

Preaching Idols

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The Primary Sin

In the Bible the primary form of sin is idolatry. Not pride, not lust, not injustice, but idolatry. Indeed, pride, lust, and injustice and other forms of sin are manifestations of the deeper sin of idolatry.

The first two of the Ten Commandments (as they are numbered in the Reformed tradition) explicitly address the issue of idolatry. “You shall have no other gods before me” (Exodus 20:3/Deut. 5:7) and “You shall not make for yourself an idol” (Exodus 20:4/Deut. 5:8). One could also argue that idolatry is the sin that underlies the other eight in both tables of the Decalogue. Furthermore, in Scripture, idolatry is addressed not only in the commandments that structure both Israel’s life before God and its communal life, but it is a repeated reality in Israel’s narrative history.¹

Perhaps best known is the story in Exodus 32 about what happens when God summons Moses to the mountain to receive the Decalogue. After awhile the people realize that Moses “delayed to come down from the mountain” (v.1). Moses had gone missing. In their anxiety as to “who shall go before us” as they continue in the wilderness—a desolate place in which they were surrounded by the real possibility of starvation, absence of water, and death—the people ask Aaron “to make gods for us.” It is not good to be without gods in the wilderness. Aaron asks for their gold jewelry, fashions the image of a calf, and tells the people, “These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt” (v.4). Indeed, these are new and improved gods, for these gods are tangible deities. You can actually get your hands on them. They will not go missing, as have Moses and his God. And the people responded as religious people always do. The next day they held a worship service. They brought offerings and sacrifices to their gods. They ate and drank and “rose up to revel” (v.6).

So too the kings of Israel and Judah are indicted in the Bible for worshipping gods other than Yahweh, “the gods of the peoples who are all around you” as Deuteronomy puts it (6:14). Jeroboam, king of Israel after the division of the monarchy, fearful he might lose the northern kingdom to Rehoboam and Judah, has two golden calves made and places one in Bethel and the other in Dan. Again, we hear, “Here are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt” (I Kings 12:25-33). The worship of other gods, of idols, seems to become part of the DNA of the rulers of Judah and Israel. With rare exceptions, it is passed from one king to the other. “Manasseh did what was evil in the sight of the Lord . . . he erected altars for Baal, made a sacred pole, as King Ahab of Israel had done, worshipped all the host of heaven, and served them” (2 Kings 21:1-3).

Practically every prophetic book in Scripture includes a denunciation of idolatry. In Second Isaiah, Israel is told, “All who make idols are nothing, and the things they delight in do not profit; their witnesses neither see nor know. And so they will be put to shame. Who would fashion a god or cast an image that can do no good” (44:9-10). Similarly, Jeremiah speaks the Word of the Lord to the people of Judah: “But where

are your gods that you made for yourself? Let them come if they can save you, in your time of trouble; for you have as many gods as you have towns, O Judah” (2:28).

Idolatry is just as prominent a theme in the New Testament as in the Old. In the Gospels Jesus begins his ministry in the wilderness, where he is tempted by the devil with the idols of food, security, and the kingdoms of the world (Matt. 4:1-11/Luke 4:1-13), but Jesus, the Word made flesh, clings to the written words of Scripture and remains faithful to the one he calls “the Lord your God.” In the third temptation (in Matthew’s story), Jesus is offered everything (“all the kingdoms of the world”) in exchange for his adoration and worship of the devil.

In his first letter to the Christians in Corinth, Paul implores them “not to desire evil” as did some of those who were with Moses in the wilderness. “Do not become idolaters as some of them did” (10:6); instead, “flee from the worship of idols” (10:14) lest they become “partners with demons” (10:20). In Revelation those who are given authority in the final judgment and who reign for a thousand years are those who have been beheaded for their testimony to Jesus. They are vindicated because they “had not worshipped the beast or its image and had not received its mark on their foreheads or their hands” (Revelation 20:4-5).

If idolatry is the primary form of sin in Scripture, why then do we hear so little about it in our churches today? Do Christians today assume that idolatry was only a problem for primitive people in ancient Israel or for Christians in the first century? If we have no golden calves in our homes and if we do not hold religious services to worship graven images, does that mean idolatry is no longer a problem? What is idolatry, anyway?

The Concept of Idolatry²

Perhaps the reason some people dismiss idolatry and assume it was only an issue in primitive religion is that they identify it exclusively with the second commandment. “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 or worship them . . .” (Exodus 20:4-5). Furthermore, to make an idol or “graven image” is to “form” or “fashion” a golden calf or something similar. A few verses after the Decalogue, we read that the Lord said to Moses, “You shall not make gods of silver along side me, nor shall you make for yourselves gods of gold” (Exodus 20:23). If one has not fashioned gods of silver and gold, if there is no shrine to a golden calf in one’s home, of what relevance are the commandments concerning idolatry?

Why do silver and gold play such a significant role in the Bible’s description of idolatry? For ancient Israel they were material objects that delighted the eye; their beauty gave great pleasure and provided joy. And therein is the root of idolatry. Human beings consist of deep desires, strong yearnings, and great fears. The Bible recognizes that the human heart is of more importance than either the mind or the will, and of first importance is not what Israel thinks or wills, but what or whom it loves. “You shall love the Lord your God with all your *heart*, and with all your soul, and with all your might” (Deut. 6:5). Idolatry results when human loves, desires, and fears become disordered. Sin, as Augustine saw so clearly, is disordered love. There are many things human hearts love and desire, but the first commandment and Deuteronomy 6:5 suggest there is only one reality that should be loved more than everything else. To sin

is to love inappropriately, to love some things (or people) more than one should or to love them less than one should. To sin is to love anything other than God “with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might.” To sin is not just to hate God, but to love God less than one loves other things.

Images are prohibited in the Bible for three reasons. First, God cannot and should not be imaged. God may speak to Moses from a burning bush, and God may be present to Israel in a pillar of cloud by day and in a pillar of fire by night, but God’s glory and holiness cannot be imaged or imagined. They are beyond human reckoning and will be misrepresented in every human attempt to depict them.

Second, images of God are prohibited because the images themselves rather than the God who is imaged become the object of human trust, love, and devotion. Rather than being the medium through which God is worshipped, the image becomes the object of worship. The image will not go missing as did Yahweh and his prophet Moses on the mountain. It can be counted on to provide security as Israel journeys through the wilderness surrounded by horror and death. Israel’s prophets may tell her that idols are “like scarecrows in a cucumber field” that “cannot do evil, nor is it in them to do good” (Jeremiah 10:5), but in the midst of peril, a god in the hand may be more attractive than God in heaven.

Third, images are prohibited not just because they misrepresent the glory and holiness of God, and not just because they rather than God become the object for worship, but because they lead to the worship of other gods, “the gods of the peoples who are all around you.” Images may be initially attractive because they are beautiful (and therefore pleasing to the heart) and tangible (and therefore pleasing to the mind), but they also easily lead to the worship of that which cannot give life, but only death.

Martin Luther recognized that the difference between the living God and idols is so perilously thin that what the Reformed tradition identifies as the first and second commandments should be only one. “You shall have no other gods before me” means “you shall not make for yourself an idol.” The one entails the other. To worship other gods is to worship idols, and to make an idol is to worship other gods. Luther knew that all human beings have desires, loves, and fears, and consequently, “All people have set up their own god, to whom they looked for blessings, help, and comfort.” But gods are not God. A “god,” Luther wrote in his *Large Catechism*, is “that to which we look for all good and in which we are to find refuge in all need. Therefore, to have a god is nothing else than to trust and believe in that one with your whole heart....It is the trust and faith of the heart alone that make both God and an idol.... Anything on which your heart relies and depends, I say, that is really your God.”³

In its simplest sense, idolatry is the worship, the trust, and the service with all of one’s heart and soul and strength of that which is not God.⁴ The power of sin, however, (and therein the power of idolatry) is its capacity to deceive, its ability to convince us that the idols we worship are truly God.

Unmasking the Idols

A Brief Statement of Faith, the last document in the *Book of Confessions* of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), describes the Holy Spirit as giving Christians “courage...to unmask idolatries in Church and culture.”⁵ The use of “unmask” is appropriate because, as we have seen, idols often appear as something they are not, and by masking their true identity as “false gods,” they deceive those who love and worship

them. *A Brief Statement* recognizes that idolatry is no less a problem for the church today than it was for ancient Israel and for the church of the first century. A major challenge, therefore, for every congregation that takes mission seriously, is to unmask the idols that surround it in its culture and the idols that are alive and well within the church. A significant challenge for all those who preach and teach is to help Christians name the idols “of the peoples who are all around you.”

What are the idolatries of North American culture? Perhaps one way to begin answering that question is to remember the close connection between “other gods” and the role of images. Where do we encounter images today that not only shape, but also manipulate our longings and desires, our loves, our hopes, and our fears? At the beginning of the twenty-first century, people in the United States and the rest of the world are besieged and assaulted everywhere by images in the print media, television, movies, and the internet. In *The Fifties*, David Halberstam documents the transformation of the United States immediately following the Second World War.⁶ During that decade television replaced the radio as the primary medium of communication. The automobile industry, interstate highways, suburbs, shopping malls, discount stores, motels, fast food restaurants like *McDonalds*, and Elvis Presley and rock music suddenly appeared and quickly transformed American culture. For the first time in their lives, large numbers of Americans were able to purchase automobiles and to buy homes in new suburban communities like Levittown outside of New York City. But not only did Americans buy new products that significantly improved their lives. They continued to buy, to consume, even when what they purchased no longer improved their lives, but, as in the case of tobacco and fast food, endangered them.

A major player in that transformation was the emergence of modern marketing and advertising. In some form there was nothing new about advertising. It was as old as the bartering of goods and human commerce. But in the fifties, when coupled with television and other forms of mass media, it took on a dramatically new form and began to exercise a heretofore unimagined powerful role in American society. The fifties, Halberstam writes, “was a decade that revolutionized Madison Avenue.”

At the turn of the century, the home had been a reasonably safe haven from the purveyors of goods (among other reasons because there was so little disposable income) other than the occasional traveling salesman. Radio advertising had been clever and deft and had greatly expanded the possibilities for reaching the consumer; but television opened up the field even more dramatically and offered a vast array of new techniques, from the subtle and sophisticated to hammering away with a brief, repetitive message.⁷

In his classic study of American marketing, *The Hidden Persuaders*, first published in 1957, Vance Packard describes the turn of the marketing industry to depth psychology and its use of images, or what Packard calls “triggers,” to manipulate the human unconscious and precondition people to purchase its products, even when doing so is detrimental to their well being.⁸ Marketing no longer tried to make an argument why the consumer should purchase a product. Its tactics became more indirect, more subterranean. It now tried to establish an emotional connection with the consumer, to manipulate basic human longings and desires, to create “wants,” and to turn wants

into “needs.”

If you want recent examples, think about the “commercials” you have seen the last few years on television. Commercials from companies like Cadillac and Enterprise Car Rental. A recent Cadillac commercial features the actress Kate Walsh in a dark, alluring dress, driving her car at what appears to be a high speed. She turns to the camera and says, “The real question is: when you turn your car on, does it return the favor?” Similarly, an Enterprise Car Rental commercial begins with a woman asking her partner whether he prefers red or black lingerie. He responds “both,” and the last we see of them is the “do not disturb” sign on their hotel door. The last words we hear are, “Let Enterprise pick you up.” Now, no one believes if you buy a Cadillac, it will come equipped with a beautiful actress or that if you rent a car from Enterprise you will be “picked up” and forced to choose between red and black lingerie. But both commercials play on the powerful reality of human sexuality and try at some level of consciousness to suggest that there is a connection between the satisfaction of sexual desire and their product. Does it work? Do you know how much money it costs to produce and distribute a television commercial?

Television commercials, however, are not the primary issue. They are only the symptom of a far more serious problem. What has it taken to turn American society into three hundred million consumers, people who live to consume, people for whom the most basic human desires, such as joy and happiness, seem to be tied to what they can acquire, and whose greatest fear is the diminishment of their power to consume? President George Bush’s words to the American people following 9/11 are telling: “Enjoy America’s great destination spots. Get down to Disney World in Florida. Take your families and *enjoy life the way we want it to be enjoyed*” (italics mine).

The “idols of the peoples all around you” today in American society are as close as your television and your personal computer. They have worked their way into the deep recesses of our psyches and our hearts. Consumerism is not simply about money and finances. It is a way of life, and as such, it is a powerful idolatry that deceives and captures the human heart. We will not be freed easily from bondage to it.

While there may be powerful idols at play in American culture, are there also idolatries in the church? Is not the church the one haven where we are safe from idols? Anyone who has read the Bible should know that idols seem to thrive in religion more than anywhere else, and Christianity is no exception. In most churches, Christians continue to struggle with idols that take the form of images, images no less powerful and no less destructive than those we encounter in our consumer society.

Examples abound. The debate of the last forty years concerning what is and is not appropriate language to describe God and to address God (the two are not the same) is an obvious example. It was the most divisive issue for the General Assembly Committee of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) in the late 1980’s that wrote *A Brief Statement of Faith*. Some members of the committee were prepared to resign if “Father” was the only word used to describe the first person of the Trinity; others were prepared to resign if any other word was used. For a long time it was unclear whether the committee would be able to find a compromise. It did, by describing God as “Like a mother who will not forsake her nursing child, like a father who runs to welcome the prodigal home.”⁹

Many congregations have not been as fortunate. The discussion of this issue continues to stir strong emotions, has caused churches to divide, and has led to the

departure or dismissal of more than a few ministers. On the one hand, the exclusive use by “traditionalists” of masculine images for God seems to reinforce the idolatry that is patriarchy, an idolatry that continues to pervade American society and Christian churches. On the other hand, “reformers” attack traditional Christian language with a vehemence that often is insensitive to the inextricable link between language and faith. To tinker with language invariably is to alter faith. Despite what they intend, “reformers” are perceived by “traditionalists” not as reformers, but as purveyors of a new religion. Not surprisingly the debate often turns into a war of images in which the opposing party’s images for God are attacked as idols, and one’s own images are affirmed as revealed truth. It is difficult not to conclude that idols are in play on both sides of the debate.

Idolatry is not just an issue in debates over language about God. It is just as much a reality in church debates over what hymns should be in a new hymnal, whether it is appropriate to use contemporary music in worship services, whether the church should offer both traditional and contemporary services, and how membership and budget can be sustained in a declining denomination in the midst of a national recession. Some Christians long for a return to the teeming congregations and the healthy finances of the 1950’s, while others yearn for a church that is still yet to be, a church that will be freed from middle class social values that were too long mistakenly identified with Christian faith. In every case, one can sense the presence of idolatry whenever the image of the church, be it the church of the past or the church of the future, becomes so powerful that it becomes impossible for people to be open to the new things God may be doing in the midst of the familiar.

The Image of the Invisible God

If idolatry manifests itself in the misuse of images-- because it is other gods and not the living god who is being imaged or because the wrong images are being used for God or because the image rather than God is what is worshipped--is not the solution simply to eliminate images? Some Christians in the past have come to that conclusion. The result was, among many examples, the “iconoclastic controversy” of the eighth and ninth centuries and the iconoclasm of some of the Protestant Reformers of the sixteenth century.¹⁰ Unfortunately, it has not proved possible or desirable to purge Christian faith of images. First, Christians are called to worship and serve God in the world, and it is not possible to either worship God or serve God without thinking about God. And it is not possible for human beings to think about God without using the imagination. Furthermore, to imagine is to image. The imagination is not and cannot be blank.

Does that mean that Christians can never be free from images and hence never free from idolatry? Probably so. To live “by grace alone” is to recognize that human faith is always, at least in this life, tainted with sin, including the primary sin of idolatry. That does not mean, however, that Christians should resign themselves to their captivity to idols. Part of the life of discipleship is the continuing struggle with idolatry. It is appropriate that *A Brief Statement of Faith* states that the Holy Spirit “gives us courage . . . to unmask idolatries in Church and culture” (italics mine). Just as we cannot extricate ourselves from sin, so we cannot free ourselves completely from our idols. But the Spirit sustains us in that struggle by giving us courage to confront a powerful oppressor.

Furthermore, the Bible points Christians to one image to which they are to cleave in life and in death. Colossians 1:15 declares that Jesus Christ is “the image of the invisible God” and that in him “all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell” (1:19). Hence it is appropriate for Christians to imagine and therefore to image the Word that has become flesh. The Word did not become flesh in general, but flesh “for us and for our salvation,” as the Nicene Creed puts it. Western Europeans, therefore, should image Jesus as a Western European, as he has been imaged in the history of Western art. But it is no less appropriate for Kenyans and Koreans to image Jesus as African and Asian.

On the other hand, while Jesus Christ is the image of the invisible God, nowhere in the New Testament are Christians given a scintilla of evidence as to Jesus’ appearance. Not a single hint as to what he looked like. If Jesus Christ is the image of the invisible, God he is an image without physical form. What the New Testament does tell us is what Jesus said and did and how he lived in relation to those around him. In that sense and only in that sense are Christians invited to image the invisible God by means of Jesus of Nazareth. God is like the one who walked this path and lived this way. That image, however, must always stand over against all our attempts to “fashion and to fasten” the invisible God and God’s anointed One.¹¹ As this particular image of God, Jesus renders all other images partial, provisional, and inadequate.

Notes

1 “One might say that the whole of Scripture is in some sense commentary on and story of the First Commandment.” Patrick D. Miller, *The Ten Commandments*, (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), 27.

2 For a helpful analysis of the concept of idolatry and the history of its development, see Moshe Halbertal and Avishai Margalit, *Idolatry*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992).

3 Martin Luther, *The Large Catechism* (1529) in *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, eds. Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 388, 386.

4 For an interpretation of idolatry in relation to love and devotion, trust and confidence, and service and obedience, see Brian S. Rosner, *Greed as Idolatry: The Origin and Meaning of a Pauline Metaphor* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans, 2007), 159-165.

5 *A Brief Statement of Faith* in *Book of Confessions: Study Edition [Part I of the Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)]*, (Louisville, Kentucky: Geneva Press, 1996), 342 (lines 66 and 69).

6 David Halberstam, *The Fifties*, (New York: Fawcett Columbine, 1993).

7 *Ibid.*, 500-501.

8 Vance Packard, *The Hidden Persuaders*, (New York: Pocket Books, Inc., 1957), 18-30.

9 *A Brief Statement of Faith*, 342 (lines 49-50).

10 Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Spirit of Eastern Christendom (600-1700)* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1974); Volume 2 of *The Christian Tradition: A History of the Development of Doctrine*. See Chapter 3, “Images of the Invisible,” 91-145; Carlos M.N. Eire, *War Against the Idols: The Reformation of Worship from Erasmus to Calvin*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986).

11 The language is John Calvin’s. “Men are so stupid that they fasten God wherever they fashion him; and hence they cannot help but adore. And there is no difference whether they simply worship an idol, or God in the idol. It is always idolatry when divine honors are bestowed upon an idol, under whatever pretext this is done.” *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1960); “The Library of Christian Classics.” 2 Vols. 1: 109 (1, 11, 9).