

Idol Factory

By Robert Peterson

“Little children, keep yourselves from idols” (1 John 5:21).

When John warned his readers to avoid idolatry, he was not writing about graven images. It is true that many people in John’s day worshiped material images of false gods. But John did not speak of this danger in his epistle, and it would have been strange for him to introduce it in the last line. Rather, John was warning about mental idols.

Idolatry goes deeper than images made by hands; it also pertains to those erected by the heart. God, speaking through Ezekiel, condemned Israelite elders “who have set up their idols in their hearts” (Ezekiel 14:3-4). Indeed, God yearned to “seize the house of Israel by their heart, because they are all estranged from Me by their idols” (v. 5). Most profoundly, idolatry has to do with mind and heart. God knows that these two things do not mix: deeply loving Him and devoting the heart to idols. So God worked to cure Israel of the second in order to promote the first.

The true and living God tolerates no rivals. That is why the one who said, “I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage,” also said, “You shall have no other gods before Me.” Yahweh’s redemption of Israel from bondage was the basis for His demand that His people worship only Him. His grace had claimed them as His own.

For this reason, he also said: “You shall not make for yourself a carved image—any likeness of anything...you shall not bow down to them nor serve them. For I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children to the third and fourth generation of those who hate Me, but showing mercy to thousands, to those who love Me and

keep My commandments” (Deuteronomy 5:8-10). Scripture (in Hosea, for example) compares God’s love for His own to that of a husband for his wife. God is jealous for the devotion of Israel His bride.

This commandment was a further demand by the Lord of the covenant that His people love Him by eschewing all idolatry. Did this mean not bowing down to idols of wood or precious metals? Of course, as God’s condemnation of Israel’s consorting with the golden calf shows (Exodus 32). But this commandment also warned the Israelites not to get their ideas about God from themselves. It taught the people of God to get their conceptions of Him from His own mouth, to think of Him as He had revealed Himself to be. For instance, when God said, “I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity...upon...those who hate Me, but showing mercy to thousands, to those who love Me,” he was telling Israel what He is like. He was telling them that He is stern, punishing sin for four generations; but He is more compassionate, extending grace to thousand generations.

Why does God regard it as so important that we get our ideas about Him from His lips rather than ours? Scripture teaches that god is incomprehensible. He has “secret things” that are not revealed and belong to Him alone (Deuteronomy 29:29). His ways and thoughts are immeasurably higher than ours (Isaiah 55:8-9). His judgments are “unsearchable” and His ways “past finding out” (Romans 11:33). He dwells “in unapproachable light” (1 Timothy 6:16). The Lord God Almighty is great and mysterious! Puny, fallen human beings are unqualified to get their ideas about God from their own heads. Instead, they are dependent on Him to make Himself known to them.

What about evangelicals today? We are frequently tempted by mental idols. Our statements about God often reveal problems with our view of God of which we are largely unaware. Consider two:

God’s most basic characteristic is sovereignty.”

My personal idol detector works well around theologies that I reject. For instance, it blares even before I open the cover of a Watchtower book. Openness theology’s assertion that God is mainly love makes my detector sing like Charlotte Church. But undue emphases of fellow Calvinists—like the one above—can fly under my radar. The person making this statement accurately prizes the absolute sovereignty of God as a crucial element of the Christian faith, an element that is often overlooked today. Nevertheless, the statement is wrong; it is out of harmony with other equally Biblical truths. Is God’s sovereignty more basic than His infinity, holiness, eternity, truthfulness, faithfulness, omnipresence, omniscience, or love? No. If you take away any of these attributes, the being we are left with is not God. It is possible to teach nothing but truth, in this case the truth of God’s sovereignty, and still promote error by neglecting other Scriptural truths. Let us be careful to present a full-orbed picture of our great God, lest we unwittingly diminish His glory by presenting a distorted picture.

“Arminians worship a different god.”

We who hold to the Reformed faith by God’s grace embrace a more Biblical view of God than many of our Christian friends. But should this make us proud and cause us to look down our noses at Arminians (or dispensationalists, Baptists, or Pentecostals) who don’t understand the doctrines of grace as well as we do? If these doctrines do not make us grateful, if they do not humble us before a holy God and before fellow believers of all stripes, then I wonder whether we have been apprehended by the grace of God at all. By God’s mercy, Arminians worship the true and living God, the same God as Calvinists. Perhaps we need the attitude of George

Whitefield, who, when asked whether he expected to see John Wesley in heaven (the same Wesley whose Arminian teaching Whitefield opposed), replied: “I fear not, for he will be so near the eternal throne and we at such a distance we shall hardly get a sight of him!” May God grant that our brothers and sisters in Christ of other theological persuasions will observe the beauty of Calvinism in our lives and be drawn toward it.

The sum of the matter is that no one but God Himself has a pure theology of God. The rest of us, who by His compassion know and love Him, understand many truths about Him. But along with truths, we all have false ideas about God. To some degree, then, we are all idolaters. Isn’t it good we are saved by grace?

Yes, some theologies are better than others, and I unashamedly embrace and teach the Reformed faith as God’s truth. But a key emphasis of the Reformation was that God’s people are to regard God’s Word as a sieve through which we continually pour our ideas. The strainer of Scripture will catch the good teaching and allow the impurities to pass through and be discarded. We who love the Lord should endeavor to “[bring] every thought into captivity to the obedience of Christ,” (2 Corinthians 10:5). *

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