

## **Idolatry: The Most Serious Evil in the Bible**

*Leviticus 26:1" 'do not make idols or set up an image or a sacred stone for yourselves, and do not place a carved stone in your land to bow down before it. I am the Lord your God.*

*Numbers 33:52 drive out all the inhabitants of the land before you. Destroy all their carved images and their cast idols*

*Deuteronomy 4:16... do not become corrupt and make for yourselves an idol, an image of any shape, whether formed like a man or a woman*

*Deuteronomy 7:25...the images of their gods you are to burn in the fire...or you will be ensnared by it, for it is detestable to the Lord your God.*

*Deuteronomy 27:15 cursed is the man who carves an image or casts an idol-a thing detestable to the Lord*

The most serious sin in the Bible is Idolatry. God forbids us from having any other gods- He is the one and only. God forbids us to make any idols. Idols are substitutes for God.

God is not here forbidding Art or painting a picture of Jesus the Nazarene, like the one hanging on a wall in our house. That concept trivializes and actually circumvents what is the most serious evil in the Bible. (Please note: the most serious evil is not sexual behavior, abortion or war.)

God is in control of our lives. He gives security & meaning and purpose. We reject God and his control. We make something else to give us meaning and security. Whatever that may be is our Idol. Actually, we make idols to make us god. Through the use of idols, we believe we are in control of our circumstances. Through the use of idols, we believe we give our lives meaning and purpose. Our self-made idols give us, through our faith in them, what only God can truly give. This is what Idolatry is about. That is the most serious sin.

This is not only error and self-deception. It is tragic self-destruction. Our self-made idols eventually take over our lives. Our idols become real gods with power over us. We make them to serve us and we end up serving them. More tragic and ironic is the fact that while we start out worshiping what gives us identity and end up becoming what we worship.

Most criticism of idolatry focuses on the failure of idols- the problems that idolatry incurs. One writer has said, "...when we turn away from the Living God, the source of our being and meaning and doing, things start to go wrong. So idolatry is not just a theological matter. It has devastating effects in us, in our families and friends, in our communities, in society and for the planet God put us on. *That* is why God hates it. He loves his creation and wants all our relationships right and healthy."

There is a sad truth to this; but, the implication here is that if idols delivered what they promise, they would be good. Then idolatry would not be evil. That can never be. Idols are evil, always, because they are substitutes for God. That is

why they fail to deliver. Our concern must be with the Idols themselves, not with the failure of Idols to deliver what we expect or the trouble they cause.

John Calvin said our hearts are idol factories. He seems to be following the prophet Ezekiel-

*Ezekiel 14:2 the word of the Lord came to me: 3 "Son of Man, these men have **set up idols in their hearts** ... Should I let them inquire of me at all? 4 therefore speak to them and tell them, 'this is what the sovereign Lord says: when any Israelite **sets up idols in his heart** and puts a wicked stumbling block before his face and then goes to a prophet, I the Lord will answer him myself in keeping with his great idolatry.5 I will do this to recapture the hearts of the people of Israel, who have all deserted me for their idols.' 6 "therefore say to the house of Israel, 'this is what the sovereign Lord says: Repent! Turn from your idols and renounce all your detestable practices!*

But Ezekiel is quoting God as saying that men bring their idols into their hearts. The idols do not originate there, but become rooted there. Idols become loved. Idols take over a man's heart- his devotion- even while that man seeks the Lord, remaining a believer in God. These idols are stumbling blocks- they lead to sin, not simply to trouble or misery for the idolater. Idolatry is the root and cause of all evil in society. cf Rom 1, Col 3:5 eg- Idolatry is the major cause of the oppression of the Poor

Idolatry, devotion to false gods in the heart, makes prayer (devotion) to the true God impossible. God hates this. He demands His people repent of the idols in their hearts and forsake them.

Beyond personal idols, there are national or public Idols that also have root in people's hearts. They have deep roots in the hearts of many Christians. What are they? Ideologies National or public idols are manifest in Ideologies: identify the Ideology- find the Idol.

We have seen-

- an idol is any thing that takes the place of God;
- any thing which is given the loyalty and obedience which is due only to God;
- any thing which is trusted to do what God alone can do.

1. An Ideology is a belief system. It offers an interpretation of the past, an explanation of the present and a vision of the future. Thus it involves doctrine and faith.

2. Ideology is a system of beliefs that explains and justifies a specific goal and offers a strategy for its attainment.

3. This system has strong emotional appeal- it arouses strong feelings and incites people to bold actions.

4. The Ideology is identified with an organized movement or party, makes much of symbols/insignia and slogans and has a very powerful, charismatic leader(s)

There are many similarities between an ideology and a religion. Often the former is adopted by the latter and function, for all practical purposes, as one. Classic examples of this synergism are the movement that led up to the American Revolution and the rise of National Socialism (the Third Reich) in pre-World War II Germany. (The Church, in many countries, has often identified with the Political Right or Left of that Country.)

Nations (or groups within nations) look to their ideologies (Idols) for national security, power, control, meaning and purpose as a Nation or Group. A case can be made that idols give national or group identity

(See -The Construction of Idols and Identity by Curtis Chang 1996 IVCF)

Bob Goudzwaard, in his book [\*Idols of our Time\*](#), says: "an ideology arises when *idolatry* takes root in the pursuit of a legitimate end." I would reverse that: idolatry arises when ideology takes root. Science, technology and the economy are legitimate and necessary to the life of a nation. Each has a valid, important role to play in national life. Each can become an idol. Each can be, and has been, made an absolute and become an object of faith - Goudzwaard is convinced that **Scientism**, **Technicism** and **Economism** are the three major idols of our times. It has been said that these 3 Idols are inseparable and thus really form a trinity: one god in three "persons". "Scientism offers omniscience, Technicism provides omnipotence, Economism... extends to all...material prosperity- nothing short of secular salvation" the Transforming Vision, Walsh & Middleton, p.138

The New Testament specifies three Idols. It warns that unbridled appetites and lusts of the body (**Materialism**) can become an Idol- we believe we need to satisfy them for a "good life". Likewise, Jesus names **Mammon** (material wealth, money, consumerism) to be an Idol. The third Idol, the New Testament warns about, is the **State**. We come to believe we need it for our security and well-being. These three are all substitutes for God.

All these Idols enslave us as individuals. Collectively, they can do the same thing to us as a group or Nation. They control, enslave and eventually destroy us. Certainly, many Americans, many Christian Americans, have set up these Idols in their hearts, for the security, power, control, meaning and purpose of the nation, as well of their personal lives. They have rejected the truth that God alone can give security, protection, strength, life, purpose and meaning.

When we look to anything else- the economy, the stock market, government, a political party or leader, our country, nationality or ethnicity, science, technology, a "cause" of any kind, formal education (Degrees and Credentials)- to give us security, protection, strength, life, purpose and meaning instead of God, we have an idols. That makes such Christians practicing Pagans. We must repent and rip these idols from our hearts.

