quoted here, according to the NRSV (with the Exodus verse references):

> *2 I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; 3you shall have no other gods before me.*
>
> *4 You shall not make for yourself an idol, whether in the form of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. 5You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I the LORD your God am a jealous God, punishing children for the iniquity of parents, to the third and the fourth generation of those who reject me, 6but showing steadfast love to the thousandth generation of those who love me and keep my commandments.*

Only a few exegetical comments can be offered here.[7]

1. The Ten Commandments are preceded by Yahweh's self-introduction (Exod. 20:2a), which claims Israel's obedient loyalty to Yahweh on the basis of his saving activity experienced by Israel (Exod. 1–18). This self-introduction is often treated separately as a prologue, and even if we follow here the tradition of associating it most closely with the first commandment, we must remember that its claim underlies every one of the subsequent commandments. Patrick Miller says it well: "The ethic of the Commandments is as much an ethic of gratitude and response as it is an ethic of obligation and duty."[8]

2. On this basis, God says to his covenant people: "You shall have no other gods before me" (Exod. 20:3). For the phrase translated here as "before," and in a footnote "Or *besides*," the Hebrew uses a somewhat ambiguous set of two words: *'al-panay* ("upon/against my face"). Why not simply say "There are no other gods?" Are we dealing here with henotheism—the worship of one

particular god without denying the existence of others—rather than outright monotheism? Our consideration of the covenant context (below) will show that such a view is untenable. What we have here might be called implicit or practical monotheism. Our text is not a dictionary entry or a religio-philosophical formulation interested in defining different isms. God says, as it were: "Out of my sight with other gods *(imposed) upon my presence*!"[9]

3. "Other gods" is one of the most frequently occurring biblical terms for the gods of other nations tempting Israel to idolatry. The images were not always conceived of as being fully coextensive with the gods, but they represented the gods' presence realistically. Consequently they could be manipulated, through offerings, incantations, processions, and the like, to do the worshipers' will.

4. The second commandment (Exod. 20:4–6) forbids Israel to make such idols.[10] In addition to this thematic linkage of the first and second commandments, they are also grammatically connected through the pronoun "them" in verse 5 (two times), whose plural antecedent must be "other gods" (v. 3). These "other gods" or "idols" are characterized here as features of God's created world (v. 4). The "other nations" of the ancient Near East conceived of their deities in the form of living creatures (human or nonhuman), often representing aspects of the cosmos (heavenly bodies, sky, land, sea, rivers, storm, for example). To worship them in their manufactured statues/icons would be to divinize creation rather than the Creator. We are not told explicitly here that the prohibition of images also includes images of God/Yahweh. That it definitely does so will become clear when we discuss the Decalogue's narrative context (below).

The characterization of God as "jealous" must be read in the covenant context, where jealousy expresses God's burning love that tolerates only an exclusive bond between the partners.

5. The characterization of God as "jealous" (v. 5), but even more merciful (v. 6), must be read in the covenant context, where jealousy expresses God's burning love that tolerates only an exclusive bond between the partners. The correlative human love for God is characterized in the *Shema* (Deut. 6:4). To direct such love and devotion to any other god/idol is idolatry. Idolatry

cannot be isolated; it affects future generations (Exod. 20:5), but God's "steadfast love" reaches many times further than God's wrath (Exod. 20:6).

Brian Rosner points to the marriage bond as the most dominant biblical metaphor for this intense and exclusive relationship between God and Israel, which logically leads to the designation of idolatry as adultery, and God's vehement reaction to it as the jealousy of a betrayed husband. The frequent practice of sexual rites in connection with worship by ancient Near Eastern nations undoubtedly contributed to this recourse to the marital bond and its breaking, especially in prophetic texts (for example, Hosea 1–3; compare also Exod. 34:11–16). Rosner names the political realm as the source of a second metaphorical conception. In this perspective, Yahweh, Israel's rightful king, will not tolerate Israel's, his subject's, turning to other nations, such as Egypt or Assyria, for help and protection. But reliance on Israel's own kings can also be idolatrous (compare 1 Sam. 8:6–9).[11] Common to both models is the element of exclusivity.[12]

There is a close connection between the third commandment (Exod. 20:7//Deut. 5:11) and the fourth commandment (Exod. 20:8–11//Deut. 5:12–15) and the first two commandments, since they also pertain to the right understanding and worship of God. This is especially true of the "name commandment," forbidding the wrongful use of God's name. Because the name embraces God's identity, and therefore (from the human vantage point) God's revelation, its wrongful use points to a serious jeopardizing of the God-Israel relationship. Like an image, the name of God may have been used for magical purposes. The Sabbath commandment, the only one of the ten directly addressing the nature of proper worship, is no less central to that relationship, but because it also encompasses proper treatment of fellow human beings, Patrick Miller rightly calls it "a crucial bridge" between the preceding and the following commandments.[13]

The Exodus context[14]

In the narrative context of Exodus it is of great significance that Israel breaks the barely concluded covenant through idolatry by constructing an image, a golden calf (Exod. 32:1–6): "He took the gold from them, formed it in a mold, and cast an image of a calf;

and they said, 'These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!' When Aaron saw this, he built an altar before it" (vv. 4–5). Although this is outright idolatry, Aaron, apparently in an attempt at damage control, adds this proclamation: "Tomorrow shall be a feast to the LORD [Yahweh]" (v. 5). This raises a question: was the calf meant to be a pedestal for Yahweh, rather than an image of Yahweh? The reaction of God, however, immediately rules out any significance of such a distinction (compare vv. 7–8).

Israel's idolatry occurs at the foot of the mountain at the very time when God is instructing Moses at the top about how God wishes to be present among his people in a noniconic form by way of the tabernacle and its rituals. This idolatry immediately cancels the covenant relationship, and is symbolized by Moses's breaking of the tablets of the covenant (Exod. 32:19). Only the persistent intercession of Moses moves the LORD to renew the covenant (Exod. 34), thereby giving permission to build the tabernacle. Just as there was no time of innocence for humanity between humanity's creation and fall, there was no time of a covenant-observing Israel between the covenant's conclusion and its breaking. An ongoing covenant relationship could only be one based on God's grace. In the tabernacle, the presence of God in the holy of holies was marked by a throne-space above the mercy seat covering the ark of the covenant, and flanked by two cherubim, but a throne without the image of a god where ancient nations would have expected one.[15] Thus covenant and idolatry are negatively correlated in Exodus (and elsewhere); they cannot coexist.

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The Deuteronomy context

In the Bible's canonical narrative, the book of Deuteronomy prepares Israel, after a generation's wandering in the wilderness (Leviticus, Numbers), for the new and different tasks and challenges of living faithfully in the promised land that lies ahead.[16] Moses, having reviewed this period of wandering (Deut. 1–4),

turns to the covenant concluded at Sinai (Deut. 5:1–5), beginning with the text of the Ten Commandments (Deut. 5:6–21), interpreted in the section on the foundational Decalogue texts (above). What new light does their Deuteronomic context shed on them?

The Decalogue in Deuteronomy is the basis for Moses's impassioned appeal to his people to keep their covenantal obligations in the land the LORD will give them. The central challenge will be to return God's "jealous" covenant love by fervent and unswerving allegiance and devotion to God alone.

This total and exclusive devotion is almost immediately expressed in the form of the *Shema* (Literally, "Hear . . . !"), which became Israel's central confession: "Hear, O Israel: The LORD is our God, the LORD alone. You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might" (Deut. 6:4–5). That will not be easy in view of the many impending contacts with other nations and their gods. Therefore the battle against idolatry will be not only crucial but difficult. Covenant breaking, especially through serving other gods—that is, idolatry—will incur God's severe judgment. Yet God's blessing and goodness will be there for Israel in great abundance (see Deut. 5:8–10, and the blessings and curses in chapter 28).

Especially problematic for Christians is the extent to which the battle against idolatry, as presented in Deuteronomy, often takes the form of holy war against peoples of other faiths in order to destroy them. Dean McBride asks the crucial question for us: "Can we appreciate [the Deuteronomic theologians'] criteria without condoning the violent measures that they proposed to safeguard orthodox Yahwism?"[17]

Concluding reflection

What is at stake in the Old Testament's fierce and persistent battle against other gods and representations of those gods formed from the stuff of the created world? The short answer is: everything that biblical faith proclaims as good news or gospel!

If Israel's deliverance from Pharaoh had been accomplished by an even more powerful neighbouring ruler, or by Israel's own fighting, the whole exodus story would have played itself out on the level of inner-worldly power struggle.[18] Only by experiencing

it as the leading of the Creator of the universe—a transcendent power/love, although the Old Testament does not use such abstract, philosophical terms—could Israel truly worship that God.

When, at the end of the Babylonian exile, the empire established by Nebuchadnezzar was overthrown by the Persian Emperor Cyrus, the Judean exiles had learned not to elevate Cyrus to divine status. Nor would they later elevate Alexander the Great, or the Roman emperors who demanded it.

Our ultimate allegiance today is also claimed by immanent, this-worldly powers and forces: political states and empires; ideologies such as Marxism, fascism, capitalism, but also democracy if it makes imperial claims; sports, movies, and other forms of entertainment, including music; academic disciplines, such as the natural and social sciences, but also rigid theological systems that attempt to fully explain God's inherently mysterious nature. In sum, any aspect of creation can become idolatrous.

Only a reality that transcends this world, that is not merely a part of it but comprehends the whole, can keep us from according ultimate allegiance to inner-worldly powers with their claims and counterclaims, often played out in violent confrontations.

Only a reality that transcends this world, that is not merely a part of it but comprehends the whole, can keep us from according ultimate allegiance to inner-worldly powers with their claims and counterclaims, often played out in violent confrontations. Such a transcendent reality remains by definition mysterious but allows us through revelatory signs to "see" its benevolent face. Everything else that lays claim to our total allegiance is idolatry.

As Israel discovered, it is not easy to resist eating from the tree of knowledge. We still find it hard to resist overstepping our God-set human boundaries. Nor is it easy even to become aware that we are doing so, when we elevate our own ideas and works to ultimate status and worship them—and thereby ultimately ourselves. And if we do that, God's jealous love could give us over to our own devices, to our "hardening of hearts" (Isa. 63:17),[19] if God's even greater love would not reach out to touch these hardened hearts (Jer. 31:31–34).

Notes

[1] Cecil Brown, "Tragedy in the China Sea," in *Combat: The War with Japan*, ed. Don Congdon (New York: Dell, 1962), 15, 43. This story is illustrative of battle dynamics; it implies no characterization on my part of any nation as righteous or idolatrous.

[2] Some scholars today hold that these judgments of idolatry are retroactive, reflecting the impact of Deuteronomic/Deuteronomistic reformers of late preexilic and exilic times, while historically, premonarchic and preexilic Israel was freely using varieties of images and worship forms that were later considered idolatrous. It is true that earlier Israel was more open to using images and other sacred objects (trees, pillars, memorial stones, etc.)—the very reason for the prophets' fierce indictments—but from my perspective, the battle against any syncretism and image use began in very early times.

[3] In the Diaspora, however, Jews living in Gentile contexts and Gentile Christian converts continued the struggle.

[4] For similarly derisive passages see Isa. 44:9–20; Ps. 115:4–8; 135:15–18; Jer. 10:3–5; Hosea 8:4–6.

[5] One is reminded of modern election campaigns that resort to caricature and satire when the battle gets fiercest.

[6] Following the counting used in most Protestant churches, which Mennonites have generally also adopted. For good reasons, others (among them Roman Catholics and Lutherans), consider verses 3–6 to be one commandment, and divide verse 17 into two to maintain the total of ten.

[7] For my fuller exposition, see Waldemar Janzen, *Exodus*, Believers Church Bible Commentary (Waterloo, ON, and Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 2000), 250–85.

[8] Patrick D. Miller, *The Ten Commandments* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), 16. This work is the fullest and most helpful recent treatment I know of (for Christians) of the Ten Commandments.

[9] The italicized words are borrowed from S. Dean McBride's solution to the apparent ambiguity of the Hebrew *'al-panay*, in his article "The Essence of Orthodoxy: Deuteronomy 5:6–10 and Exodus 20:2–6," *Interpretation* 60, no. 2 (April 2006): 143. McBride points out that God's "face" often refers to God's presence (compare the Aaronic blessing, Num. 6:24–26). This command, in effect, "prohibits allowing 'other gods' or their iconic surrogates to obtrude between Israel and the sublime, beneficent presence of Yahweh" (146). Such surrogates include statues of gods, but also sacred items such as altars, trees, sacred pillars or poles; whatever is meant to represent a god in the created order (144–46). There is a certain fluidity here; some sacred trees, memorial stones, or worship accessories (as in the tabernacle and temple) are not rejected in biblical orthodoxy.

[10] The phrase "idol, whether in the form of" in verse 4 (NRSV) combines a Hebrew phrase that can also be rendered by two parallel nouns: "a sculptured image or any likeness" (JPS). That is reminiscent of God's decision "Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness" (Gen. 1:26), but the Hebrew words underlying that passage are different from those in the second commandment. Nevertheless, an intriguing connection seems to exist here; see Waldemar Janzen, *Still in the Image: Essays in Biblical Theology and Anthropology* (Newton, KS: Faith and Life Press, 1982), 51–60.

[11] To the extent that the formal resemblance of covenant texts to ancient Near Eastern suzerainty treaties is recognizable, which seems to be the case at least in Deuteronomy, this connection would underscore the propriety of the king/suzerain–Israel/subject bond as metaphorical context for covenant keeping or breaking.

[12] Brian S. Rosner, "The Concept of Idolatry," *Themelios* 24, no. 3 (May 1999): 21–30.

[13] Miller, *The Ten Commandments*, 117. For further comment, see Janzen, *Exodus*, 250–85.
[14] For my fuller interpretation, see Janzen, *Exodus*, 378–414.
[15] For an extensive presentation of the tabernacle, its structure, theology, and history, see Waldemar Janzen, "Tabernacle," in *The New Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, ed. Katharine Doob Sakenfeld (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2006–2009) 5: 447–58.
[16] That a complex process of transmission lies behind this loosely coherent narrative is assumed here and should be considered where necessary.
[17] McBride, "The Essence of Orthodoxy," 133 (part of motto). Of course, the same applies to other Old Testament texts, including the violent conquest of the land under Joshua (Josh. 1–12), Elijah's execution of the priests of Baal and Asherah (1 Kings 16:40), and Josiah's reformation (2 Kings 23:20), just to mention some salient examples. An intriguing step in the direction suggested by McBride is taken by R. W. L. Moberly, when he cautiously argues that *herem* in Deuteronomy, and perhaps beyond, had possibly become a metaphor for fidelity, no longer requiring actual killing. An analogous development can be seen in the transformation of "sacrifice," employed freely in the church now without implying the slaughtering of animals. See R. W. L. Moberly, "Toward an Interpretation of the Shema," in *Theological Exegesis: Essays in Honor of Brevard S. Childs*, ed. Christopher Seitz and Kathryn Greene-McCreight (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999), 124–44.
[18] The latter, of course, is the Marxist interpretation.
[19] For the inherent connection between idolatry and the recurrent biblical theme of "hardening of heart," see Edward P. Meadors, *Idolatry and the Hardening of Heart :A Study in Biblical Theology*" (New York: T&T Clark International, 2006).

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Money: Master or servant?

J. R. Burkholder

No servant can be slave to two masters; for either he will hate the first and love the second, or he will be devoted to the first and think nothing of the second. You cannot serve God and money. That's the way Matthew 6:24 reads in The New English Bible.

But generations of Bible readers had to go through a translation smokescreen in order to get the full impact of that basic statement. Translators of the King James Bible and the RSV carried along the original Aramaic word *mammon* ("money" or "wealth"). They seem to have been reluctant to come right out and say we face such a stark choice—God or money. That untranslated Aramaic word enabled us for a time to create in our imaginations an image of a false god, Mammon—another name for the devil, as some readers thought. It was just too blunt to call money God's enemy. Yet that is the way Jesus puts it.

Jesus doesn't tell people that you should not serve two masters, that it's not a good idea. No, it is simply a straightforward declarative statement: you cannot!

A second thing we should notice is this text's form as a simple descriptive statement. Jesus doesn't tell people that you should not serve two masters, that it's not a good idea. No, it is simply a straightforward declarative statement: you cannot! In Jesus' perception of reality, such divided loyalty is an outright impossibility.

What then is this master called money, this personification of wealth and riches? What does Jesus mean by putting it on a par with God? If we begin by asking what the word *god* means—god with a small "g," not the Lord God of the Hebrew and Christian traditions—there is a sense in which we can say that anything that people view as worthy and powerful can be called a god. From this we get the symbolic meaning of money. Money represents a superhuman force; it's a symbol for great power. Let's not underes-

timate the power of symbols. People live for them; they die for them—words, slogans, a flag.

There definitely is a theology of money in the Bible, and if we take time to check out all the references to money, to wealth, and to riches, we make some sobering discoveries. Jesus and his apostles take a pessimistic view of the money game. Almost without exception, the rich ones are condemned. It is generally assumed that the rich are oppressors. I could find only two places in the New Testament that mention riches in a possibly favorable light. One describes Joseph of Arimathea as a rich man who came forward to claim the body of Jesus for burial. We don't really know what final judgment is made of him, but in this instance the Gospel portrays him sympathetically. Then, in 1 Timothy 6, after an admonition against seeking to become rich, Paul the apostle recognizes that there may be some rich people in the church. But what are they instructed to do? To give away, to share what they have.

What's wrong with money?

Why is money such a problem? What's wrong, in the New Testament view, with being rich in the goods of this world? The first reason we've considered already—the fact that money can become a god, symbolically and actually. Because it represents power, money tempts us to abuse that power, and to seize power is to become a direct rival to God. Wanting to take the place of God is the primordial sin, the temptation that came way back there in the garden: "You shall be like gods." But the attempt to take God's place only lands one on the devil's team.

Second, and closely related, money is not just a symbol of power but actually *is* power. Even in the simple setting of the New Testament, we see concern about the control over others that money makes possible. James warns against the inclination to give special attention to the well-dressed rich man as he comes into the assembly. That would contradict the spirit and example of Jesus. And yet, how well we know that money talks. Those with a fortune can buy out their competitors; they can invest here, and they can withdraw there. They can manipulate corporations, control virtual empires. Money talks; money votes. How seldom is it an expression of compassion and community.

Third is the problem of what one needs to do to become rich. In a world of finite resources, it is mathematically obvious that if some have too much, others have too little. Both the Hebrew prophets and the New Testament apostles seem to take it for granted that the rich get that way by oppressing the poor. Isaiah the prophet said: "Woe to those who join house to house, who add field to field," until there is no room for the poor (Isa. 5:8, RSV). James says flatly, "Is it not the rich who oppress you?" (James 2:6). He thunders out, "The wages of the laborers who mowed your fields, which you kept back by fraud, cry out, and the cries of the harvesters have reached the ears of the Lord of hosts. You have lived on the earth in luxury and in pleasure; you have fattened your hearts in a day of slaughter. You have condemned and murdered the righteous one, who does not resist you" (James 5:4–6). Hard sayings! This analysis seems simplistic—good guys and bad guys. And some will say that it is not good economics, and surely most of us are not conscious of exploiting anyone. But there is no easy way to duck the issue. If the system makes some rich at the expense of others, the Bible does not like it.

The fourth point is that being rich makes us insensitive to the poor. That problem was the focus of Jesus' parable of the rich man and Lazarus. The poor beggar was there every day, but apparently the rich man did not see him until his eyes were opened—too late, on the other side of death. When poverty was "discovered" in America in the 1960s, a prominent newspaper editor, faced with statistics claiming that 17 million desperately poor people were living in America, said flatly, "I don't believe it. I don't know any poor people." He had insulated himself from the poor. That was his problem. It may be ours also. We may recite, "Blessed are the poor," yet it is awfully hard to identify with them. But remember, God does.

The Hebrew prophets and the New Testament apostles seem to take it for granted that the rich get that way by oppressing the poor.

And a fifth point: riches can cause us to forget God completely. The more earthly security we have, the more we depend on ourselves, the less we think about God. That's the situation of the rich fool in Jesus' parable in Luke 12. "I've got the goods. I've got it made." Comfort, money, security, property. And then the voice in the night: "You poor fool!"

In short, the New Testament is bad news for the rich. And who are these rich? There's really no way to avoid the answer. *We are the rich*—by whatever standard of measurement one might want to use. If we begin with the situation of Jesus and his apostles back in Palestine, where most people existed in a subsistence economy, the rich were just those who had a bit more land than they needed for themselves, a few extra cattle, a strong box for their savings. By that standard we are rich.

Wait, you say, that's not our world. Of course it isn't. But let's take our contemporary situation. Most of us are numbed by the statistics reminding us of the huge disparity between the wealth of North America and the poverty of the two-thirds world. We turn away from the guilt-inducing reality, from the fact that our pets receive better food and medical care than most of the world's children, that we are 6 percent of the world's population using 40 percent of the world's resources, and so on. Still—most of us don't feel rich. We worry about rising prices, unpaid bills, by the struggle to balance the budget. We want to reserve the label *rich* for the conspicuously wealthy. The telling point is that *we*—just about all of us—have more wealth than most of those rich men and women in Bible times could have imagined. But the situation of the poor has not changed much in twenty centuries—except that there are an awful lot more of them!

The whole theological and ethical problem is sharply focused in Mark's account of the rich ruler (Mark 10:17–30). We all know the story, so we no longer share the surprise of the disciples when they heard Jesus exclaim: "How hard it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God!" The disciples were amazed. "Then who can be saved?"

We are not amazed anymore, perhaps because we make our peace by setting up a logical formula. Premise: the rich cannot enter the kingdom. Fact: I can enter the kingdom. Therefore, I must not be rich. But suppose you turn the argument around. Use the same premise: the rich cannot enter the kingdom, but begin with another fact: I am rich. Therefore, I cannot enter the kingdom. That seems to be arguing from facts, and where does it leave us? Lost?

Well, not quite, because if you have watched closely, you know that I set up the logic too rigorously. I did not quote Jesus

altogether correctly. He did not say categorically, "The rich cannot enter heaven." But he did say, "How hard!" And the disciples responded in amazement, "Then who can be saved?" "For mortals it is impossible, but not for God." But be careful! Our temptation is to shout so quickly, "Hallelujah! Rich and poor are saved only by the grace of God!"—and forget the whole point of the parable. Jesus was talking about the kingdom—God's kingdom. How hard it is for those who have riches to enter that kingdom, because the values of the kingdom and the values of the person whose god is money just don't come together. In the sphere of God's rule, there is no place for those whose master is money.

We are back where we started: You cannot serve two masters. We shy away from that truth, because just about all the forces and influences in our culture tell us that money is success, power, glory. The Bible points in a different direction. It sees the accumulation of personal wealth as the biggest obstacle to faith, to salvation. The love of money is the root of all evil. It's that simple, and that devastating to our usual assumptions.

We must distinguish between the accumulation of capital for one's personal benefit—those are the riches that the Bible unequivocally condemns—and the accumulation of capital as an economic resource.

Is *money* the problem?

We have been talking about money, but let's be sure we understand that the problem is *not* money in itself. The Bible isn't against money as such; it's against money as a god. The Bible isn't against business but against personal riches. In talking about money and riches, we so often fail to make a fundamental distinction. We must distinguish between the accumulation of capital for one's personal benefit—those are the riches that the Bible unequivocally condemns—and the accumulation of capital as an economic resource, as a productive capacity that may indeed be a tool in the work of God's kingdom—or at least in the enhancement of human welfare.

This is part of the magic of money, its fascinating potential. As Lutheran scholar Otto Piper put it, "Money completely changes its character when it is used for the benefit of others rather than for the multiplication of our own capital."

Taking that as a starting point, we have a whole new orientation on the money and riches problem. With the whole scope of biblical teaching as our framework, we can begin to construct an economics of the kingdom. Our foundation is the Hebrew scriptures' teaching that the earth is the Lord's, that resources are to be distributed equitably (that's the meaning of the Jubilee year in Leviticus 25), and that property must serve the common welfare through human stewardship. The pattern is completed by the emphasis on radical sharing demonstrated in the New Testament community of faith.

The Bible does offer an answer to the money problem, and that answer has two parts, a *what* and a *how*, an end and a means. The what, the goal, is the kingdom of God: seek first God's kingdom and God's justice (Matt. 6:33). In these words Jesus sums up that whole section of teaching on money. How then do we put first God's kingdom and God's justice? By completely turning around the problem we began with: to making money a *servant* instead of a master.

Making money a servant

Money can indeed be a servant. The marvelous powers and properties that give it such a potential for evil, for usurping the place of God, can also be turned completely around, if money is kept in place as a servant rather than a master. To accomplish this we must understand the instrumental character of money.

Money as an instrument is a fascinating subject. It is a tool adaptable to all kinds of purposes. We know its use as a measuring rod, a scorecard, a valuing mechanism. We scarcely give a second thought to its power of flexibility and transferability, turning time, talent, and energy into a medium that transcends the ordinary limits of time and space and personality. It can be projected into the future, transformed into something completely new and different.

Money operates in a context of trust. It can only function in an atmosphere of confidence, where society is relatively healthy and stable. When a society is chaotic, money becomes worthless, and people are forced to return to a barter system. In today's international money economy, despite its imperfections, amazing transactions can be carried out. Think of the network of trustwor-

thy relationships that are involved when you use a credit card in Tokyo and pay the bill weeks later back home. This network stretches over cultural, linguistic, and political boundaries. Money can indeed be a symbol of the universal community.

The Bible's answer to the money problem includes a *what* and a *how*. The what is the kingdom of God: seek first God's kingdom and God's justice. The how is by making money a servant instead of a master.

Whether or not we admit it, money talks, money votes, money controls. But precisely because of its power, money can also *liberate*. In human economic terms, nothing has quite the freedom potential that money does. Give a poor peasant some tools, or even a mule or a tractor, and you may have expanded her life a bit. Although she may have only limited possibilities for the use of those tools, when you give her money, you also transfer to her the power to make choices.

This glimpse of the marvelous power of money suggests the reason for the biblical warnings. Any instrument with such tremendous power represents a serious temptation, a false god. To set the priorities in order, Jesus brings his discussion on money and property in Matthew 6 to a fitting climax, with these words: "Set your mind on God's kingdom and [God's] justice before everything else, and all the rest will come to you as well" (NEB).

A dangerous servant

Money can indeed be a servant, but it is a dangerous servant. It has such amazing potentialities that it requires a master big enough to control it—or else the servant may overthrow the master and reverse their roles. Here is the real heart of the problem of personal riches, the reason the whole New Testament speaks against accumulation of personal riches. Something about money resists the servant role. Unless the master is truly great enough to be a master, the demonic power takes over.

I believe that it is next to impossible for one person alone to be master of money in a Christian way. My isolated and selfish ego is not adequate for the task. If I attempt to master money on my own, those superhuman demonic qualities will assert themselves and again money will become the master. Only God's kingdom and God's justice can be a big enough purpose, a worthy enough

cause for the final mastering of money. If we are to escape the demonic captivity to money and riches, we must recover the biblical perspective that property must serve the common welfare, and that sharing is the Christian lifestyle.

What might it mean, concretely, to place *all* our money—not just the portion we give to the church—in the role of servant to God's kingdom and God's justice? That's a large topic for another occasion. Here I can only drop some hints.

For example, what can we do to reverse our societal tendency to indulge private greed at the expense of public need? Analysis of the facts shows us that our real problems are largely in the public realm—pollution, mass transport, delivery of adequate health care, conservation of resources—but how few of us look beyond our own interests!

How can we use money so that our business, our capital, whatever resources we have, are actually serving the kingdom of God rather than promoting the accumulation of private wealth? How can we go further with some of the models we have, such as Koinonia Partners or other economic-sharing schemes? What about agencies such as Mennonite Economic Development Associates, for development in the two-thirds world?

These are tasks for hardheaded economists; they are challenges for technologically sophisticated people who care about the issues. I have argued that the only answer to our problem of material riches—a problem that leads to spiritual poverty—is to redirect those riches so that they in turn become the answer to the world's problem, the problem of material poverty and spiritual darkness. Our money—all of it—must be totally devoted to God's kingdom and God's justice, for only in that way can money become a blessed servant instead of a demonic master.

About the author

As an ethicist, J. R. Burkholder (Goshen, Indiana) has always been concerned with how money was collected, distributed, and spent, at both the personal and the national level. "Money: Master or Servant?" was published in *Gospel Herald* in October 1974 and later in *Sojourners*. Burkholder was a professor of religion at Goshen College at the time. The article is abridged from *Prophetic Peacemaking: Selected Writings of J. R. Burkholder*, edited by Keith Graber Miller.

Contemporary images of idolatry

Hippolyto Tshimanga

When God called Moses from within the burning bush and sent him to Pharaoh to bring out the children of Israel from Egypt, Moses was alert enough to say to God, "Here I am coming to the children of Israel, and I will say to them, 'Your fathers' God sent me to you.' And if they say to me, 'What is his name?' what shall I say to them?" God responded to Moses with a series of strange phrases: "I am who I am," "I am." He said further to Moses: "You shall say this to the children of Israel: YHWH, your fathers' God, Abraham's God, Isaac's God, and Jacob's God has sent me to you. This is my name forever, and this is how I am to be remembered for generation after generation" (Exod. 3:1–15).

Exegetes, both Jews and Christians, tell us that this strange series of four Hebrew letters, transliterated into Roman letters as YHWH, is actually a causative form of the verb "to be." The verb tense, here, is imperfect and it cannot be limited to a past, present, or even future time. The nearest translation of the name YHWH to English would be "he causes to be."[1]

The tragedy today is that the church has not fully comprehended the fact that many of the social structures that make up our societal system are integrated around idolatrous values.

The God who causes to be is also the God who spoke these prohibitive words: "I am YHWH, your God, who brought you out from the land of Egypt, from a house of slaves. You shall not have other gods before my face. You shall not make a statue or any form that is in the skies above or that is in the earth below or that is in the water below the earth. You shall not bow to them, and you shall not serve them" (Exod. 20:1–5). Bowing to gods other than YHWH is what Jewish and Christian believers call idolatry. In *Amazing Grace*, Kathleen Norris rightly writes, "Maybe God addresses the problem of idolatry at the outset of a new relationship with Israel

because human beings are incurable and remarkably inventive idol makers."[2]

Idolatry today

Most of us, in the Western world, think of idolatry as something far away from our way of life. We know of golden calves and of fertility rites as mentioned in the Bible. We have read ethnological tales and heard missionaries' narrations about "primitive" African, South American, or Asian tribal people who still make images or sculpt statues and dance to worship them.

Indeed, idolatry as a belief system still exists in many forms and many countries, mostly among sections of the population with less formal education. It is present, for instance, in the *brujería/ hechicería, santería, and makumba*[3] of South American people, and it is alive in the practices of the Bantu people of Central and Southern Africa who believe in and fear the vital forces and powers inherent in animism and other occult practices.[4]

But idolatry is also alive all around us in the Western world. Idolatry is alive in the resurgence of occult sciences all over the West. An ever-increasing number of people in North America and Europe consult psychics, tarot readers or other occult media before making any important decision. In "The Church of Everywhere," Cole Moreton writes, "There are only about 240,000 practicing pagans in the UK at most, but the influence of their ideas on mainstream culture is far wider than that."[5] Moreton explains that a significant number of people in the UK admit that they sometimes go up a hill or down to the beach at dawn on May Day to tune in to the universe. Moreton also indicates that in the UK, the Pagan Federation includes all kind of believers, from Wiccans to worshipers of Norse gods, and all you have to do to belong is agree with three simple ideas: that there is a higher power, that the earth is sacred, and that everyone has the right to follow their own path, as long as they harm no one else.[6]

A second idolatrous practice of our time, the most pervasive, is manifest in the financial capitalism system. In fact, financial markets as embodied by modern banks, fiduciary institutions, and insurance companies have become the new idols of our time. In the past, the word *economy* (from the Greek *oikonomia,* referring to norms for house management) used to refer to all activities

related to the production of goods and services in a particular geographic area or region. This is how people such as Adam Smith, the eighteenth-century philosopher of capitalism, understood it, because Smith explained that "businesses exist to serve the general welfare. Profit is the means not the end. It is the reward a business receives for serving the general welfare." According to Smith, "when business fails to serve the general welfare, it forfeits its right to existence."[7]

For decades, market economy activities were mainly aimed at attracting money from customers and then channelling it in responsible ways to businesses that contributed to a sustainable society. Such institutions were disciplined and tightly regulated, so that they would use that money to invest in people's productive capacity. In other words, these institutions only provided loans to people or companies that could prove they would use these loans to produce goods and services in a durable way. These companies offered products that stimulated sustainability in society, while reducing poverty and improving living standards.

Today's financial markets mostly invest in controlled assets, where money can produce money. Financial market specialists teach that stocks are what offer people the best return over the long haul. In his article "The Church of Warren Buffett: Faith and Fundamentals in Omaha," Mattathias Schwartz describes the philosophy of financial markets, as taught by Buffett, the most articulate exponent of American capitalism, who happens to be CEO and chairman of Berkshire Hathaway and one of the richest men in the world. Schwartz writes: "The [siren] song goes something like this: Common sense is worth more than inside information. Stocks offer the best returns over the long run. Follow a few simple rules and your money can grow 10, even 20 percent annually.'"[8] The system is based on a buy-and-hold philosophy, and "the value investor is . . . a dedicated transcendentalist" who acts as though he sees the invisible. He ignores "the tumultuous swings in price and focuses on 'intrinsic value,' the present value of all future profits. . . . He believes the true value of a thing is definite, invisible, and knowable only through private reflection."

Financial markets as embodied by modern banks, fiduciary institutions, and insurance companies have become the new idols of our time.

The value investor believes in endless felicitous growth. What we all want is to be like Buffett, who no longer needs money to spend. Like him, we want to reach that point of simply sitting in our room, watching our money grow. Buffett encourages us to follow his example and continue to pour our money into stocks even in times of trouble. If a guru like Buffett says it, why wouldn't the majority of us lesser mortals want to follow suit?[9]

It is common sense to build some financial security against the unpredictable in these times. Financial security becomes problematic when money becomes an end in itself, when investors and capitalists are sitting on record stockpiles of cash instead of investing it in business to provide jobs for those who need them. That is when financial capitalism becomes an idolatrous system. As a matter of fact, many of us who participate even modestly in the system may be tempted to have a bottomless faith in financial capitalism, and the danger is that we can become obsessed by our financial security to the point of walling off our heart to the needs of people around us. Jesus diagnoses this problem as *sclerocardia*: the hardening, blocking, barricading, or shutting down of one's heart (see, for example, Mark 3:5; 6:52; 8:17).

Idolatry within the family also manifests itself in our dreams for our children. We are prone to try to raise our children so that they will respond to our idea of how they should be.

A third idolaltry of our time, a more subtle one, is in the realm of the family. Modern men—more than women—tend to depersonalize their partners, turning them into objects of devotion. As Kathleen Norris observes, "Young people grow up understanding that love means possessing and being possessed. It is a consumer model of love, an 'If I can't have her, nobody will' psychology that all too often turns deadly." Norris notes that "nearly half the murders in North Dakota, for example, are 'domestic' in origin."[10] And other parts of the world are similarly affected. Today the latest common crime among male young adults in Botswana, a country until now known for its pacifism, is "passion killing." Young men invest so much in their girlfriends that they can't bring themselves to let them go when things go sour. I can't help but conclude with Norris that "many men, and some women, cannot give up the illusion of possessing another person. The idea of that

person—and 'idea' is related etymologically to the word 'idol'—becomes more important, more potent than the actual living creature. It is much safer to love an idol than a real person who is capable of surprising you, loving you and demanding love in return, and maybe one day leaving you."[11]

Idolatry within the family also manifests itself in our dreams for our children. Kahlil Gibran, Lebanese philosopher and poet, once wrote, "Your children are not your children. They are the sons and daughters of Life's longing for itself. . . . You can give them your love but not your thoughts, for they have their own thoughts."[12] Men and women of our time, in contrast, are prone to try to raise our children so that they will respond to our idea of how they should be. When they go out for sports, we push them to perform beyond their abilities, because we want them to be the best. Our devotion to them—our idolatry—is demonstrated in the passion with which we participate in their hockey, football, soccer, and other games from our the seats. The joy, the frustration, and the anger one sees in the stadium makes one wonder which are the real players—the parents or their children. Here again, Norris writes about where such devotion can lead. She tells the story of a Texas mother who hired two people to kill some competitors, so that her daughter could get a place on the high school cheerleading squad.[13]

How does the church address the issue of idolatry today?

All these examples illustrate what Walter Wink calls "soft materialism." While "hard or philosophical materialism" sees the universe as devoid of spirit, the soft variety is associated with consumerism, self-gratification, and to some extent, the absence of spiritual values. As Wink notes, this type of materialism is also the dominant ethos in universities, the media, and our culture as a whole. Where this ethos predominates, the world seems to have no intrinsic meaning or purpose, and therefore no source of right or wrong values—beyond what people create and agree to for the sake of survival and tranquility. Wink also observes that "this materialistic worldview has penetrated deeply even into many religious persons, causing them to ignore the spiritual dimensions of systems or the spiritual resources of faith."[14] I believe this soft materialism is effectively banishing the divine from our society,

replacing the God of the Bible with idols of our creation. Thus this soft materialism is the practical equivalent to atheism, removing God and God's designs from our lives, without supplying a philosophical justification for doing so.

The question now is, how does the church address the issue of idolatry today? One can respond, without fear of being contradicted, that the history of the evangelization of people has at the same time been the history of the church's intervention in human affairs. The church sees its task as preaching a change of worldview (*metanoia*, commonly translated "conversion") not only to individuals but also to human institutions and cultures.

The tragedy today is that the church has not fully comprehended the fact that many of the social structures that make up our societal system are integrated around idolatrous values. Because Christian people themselves have bought into soft materialism, they can't see that this very system and its structures have betrayed the church's divine vocation. Indeed, the church still issues pastoral letters and other statements to remind us of its social doctrine, when difficult and controversial questions arise. And the church, in all its denominational varieties, has always championed charitable work around the globe. But the church seems confused and unable to distinguish between charitable work, which by nature is in the present, and the building of a just society, which is prophetic and a foretaste of the kingdom to come. One is tempted to say that the church has simply not yet moved from the rural society where its teaching constituted the social fabric, to cities and towns where it unwittingly becomes a simple piece of the total social mechanism. It is urgent that we as church seriously engage in that move, and the key to doing so is knowledge of the worldview that governs our lives.

Because Christian people themselves have bought into soft materialism, they can't see that this very system and its structures have betrayed the church's divine vocation.

Wink writes that "understanding worldviews is key to breaking free from the ways the Powers—*understand here "idolatrous structures"*—control people's minds. . . . Naming the Powers identifies our experiences of these pervasive forces that dominate our lives. Unmasking the powers takes away their invisibility, and thus their

capacity to coerce us unconsciously into doing their bidding."[15] The truth is that the church has not yet seriously studied and understood the materialistic worldviews of the society in which we live; therefore the church is unable to refuse to do their bidding, or to engage them in order to bend them back to their divine purposes. Not so long ago, Latin American theologians of liberation, in a collective movement that had a strong following at the grassroots level among the Basic Ecclesial Communities, had begun a serious study of the capitalistic system and its impact on the lives of the poor and downtrodden. They showed us that the *idols of death*—another way of naming principalities and powers—should be regarded not as disembodied spirits inhabiting a metaphysical realm but as real forces that govern real human institutions, structures, and systems.[16] Unfortunately, this theological framework was not in line with the mindset of the Vatican dignitaries, who strongly criticized the writings of these theologians, describing them as infiltrated by socialism. In my view, this discrediting deprived the church of an important tool for the inculturation of the gospel message in society today.

Apart from attempts in South Africa during apartheid, and in the Philippines during the Marcos dictatorship, I know of no other ecclesial, intentional, and collective effort aimed at naming and unmasking the idols of our time.

Apart from some attempts in South Africa during apartheid, and in the Philippines during the Marcos dictatorship, I know of no other ecclesial, intentional, and collective effort aimed at naming and unmasking the idols of our time. The churches as we know them, and many of their pastors, are simply ill equipped for ministry to the men and women in the present. Therefore, it can be unsettling for a pastor to consider that status and unbridled wealth are inappropriate for the followers of Christ. I still remember reading a sentence written by an evangelical missionary pastor, when I was working as a missionary in Latin America some years ago. He put it simply: "It is not easy to be a prophet in evangelical denominations." I have always wondered whether he wanted to say, "You do not bite the hand that feeds you."

I believe that part of the church's role is to spread the seeds of life where other institutions and systems have planted the idols of

death. I also believe that it is the church's vocation to accompany men and women as they struggle in difficult and demanding circumstances to build strong families that respond to God's vision. Church leaders must be convinced that the formation of character hinges more on religious and spiritual teaching than on any other training. Finally, I concur with Wink when he affirms that "it is part of the church's task to remind corporations and business that profit is *not* the 'bottom line,' that as creatures of God they have as their divine vocation the achievement of human well-being (Eph. 3:10). They do not exist for themselves. They were bought with a price (Col. 1:20). They belong to the God who ordains sufficiency for all."[17]

Our God is the "one who causes to be." And our God made us capable of creating institutions and systems that can serve God's humanizing purposes in the world. Alas! These structures willed by God are prone to corruption, because they often put their own interests above the interests of humanity as a whole. However, I agree with Walter Wink in his insistence that "they can be redeemed, because what fell in time can be redeemed in time. . . . God at one and the same time *upholds* a given political or economic system, since some such system is required to support human life; *condemns* that system insofar as it is destructive of fully human life; and *presses for its transformation* into a more humane order."[18]

Notes

[1] See Richard Elliot Friedman, *Commentary on the Torah: With a New English Translation and the Hebrew Tex*t (San Francisco: Harper, 2003), 178.

[2] Kathleen Norris, *Amazing Grace: A Vocabulary of Faith* (New York: Riverhead Books, 1998), 91–92.

[3] These are Hispano-American, Cuban, and Brasilian words for witchcraft. Santería is somehow regarded as religious syncretism. So is the Haitian Voodoo.

[4] These include *buloji/ubolushi/ubuloyi/buroyi/boloi/ubuthi/ubugqwira/donki,* Ciluba (DRC Congo), Cibemba (Zambia), Ndebele and Shona (Zimbabwe), Setswana (Botswana), Zulu and Xhosa (South Africa), and Lingala (DRC Congo) words for witchcraft. Though not always articulated in terms of power, witchcraft is all about vital force and power. Witchcraft is based on the appropriation of somebody's else vital force to increase one's own, in order to become successful or powerful. Destroying somebody else to get where you want to be is part of idolatry.

[5] Cole Moreton, "The Church of Everywhere," *Third Way* 33, no. 3 (April 2010), 26.

[6] This sentiment sounds benign, but if we were all to construct our own values, we might end up being even more incapable of agreeing on basic secular principles of law

and order. The result could lead us into chaos, which can make evil rampant.
[7] Adam Smith, as paraphrased by Walter Wink, *The Powers That Be: Theology for a New Millenium* (New York: Doubleday, 1989), 30.
[8] Mattathias Schwartz, "The Church of Warren Buffett: Faith and Fundamentals in Omaha," *Harper's Magazine*, January 2010; http://www.harpers.org/archive/2010/01/0082783.
[9] This is a judgment not so much against Warren Buffett as an individual as against the system he promotes. In July of 2010 alone, Buffett gave $1.03 billion in shares to charity.
[10] Norris, *Amazing Grace*, 89.
[11] Ibid., 89–90.
[12] Kahlil Gibran, *The Prophet* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1977), 77.
[13] Norris, *Amazing Grace*, 90.
[14] Walter Wink, *The Powers That Be*, 17–18.
[15] Ibid., 14 (my italics).
[16] See ibid., 23–24.
[17] Ibid., 30.
[18] Ibid., 32.

About the author

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Paul on idolatry
Finding fruitful fellowship

Nancy R. Heisey

When Paul received his calling as apostle to the nations/Gentiles, he heard it with ears trained by centuries of Jewish reflection on the gods of the nations. By the first century of the Common Era, Jews had a long history of commenting in their scriptures on their encounters with the theologies of their neighbors. Their pagan neighbors knew Jews as people who remained aloof from much of the public life of their cities and regions.[1] Jews were viewed as misanthropic, because they would not eat with Gentiles or marry them, they carried out strange practices such as circumcision and Sabbath observance, and they resisted participation in public civic events, which almost always had to do with interactions with the deities of their cities and regions. All these behaviors were in some degree the "social embodiment of anti-idolatry."[2] Jewish reflection in many of the earlier texts had discussed the "gods of the nations," but an emerging understanding added that "the gods of the peoples are *idols*" (Ps. 96:5).[3] Prophetic voices from the exile echoed the psalmist's words: "The idols of the nations are silver and gold, the work of human hands" (Ps. 135:15).[4]

The Gospels, focused on a story based in a Jewish context, reflect little about idolatry. In contrast, Paul, whose ministry was among Gentiles, addresses idolatry as a critical matter.

It was the encounter of Jews with the nations that sharpened discussion about and polemic against idolatry. It is striking that the Gospels, focused primarily on a story based in a Jewish context, reflect little about idolatry.[5] In contrast, Paul, nearly all of whose ministry was exercised in settings where Gentiles made up the majority, addresses idolatry as a critical matter. In one of his earliest letters, he comments on the response he hoped for and others observed in the Gentiles who received his message: "For the people of [Macedonia and Achaia] report about us what kind

of welcome we had among you, and how you turned to God from idols, to serve a living and true God" (1 Thess. 1:9).

Yet Paul's letters are not full of direct references to idolatry. Fewer than twenty uses of the root word *idol* and words formed from it are found in them.[6] Three direct references to idolatry are in Paul's nine "vice lists," places where his letters specify the problems from which his hearers need to be liberated.[7] Galatians, an early letter, locates idolatry in a long list that also includes sins such as licentiousness, strife, jealousy, anger, and drunkenness (5:19–21). The other two texts parallel each other, and they identify idolatry as a descriptor of the vice of greed. In Colossians, we hear: "Put to death, therefore, whatever in you is earthly: fornication, impurity, passion, evil desire, and greed (which is idolatry)" (3:5). Ephesians makes this claim more personal, referring to "one who is greedy (that is, an idolater)" (5:5).

Idolatry: The result of failing to recognize and honor God

Before reflecting on why Paul might link greed and idolatry, we must consider two other places in his letters where Paul deals at some length with what idolatry is and why it must be rejected. In Romans, one of his later letters, a text that includes a vice list without the *idol* root in it (1:29–31), Paul gives his most thorough portrayal of the fundamental human crisis—the failure to recognize and honor God, which leads to idolatry.[8] Paul remains clear about the Jewish understanding that God cannot be directly seen or known; his "eternal power and divine nature" are "invisible." Yet Paul insists with his ancestors that God has revealed Godself in creation (1:20).[9] Humans should have been able to see God by looking around them, and were to have responded by giving honor to God. Instead, "they exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling a mortal human being or birds or four-footed animals or reptiles" (1:23).

The order of Paul's argument in this key passage is important. First, humans knew God but did not honor God (1:21); second, "their senseless minds were darkened" (1:21); and third, they became idolatrous. "Perverted relationships and chaos in the social order result from rejecting God. . . . People become like what they worship."[10] The extensive description of behavior that follows reflects Paul's perception of the Roman imperial context in

which his Mediterranean mission was being carried out. Although he had not yet visited Caesar's capital, he knew, as did many, about the exploitative, abusive, and lewd behaviors of the Roman elite.[11]

Yet, shocked as a good Jew would be by Gentile perversions, Paul does not see the problem of idolatry as limited to them. In Romans 2, when his diatribe turns to his compatriot Jews, he pointedly suggests that overt Jewish abhorrence of idolatry hides equally reprehensible behavior (2:22). Indeed, in the development of his argument in chapter 1, he already hints at Israel's own past idolatrous lapses. His description of the idolatry's inception—"they exchanged the glory"—echoes Jeremiah's complaint that Judah had "changed their glory for something that does not profit" (Jer. 2:11). The language of exchange of glory also recalls the Psalms, whose retelling of Israel's story includes the episode of the golden calf (Ps. 106:20).[12] Further, underlining the "all" language pervading the Roman letter,[13] Paul ties the sinfulness of all human societies to the first human being, Adam (as he was known through the biblical creation accounts). The charge that humans "worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator" (Rom. 1:25) offers an ironic twist from the ancient claim that God created *adam* in *God's* image (Gen 1:27). Still further, the charge that humans exchanged the truthfulness of God for a lie (Rom. 1:25) recalls the action of Adam and Eve in taking the serpent's word rather than God's about what would result from eating from the forbidden tree (Gen. 2:17, 3:4–6).[14]

In Romans, one of his later letters, Paul gives his most thorough portrayal of the fundamental human crisis—the failure to recognize and honor God, which leads to idolatry.

Anti-idolatry: Honoring God's community at the table

By the time Paul laid out this theological groundwork in his letter to the Romans, he had decades of missionary experience in encountering and responding to particular situations in which the members of his churches found themselves. In the first of his letters to the Corinthians that is available to us,[15] he offered a priceless look at the everyday questions raised by the encounters of Christ followers living in that cosmopolitan city. Among the

matters that the Corinthians raised with their founding father was what to do about *idolothutōn,* a word usually translated food "sacrificed to idols" (NRSV, NIV), or "idol meat." Chapters 8–10 contain an extensive discussion about idol meat, a conversation with conclusions that seem confusing to many readers, especially because other parts of the New Testament are clear in rejecting the eating of such food by Christ followers.[16] In chapter 8, Paul agrees with those Corinthians who argue that only one God exists, with the implication that no harm could come from eating food sacrificed to what is not God (vv. 4–6). Yet in chapter 10, Paul strongly commands them to "flee from the worship of idols" (v. 14), and then gives permission to eat "whatever is sold in the meat market" (v. 25) and "whatever is set before you" (v. 27). In between we find chapter 9, where Paul offers an apparent digression into questions about his choices on the matter of apostolic support.

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Reading more carefully, we find that chapter 8 reveals that "the character of Pauline ethics is its focus on relational concerns as crucial to moral decisions."[17] Those with the knowledge that there is no god but God have liberty to eat (v. 9), but acting on that liberty could have disastrous consequences for those who are "weak" (v. 7), those whose lives until recently were lived under the power they believed idols to have. As Christ followers, those who feel no risk of idolatry in eating idol meat are above all responsible for the welfare of sisters and brothers.

In chapter 9, Paul's description of his apostolic ministry links it to the Corinthians' questions. The question of eating and drinking is named up front (v. 4) as a "right" of an apostle; here Paul uses the word that is translated as "liberty" (8:9) when it describes what the idol meat eaters in Corinth claim.[18] As an apostle, Paul is free to claim the benefits of room and board as well as the opportunity to travel with a wife. Indeed, he stresses that the Lord himself commanded that "those who proclaim the gospel should get their living by the gospel" (9:14). Yet Paul is willing to forgo these privileges "for the sake of the gospel" (9:23). Finally, wrap-

ping up his treatment of the idol meat question, he summarizes, "Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ" (11:1). With that summary ringing in their ears, the hearers of chapter 9 would grasp that those who feel free to eat idol meat should, as their apostle has done, be willing to give up that right for the benefit of others in the community.[19]

Chapter 10 returns to the idol meat discussion directly, with a series of sober reminders from the scriptures about the deadly results of taking idolatry lightly. Among the stories referred to, the clearest connection is found in the quotation from Exodus 32:6 (1 Cor. 10:7), describing the eating and revelry that accompanied the Israelites' worship of the golden calf.[20] For Paul, any eating in a worship context, whether among the Christ followers (vv. 16–17), among traditional Jews (v. 18), or among pagans (v. 19), involves "fellowship" with the divine or spiritual beings invoked in each setting.[21] Clearly, eating idol meat in the setting of a pagan temple is dangerous. But other settings, such as buying marketplace meat or being served when one is a guest in a pagan home, do not carry the same threat of spiritual power, particularly when it is impossible to know the provenance of the food being served (10:25–27). Even then, however, care for the welfare of sisters and brothers has to be foremost—if someone warns a believer that the food being purchased or served is idol meat, it is best to refrain from eating (v. 28).

The promise offered in images of lush fertility was that the empire, if they would acquiesce to it, would make their lives fruitful. Idolatry, in Paul's world, had to do with efforts to attain and participate in "the generation and sustenance of life" in ways that were not only wrong but unfruitful.

Honoring God in right fellowship

Paul's comments on idolatry at one level underline the wide range of possibilities represented under the umbrella term *idolatry*.[22] At a deeper level, the connections between particular cases of struggle against idolatry throughout Paul's work may be traced by asking how Paul advocates that humans created in the image of God experience fruitfulness and fellowship. When idolatry is examined top-down, its definition might focus on "God as the absolute one."[23] Thinking bottom-up, as Paul often does, expands our

understanding by focusing on "what idolaters do with their idols."[24] As we read in Romans and 1 Corinthians, we see that food and sex practices are intricately interwoven with the problem of idolatry. Both of these worlds of activity "have to do with matters of utmost seriousness: *the generation and sustenance of life*."[25] But how, for Paul, did these practices connect with the problem of greed—"which is idolatry"?

The introduction to the Colossian letter, in which this equation appears, emphasizes fruitfulness (1:6, 10). This focus directs a clear word to believers in a city in which public art and buildings, as well as items used at home, carried images of "lush fertility" linked to the imperial structure. For Colossae, as for the other major cities of the Roman world, the promise offered in these images was that the empire, if they would acquiesce to it, would make their lives fruitful. Yet the empire ruled by brute military force and harshly hierarchical social systems.[26] Colossians rebuts this worldview with the claim that Jesus Christ "is the image of the invisible God" (1:15). The argument of the letter then proceeds: true fruitfulness comes not through "the hoarding abundance touted by the empire," but rather "in the following of a Savior who calls his followers to practice a loving and forgiving generosity."[27]

If Paul's vision of a community of Christ followers from all nations is to bear fruit in our time, we must join together to repudiate false promises of abundant life, and find our sustenance in deeper sharing with all those who have entered the community of the true Image of God.

Idolatry, in Paul's world, had to do with efforts to attain and participate in "the generation and sustenance of life" in ways that were not only wrong but unfruitful. The realities of existence for many of the members of Paul's churches were shaped by the struggle for daily survival—eating at the subsistence level, high infant mortality, and low life expectancy.[28] Paul, in contrast, offers the goodness of the Creator of the cosmos, made visible by those called into the community of God's anointed one. Those "in Christ" should participate at a table of fellowship where food is shared and where those facing constant hunger are protected. They should enter a world of sexual relationships based in mutuality, constancy, and the self-sacrifice of Christ for the church, and

they should develop an attitude that challenges the accumulation of worldly goods.

Paul's twenty-first-century readers need to ponder the interwoven nature of all the matters Paul addresses throughout his letters. While we may have more individual freedom to choose against the idolatries linked to sexual behavior and food usage, we recognize quickly, when we begin to think about a world of enough, that questions related to greed are complex and global. Many of us Canadians and Americans need an ongoing conversation and practice of economic sharing throughout a global community of believers in order to understand and turn away from the greed that is idolatry. If Paul's vision of a community of Christ followers from all nations is to bear fruit in our time, we must join together to repudiate false promises of abundant life in the global marketplace, and find our sustenance in deeper and more radical sharing with all those who have entered the community of the true Image of God.

Notes

[1] Stephen C. Barton, "Food Rules, Sex Rules and the Prohibition of Idolatry: What's the Connection?" in *Idolatry: False Worship in the Bible, Early Judaism and Christianity,* ed. Stephen C. Barton (London: T&T Clark, 2007), 153.
[2] Mark Bonnington, "Fleeing Idolatry: Social Embodiment of Anti-Idolatry in the First Century," in *Idolatry,* ed. Barton, 107.
[3] My italics. All scripture quotations are from the NRSV.
[4] See Isa. 45:20; Jer. 50:2; Ezek. 6:9, 22:4, 23:30.
[5] However, see the discussion on Caesar's coins (Mark 12:13–17//Luke 20:20–25// Matt. 22:15–21), and the accusation that Jesus referred to the Temple as "made with hands," a Septuagint phrase for the temple of an idol (Mark 14:58) (Barton, "Food Rules," 141–42).
[6] Rom. 2:22; 1 Cor. 8:1, 4, 7, 10; 10:14, 19; 12:2; 2 Cor. 6:16; Gal. 5:20; Eph. 5:5; Col. 3:5; 1 Thess. 1:9.
[7] Four of Paul's ethical lists that include the vices are found in his undisputed letters: Rom. 1:29–31; 1 Cor. 5:1–11; 6:9–10; Gal. 5:19–21. Five others are in letters some view as deutero-Pauline: Eph. 5:3–8, Col. 3:5–9; 1 Tim 1:9–10; 2 Tim. 3:2–5, Titus 3:3.
[8] David H. Horrell, "Idol-Food, Idolatry and Ethics in Paul," in *Idolatry*, ed. Barton, 121.
[9] John E. Toews, *Romans* (Scottdale, PA, and Waterloo, ON: Herald Press, 2004), 69–70.
[10] Ibid., 72.
[11] See Neil Elliott, *The Arrogance of Nations: Reading Romans in the Shadow of Empire* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2008).
[12] A. B. Caneday, "'They Exchanged the Glory of God for the Likeness of an Image': Idolatrous Adam and Israel as Representatives in Paul's Letter to the Romans,"

Southern Baptist Journal of Theology 11, no. 3 (Fall 2007): 37.
[13] For "all" references in Romans that indicate both Jews and Gentiles, see 1:7, 8; 2:12, 16; 3:10, 12, 22, 23; 4:16; 5:12, 18; 6:3; 8:14; 10:12; 11:32; 14:10; 15:33.
[14] Caneday, " 'They Exchanged the Glory of God for the Likeness of an Image,' " 39–40. It is possible to translate "the truth about God" (NRSV) or "the truth of God" (NIV) (1:25) as "the truthfulness *of* God."
[15] Paul refers in 1 Corinthians to an earlier letter which we do not have. See 1 Cor. 5:9.
[16] Horrell, "Idol-Food, Idolatry and Ethics in Paul," 122; Richard B. Hays, *First Corinthians* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1997), 134. See Acts 15:28–29, Rev. 2:14, 20.
[17] Horrell, "Idol-food, Idolatry and Ethics in Paul," 123.
[18] Ibid., 148.
[19] Ibid., 179.
[20] Ibid., 163.
[21] Ibid., 167.
[22] Brian S. Rosner, "The Concept of Idolatry," *Themelios* 24, no. 3 (May 1999): 21. See also Rosner, *Greed as Idolatry: The Origin and Meaning of a Pauline Metaphor* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2007).
[23] Rosner, "The Concept of Idolatry," 25.
[24] Ibid., 27.
[25] Barton, "Food Rules,"145 (Barton's italics).
[26] Sylvia C. Keesmaat, "In the Face of Empire: Paul's Use of Scripture in the Shorter Epistles," in *Hearing the Old Testament in the New Testament*, ed. Stanley E. Porter (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2006), 199.
[27] Ibid., 200.
[28] Steven J. Friesen, "Injustice or God's Will? Early Christian Explanations of Poverty," in *Wealth and Poverty in Early Church and Society*, ed. Susan R. Holman (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2008), 20–21.

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The idolatry of the self
Renouncing the religion of Sheilaism

Rebecca Slough

The worship here just doesn't feed me. I don't get anything out of the service. Our worship is not upbeat enough. Our worship is too emotional and not intellectually serious. I don't like . . . [choose your favorite: *the music, the preaching, all the masculine or feminine language, the responsive readings, the visuals*]. *I just don't like it when . . .* [supply an ending of your choice]. I have often heard these and similar critiques of congregational worship in North America. People offer them as justifications for leaving one congregation for another, for changing denominations, or for leaving the church all together.

These complaints are theologically threadbare. They presume that the primary purpose of Christian worship is to nurture, feed, and comfort *me*. They are spoken as if the ultimate goal of worship is to fulfill *my* desires, as if worship is a commodity: *I* don't get anything out of it. *My* worship preferences have priority over any consideration of the congregation's history, its shared values, and its mission. Church leaders should be struck by the narcissism lurking in these complaints.

The complaint that "the worship here just doesn't feed me" is theologically threadbare. Such critiques presume that the primary purpose of Christian worship is to nurture, feed, and comfort *me*.

People ought to complain when what happens in worship is biblically trite, poorly led, nonsensical, or confusing. Some critiques that congregational leaders receive do have theological concerns at their base. But many discontented worshipers lack the language to get to the deepest questions or stirrings of their souls. So they do what anyone in cultures shaped by consumerist and therapeutic values does: they frame their complaints in the words of the self: I, me, my, and mine.

Sheila Larson, a young nurse, was interviewed as part of a large sociological study, the results of which were published in the mid-

1980s in *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life*.[1] She named her religion, her faith, as "my own Sheilaism": "I believe in God. I'm not a religious fanatic. I can't remember the last time I went to church. My faith has carried me a long way. It's Sheilaism. Just my own little voice . . . It's just try to love yourself and be gentle with yourself. You know, I guess, take care of each other. I think He would want us to take care of each other."[2]

Give Sheila credit: she names her religion what it is. She is unencumbered by a community of people who live within the wisdom of a tradition. She is freed from any external claims that would anchor her faith. She is not bound by the need to discern whether her own little voice is truthful or deluded. She can freely assert what "He" would want us to do (though how she knows this remains sketchy). She relies on no one; beyond the obligations of her job, it seems that few people rely on her. She demonstrates no embarrassment about the idolatrous character of her faith.[3] And Sheila may not be unusual in her beliefs, values, loves, and sources of trust. Perhaps if we were as honest as she is, many of us would give our faith not Sheila's name but our own.

In *Greed as Idolatry,* Brian Rosner distills a definition of idolatry as "an attack on God's exclusive right to our love and trust."[4] We cannot assume that worshipers whose preferences are continually frustrated do not love or trust God. But we may question whether they have placed themselves right alongside God as the focus of commitment, love, and trust. Individualism is a strong sociocultural value in North America. Self-reliance, economic independence, free choice unencumbered by the needs of others, few obligations to honor ties to family or community, privately held faith commitments—these are societal marks of the competent man or woman. North Americans may love and trust a "God-of-the-gaps" amid other sources of security they have garnered for themselves.

We become what we worship

In his biblical theology of idolatry, G. K. Beale explores the thesis that biblical writers throughout the canon describe idolaters as exhibiting the spiritual characteristics of the idols they worship.[5] He demonstrates how Israel—in its spiritual blindness, deafness,

"stiff-necked" stubbornness, disorientation, and incomprehension—resembles the idols that cannot see, hear, yield to God, or interpret God's activity. In the Old Testament, idolaters worship animals made out of wood or stone. Idolatry in the Gospels and in some of Paul's writings takes the form of worshiping Jewish tradition.[6] Israel, and later the Jews, become like the idols they worship.[7] "Let all who have ears to hear, listen" is a recurring biblical exhortation spoken by the prophets, Jesus, and Paul to awaken the dead senses of God's people.

Self-reliance, economic independence, free choice unencumbered by the needs of others, few obligations to honor ties to family or community, privately held faith commitments—these are societal marks of the competent man or woman in our society.

Beale's work alerts us to characteristics of worship that focus trust and love almost exclusively on the self. Vision is limited to "my needs." "Good" worship results in warm feelings, a personal high, or some "awesome" cathartic release of energy: "I feel, therefore I am." Or, "good" worship is intellectually stimulating, critically assessing the truthfulness of faith claims. If they cannot withstand the scrutiny of reasoned analysis, beliefs are set aside like outdated clothes: "I think, therefore I am." Confirmation of the self becomes the highest value of worship, a cul-de-sac of ceaseless personal needs, desires, and fears.[8]

In the deepest reaches of consciousness, we know that the self is too flimsy to build our lives around. We know there is something beyond the neat principles, values, beliefs, preferences, and goals we have constructed to manage our doubts, failures, and pain. God can serve as the Other beyond. But so can money, goods and services, technology, security devices (including armies), social connections, work, and addictions. If we choose God as the Other, we maintain a relationship with clear arrangements: we do this—God does that.

Joan Chittister wonders why religion has gotten media attention while expressions of faith are hardly noticed: "The answer to the questions cuts to the core of the spiritual life. The fact is that it might well be that deep down we are still substituting a kind of magic for faith. God we make a cornucopia of human desires, a vending machine of human delights. We coax God to be on our

side and call it faith. We cajole God to save us from ourselves and call it devotion. But those things reduce God to some kind of popular puppet."[9]

We keep fear of our inadequacy at bay with structure, organization, and clear role arrangements. When the self is the center of all our concerns, or even if God shares the center with the self, three things result: (1) we expect that God will play by the rules we have set out between us; (2) we don't expect (or accept) that God has purposes that might disrupt the relationship we have settled into; and (3) we assume that with God there is no mystery. We do, in fact, come to see God as a puppet, like all the other puppets we worship, trust, and love.

Breaking out beyond the self

God has given us the capacity for consciousness. Being a self is a good gift from God for the sake of relationship with God, other people, and creation.

Families, friendships, and congregations are the primary spaces in which we learn to love, trust, and serve God. Our unique gifts can be honed for God's purposes in the company of others. With the help of mature friends we learn to discern how our gifts may be best used for the sake of others. But families, friends, and congregations can also fall into idolatry, trusting tradition or structures of relationships in order to keep their fears of the unknown at bay. Many Christians struggle to find mature believers who can help them move beyond their preoccupations with the self to be drawn into a deeper relationship with God.

Beale uses Isaiah 6 as a paradigm for how God must intervene to break the hold of idolatry. In a dream Isaiah is drawn into an encounter with God in the temple, surrounded by seraphs continually proclaiming God's holiness. Isaiah comes to his senses, seeing himself accurately as a sinful man living among an idolatrous people. He confesses, and a seraph purifies him with fire. He emerges from the dream with a mission to serve the true God and reveal the depths of idolatry that have captivated Israel. An extraordinary action by God is required to break the prison of idolatry.[10]

In Isaiah's dream God uses a place of worship and actions of worship to open Isaiah's senses to what is really real. God still uses

familiar aspects of worship to help Christians name the truth about ourselves and to focus the self's love and trust on God.

Being present in the gathered body of Christ reveals the visual and aural truth that the self's relationship with God is corporate and individual. God's word, Christ's presence, and the Holy Spirit's empowerment are active in the body and in each worshiper. Deepening personal relationships with other maturing Christians often deepens the self's relationship with God.[11] Gatherings around the Lord's table with people we love in Christ begins to loosen the self's terrible fears of not having or being enough.

The exasperating books of Job and Ecclesiastes force us to grapple with God's mysterious character that will not be controlled by our pious intentions, desires, or strivings for personal meaning. Job, in particular, plays havoc with the safe arrangements we have established with God. Good, honest, hardworking people have lost jobs in the recent economic downturn. Notions of self-sufficiency and autonomy are shattered. The shame of failure clouds everything. The unemployed ask, why? Yet the wisdom books leave us not with fear but with the assurance of God's abiding presence, a presence we feel near at hand or trust at a greater distance.

In Isaiah's dream God uses a place of worship and actions of worship to open Isaiah's senses to what is really real. God still uses familiar aspects of worship to help Christians name the truth about ourselves and to focus the self's love and trust on God.

Psalms and hymns of praise that include expressions of thanksgiving set the self in its proper relationship with God. Praise acknowledges God's power to create, love, save, and provide for humankind. Acknowledging God's power costs the self its illusion of power. And gratitude means reliniquishing the illusion of self-sufficiency. None of us can provide everything we need for living each day. Gratitude requires humility, which redefines the self's real accomplishments.

Through a cycle of songs like the ones that follow, the self can claim its true identity in God, its true source of empowerment, and its ultimate purpose within God's expansive love for the world. Singing allows us to embody words that express love and trust by using the limits of voice, breath, and body. When we sing

"What is this place,"[12] we gather as a body, in a place, to hear God's Word and to share at Christ's table. In sharing together, we become Christ's bread and wine for one another. In singing "Spirit divine, inspire our prayers,"[13] we know that our worship is inspired by God's Spirit, not only by our volition. By this Spirit, we recognize our need, our duplicity of heart, and our desire to offer ourselves to God. Through this gathered expression of the church, the Spirit reveals God's glory. In the company of the congregation, I sing "Praise, I will praise you Lord,"[14] and in doing so I praise God with my whole being. Praise leads me to loving God and binds me to God's service. I find joy in God, not in who or what I am. In song we pray "Open, Lord my inward ear."[15] Because I trust God, I dare to ask to hear words of truth about myself. With persistent but steady gentleness, the truth of my soul is told. By God's grace I am changed, giving up all that seemed important to me, so that I can share in God's wisdom, power, and love. With an ear that hears, I can say with Isaiah, "Here I am, Lord."[16] I will go where you lead me, for the sake of your people.

In confession we confront our inability to control our lives or to liberate ourselves from the snares of evil and death. We cede the self's power to God, who has power to redeem and save.

Confessions of sin name the truth about human sinfulness, limitation, and captivity to powers that constrain our love for God. Confessions of faith in God relinquish the self's belief in itself as savior and lord. In confession we confront our inability to control our lives or to liberate ourselves from the snares of evil and death. In confession we cede the self's power to God, who has power to redeem and save.

The baptismal rites set out in the *Minister's Manual* accent the individual and corporate nature of claiming Christian faith; they set a life orientation for new believers.[17] The baptismal questions give candidates the opportunity to renounce the powers of the world; to assert their belief in God, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit; to accept God's Word as a guide for life; to take on the responsibility for giving and receiving counsel; and to participate in the mission of the church.[18] The questions imply that idolatry, whether of the self or of something else, can divert a believer's ability to love and trust God, but they are not explicit. Renouncing the powers of

the world may not be a strong enough conviction to resist the tempting power of the self. Perhaps in this period of the church's history, two additional questions should be added: Do you promise to love the Lord, your God, with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength? Do you promise to love your neighbor as yourself? And the fitting answer to these questions would be, "With God's help, I do." These affirmations could help keep the tendencies toward "Sheilaism" in check.

Conclusion

Human consciousness, self-awareness, reflection, and volition are God's gifts for building loving and trusting relationships. In giving us these capacities God has taken great risks. We may use them to worship God or ourselves. In cultures that exalt market capitalism, consumerism, unbridled technological development, privatization of religious values, and entitlement or exceptionalism, the temptations to make the self an idol are nearly overpowering. The church is possibly the only space in contemporary North American societies in which that idolatry can be challenged. It takes the body of Christ, enlivened by the Spirit, to keep the self focused on loving and trusting God completely.

Notes

[1] Robert N. Bellah, Richard Madsen, William M. Sullivan, Ann Swidler, and Steven M. Tipton, *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life*, updated edition with new introduction (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996). This sustained study, first published in 1985, explores the public and private expressions of personal commitments of faith, service, community, work, marriage and family.

[2] Ibid., 221.

[3] Sheila was a young woman at the time of the study. Her views are somewhat caricatured in the Bellah study and to a certain degree in this essay. We can hope that her ideas about faith developed as she encountered more of life's quandaries and unanswerable questions.

[4] Brian S. Rosner, *Greed as Idolatry: The Origin and Meaning of a Pauline Metaphor* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2007), 148. Rosner's project is to demonstrate what Paul means in saying that "greed is idolatry" in Col. 3:5 and Eph. 5:5. Greed and idolatry do not normally inhabit similar semantic domains. For this essay I have drawn on his definition of idolatry, but have not dealt with greed. This quote gives a fuller view of his project's conclusion: " 'greed is idolatry' may be paraphrased as teaching *that to have a strong desire to acquire and keep for yourself more and more*

money and material things is an attack on God's exclusive rights to human love and devotion, trust and confidence, and service and obedience" (173; Rosner's italics).

[5] G. K. Beale, *We Become What We Worship: A Biblical Theology of Idolatry* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press Academic, 2008). Beale traces explicit and implied references to idolatry throughout the biblical canon. Early in this work he acknowledges that his approach to identifying texts, especially in the New Testament, is not limited to explicit references to idolatry, but rather looks to probable allusions to texts related to idolatry. He pays careful attention to the recurring references to people not having eyes to see or ears to hear, who are stubborn or easily led astray. He demonstrates how such references in the Old Testament were specifically tied with situations in which idols played an important role in the story. Later references to spiritual blindness, deafness, stubbornness, and being lost are also found in contexts in which people were not able to apprehend what God was doing in their midst (see 22–35).

[6] Beale claims that in the Old Testament the primary form of idolatry was worshiping gods created by human hands. In the New Testament, idolatry was connected with worshiping the Jewish tradition (169).

[7] Among the texts that Beale explores are: Isa. 6; Ps. 115:4–8; Ps. 135:15–18; Deut. 4:27–29; Exod. 32–34; 1 Kings 12; Num. 25; Ps. 106:20; 2 Kings 17; Jer. 2:5; Hosea 4:7; 13:2–3; Ezek. 44; Gen. 1–3; Ezek. 28; Isa. 29; Matt. 13:10–15; John 12:37–43; Acts 28:25–28; Rom. 1, 12; Revelation.

[8] See Beale, *We Become What We Worship,* 138–40.

[9] Joan Chittister and Rowan Williams, *Uncommon Gratitude: Alleluia for All That Is* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2010), 8.

[10] Beale, *We Become What We Worship,* 268–69.

[11] Roberta Bondi, *Memories of God: Theological Reflections on a Life* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995), 201. Bondi writes about the sixth-century teacher Dorotheos of Gaza who said, "Imagine now . . . that there are straight lines connecting from the outside of the circle all human lives to God at the center. Can't you see that there is no way to move toward God without drawing closer to other people, and no way to approach other people without coming near to God?" (201). Bondi elaborates more on this teaching in *To Love as God Loves* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987).

[12] *Hymnal: A Worship Book* (Elgin, IL: Brethren Press; Newton, KS: Faith and Life Press; Scottdale, PA: Mennonite Publishing House, 1992), no. 1.

[13] Ibid., no. 30.

[14] Ibid., no. 76.

[15] Ibid., no. 140.

[16] Ibid., no. 395.

[17] *Minister's Manual*, edited by John Rempel (Newton, KS, and Winnipeg, MB: Faith and Life Press, 1998) is recommended for use by pastors serving Mennonite Church USA and Mennonite Church Canada congregations.

[18] Ibid., 48. An alternative set of questions on page 51 asks the baptismal candidate whether she/he renounces the devil. This alternate set (more than the set of questions found in the complete form of the service) places temptation as a clear threat to baptismal life.

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Idolatry in therapy
Dethroning the gods, enthroning God

Delores Friesen

Marriage and family therapists and pastoral counselors often encounter situations that call to mind Elijah's question to the Israelites and the prophets of Baal at Mount Carmel: "How long will you go limping with two different opinions?" (1 Kings 18:21).[1] Limping people come to my office to explore their options, their fears, their idolatries, their alliances and commitments. In the process of therapy, they call on their gods and seek to prop up their hopes and dreams and fulfill their needs. Sometimes they find the path to healing through discarding all the false gods they have set up, including (sometimes) their expectations of marriage, their ways of being in the world, their goals and dreams. Sometimes they cry and cut themselves, even engage in suicidal gestures, as they feel bereft of all that they had worked and hoped for.

It is holy work, this therapeutic cleansing of the soul that permits people to recognize what they have been worshiping and what it takes to cast down every idol and become integrated and at one with the Creator/Redeemer.

But then a more chastened, focused, integrated self emerges, with a heart purified in willing one thing, and the therapist or pastoral counselor stands as a witness to one made whole, with the dross and desires cut away, and the false selves, facades, and masks destroyed. It is holy work, this therapeutic cleansing of the soul that permits people to recognize what they have been worshiping and what it takes to cast down every idol and become integrated and at one with the Creator/Redeemer.

Therapy as stripping away lies, finding meaning

As a marriage and family therapist, and as a pastor, I have been privileged to walk the road with many troubled souls. The essence of therapy is stripping away the defenses, the lies, the beliefs that

keep one bound to relationships or ideas that no longer are life giving and freeing to the soul. The second step, which is sometimes neglected, is equally necessary: helping a client or a parishioner or a troubled, isolated person connect with others and find meaning and purpose in relationships, work, and service. As Alfred Adler summarized it, healthy people are able to love and to work. They, like God, are able to create and redeem. They are focused, single-minded, purposeful. They no longer have to blame others for their situation, or complain, or run around seeking solutions and cures. Instead they have found the center that integrates and holds their life together. They no longer seek solace in passive-aggressive behaviors, violent actions, or anxiety-ridden patterns that threaten or destroy the self and others.

The common idols of our culture—beauty, achievement, riches, privacy, technology, power, adulation, sports, possessions, polarizing political ideologies, pornography, and militarization—captivate and enslave. At the heart of most of these idols is the attempt to present the self as more than it is. For example, anorexia may be an attempt to meet the cultural ideals of slimness and beauty, but to deny the body its food is akin to denying the soul what it needs to flourish and grow. Addictions are often used to mask feelings and to relax people and help them lose their inhibitions, be one of the crowd, and be accepted and desired by others. Narcissism is self-worship; anxiety often signifies an inability to trust and find safety and security.

Jesus' response to the rich ruler, and to the lawyer—seeking, intelligent people who were captured by the idols of their day—was: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind, and you shall love your neighbor as yourself" (Matt. 22:37–38). Much of the work of therapy is helping people discover who and what they love, and helping them to do it with all their heart, all their soul, and all their mind. When a divided mind and heart cannot let go of its idols and the pulls and pushes of others, there is no center, no loyalty, no integration of heart and mind and soul. The practice of therapy strips away what is false, what divides the soul—perhaps the marriage or the vocation—from one's personhood, and seeks to guide the person back to the *imago Dei*. Finding one's true self, understanding one's personality, developing the courage to ask for

what one needs and wants, letting go of family expectations, and exploring past wounds are all ways the relationship of therapist and client heals and purifies.

For the therapist and pastor, often the task is to challenge the dominant story, the narrative that keeps a person bound or running after things that do not satisfy. In practice, this means approaching the other in humility and empathy, valuing the other and helping him mourn, let go, and discover a new story, a new identity, a new focus. As Jesus put it so aptly in the Beatitudes, blessing comes when one mourns; hungers and thirsts; is merciful, pure in heart, poor in spirit. And being a peacemaker and finding resilience even in the midst of persecution, evil, and false accusations are other marks of those who follow God's way.

For the therapist and pastor, often the task is to challenge the dominant story, the narrative that keeps a person bound or running after things that do not satisfy.

People often come for therapy bringing a combination of unworthiness, shame, and general unhappiness with their life. All these negative feelings enthrone the self and put one in a position more important than the other's or even than God's. In marital counseling, partners often insist that they are innocent, and the one who had the affair, the one who hurt them or left them, is the scum of the earth. The real work of therapy is to dethrone the self, recognize one's own failings and needs, and figure out how to connect with the other and build a bridge of communication so at least some of both partners' needs can be met.

Bound by fear of rejection

A medical student, the first in her family of origin to attend college, is failing her classes. Her constant negative self-talk floods her mind and heart and soul, so she no longer believes that she is capable of becoming a doctor. Exploring her intense anxiety, self-loathing, and depression reveals deep fears that if she did succeed, she would no longer be accepted by the blue-collar mechanics in her family. Her dreams and vision, her deep desire for "something better than working on cars," are buried under the family rules, the traumatic memory of hazing when she graduated from college, and her procrastination and inability to focus enough to study. She constantly thinks of herself, her failures and dilemmas. She

has to begin by naming her fears and worries, and recognizing how self-centered it all is. Then she can start to unpack how much she has idolized "becoming a doctor, and helping my parents get a nice house, so they don't have to work so hard." She has valued medical school not for what she can learn but for the prestige, power, and money she thought it would grant her, when she finally made it through and was a doctor.

The simple act of wearing a rubber band on her wrist and snapping herself with it every time she engages in negative self-talk awakens her to the violence she is doing to herself, and the self-sabotaging attitudes she is indulging. She finally admits that she needs to be a part of her family more than she needs to rescue them or prove to them that she is somebody. She acknowledges her fear that to move beyond where they are might create a chasm so wide it could not be bridged! Her depression and despair are an opportunity to ask herself questions: Who am I? Who is God? What is my purpose in life? What is realistic and possible? What gives life to my soul?

Dethroning the gods of self-justification

A wife and husband are each convinced that the other is narcissistic, self-centered, and impossible to live with, and they are probably both right. Their only child has adopted the patterns they have modeled: they scream, dig in their heels, act in passive-aggressive ways, and are resentful and full of anger and disappointment, because "you have let me down again." These partners have learned not to expect—or give—much. They distance each other in order to keep conflict levels from escalating, and they put each other down in front of their child.

Unless they can dethrone the gods of self-righteousness, self-justification, and self-sufficiency; until they can give up sarcasm and coldness; as long as they refuse to give and receive counsel, grace, sex, understanding and forgiveness, their marriage and their child are at risk. Both are Christians, but their reality is so far from their expectations of a partner "who would always love and care for me" that they have ceased to hope. Recognizing idols and idolized views of self and other will be one place to begin the therapeutic process. Grace, intimacy, delight, and love would all help heal their shame and disgust. When the therapist asks, "Who

delights in you?" "Who gives you grace and accepts you just as you are?" she also offers acceptance, grace, and unconditional positive regard, allowing each individual and the couple and family an opportunity to experience a relationship based on God-like behaviors and trust. Insecure attachments are healed by consistent love and acceptance, and the therapist uses heart, soul, and mind, feelings, experiences, story, and metaphor to challenge and connect.

Dying to accumulate

A professional man spent his retirement agonizing over the ups and downs of the stock market, anxiously calculating whether his savings and investments would suffice. His fascination with the economy's vagaries became an obsession, and he traded almost daily. He lived to read the business news and check his accounts, and he increasingly isolated himself from the outside world, even ignoring his wife, children, and neighborhood, as he made deals motivated by his fears and by a desire to take advantage of others' mistakes. Soon his physical and mental health deteriorated, and he died a broken and disappointed man. One thinks of Jesus' story of the rich fool, who gathered and stored into barns.

But Jesus' admonition to give in full measure also comes to mind: "Do not judge, and you will not be judged; do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven; give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap; for the measure you give will be the measure you get back" (Luke 6:37–38). A good therapist might have been able to help break down the idols that bound this man preoccupied with his stocks among facades of reality. A counselor could perhaps have worked with him and those he loved, seeking to help him find other meanings and purposes for his life, eliciting gratitude for enduring blessings; creating a new narrative, a new story, an engagement with a future removed from the Monopoly game that consumed him.

Prisoners to self-loathing

Women who have had abortions or who have experienced rape or incest or promiscuity sometimes feel they are "damaged goods,"

and that no one will ever respect or want them. Wise therapists and pastors ask, "Are you too bad to receive grace? Grace woos and comforts us when we think we are too far gone to be rescued. How could you be too bad to receive what is for the bad?"[2] They offer acceptance, forgiveness, and love, and they engage in the redeeming and creating work of God, helping their clients find ways to memorialize an unborn child, create cleansing rituals, write lament psalms. They sit with their parishioners in their tears and pain and self-loathing, until these women can believe that God cares and God forgives, and that God wants their allegiance and commitment, not their self-destruction and preoccupation with the idolatry of "what might have been" or "what should never have happened."

The promise and pitfalls of counseling

As a professor of pastoral counseling in a seminary for more than two decades, I have worked with several generations of students, most of them planning for a ministry of counseling, and some for pastoral or chaplaincy vocations. But sometimes it seems that the church values preaching, telling, and leading more than service, healing, and counseling. Why not train our pastors *and* our counselors to listen to the confessions and pain of those who come to them, so they can help break down the idols and offer forgiveness and grace? Why do we continue to perpetuate the practice and idea that mission and ministry are more worthy vocations than counseling?

Why not train our pastors *and* our counselors to listen to the confessions and pain of those who come to them, so they can help break down the idols and offer forgiveness and grace?

Even more troubling are claims to have The Truth, The Method, or The Correct Theology, which then becomes in itself idolatrous. For example, the commitment of the Biblical Counseling Movement "to use only the Bible in its counseling theory and practice and its general rejection of modern psychology are based on the theological assumption that the Bible is entirely and singularly sufficient for counseling and psychotherapy."[3] Whenever an ideal or theological concept or even an ethical position becomes set in stone, it elevates that truth, that belief, that idea to the level of an idol.

When elements of the Christian faith are taken as ultimate, or one counseling method is chosen as the one and only way to engage in the cure of souls, this becomes

> *the most difficult form of idolatry for Christians to recognize, because it clings to the trappings of Christian subculture and, in the worst cases, to the very means of grace that foster one's relationship with God. Nonetheless, these means can become unconsciously identified with the Self and subservient to its narcissistic agenda and so take on an idolatrous significance in relation to God. Here, religious activity (e.g., church-going, praying, personal devotions, evangelism), the Bible, Christian doctrine, pride in one's denomination or branch of Christianity, a gift of the Spirit, the type of Christian counseling we do and even the fact of one's salvation can be unconsciously abstracted from God and become paradoxical sources of self-aggrandizement and self-satisfaction. They can make believers feel superior to others and so become, at least in part, the unconscious focus of one's ultimate reliance, paradoxically dissociated from the very God to whom they are supposedly related.*[4]

As Blaise Pascal put it, "We [can] make an idol of truth itself, for truth apart from charity is not God, but His image and idol, which we must neither love nor worship."[5]

In sum, then, the Christian counselor has many opportunities to challenge idolatry in all its forms. However, those who do this work face unique temptations and risks, not the least of which is setting up oneself or one's own work as healer as the idol. Walking with others as they journey through life and death is holy work, but those of us who accompany others must guard our own hearts and souls and minds lest we elevate our work, our insights, our training, or our wisdom above that of God. And, like our clients and parishioners, we must worship God and God alone, and love the Lord our God with all our heart, soul, strength, and mind, and our neighbors as ourselves.

Notes

[1] All scripture quotations are from the NRSV.

[2] David Powlison, *Seeing with New Eyes: Counseling and the Human Condition through the Lens of Scripture* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R Pub., 2003), 49.
[3] Wayne A. Mack, "What Is Biblical Counseling?" in *Totally Sufficient: The Bible and Christian Counseling,* edited by Edward E. Hindson and Howard Eyrich (Eugene, OR: Harvest House Publishers, 1997); quoted in *Foundations for Soul Care,* by Eric L. Johnson (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2007), 108.
[4] Johnson, *Foundations for Soul Care,* 463.
[5] Blaise Pascal, *Pensées/Provincial Letters* (New York: Random House, 1941), 191; no. 581; quoted in *Foundations for Soul Care,* by Johnson, 463.

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Idolatry and empire

J. Nelson Kraybill

On that morning a decade ago when twin towers fell and an empire shuddered, a dirge over the fall of Babylon in John's apocalypse pulsated on the pages of my Bible: "Alas, alas, the great city, where all who had ships at sea grew rich by her wealth! For in one hour she has been laid waste" (Rev. 18:19). Using "Babylon" as an epithet for first-century Rome, chapters 17 and 18 of Revelation expose the linkage of international trade, violence, and idolatrous allegiance in the first-century Roman Empire.

In the years since 2001, John's concern that Christians follow the Lamb and not take up arms has rung in my ears as a modern empire struck back with two wars of invasion: "If you kill with the sword, with the sword you must be killed. Here is a call for the endurance and faith of the saints" (Rev. 13:10).

Empires seduce and intimidate because they are beautiful and powerful. They generate rituals, symbols, and icons that reinforce their aura of legitimacy. These rituals and symbols unconsciously shape our attitudes and actions.

John spoke to his day

There is no reason to think that John predicted the 2001 attacks or any other modern events. John and other ancient apocalyptic authors largely dealt with political and spiritual realities of their own day. But Revelation's exposé of idolatry and empire in the Roman world can open our eyes to imperial pretense in our era. Revelation calls first-century readers—and today's believers—to give radical allegiance to Christ the Lamb.

Empires seduce and intimidate because they are beautiful and powerful. They also generate rituals, symbols, and icons that reinforce their aura of legitimacy. Rituals and symbols of empire, such as coins, flags, patriotic events, and national heroes, become so pervasive in the culture that they unconsciously shape our

attitudes and actions. Christian worship of God and the Lamb is essential to counter the spirit of violence, greed, and arrogance that undergirds empire. Worship reminds us that our allegiance is to the global reign of God, not primarily to nation, ethnic group, or class.

Seeing empire from a distance

It often is easier to identify idolatrous claims of empire from a distance than to see them in our immediate surroundings. The crass nature of eighteenth-century imperial ideology, for example, is evident to us in "Rule Britannia," a song is still played today:

> *When Britain first, at heaven's command,*
> *arose from out the azure main . . .*
> *This was the charter, the charter of the land,*
> *and guardian angels sang this strain:*
> *Rule Britannia! Britannia rule the waves!*
> *Britons never, never, never shall be slaves!*

Subsequent verses laud the freedom and majesty of Britain, and chortle over the "dread and envy" of other nations. These are classic imperial claims: divine mandate, glorious origins, and invincibility. John of Patmos saw the same qualities in Babylon/Rome, which "glorified herself and lived luxuriously." Rome smugly said, "I rule as a queen; I am no widow, and I will never see grief" (Rev. 18:7).

Rome broadcast arrogance

Such arrogance went all the way back to Caesar Augustus, the first emperor to govern "all the [Roman] world" (Luke 2:1). By 31 BC, General Octavian—soon to be called Caesar Augustus—had defeated every opponent and established himself as undisputed ruler of the Mediterranean region. Though not named emperor until 27 BC, Octavian already had well-oiled propaganda mechanisms.

A denarius coin from 31 BC (see fig. 1) portrays Octavian (Caesar Augustus) as a handsome and resolute leader. The reverse depicts Victory, personified as a graceful female figure, striding across the globe. She bears two symbols of victory, a laurel wreath

and a palm frond. The inscription proclaims CAESAR DIVI F[ilius]—"Caesar, son of the deified one." Octavian claimed the title of divinity because he was the adopted son of Julius Caesar. The Roman senate declared Julius Caesar divine after his assassination, allowing Octavian (Caesar Augustus) to claim the title "son of god."

Fig. 1. Denarius coin depicting Octavian (Caesar Augustus). Image courtesy of Classical Numismatic Group, Inc.

Some subject people in the East, especially in the region where the seven churches of Revelation later emerged, *wanted* to worship Octavian (Caesar Augustus) as a god. After decades of wars and economic upheaval in the Mediterranean region, Octavian brought political stability and opportunity for business to flourish. Entrepreneurs and politicians requested permission from Octavian to set up altars and temples in his honor. Octavian and later emperors recognized the propaganda value of such extravagant expressions of allegiance. Pergamum—one of the seven cities of Revelation—was the first of many cities in the Roman world to erect a temple to worship the goddess Roma (personification of the Roman Empire) *and* Augustus (Octavian).

A *tetradrachm* coin (see fig. 2), minted in first-century Asia Minor, features Emperor Claudius (AD 41–54) on the front and a temple labeled ROM[a] ET AUG[ustus]—"Roma and Augustus"—on the reverse. The goddess Fortuna, holding a cornucopia representing abundance, places a crown on the head of Claudius. The emperor carries a scepter, symbol of power. The tableau

portrays emperor worship, which John of Patmos condemns in his vision as a vulgar parody of worship of the living God (Rev. 4:1–11).

Fig. 2. T*etradrachm* coin depicting Emperor Claudius. Image courtesy of Classical Numismatic Group, Inc.

Imperial idolatry in a modern capital

Outright ruler worship seems foreign to us, but something reminiscent surfaced when the United States was an expanding global power in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. A larger-than-life marble statue of George Washington, commissioned by the United States Congress in 1832, featured the first president posed like Zeus—naked above the waist, with right arm raised.[1]

A massive 1865 fresco on the ceiling of the United States Capitol rotunda, still there today, shows Washington seated gloriously in the clouds of heaven, a rainbow at his feet. Flanking the first president are female personifications of Liberty and Victory, and thirteen maidens representing the thirteen first states. It is called "The Apotheosis [elevation to divinity] of Washington." The title includes the very Greek word that ancient Romans used to describe the divinization of their emperors!

Female personification of empire

It is perverse that empires, generally patriarchal in character, often use images of women to personify themselves. The Romans called her *Roma,* the British called her *Britannia,* and the United States calls her *Liberty, Progress*, or *Columbia.* These images appear millions of times on coins, stamps, statuary, and official documents.

One of the most widely distributed artistic images of nineteenth-century America was the 1872 painting *American Progress*, by New York artist John Gast. The original is small (13 x 17 inches), but its symbolism made a huge impact on the American psyche. Lithographer George Crofutt added explanatory notes to his countless reproductions of the painting (see fig. 3). He said the "beautiful and charming Female" on the print "is floating westward through the air bearing on her forehead the 'Star of Empire.' On the right of the picture is a city, steamships, manufactories, schools and churches over which beams of light are streaming and filling the air—indicative of civilization."

Fig. 3. A lithograph by George Crofutt, based on the painting *American Progress*, by John Gast (1872). This image is in the public domain.

To the west, Crofutt added, all is "darkness, waste and confusion." From the east come railroads, wagons, hunters, gold seekers, pony express, and immigrants. Fleeing from Progress are "Indians, buffaloes, wild horses, bears, and other game, moving Westward, ever Westward, the Indians with their squaws . . . [who] turn their despairing faces" as they "flee the wondrous vision. The 'Star' is too much for them."[2]

It is unlikely that John Gast ever saw the coin of Octavian (fig. 1), but the similarity between the Roman image of Victory and the American image of Progress is striking. Imperial power is a triumphant female striding across the globe, head high, skirt blowing in the breeze. She carries a schoolbook and represents enlightenment. She symbolizes Manifest Destiny, the political doctrine that God ordained (European) American colonists to conquer and exploit the continent from sea to sea.[3]

Babylon as epithet of loathing

The name *Babylon*—once denoting a city at the heart of the vast empire that ravaged Jerusalem in Jeremiah's day—became an epithet of loathing that John and other Jewish or Christian radicals hurled against ancient Rome.[4] In John's appropriation of the label, Rome became a "great whore" with whom "the kings of the earth have committed fornication, and with the wine of whose fornication the inhabitants of the earth have become drunk" (Rev. 17:1–2).

A kind of globalization and business boom occurred in the ancient world as Rome imposed a unified monetary system on a vast region, suppressed piracy, and built roads. Elites in many subject nations acquired wealth and status by aligning themselves with Roma (Rome) and her "divine" emperors, a network of allegiance that John calls "fornication."

Economic agenda of empires

Empires always have vested economic interests, and Revelation links those closely to idolatry. Given the fact that emperor worship pervaded trade guilds and merchant associations throughout the Roman world, this is not surprising. Merchants and entrepreneurs had to wear the "mark of the beast" (participate in emperor worship) in order to be able to "buy or sell" (Rev. 13:17). A modern equivalent might be tacit approval of the "war on terrorism" by corporations that massively participate in the Iraq and Afghanistan wars. Countless Canadians and Americans are part of this endeavor through mutual funds invested in such companies.

When Americans invaded Iraq in 2003, they literally built a military base on top of archeological ruins of Nebuchadnezzar's old imperial capital.[5] Did the soldiers digging trenches through

those archeological ruins consider how the location of their military base represented modern empire aligning with the idolatry and hubris of ancient Babylon (Ps. 137) and Rome (Rev. 18)? If John of Patmos were listing the booty of empire today (see 18:11–13), he certainly would include petroleum!

Powerful rituals in worship today

Christian worship needs to include powerful rituals of allegiance to God and the Lamb to counter the constant lure and booty of empire. Most residents of the United States and Canada benefit from economic imbalances that tilt the scales of international commerce in favor of wealthy nations. European nations and the United States once colonized other parts of the world by direct rule. Now they often find it preferable simply to siphon off natural resources of weaker nations through diplomatic pressure or economic incentives to local elites.

The resulting injustices include poverty-level wages for millions of workers in the two-thirds world, trade agreements that favor North American exports of agricultural products, and "foreign aid" that is largely military in nature. The American empire conducts business with a veiled fist, putting faith in a defense budget that is 46.5 percent of *global* arms spending.[6] Canadians cannot wash their hands of this idolatry by claiming to be a demographically small nation with a modest military budget. Canadian prosperity and national security are inextricably linked to the imperial neighbor to the south.

Use and misuse of Revelation imagery

Revelation calls the Roman empire a beast, and exposes the hubris and violence of the "great city that rules over the kings of the earth" (17:18). John's vision offers a counternarrative of salvation that culminates in a just society where God and the Lamb reign. The new Jerusalem (Rev. 21, 22) is not a pie-in-the-sky ideal of where we go when we die. It is a tangible matrix of relationships and allegiances, a new community of justice and *shalom* that God is bringing into being today. Christians already have citizenship in this city, living by the example and teaching of the Lamb who someday will complete the restoration of our world.

Iconography and liturgy from Revelation appropriately have influenced Western Christian worship, as in Edward Perronet's hymn: "All hail the power of Jesus' name! Let angels prostrate fall . . . Bring forth the royal diadem, and crown him . . . Lord of all."

Christians need to celebrate Jesus the Lamb as Lord *of all,* not as a patron deity of our national or class interests. Allegiance to the God made known in Christ must supersede and sometimes oppose political currents in surrounding culture.

But sometimes imagery or texts from Revelation get co-opted by empire, incorporated into militaristic songs, patriotic jingo, or partisan politics.[7] The *Left Behind* books and movies warped the message of Revelation into Christian triumphalism, with believers carrying automatic weapons and the Antichrist masquerading as a pacifist.

Christians need to counter such misuse of scripture by celebrating Jesus the Lamb as Lord *of all,* not as a patron deity of our national or class interests. Allegiance to the God made known in Christ must supersede and sometimes oppose political currents in surrounding culture. The governing motif for allegiance in Revelation is a Lamb who has won victory through suffering, death, and resurrection.

Salvation belongs to God

Revelation assumes that Christians may suffer, even endure martyrdom. But "salvation belongs to God . . ., and to the Lamb" (Rev. 7:10), not to human political machinations or ideology. Mennonites are not immune to a kind of idolatry that puts pacifism or activism at the center of our lives rather than God and the Lamb. Whenever we are tempted to give our highest allegiance to anything less than God, we need to hear the rebuke John himself received twice: "You must not do that! . . . Worship God!" (Rev. 19:10; 22:9).

A faithful response to the ideology of empire is not another ideology but *relationship* with the Lamb who has triumphed over sin, death, and empire. That relationship unfolds in worship, active discipleship, and faithful witness. Radical allegiance to Christ that transforms our economic, political, and social priorities should be celebrated at baptism. Eucharist is an opportunity for God's strategy of suffering love in Christ to turn us away from

the coercive ideology of empire. At communal or individual prayer we can hear Jesus say, "I am standing at the door, knocking; if you hear my voice and open the door, I will come in to you and eat with you, and you with me" (Rev. 3:20). When we know the Lamb, we can follow him and claim our citizenship in the reign of God that will endure when every empire falls and death is no more.

Notes

[1] Sculpted by Horatio Greenough, the statue was so heavy it damaged the floor of the Capitol rotunda and had to be moved outdoors. Today it is in the National Museum of American History in Washington DC.
[2] Merritt Roe Smith and Leo Marx, *Does Technology Drive History? The Dilemma of Technological Determinism* (Boston: MIT, 1994), 9.
[3] A current corollary to this doctrine is the notion of American *exceptionalism:* generally it is wrong for nations to invade each other, use torture, or support repressive regimes. But if these are done for the cause of democracy, exception can be made.
[4] See, for example, 1 Pet. 5:13 and *Sibylline Oracles* 5.159.
[5] See Steven Lee Myers, "A Triage to Save the Ruins of Babylon," *New York Times,* January 2, 2011.
[6] Stockholm International Peace Research Yearbook 2010. See http://www.globalissues.org/article/75/world-military-spending#WorldMilitarySpending.
[7] For recent analyses of liturgy and worship in Revelation, see David A. deSilva, *Seeing Things John's Way: The Rhetoric of the Book of Revelation* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2009); and Michael J. Gorman, *Reading Revelation Responsibly* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2011). The latter works well as an adult education resource for congregations.

About the author

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Advent and idolatry
A sermon

Chris K. Huebner

The first Sunday of Advent marks the beginning of the Christian year, so it would be appropriate to greet each other today with the recognition that a new year has begun. Among other things, doing so would remind us that Christian time is different from other ways of marking time. But we have not given each other new year's greetings today, so we are reminded instead that we generally live our lives according to a movement of time that is at odds with the church's time. I suspect the everyday texture of our lives is determined as much by temporal markers such as Black Friday as by Advent. It is no wonder we find ourselves confused. At least I'm confused. And I make no promise to be able to undo that confusion. If anything, today's lectionary texts (Ps. 80:1–7, 17–19; Isa. 64:1–9; 1 Cor. 1:3–9; and Mark 13:24–37) might add to our confusion by challenging some of our customary ways of understanding the season of Advent.

Advent is the most Jewish of Christian seasons. Yet we approach it in a way that strips it of its Jewish character, and we end up with a version of Christianity at odds with itself.

Let me begin by summarizing the general contours of what I want to say in a way that might seem counterintuitive: the first and most basic point is that Advent is the most Jewish of Christian seasons. As Rowan Williams puts it, "In Advent . . . we all become . . . Jews once more."[1] Yet we are accustomed to approaching Advent in a way that strips it of its Jewish character, and we end up with a version of Christianity that is somehow fundamentally at odds with itself. That is to say, we end up with a church that is insufficiently Christian precisely because it is not properly Jewish. And if such a church is at odds with itself, that is paradoxically so because its identity has become far too clear, too pure, too smooth, too neat and tidy. In other words, it is at odds with itself precisely because it is not sufficiently at odds with itself.

A church that has lost a sense of the Jewish character of Advent loses the ability to wrestle with a particular set of tensions and ambiguities essential to its being the church. When Christianity came to define itself over against Judaism, more than anything else it lost a robust sense of the messianic. Christianity's identification of Jesus as the Messiah has all too often had the effect of initiating an erasure of the very concept of messiah. By *messianic*, I mean to point to a sense of radical interruption—an inversion of the "laws" of history, a revolutionary change that undoes and transforms the ways we have become accustomed to thinking and acting. It is this sense of interruption and revolutionary change that gives rise to the tensions and ambiguities I spoke of earlier. I will say more about this in a moment. For now, I want to suggest that all of this has to do with how we conceive of the relationship between Advent and Christmas. Let me try to explain.

What are we waiting for?

We think of Advent as a season of waiting. We speak of it by invoking notions of preparation and expectation, of anticipation and longing. This is appropriate: Advent names an expectation of an event that is to come. It is a preparation for an arrival that we are still waiting for. But things start to get interesting and difficult when we ask questions like these: What are we waiting for, and why do we wait? How are we to prepare for this event that is to come? What does our longing and expectation look like? What shape does it take? What sort of posture does this waiting require?

The starting point from which we must attempt to answer these questions is, of course, the recognition that Advent is a time of preparation and waiting for Jesus, the Messiah. But I'm struck by how easy it is to think about this season in ways that minimize, even cancel out, a sense of the messianic character that is necessary if Jesus is to be what we Christians confess him to be. We cancel out the logic of the messianic when we think of preparation and expectation in terms of one coming who is known in advance of his arrival. We cancel out the logic of the messianic when we think of the Messiah as someone we will surely recognize. And we cancel out the logic of the messianic when we think of Advent as preparing for something that *we* are striving for, a longing for something that *we* are responsible to bring about.

But this approach is exactly what today's Old Testament texts warn us against. Notice that they both emphasize the anger of God. They plead with God not to be angry—even though God has every right to be angry. The psalmist asks, "O Lord God of hosts, how long will you be angry with your people's prayers?" (Ps. 80:4).[2] Isaiah appeals to God: "Do not be exceedingly angry, O Lord, and do not remember iniquity forever" (Isa. 64:9). Another way to put it is that these texts involve confession: "We have sinned." They turn on a recognition of Israel's transgression and need for restoration.

Why are the people in need of restoration?

Why is God angry? Why are the people of Israel in need of restoration? They are in need of restoration because they have taken their future into their own hands. They have tried to reach God. They have become impatient. They have forgotten that their very existence rests on their being chosen, called out from the nations. They have forgotten that God comes to God's people, not the other way around. They have, in short, failed to let God be God. Isaiah in particular is clear about this reality. He emphasizes the fact that God arrives in ways we do not expect: "When you did awesome deeds that we did not expect, you came down, the mountains quaked at your presence. From ages past no one has heard, no ear has perceived, no eye has seen any God besides you, who works for those who wait for him" (Isa. 64:3–4).

Why is God angry? Why are the people in need of restoration? They have forgotten that God comes to God's people, not the other way around. They have, in short, failed to let God be God.

Notice the points of emphasis here: God's deeds are unexpected. God comes down. God works for those who wait. We cannot see or hear any God but God. Or rather, when we try to see or hear God, we can be reasonably confident that it is not God whom we will see or hear. This is why we are to wait for God to come to us: if we rush to meet God, we invariably find something other than God. Paul's letter to the Corinthians echoes a similar theme: "God is faithful; *by him* you were called into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord" (1 Cor. 1:9; my italics). And the reading from the Gospel according to Mark also reflects this conviction:

"But about that day or hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. Beware, keep alert; for you do not know when the time will come" (Mark 13:32–33).

The danger is us.

I am struck by the sense of danger here. Do we see Advent as a dangerous time? I suspect most of us do not. But here we are being told to beware, keep alert, and be watchful. Apparently danger is lurking. And it seems that the danger is us, and it is linked to the fact that our knowledge is not nearly as secure as we think it is. More than anything else, we are confronted with the fact of our apparently intractable human capacity for self-deception.

As we enter into the time of expectation that is Advent, we are first of all confronted with our sinfulness: We yearn for a messiah whom we will recognize. We want a messiah who reflects what we would identify as best about ourselves. We long for a messiah who seems familiar, someone we feel like we know. But our scripture passages today seem to cut in exactly the opposite direction. This is why Advent is dangerous: because it all too easily turns into a longing for and anticipation of the Jesus we think we've got figured out. It is exactly for this reason that we are called to beware, remain watchful, and keep alert.

We tend to think of Advent as a time when we gradually come closer to God, a God who comes to us in human form in Jesus. But Advent begins by confronting us with the anger of God. If these passages underscore anything, it is God's distance or difference from us. The emphasis is not on a God with whom we are becoming increasingly familiar but on a God who remains exceedingly strange. So it is in a spirit of confession that we come to this season. Advent is a time of preparation that requires us to confess our tendency to forget God or to turn God into something familiar. Advent as the most Jewish of Christian seasons in the sense that it brings us face to face with our seemingly insatiable desire to erect idols. It is Jewish because it reminds us that our expectations will not be straightforwardly satisfied; we will not get the messiah we think we are waiting for. It is Jewish because it emphasizes that God remains beyond our knowledge. It is Jewish because it reflects a longing that in some sense remains frustrated and endlessly deferred.

We often think of Advent as a sort of bridge we must traverse in order to arrive, once again, at that site of holiness called Christmas. We see Advent as a time when we move ever nearer to the presence of God; the direction of movement is from us to God. But this view gets it exactly the wrong way around. It turns the logic of the messianic inside out. The lectionary readings we have heard today suggest that God is not something we reach, even when we do our best to get things right, even when we strive to be our holiest. Rather, the idea of the messianic is that God comes to us—and in so doing radically transforms our way of being and thinking. Here Advent names a divine movement that interrupts and reorients us. If it names an expectation, it is of an event that will be explosive and disruptive—and thus profoundly unexpected.

Let us reimagine Advent as a hollowing out that makes us ready to receive the gift that Christmas has to give—the unexpected gift of a Messiah who comes to save us from the temptation that we must somehow save ourselves.

How do we prepare?

How do we go about preparing for an Advent like this? I don't have a ready answer. And I think the point is that none of us does. But at the least, an Advent like this seems to require a change in how we think about preparation. We often think of preparation as a gradual filling up, a process of addition or accumulation, a progressive unfolding that moves ever forward. Think, for example, of how we prepare for an exam—by filling our minds with the knowledge we might reasonably be expected to deliver. Here we are presented with a different image of preparation. It is not so much a filling up as an emptying. It is a matter not of addition but of subtraction. It is a negative—perhaps even nihilistic—moment more than one that is positive or progressive, because the Messiah comes as much to defy our expectations as to satisfy them.

This is why Advent is so important: because it serves to remind us that we have made Jesus all too familiar, perhaps even idolatrous. It reorients us to his profound strangeness. To quote Rowan Williams once again, it is "a way of learning again that God is God: that between even our deepest and holiest longing and the reality of God is a gap which only grace can cross."[3]

North American Christians tend to approach Advent from the perspective of Christmas. We think that the point of Advent is to focus our gaze on the event of Jesus' arrival. This is no doubt because our lives are governed so much by metaphors of progress and accumulation. But Advent ceases to be Advent when it is overdetermined by Christmas; the meaning of Advent requires us to let our gaze be turned the other way around. And perhaps Christmas can only be Christmas if we can somehow unlearn what we think we know about it. The peculiarly Jewish character of Advent that we are wont to forget reminds us that we must unlearn the Jesus we think we know so that Jesus can come to us as Messiah.

We tend to forget that the season of Advent has as much to do with the second coming of Jesus as with his birth in Bethlehem. And this forgetfulness is yet another symptom of how Christianity has abandoned the Jewish character of Advent. But without the Jewishness of Advent, we are left with a most unchristian conception of Christmas. So let us reimagine Advent as a kind of self-emptying, a hollowing out so that we can become ready to receive the gift that Christmas has to give—the unexpected gift of a Messiah who comes to save us from the temptation that we must somehow save ourselves.

Notes

[1] Rowan Williams, *A Ray of Darkness* (Cambridge, MA: Cowley Publications, 1995), 5.
[2] All scripture quotations are from the NRSV.
[3] Williams, *A Ray of Darkness*, 6.

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Chris K. Huebner is associate professor of theology and philosophy at Canadian Mennonite University, Winnipeg, Manitoba. He is the author of *A Precarious Peace: Yoderian Explorations on Theology, Knowledge, and Identity* (Herald Press, 2006). He is currently working on a book that explores the relationship between martyrdom, knowledge, and the theological virtues of faith, hope, and charity. This sermon was preached on the first Sunday of Advent in 2008, at Chapel Hill (NC) Mennonite Fellowship.

Resources on idolatry
A review article

Justin A. Neufeld

The books reviewed in this article are:

Campbell, Will D., and Richard C. Goode. *Crashing the Idols: The Vocation of Will D. Campbell (and Any Other Christian for that Matter)*. Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2010.

Keller, Timothy. *Counterfeit Gods: The Empty Promises of Money, Sex, and Power, and the Only Hope That Matters*. New York: Dutton, 2009.

Robinson, Marilynne. *Absence of Mind: The Dispelling of Inwardness from the Modern Myth of the Self*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010.

In *The Sickness unto Death,* Søren Kierkegaard gives a compact yet intricate definition of the human being. He says that the human being is a relation, a synthesis of the temporal and the eternal, which relates itself to itself. In addition, this relation that relates itself to itself "must either have established itself or have been established by another." Kierkegaard sides with the latter, offering this final definition of the human being: "The human self is . . . a derived, established relation, a relation that relates itself to itself and in relating itself to itself relates itself to another."[1]

This formal account is given content by Kierkegaard's discussion of the person of immediacy. This person defines herself by her success at acquiring and keeping the objects of her desire. She is happy when "good fortune" brings these things into her possession, and is unhappy when, by "bad luck" or "a stroke of fate," they are taken from her. The person of immediacy, therefore, is a person who rises and falls with the gain and loss of external things, without ever recognizing the true despair of her condition, which is her separation from the eternal. She is not aware that her attempts to be happy by getting this or becoming that are, at

bottom, attempts to be rid of herself as spirit, that is, as a synthesis of the temporal and the eternal.

Timothy Keller, *Counterfeit Gods*

I start with Kierkegaard because Timothy Keller's *Counterfeit Gods* emphasizes the fundamental moral-spiritual character of human beings and asserts that idolatry is the substitution of a created good for God as the focus of our identity and meaning. Keller begins the book by noting the suicides of high profile executives following the 2008 global economic crisis. In this context, Keller echoes Kierkegaard's observation that when we despair over the loss of created goods, we are really despairing of the eternal—that which would release us from our despair. Despair, he writes, "comes from losing an *ultimate* thing. When you lose the ultimate source of your meaning or hope, there are no alternative sources to turn to" (x–xi). The economic crisis is a gift, Keller writes. It has alerted us, not just as individuals but as a society, to our misery. Now is a chance to escape our enslavement not only to the false promises of wealth but to all enchantments.

Keller's *Counterfeit Gods* emphasizes the fundamental moral-spiritual character of human beings and asserts that idolatry is the substitution of a created good for God as the focus of our identity and meaning.

In the following chapters, Keller tackles the personal counterfeit gods of romantic love, money, success, power, and glory, and the corporate counterfeit gods of racial pride and cultural narrowness. What Keller says about each of these counterfeit gods is instructive, and his alignment of specific biblical figures with these idolatries is illuminating; at those points where he pushes the limits of what the biblical text can bear concerning the character of Jacob's or Zacchaeus's existential struggle, his fundamental claims about the spiritual dynamics of service to these gods remain compelling.

Together with the introduction, the chapter on Abraham serves as the foundation for the book's analysis of idolatry. The story of Abraham, according to Keller, is the story of the struggle of faith against idolatrous love. Abraham sacrificed friends, family, and prosperity to follow God. In return he was given the promise of the one thing he did not and could not have, a son. Thus, the

birth of Isaac represents both the triumph of Abraham's faith and its point of crisis. Keller writes: "He had waited and sacrificed, and finally his wife had a baby and it was a boy! But the question now was—had he been waiting and sacrificing for God, or for the boy? Was God just a means to an end? To whom was Abraham ultimately giving his heart?" (6).

The point that Keller wants to make is that we all have our Isaacs, created goods for which we have rejected God or for which we are using God. And thus, like Abraham, we must face our Mount Moriah, the moment when the things we love are threatened and we must opt either "for bitterness and despair" or for faith that life and love are found in loving things in God, not apart from God. But Keller works against this point by means of an interesting interpretive decision. He decides that Abraham was commanded to sacrifice Isaac because Isaac had become a counterfeit god. God "was calling in Abraham's debt. His son was going to die for the sins of the family" (10). What happens on Mt. Moriah, however, is that grace triumphs. Isaac is spared. Yet this leaves God's justice unsatisfied. The solution for this difficulty, Keller writes, is Jesus. The ram that was substituted for Isaac prefigures God's only Son, the true substitute for the debt of sin. "The only way that God can be both 'just' (demanding payment of our debt of sin) *and* 'justifier' (providing salvation and grace) is because years later another Father went up another 'mount' called Calvary with his firstborn and offered him there for us all" (18).

The major weakness of Keller's book lies here, in how he sees God in Jesus addressing the idolatrousness of the human heart. In a word, in his interpretation of the story of Abraham, Keller risks turning God into a counterfeit god—not with the claim that we owe God everything, or with the claim that sin introduces a debt we cannot pay on our own, or even with the claim that forgiveness cannot fail to make the destructiveness of sin manifest. The problem lies with how God elicits recognition of these truths.

Keller has given us a God who finds satisfaction for the debt of our ingratitude by taking our firstborn, but who then deflects that debt onto his own son. Thus we are spared—but not without the debt being collected, and not without us duly noting what we have narrowly avoided. It is only *this* god, Keller declares, who

assures us that we are truly loved and truly secure. I'm not so sure. These seem like the methods of a pseudo-god, powerful but insecure, competing with others for human loyalty and affection.

Keller could learn from Kierkegaard on the significance of Abraham's sacrifice of Isaac. For Kierkegaard, Abraham is the father of faith because he neither rejected eternal joys for temporal joys nor rejected temporal joys for eternal joys. The person of immediacy follows the first path: blind to the eternal dimensions of the human spirit, he serves the god of his stomach. Socrates exaggeratedly described this person as one who "surrenders to pleasure and sets out in the manner of a four-footed beast, eager to make babies." I mention Socrates because Kierkegaard praises his wisdom. First, Socrates recognized the narrowness of human existence that does not attend to the transcendent dimensions of goodness and beauty. Second, Socrates recognized that even if we give up the fanciful love of the person of immediacy and embrace a truer form of love, we still face the hard truth that even this love is not rewarded on earth. Thus, Socrates counselled his listeners "to die to the temporal vindication of love by dwelling in higher sufficiency of the love of the eternal."[2]

Abraham, having renounced the temporal vindication of love, was nevertheless able, by faith, to re-embrace the temporal. It is for this reason that we find him welcoming Isaac with joyful laughter when God's promise is finally fulfilled.

It is only with Abraham, according to Kierkegaard, that we see the error of this higher wisdom. Like Socrates, Abraham died to the impatient desire to see love rewarded. He too rested in the higher sufficiency of the love of God. However, unlike Socrates, Abraham did not treat his earthly loves with resignation or ironic detachment.[3] Instead, having renounced the temporal vindication of love, he was nevertheless able, by faith, to re-embrace the temporal. It is for this reason, says Kierkegaard, that we find Abraham welcoming Isaac with joyful laughter when God's promise is finally fulfilled.

What does this review of Kierkegaard have to do with Keller? Jesus is not a solution for a problem in God. He is not God's means of collecting on a debt he is owed so that, now satisfied, he is able to give the mercy he was otherwise unable to give. Rather, the penalty that Jesus suffers is death—the wage of sin, the natural

consequence of our prideful separation from the source of life—and he suffers it at the hands of humans who have fallen so far from the thought of God that they believe physical death is the greatest possible punishment. They do not recognize, as Jesus said upon hearing of Lazarus's death, that "this illness does not lead to death." The illness that leads to death is the egoistic spiritlessness that belongs, in different ways, to both Socrates and the person of immediacy; it is what Abraham, in fear and trembling, triumphed over on Mt. Moriah. For Kierkegaard, the gift of Jesus' atoning presence is that he frees us to enter the ordeal of humble faith that Abraham modeled.

One of the antidotes to the interpretation of Jesus that I have attributed to Keller is an enlarged sense of God's transcendence and sovereignty. Both Marilynne Robinson's *Absence of Mind* and Goode and Campbell's *Crashing the Idols* communicate this powerfully.

Marilynne Robinson, *Absence of Mind*

The target of Marilynne Robinson's book *Absence of Mind* is expressed in its title: she is after the baffling modern tendency to assert that the mind is not to be credited or trusted. She singles out Freudianism and Darwinism as two exemplary, and irreconcilable, instances of this tendency. Each in its own way asserts that our experience of the mind—its creativity, its complexity, and its liberty—is illusory. The real forces at play are either genetic imperatives or unconscious drives. Our sense of ourselves as rational, free, reflective agents is a screen thrown up by these deeper elements.

The majority of the book is devoted to Darwinism, but it is important to note that Robinson is not an enemy of evolutionary theory. Her target is narrower, namely, the chortle of triumph that came in response to the discovery of evolution and which continues to be heard today. Charles Darwin was the first to chortle. The opening chapter of his *Descent of Man* (1871) contains this sentence: "It is notorious that man is constructed on the same general type or model as other mammals. All the bones in his skeleton can be compared with corresponding bones in a monkey, bat, or seal. So it is with his muscles, nerves, blood-vessels, and internal viscera."[4]

The background to Darwin's remark is his belief that Christianity stands or falls on showing that the characteristic activities of humans—our wit, rationality, and morality—belong to our souls, nonmaterial substances created by God and for God, free from the decay and dumbness belonging to matter. Thus, demonstrating the extensive biological similarity of humans to animals, and showing how our characteristic activities are anticipated in primates and other species, deals a decisive blow to religion in general and Christianity in particular. Now we can say good-bye to superstition and anxiety. Now we can say good-bye to Christianity's powerful but hectoring god who jealously promises heaven for those who flatter him and hell for those who do not.

In response, Robinson points out that Darwin and those who have followed him abide by the mind-body dualism they think they have refuted. The evidence is their repeated insistence that because cognition is embodied in the (evolved) brain, we cannot really be concerned to see, know, and love far beyond the limits of any conception of utility. And so from Darwin to today we have been subjected to comical attempts to explain altruistic behaviour in terms amenable to rational self-interest. "A parent is likely to rescue a child of his own, since that child is presumably the bearer of half his parent's genetic inheritance. . . . To quote Lee Alan Dugatkin, 'If grandchildren are in need of rescue, the net benefit received by the altruist is cut in half.'"[5]

The idolization of substance that has afflicted Christianity has been unthinkingly appropriated by scientists ever since Darwin. The cure for it is a more penetrating wonder served only by openness to divine sovereignty and transcendence.

These perspectives are terribly shortsighted, Robinson contends. Demonstrating that the brain is the site of wit, rationality, and morality does not diminish the spiritual reach of these activities, unless we take a diminished view of the brain. In other words, it is only "notorious" that we share so much with animals if we think so little of them. But nothing says that we must. Rather than lowering our estimation of our minds, our similarity with other species and the embodiedness of our thinking should raise our estimation of the material universe. "If the mind is the activity of the brain, this means only that the brain is capable of such lofty and astonishing

things that their expression has been given the names mind, and soul, and spirit. Complex life may well be the wonder of the universe, and if it is, its status is not diminished by the fact that we can indeed bisect it, that we kill it routinely" (112).

Thus, not only have the Darwinists given us self-interested genes, they have given us self-interested genes that are ashamed of themselves and cloak their nakedness through the fine words of *love*, *sacrifice*, and *moral duty*. In the end, Robinson's claim is that the Darwinists' determination to explain change within and between species in terms of randomness and self-interest, while situating these explanatory categories within a broader narrative about the accidental and unthinking origin of the universe, leaves us with anomalies that only an unscientific commitment to curtailing the capacities of the mind can live with. The idolization of substance that has afflicted Christianity has been unthinkingly appropriated by these scientists. The cure for it is a more penetrating wonder served only by openness to divine sovereignty and transcendence.

Will D. Campbell and Richard C. Goode, *Crashing the Idols*

This brings us to *Crashing the Idols*, a book designed to serve as an introduction to the life and thought of Will Campbell. It begins with a biography of Campbell and closes with Richard Goode's explication of Campbell's theological vision. Between these pieces by Goode is a reprint of Campbell's *Race and Renewal of the Church*, a powerful text.

According to Campbell, any attempt to address the problem of race by adopting a humanitarian approach—by which he means one emphasizing law and order, equality, communication, human rights, constitutional process, public schools, the dangers of poverty, and so on—is to work at the level of the symptoms. What needs to be confronted is the disease of sin. What is the sin? It is the denial of God's sovereignty. Campbell writes:

> *When we confess God as Creator and Sovereign who not only brought the world into being but continues to be its sole sustainer and judge, we see that no matter how high man may rise, no matter what legislation we engineer, no matter how loudly he screams "nigger, jew, dago, kike," his final outcome will be that of the mighty*

> *kings of Judah, in the book of the Chronicles and the Kings—Jehoahaz, Joash, Jeroboam.*[6] *Each died and slept with his fathers and another reigned in his stead until he too died and slept with his fathers and another took his vacant throne. To recognize God as Sovereign, Creator, Judge, and Ruler of the universe is to see how weak is the hand of men who must die and sleep with their fathers and go down into the great sepulcher of the earth together with "all sorts and conditions of men" only to be raised and judged by that one Sovereign who is Lord of all* (118–19).

Campbell opens *Race and Renewal of the Church* by characterizing the work as his effort to say something about which the Bible says nothing. The cause of the Bible's silence is not its ignorance of the issue; it is its principled refusal to legitimate racial categories. The Christian, Campbell writes, does not speak as a white man, a black man, or a red man. Rather, he speaks as "the offspring of a 'peculiar family,' so strange as to be called a *tertium genus*, a third race, a people neither Jew nor Greek, bond nor free, embracing master and slave alike . . . asking only one question of each: Who, do you believe, is this man who is called the Christ?" (77). Race becomes a natural category only when the emphasis is on humans instead of on God, and we betray this rejection of the basis of our common humanity whenever we focus on the strategies and institutions we might employ to effect reconciliation. We *are* reconciled, Campbell says again and again. We need only abide in the kingdom already established and invite others to do the same.

Here we arrive at the deep tension of Campbell's theological vision. On the one hand, Campbell calls the church to incarnate the reconciliation that Christ has effected. On the other hand, he sees *all* institutions as evil.

Here we arrive at the deep tension of Campbell's theological vision. On the one hand, Campbell calls the church to incarnate the reconciliation that Christ has effected. On the other hand, he sees *all* institutions as evil, because what is required to preserve them inevitably conflicts with the other-regarding, sacrificial character of reconciling love. In what sense they are evil, however, is not clear. Is this the kind of evil one must flee from? Or is

it the kind of evil that must be suffered in patience and penitential prayer? More thought needs to be given to the radical anti-institutionalism belonging to Campbell's theology of the principalities and the powers. But it is clear that it needs to be done in the spirit of Campbell, whose passionate hatred of slavery is matched only by his passionate desire for reconciliation with the enslavers. "The church must stand in love and judgment upon the victim, the victimized, and those, both black and white, who exploit both, for they are all children of God" (90).

A compelling picture of the challenge of faith

Together these three authors give us a compelling picture of the challenge of faith. Robinson's critique reminds us that the devil is the best cure for humanity's preference for the dualism of body and soul over the dualism of Creator and creature. As Augustine noted long ago, the devil is the "fleshliest" of all created things not because he has a body—he does not—but because he is supremely proud and envious. If the body were the problem, we would have to absolve him of all vices. The issue is not the particular substance we are as much as it is the substance of our willing. Accordingly, the ordeal of faith—recognizing that love is not temporally vindicated while being humble enough still "to rally to finitude and its joys"[7]—is not done away with by discovering the embodiedness of cognition or the evolution of our species.

Campbell's discussion of race reminds us that the ordeal of faith does not end here. Not only must we confront the challenge of choosing or rejecting faith in a sovereign God, but we also must live with the consequences of faith's rejection by others and ourselves. We must, that is, confront the challenge of choosing or rejecting reconciliation both with those who have acted mercilessly toward us and with those we have acted mercilessly toward. And all this because of Christ: his appearing forces a decision concerning these possibilities without making this decision for us. This is a steep price to pay to avoid idolatry. In its light, the unfreedom of service to counterfeit gods looks liberating.

Those familiar with Keller's *The Reason for God* will know that there Keller affirms substitutionary atonement but denies that Christ was a substitute to satisfy God's wrath. Rather, Christ

suffered the violence, death, and alienation that results from our prideful separation from God, thereby testifying to the destructiveness of sin while also releasing us from its consequences. So I am puzzled by Keller's interpretation of Christ's sacrifice in *Counterfeit Gods*, and by his smug dismissal of Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling*.[8] I invite readers to make their own judgments about where Keller stands. And I believe that if they take up *Counterfeit Gods* alongside *Absence of Mind* and *Crashing the Idols*, they will deepen their understanding of just how costly and rewarding is service to the sovereign God revealed in Jesus Christ.

Notes

[1] Søren Kierkegaard, *The Sicknesss unto Death: A Christian Psychological Exposition for Upbuilding and Awakening*, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), 13–14.
[2] P. Travis Kroeker and Bruce K. Ward, *Remembering the End: Dostoevsky as a Prophet to Modernity* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2001), 218.
[3] Ibid.
[4] Charles Darwin, *The Descent of Man, and Selection in Relation to Sex* (London: Penguin Books, 2004), 22.
[5] Robinson, *Absence of Mind*, 61.
[6] These racial and ethnic slurs, which are a way of elevating ourselves above one another and thus before God, are a denial of God's sovereignty. They are a reflection of the core sin Campbell is addressing—the sin of pride and presumption. They reflect our refusal of both our lowliness before God and our dignity in being graced with God's sovereign company. Those who use this kind of language are in denial that they are dust, and that they will die, and that they will be brought before the sovereign creator of the universe.
[7] Søren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, eds. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983), 37; see 118–20.
[8] For Keller's dismissal of *Fear and Trembling*, see *Counterfeit Gods*, 8. Readers familiar with *The Reason for God* will also know that chapter 10 of that book contains the argument of *Counterfeit Gods* in short form. They will also know that Keller begins this chapter with Kierkegaard's *The Sickness unto Death*, affirming its statement of the eternal dimension of the human being. This makes what Keller says in *Counterfeit Gods* all the more baffling.

About the reviewer

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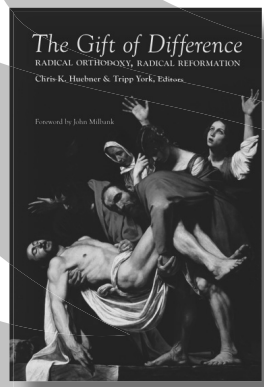

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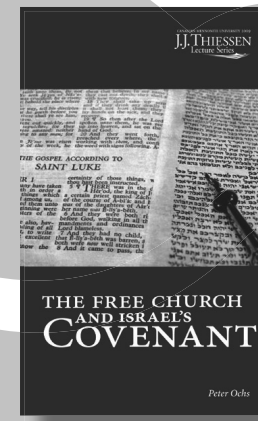

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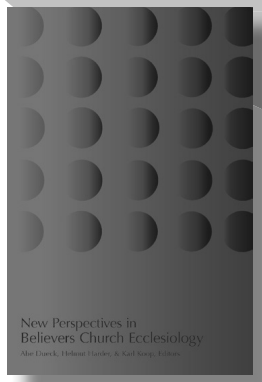

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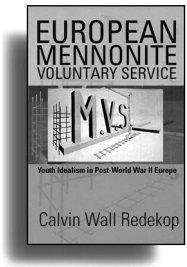

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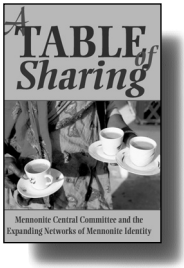

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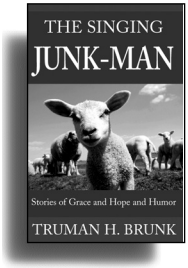

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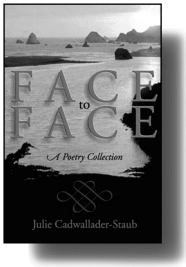

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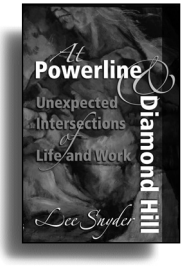

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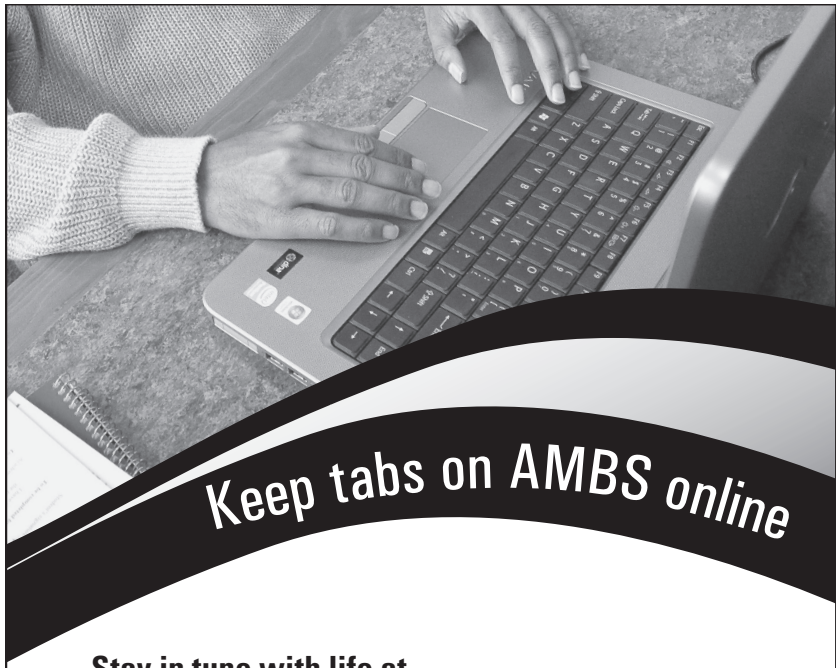

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