

We Are What We Worship

Perspectives on Worship and Idolatry

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Introduction: “People resemble what they revere, either for ruin or restoration. God has made all people to reflect, to be imaging beings. People will always reflect something, whether it’s God character or some feature of the world. If people are committed to God, they will become like Him; if they are committed to something other than God, they will become like that thing, always spiritually inanimate and empty like the lifeless and vain aspect of creation to which they have committed themselves and which leads to destruction.”

Story illustration: Native American and the Totem Pole: I grew up in Oklahoma where the state license plate reads, “Native America.” In Oklahoma there is a certain pride associated with having “Indian blood” in your family tree while in Minnesota and the Dakotas there is a racial prejudice among some against Native Americans. Life for many Native Americans is backward and poverty stricken on reservations that are the shadowy remnants of the vast prairie lands once inhabited by native tribes. I believe there is a reason for this that goes beyond socio-economic class and racial prejudice. I believe there is a spiritual dimension that is at least partially to blame.

One of the cultural realities present in many Native American tribal groups is a religion known as “Totemism.” Totemism is a religious belief, usually associated with a myth that considers an object of nature (usually an animal or a plant) to be sacred and representative of a group of people or clan spiritually. So, in many Native American villages you will see “Totem Poles.”

“Totemism” has as one of its base worship characteristics a variable which is best described as “imitative” or “contagious.” Native American tribes would view a totem pole as set apart and sacred. They would then enact rituals that imitate the sacred objects or that identify the people of the clan with the objects they hold sacred.

For example, by dressing with various parts of the animals depicted on totem poles (animal skins, horns, wings, claws, etc...), or by painting the face or wearing a mask like the figures depicted on the totem pole, identification with the totem animal and its power occurs.

In this way each member of the totem clan is invested with the characteristics of the animal or plant represented and they become an animal or plant of the totem species. They believe in this way that they resemble and reflect the nature of the sacred animal and are thus spiritually venerated (i.e. they please the totem gods and invoke the blessings of the spirits).

Principles illustrated in this story:

1. **“Like produces like”** – we reflect the character and nature of the object of our worship
2. **We are either worshipping the God** of the Bible and reflecting His character , *or* **We’re worshipping something other than the God** of the Bible which the Bible calls “an idol” and we are reflecting the characteristics of that idol. There is no third option, including indifference.
3. **We are created as “image bearers.”**
The God of the Bible created human beings “In His Image.”
We either reflect God’s image or the image of a created idol.
4. **We are either worshipping the God of the Bible and are in the process as believers of being *restored* to His image, or we are worshipping an idol and are being *ruined* by reflecting the character (image) of the idol.**

What we revere is what we resemble, either for our ruin or restoration.

Summation on “Toteism:” Religious sociologists would claim that all religions are the same, that one is no more helpful or harmful than another. In the case of many Native American tribes, Totemistic idolatry degraded and destroyed the spiritual health of an entire indigenous people. The same could be said of cannibalism among island tribesmen, or ancestor worship among the villages of China. These idolatrous practices ruin lives rather than produce restored lives.

This observable “ruin” among non-Christians resulting from their reflecting the characteristics of powerless and empty contemporary idols proves that all religions are not the same. Only the worship of the One True and living God results in a positive restorative life and eternal future for each person.

Class objective: We want to look at these principles in the life of the Nation of Israel, in the early days of the church, and in our own lives in our day.

We want to identify the idols of our day and how it is that people who are spiritually privileged can ever come to a point where they worship something or someone other than Jesus Christ.

Questions to begin:

What is an idol?

What is idolatry?

What is true worship?

How do we gravitate toward one or the other?

I. What is an “idol?”

An idol is a man made image of a ‘god,’ or an object from creation used as an object of worship which garners ardent or excessive devotion from human “image bearers” in defiance of God’s direct command to the contrary.

II. What is idolatry?¹

Idolatry is the human rejection of God and the finality of God’s moral authority as expressed by:

1. Worshipping a created object by believing that the presence of God or His Spirit is in the object, or can be induced to inhabit the object;
2. Worshipping a created object by rationalizing said worship as if it were the worship of God, Who is errantly represented by the object;
3. Making and worshipping an ‘image of God,’ since God is a Spirit and cannot be seen, so as to make God visible and manageable;
4. Worshipping a created object instead of, and as a blatant rejection of God so as to give it our affections that are rightfully God’s, to the idol for personal gain.
5. Assuming that a created object is worthy of things that are rightfully God’s alone, and believing it is capable of delivering blessings.

Idolatry is the sinful defiance and violation of the first two commandments:

“You shall have no other gods before Me.” Exodus 20:3

“You shall not make for yourself and idol, or any likeness of what is in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the water under the earth. You shall not worship or serve them: for I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God.” Exodus 20:4

III. What constitutes true worship?²

True worship is the celebration of being in relational fellowship with the sovereign and holy triune God, as expressed by our reverent adoration and spontaneous praise of God’s Name, nature, and works. True worship is the expressed commitment of trust and obedience inherent in our relational responsibilities toward God. True worship is our acknowledgment of the supreme worthiness of God who alone is worthy of our worship. True worship is expressed through the memorial reenactment of outward expressions of service and devotion by observing the ordinances and biblical directives for public and private worship. True worship is expressed with the confident anticipation of the fulfillment of the promises of God in eternal glory.

¹ G.K. Beale; We Become What We Worship: A Biblical Theology of Idolatry. Pg. 311, IVP Academic, 2008

² Allen P. Ross; Recalling the Hope of Glory. Pg. 67-68, Kregel Publishing, 2006

Both definitions are revised versions of those primarily expressed by these authors.

Some thoughts on true worship

Donald McCullough writes:

“Hunger for worship and the joy it brings remains buried deep within the human heart. In addition to established religions and our own trivial gods, trendy spiritualities come and go, rising and falling with celebrity endorsements and cultic tragedies. These yearnings simply intimate we were made for something more, for Someone more, for an Other who exists wholly outside us and “above” us.

When this One seizes our attention through Jesus Christ, we may very well respond in joyous praise. But as this worship opens us to the presence of God, we find ourselves filled with fear. At least, we ought to be filled with fear. For if God is holy, our efforts to be like God are undone; if God is holy, our trivial gods are revealed as worth precisely nothing; if God is holy, the ground has been yanked out from under our feet and we are left hanging in the thin air of absolute vulnerability. “The fear of the Lord,” we are told, “is the beginning of knowledge” (Proverbs 1:7)...this Lord has not allowed us to fall into the lostness we deserve, but has touched our lips with a coal taken from the altar of holy love, forgiven us, and filled us with a respectful awe.”³

Paul Jewett adds:

“This worshipful prostration in awe and boundless adoration on the part of the creation goes far beyond the commitment to some moral ideal. It reflects the awareness of what Otto has called the *mysterium tremendum* –the awesome strangeness, the fearsome otherness, the dreadful majesty of God; in short, his holiness, which makes Him distinct from all others and comparable to no earthly being...Even when this transcendent and mysterious God condescends to become one of us, he yet remains the One whose presence invokes reverence and awe. The more intimate the disciples became with Jesus, the less they understood Him...this sense of the divine as “otherness” is paramount in worship. Worship, indeed, is fellowship with God, the God who has drawn near to us in Christ. But it is fellowship informed by reverence and awe.”⁴

³ Donald McCullough, *The Trivialization of God: The Dangerous Illusion of a Manageable Deity*; NavPress, 1995, pg. 108

⁴ Paul K. Jewett, *God, Creation, and Revelation – A Neo-Evangelical Theology*; Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1991, pg. 192

Moving Toward Worship or Idolatry

“An hour is coming, and now is when, when the true worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and in truth; for such people the Father seeks to be His worshippers. God is spirit and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and in truth.” Jesus; John 4:23-24

I. The Triune God is the Supreme Object of true spiritual worship.

“Our God is the sovereign Creator and Lord of the whole universe, the eternal and ever-living God, all wise, all powerful, and ever present. Our attention to the Lord must not be an ordinary part of life; our worship of Him should be the most momentous, urgent, and glorious activity in our lives.

There is God, the inconceivable and incomprehensible source of all existence; He is the invisible majesty who reigns on high. This God is the one before whom thousands upon thousands of angels and archangels stand, never ceasing to laud and praise Him as the holy and glorious majesty. This Lord merely speaks, as He did at creation, and myriads of angels wait to carry out His will. He is completely unique, truly glorious and incomparably holy – there is no one like Him, anywhere, at any time. And there is no measure of the magnificence and beauty of His holiness, for all His works are amazing, good, and glorious.”⁵ Allen Ross

II. Our worship should be directed toward Jesus Christ.

Jesus is to the Father, what speech is to thought.

Jesus came to exegete (explain) the Father.

“By His greatness and by His grace, this God created us humans out of the dust of the ground and made us in His image; He made a perfect Paradise for us and promised us immortality and everlasting joy in His presence. And even though we, His creation, treated Him as worthless and relegated Him to an insignificant place in our all important lives, He still desires that we be with Him and He with us. His plan was to bring into this world at just the right time in human history a little child who would die a humiliating death in our place so that our indifference to and rebellion against Him could be forgiven and that we might still live with Him forever. This incarnate Lord, the Jesus we talk about as if He was just another man, albeit extraordinary and exemplary, is the one who made all things. And He is the one who is the radiance of the glory of the Godhead, the exact representation of the divine essence (Hebrews 1:1-4; Col. 1:15-20).

It is He who someday will come in great glory and power to judge the living and the dead. It is He who will make all things new. There is no power in heaven, on earth, or under the earth that can change his plan, for all wisdom, knowledge, power, and dominion belong to Him. Nothing occurs, or has occurred that He does not know perfectly well. And because of who He is and what He has done, there is nothing in all the universe that can compare with His unimaginable perfection, illimitable majesty, and incomprehensible glory. Our minds can scarcely begin to take it in.”⁶ Allen Ross

Question:

How do we come to a point of taking casual toward the Lord?

How do we think there might be more important things to do in life than worship Him?

⁵ Ross, pg. 35-36

⁶ *ibid.*

Answer:

Our life in this world distracts us with all its business, expectations, and temptations. Here our minds are fixed on mundane thoughts and our attention is given to mundane concerns.

Worship only occurs when we are able to focus our minds and hearts on the holiness and glory of the one we say we know and love.

Without sustaining a vision of the holy Lord of glory, worship quickly digresses from the revealed design of worship that God desires and becomes routine, predictable, and even irrelevant. In extreme cases, the desire for pleasing the human senses turns worship into the expedient, yet temporal and sensory deadening option of idolatry.

III. Worship involves the “Senses” of the human spirit – *the point of true worship or departure!*

***“We are not human beings having a spiritual experience.
We are spiritual beings having a human experience.”***

Christians seek to be aware of a spiritual reality that is “awesomely vast” and transcendent and respond in song, prayer, praise, and preaching (via the human senses of mind, voice, and emotions, in the Spirit).

“The worshipper is never to be a passive auditor of the words and the ritual of worship. Neither is worship to be a dry routine nor a formless ecstasy. It is designed for the consecration of all our faculties to God. God’s revelation demands a response; and our commitment demonstrates that we as worshippers have properly understood the revelation and desire to actively participate in it.”⁷

The lost “suppress the truth in unrighteousness knowing that which is evident about God within them; for God made it evident to them. Since the beginning of the world His invisible attributes, His eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly seen (eyes), being understood (with the mind) through what has been made, so that they are without excuse. For even though they knew God (instinctively through sight and thought), they did not honor Him (heart and voice) as God or give thanks (heart and voice), but they became futile (like the false image they hold of God) in their speculations (thoughts), and their foolish hearts (spiritual senses) were darkened (Romans 1:18-21).”

What we revere is what we resemble, either for our ruin or restoration.

Idolatry soon follows our misconception of God:

“Professing to be wise, they became fools, and exchanged the glory of the incorruptible God for an image in the form of corruptible man and of birds and four-footed animals and crawling creatures.”

(Romans 1:22-23).

We are either worshipping the God of the Bible and are in the process of being restored to His image, or we’re worshipping an idol to our ruin by reflecting the image of the idol.

⁷ Ross, pg. 54-55

John Stott writes: “Human beings are aware of a spiritual reality that is “awesomely vast” and transcendent but that we look for it in unlikely places. We seek it everywhere, through yoga, Transcendental Meditation, and other forms of Eastern Mysticism; through illicit sex, which has always been associated with idolatry; through music and the arts; through drug taking and the “higher consciousness;” through modern religious cults and dangerous experiments with the occult; and through the fantasies of science fiction.”⁸

1. Isaiah’s Renewal to Worship involved his spiritual “Senses.” (Isaiah 6:1-9a)

Isaiah’s confession, “Woe to me! For I am a man of unclean lips;” led to his restoration and commissioning in service for the Lord. Isaiah’s spiritual senses were heightened because of his focus on the Lord.

We see the spiritual progression that is to be reflected in true worship in Isaiah 6:1-9a.

1. Revelation: the *vision* of the holy Lord of glory overwhelmed the prophet and uncovered his sinfulness. (6:1-4)
2. Cleansing: His *confession* brought direct intervention from the Lord to remove and forgive sin. (6:7)
3. Commitment: Once the prophet was cleansed from sin, he *was able to hear* the word from God calling him to greater service. (6:8-9a)

Because Isaiah’s heart and mind were focused on the Lord, he was able to “see” the vision of God enthroned in heaven, and to “hear” the word of the Lord. His spiritual senses were in tune.

2. The Biblical components of worship are designed to satisfy four basic senses of the human spirit as it responds to God.

If these components of worship fail to enhance these senses, then worship will be imbalanced if not deformed.⁹ In a very real way, our physical senses impact our spiritual health and vitality.

a. Worship must involve the intellect - The “Intellectual” Sense.

The intellect drives the heart’s ability to “value.”

Israel worshipped in response to the words of Moses, Joshua, Samuel, David, and the prophets. In the church the Word of God must be an essential component of our corporate and private worship. Reflecting on the Word of God safeguards the expression of worship from degenerating into misdirected and superstitious routine. The Word allows worshippers to think and focus on the God of heaven so as to reflect God’s glory in the reality of everyday life. Outside of faith in the true God, life cannot be addressed effectively.

Paul said, “The mind set on the flesh is death, but the mind set on the Spirit is life and peace.”
Romans 8:6

“Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind...”
Romans 12:2

“Give attention to the public reading of Scripture, to exhortation and to teaching.” 1 Tim. 4:13

“Preach the Word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, exhort, with great patience and instruction.”
2 Timothy 4:2

⁸ John R.W. Stott, “The World’s Challenge to the Church,” pg. 124.

⁹ Allen Ross, Recalling the Hope of Glory, pg. 57

b. Worship must be impacted by what we see and hear – The “aesthetic sense.”

Through the aesthetic venue of human sight, or sound, or even touch for some hearing impaired, the ordinances and observances of the church draw a worshipper into reflection and remembrance of the God of Heaven.

“Every church uses symbolism; music, prayer, and now media to effectively draw people into the service and out of the outside world. The focus is on drawing people toward the spiritual through the employment of the historic venues of worship.

Whether in an elaborate formal service or on special occasions such as baptisms, weddings, funerals, dedications, sunrise services, musicals, children’s plays, drama, or the Lord’s Supper itself, the point is that people come out of themselves when they take part in these historic variables of Christ centered worship.”¹⁰

**c. Worship involves our “gathering together.” – The “Physical Sense”
Corporate worship reduces the emotions of fear and isolation.**

Private worship:

“Private devotions, which are essential for our spiritual life, must lead into and find full expression in the larger assembly because private meditations must ultimately also benefit others. Individuals are not to loose themselves totally in the crowd, but neither are they to function in isolation from the greater body.”¹¹

Corporate worship:

“Under the influence of others, people act differently. Joy is made full and fear fades.

Communal worship enables people to overcome their self-consciousness and their insecurity...in the congregation faith is made courageous, the unity of the body of Christ is made visible, we are prayed for, encouraged, and strengthened as testimony of God’s working is proclaimed.”¹²

Hebrews 10:25, “Do not forsake assembling together.”

When Israel gathered together the music sounded better, the testimonies were more plenteous and confirming, the prophetic messages more powerful, and shared joys and sorrows strengthened people emotionally and spiritually to move forward in the days following the Sabbath.

d. Worship should heighten our sense of morality. – The “Moral Sense.”

Corporate worship, as well as private meditation, should leave us with a heightened sense of moral conviction or else we have failed to worship. Reflection on the things of God should bring to us a sense of comparative peace and security that life doesn’t have to be lived out according to the dictates of the culture. We should realize a sense of assurance and security as we respond in obedience to the things of God, and as we see others doing the same. In this way also, we realize we are not fighting the battle alone. The awareness of our eternal destiny should bring a sense of peace in the heart that nothing other than the worship of Jesus Christ can bring.

¹⁰ Ross, pg. 58

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid, pg. 59

To do otherwise is to leave us self centered, mean-spirited, immoral, and unkind. A heightened sense of anxiety and a multitude of relational problems always accompany these behaviors.

“Worship must develop this sense, otherwise the intellectual sense will become arrogance, the aesthetic sense will be entertainment, and the corporate sense an unguided assembly. Ethical and moral content must be clearly present and taught in the ordinances and ceremony of worship to bring about a different ethical standard in the people of God. All aspects of worship then must reinforce the truth of God’s Word in the assembly of God’s people.”¹³

Questions:

Based on these observations about the “sensory” dimension of worship, to what extent have you seen these variables impacting you?

What needs to be included in worship for you to be influenced toward Godliness?

How could variance from these principles influence you toward idolatry?

Answer:

Since we have said, “What we revere is what we resemble, either for our ruin or restoration;” what we think, see, hear, and who we gather with all impact our morality and level of spiritual awareness either for good or evil.”

Isaiah was being commissioned to address the Israelites, who were not focused on the Lord but instead on idols, Isaiah 6:9b-10 says that they...

***“kept on listening, but did not perceive;
kept on looking but did not understand...
Their hearts were insensitive, their ears dull, their eyes dim...”***

The spiritual senses of the Nation of Israel were diminished due to their idolatry.

We need to track Israel’s path away from Yahweh and toward idolatry.

¹³ Ross, pg. 60

The Presence and Prohibition of Idolatry in the Nation of Israel

The story of Old Testament religion could be told for the most part in terms of a tension between a spiritual conception of God and worship, the hallmark of the genuine faith of Israel, and various pressures, such as idolatry, which attempted to debase and materialize the national religious consciousness and practice. We do not find, in the OT, an ascending from idolatry to the pure worship of God, but rather a people possessing a pure worship and a spiritual theology, constantly fighting, through the medium of divinely-raised spiritual leaders, religious seductions which, nevertheless, often claimed the mass of the people. Idolatry is a declension from the norm, not an earlier stage gradually and with difficulty superseded.

If we consider the broad sweep of evidence for patriarchal religion we find it to be a religion of the altar and of prayer, but not of idols. There are certain events, all associated with Jacob, which might appear to show patriarchal idolatry. For example, Rachel stole her father's TERAPHIM (Gn. 31:19). By itself, this, of course, need prove nothing more than that Jacob's wife had failed to free herself from her Mesopotamian religious environment (*cf.* Jos. 24:15). If these objects were of legal as well as religious significance, the possessor of them would hold the right of succession to the family property (NUZI). This accords well with the anxiety of Laban, who does not appear otherwise as a religious man, to recover them, and his care, when he fails to find them, to exclude Jacob from Mesopotamia by a carefully-worded treaty (Gn. 31:45ff.). Again, it is urged that Jacob's pillars (Gn. 28:18; 31:13, 45; 35:14, 20) are the same as the idolatrous stones with which Canaan was familiar.

Finally, the evidence of Gen. 35:4, often used to show patriarchal idolatry, actually points to the recognized incompatibility of idols with the God of Bethel. Jacob must dispose of the unacceptable objects before he stands before this God. That Jacob 'hid' them is surely not to be construed as indicating that he feared to destroy them for reasons of superstitious reverence. It is allowing suspicion to govern exegesis if we do more than assume that this was the simplest as well as the most effective way of disposing of noncombustible objects.

The weight of evidence for the Mosaic period is the same. The whole narrative of the golden calf (Ex. 32) reveals the extent of the contrast between the religion which stemmed from Mt Sinai and the form of religion congenial to the unregenerate heart. These religions, we learn, are incompatible. Moses warned the people (Dt. 4:12) that the revelation of God vouchsafed to them contained no 'form', lest they corrupt themselves with images. This is the essential Mosaic position, as recorded in the Decalogue (Ex. 20:4; *cf.* Ex. 34:17). For Israel to carry this over into religious practice could only involve corruption of truth and life. This is a striking testimony to the nature of Israel's worship. The second commandment was unique in the world of its day, and the failure of archaeology to unearth a figure of Yahweh (while idols abounded in every other religion) shows its fundamental place in Israel's religion from Mosaic days.

The historical record of Judges, Samuel and Kings tells the same story of the lapse of the nation from the spiritual forms proper to their religion. The book of Judges, at least from ch. 17 onwards, deliberately sets out to picture for us a time of general lawlessness (*cf.* 17:6; 18:1; 19:1; 21:25). We should not dream of seeing in the events of chp. 19 the norm of Israelite morality. It is candidly a story of a degraded society and we have as little reason for seeing the story of Micah (Jdg. 17-18) as displaying a lawful but primitive stage in Israel's religion. The same comment from the author of Judges points in turn to the religious corruption (17:1-13; see v. 6), social unrest and lawlessness (18:1-31; see v. 1) and moral declension (19:1ff.) of the day.

It is a most significant thing that when Israel turned to idolatry it was always necessary to borrow the outward trappings from the pagan environment, thus suggesting that there was something in the very nature of Yahwism which prevented the growth of indigenous idolatrous forms. The golden calves made by Jeroboam (1 Ki. 12:28) were well-known Canaanite symbols, and in the same way, whenever the kings of Israel and Judah lapsed into idolatry, it was by means of borrowing and syncretism. H. H. Rowley (*Faith of Israel*, pp. 77f.) urges that such evidences of idolatry as exist after Moses are to be explained either by the impulse to syncretism or by the tendency for customs eradicated in one generation to reappear in the next (*cf.* Je. 44). We might add to these the tendency to corrupt the use of something which in itself was lawful: the superstitious use of the ephod (Jdg. 8:27) and the cult of the serpent (2 Ki. 18:4).

The main forms of idolatry into which Israel fell were the use of graven and molten IMAGES, pillars, the ASHERAH and TERAPHIM. The *massēkâ*, or molten image, was made by casting metal in a mould and shaping it with a tool (Ex. 32:4, 24). There is some doubt whether this figure, and the later calves made by Jeroboam, were intended to represent Yahweh, or were thought of as a pedestal over which he was enthroned. The analogy of the cherubim (*cf.* 2 Sa. 6:2) suggests the latter, which also receives the support of archaeology (*cf.* G. E. Wright, *Biblical Archaeology*, p. 148, for an illustration of the god Hadad riding upon a bull). The cherubim were, however, concealed from view and were at any rate 'unearthly' in appearance. They could not point to any unacceptable affiliation of the enthroned God with earthly parallels. The bulls, on the contrary, were not (as far as the narrative suggests) concealed from view and could not but point to an involvement of Yahweh in fertility religion and theology.

The pillars and the asherah were both forbidden to Israel (*cf.* Dt. 12:3; 16:21-22). In Baal sanctuaries the pillar of Baal (*cf.* 2 Ki. 10:27) and the pole of the Asherah stood beside the altar. The pillar was thought of as a stylized representation of the presence of the god at the shrine. It was the object of great veneration: sometimes it was hollowed in part so as to receive the blood of sacrifice, and sometimes, as appears from its polished surface, it was kissed by its devotees. The asherah was wooden, as we learn from its usual destruction by burning (Dt. 12:3; 2 Ki. 23:6), and probably originated from the sacred evergreen, the symbol of life. The association of these with Canaanite fertility practice sufficed to make them abominable to Yahweh.

The Old Testament polemic against idolatry, carried on chiefly by prophets and psalmists, recognizes the same two truths which Paul was later to affirm: that the idol was nothing, but that nevertheless there was a demonic spiritual force to be reckoned with, and that the idol therefore constituted a positive spiritual menace (Is. 44:6-20; 1 Cor. 8:4; 10:19-20). Thus, the idol is nothing at all: man made it (Is. 2:8); its very composition and construction proclaims its futility (Is. 40:18-20; 41:6-7; 44:9-20); its helpless bulk invites derision (Is. 46:1-2); it has nothing but the bare appearance of life (Ps. 115:4-7).

But, though entirely subject to Yahweh (*e.g.* Ps. 95:3), there are spiritual forces of evil, and the practice of idolatry brings men into deadly contact with these 'gods'. Isaiah, who is usually said to bring the ironic scorning of idols to its peak, is well aware of this spiritual evil. He knows that there is only one God (44:8), but even so no-one can touch an idol, though it be 'nothing', and come away unscathed. Man's contact with the false god infects him with a deadly spiritual blindness of heart and mind (44:18). Though what he worships is mere 'ashes', yet it is full of the poison of spiritual delusion (44:20).

Those who worship idols become like them (Ps. 115:8; Je. 2:5; Ho. 9:10). Because of the reality of evil power behind the idol, it is an ABOMINATION (*tô'ēhâ*) to Yahweh (Dt. 7:25), a detested thing (*šiqqûš*) (Dt. 29:17), and it is the gravest sin, spiritual adultery, to follow idols (Dt. 31:16; Jdg. 2:17; Ho. 1:2). Nevertheless, there is only

one God, and the contrast between Yahweh and idols is to be drawn in terms of life, activity and government. The idol cannot predict and bring to pass, but Yahweh can (Is. 41:26-27; 44:7); the idol is a helpless piece of flotsam on the river of history, only wise after the event and helpless in the face of it (Is. 41:5-7; 46:1-2), but Yahweh is Lord and controller of history (Is. 40:22-25; 41:1-2, 25; 43:14-15, *etc.*).

The New Testament reinforces and amplifies the Old Testament teaching. Its recognition that idols are both nonentities and dangerous spiritual potencies has been noted above. In addition, Romans 1 expresses the OT view that idolatry is a decline from true spirituality, and not a stage on the way to a pure knowledge of God. The NT recognizes, however, that the peril of idolatry exists even where material idols are not fashioned: the association of idolatry with sexual sins in Galatians 5:19-20 ought to be linked with the equating of covetousness with idolatry (1 Cor. 5:11; Eph. 5:5; Col. 3:5), for by covetousness Paul certainly includes and stresses sexual covetousness (*cf.* Eph. 4:19; 5:3; 1 Thes. 4:6, Gk.; 1 Cor. 10:7, 14). John, having urged the finality and fullness of revelation in Christ, warns that any deviation is idolatry (1 Jn. 5:19-21). The idol is whatever claims that loyalty which belongs to God alone (Is. 42:8).

The bearing of the biblical teaching on idols on its monotheistic doctrine of God cannot be overlooked. In its recognition of the magnetism of idolatrous religion for Israel and also in such seeming recognition of 'other gods' as, *e.g.*, Ps. 95:3, the OT acknowledges not the real existence of the 'gods' but the real existence of the threat to Israel, the menace of alternative cults and claims. It thus constantly holds its monotheism (as indeed the NT also does) in the setting of the religion and religious environment of the people of God.

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ERE J. Hastings (ed.), *Encyclopaedia of Religion of Ethics*, 13 vols., 1908-26

NIDNTT C. Brown (ed.), *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, 3 vols., 1975-8

Moving Away From Worship toward Idolatry – Part 1

The Idolatry of Adam in the Garden

Remember our original question: *What is an “idol?”*

An idol is a man made image of a ‘god,’ or an object from creation used as an object of worship which garners ardent or excessive devotion from human “image bearers” in defiance of God’s direct command to the contrary.

“When Adam stopped being committed to God and reflecting His image, he revered something else in place of God and resembled his new object of worship. Thus, at the heart of Adam’s sin was turning from God and replacing reverence for God with a new object of reverence to which Adam became conformed.”¹⁴

Since Adam and Eve did not set up any created object, or man-made image in the Garden of Eden, how can we say their sin was the sin of “idolatry?”

Remember from Genesis 1:

- Adam was to be God’s “image bearer” reflecting God’s divine glory and holiness.
- Adam was to reflect God’s image in his ruling over and subduing the earth.
 - I. They were to reflect God’s image by “subduing” = God’s subduing darkness at creation
 - II. They were to reflect God’s image by “ruling” = God’s sovereign rule over all creation
 - III. They were to reflect God’s image by “multiplying” = God creating more species of life
- Adam was placed in a Garden sanctuary over which he was to rule.
- Adam was instructed by God “not to eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.”
 - I. He was to act as a wise ruler “discerning between good and evil” as a holy priest.
 - II. He was to protect the creation from any evil by legally ruling on evil in the realm (He should have discerned the serpent’s evil intent and expelled him from the garden.)
 - III. He was to perfectly respect the laws of the kingdom he ruled – not violate them.

Adam moves toward idolatry.

- Adam allowed the serpent to rule over him rather than ruling over it and casting it out of the garden. He begins to take on the characteristics of, and suffer the consequences of the serpent.

What Adam revered Adam resembled for his own ruin and the ruin of his descendants.

- Adam’s allegiance shifted from God to himself and probably also to Satan.
- Adam begins to resemble the character of the serpent in that:
 - I. **Adam became a liar and a deceiver** (Gen, 3:1,4,13) when he does not answer God directly on where he has gone. Adam blamed Eve (Gen. 3:12) for the fall instead of assuming responsibility for his own sin.

¹⁴ G..K. Beale, *We Become What We Worship*, pg. 127

II. Adam stopped trusting the Word of God and believed the Liar.

III. Adam set up “self” as the idol in his life in that he decided for himself he would:

- Adam trusted in the creature (serpent and self) as the authority in his life.
- Adam set himself up as the maker of ethical and moral law, taking on the prerogative belonging only to God.

“Therein lies the root of all other forms of idolatry: we “Deify” ourselves and our own capacities, and thereby make gods of ourselves and our choices and all their implications. At the root then, all idolatry is human rejection of the goodness and Deity of God and finality of God’s moral authority.”¹⁵

IV. Adam’s “self” rule demonstrated a lack of concern for the welfare of others, beginning with his immediate family.

- Adam was left with only his own wisdom to guide him
- Adam had to look after himself to ensure his own physical, economic, and spiritual welfare.
- Adam brought others down with him through his own selfishness.
“We devote ourselves to “self” by taking every expedient route in order to insure the welfare of “self” ultimately without concern for others or for God.”¹⁶

V. Adam resembled the serpent in the judgment for sins by God.

- The serpent was cast out of the garden as was Adam.
- The serpent would be “crushed” at the cross, as Adam would be apart from the One whose heel the serpent would “bruise.” (Gen. 3:15)
- The serpent was condemned to “crawl on his belly and eat the dust of the earth.’ Adam was condemned to toil in the dirt of the earth to produce food.
- Adam saw his future hope disappear when he lost intimacy with God.
- Adam no longer enjoyed the immediate presence of God.
- Adam reflected the idol of “self” by trying to enlarge his rule and authority apart from God, which ultimately only reduced his rule and authority.
- As the serpent lost his “beauty,” Adam’s attempt to enlarge himself only made him a smaller man.

¹⁵ Beale, pg. 134-135

¹⁶ Ibid, pg. 138

Moving Away From Worship toward Idolatry – Part 2

Idolatry in Early Judaism

Psalm 115:4-8

“Their idols are silver and gold,
They are the work of man’s hands.
They have mouths, but they cannot speak;
They have eyes, but they cannot see;
They have ears, but they cannot hear;
They have noses, but they cannot smell;
They have hands, but they cannot feel;
They have feet, but they cannot walk;
They cannot make a sound with their throat.
Those who make them will become like them,
Everyone who trusts in them.”

Jewish philosopher Philo of Alexandria...

Provides insight into the reality of this Psalm in the life of an idolater.

Philo of Alexandria was a member of a rich and influential Jewish family in Jerusalem in the 1st century. He was a Hellenistic (culturally oriented toward Greek thought) Jewish philosopher. His brother Alexander was one of the richest men of his day, while his nephew Tiberius Alexander became in due time Procurator of Judaea and Prefect of Egypt, having apostatized from the Jewish faith.

Little is known of the life of Philo himself; neither his birth nor his death may be dated, the one sure date in his career being his membership in the embassy to Gaius (Caligula) in AD 39. From this it is evident that he was quite old at that time, and conjecturally we may place his dates as approximately 20 BC to AD 45. From his writings it may be deduced that, as a leader of the Jewish community, he spent much of his life in the duties of public service. His natural bent, however, was to the life of contemplation and the pursuit of philosophy, in which, as he asserts, he spent his youth, described by him in *Concerning the Contemplative Life*. Although he was obliged to leave this to take up his duties, he found opportunity to produce a body of writings on philosophical and theological topics.¹⁷

A. The Characteristics of Idolatry in Psalm 115:4-8 as reflected on by Philo.

- I. **Aware verses Unaware** – “The psychological truth is that on the conscious level idolaters do not want to resemble what they revere most. In reality that is just what happens to people as a punishment for the obstinate refusal to stop worshipping lifeless images.” Philo¹⁸
- II. **The “Lexus Affect.”** – “Idol makers manufacture their idols in a manner “to promote seductiveness” and “delusion” of the idols. In particular, “their fine workmanship may enthrall the spectators and so *beguile the two leading senses, sight and hearing* – sight through lifeless shapes of beauty, hearing through the charm of poetry and music – and thus make the soul steady and unsettled and seize it for their prey. Let no one who has a soul worship a soulless

¹⁷Wood, D. R. W. (1996, c1982, c1962). *New Bible Dictionary* (923). InterVarsity Press.

¹⁸ Philo, Decalogue, 72-75, first century A.D.

thing. It is right for him who honors lifeless things should have no part in life, especially if he has become a disciple of Moses and has often heard from his prophetic lips.”¹⁹

Philo is pointing out that to “listen to idols” makes us “deaf” to Moses.

B. The Characteristics and Consequences of Idolatry in Deuteronomy 32:5, 17-20.

Centuries before Philo penned his philosophical reflections on Psalm 115, Moses proclaimed the Word of the Lord to a new generation of Israelites gathered on the Plains of Moab just prior to entering the Promised Land under Joshua. The parents of these second generations Israelites had died in the wilderness as judgment for following an idol in the form of a golden calf. Moses was concerned that this new generation not become as “deaf” as their parents to his words of God’s admonition and warning.

Deuteronomy 32:5, 17-20

“They have acted corruptly toward Him, They are not His children
Because of their defect; but are a perverse and crooked generation.

They sacrificed to demons who were not God,
To gods whom they have not known, new gods who came lately,
Whom your fathers did not dread.
You neglected the rock who begot you,
And forgot the God who gave you birth.

The Lord saw this, and spurned them
Because of the provocation of His sons and daughters.
Then He said, ‘I will hide My face (Shekinah glory) from them,
I will see what their end shall be;
For they are a perverse generation, sons in whom in no faithfulness.’”

I. Change of Ownership – “the Lord spurned them”

“There is a clear portrait here of the fact that demonic activity was behind Israel’s idolatry in the wilderness. They committed themselves to idols and ultimately to the demons behind them. They no longer are associated with, nor do they reflect the Shekinah of God indicative of the Divine presence and attendant glory, but they are associated with and reflect another idolatrous reality. Those who worshipped and committed themselves to demons would be possessed by those demonic spirits, and such demonic possession would change their very being.”²⁰

They have become children of their new deities and children reflect their parents. This is a reality Moses knew full well when he spoke on the Plains of Moab to children whose parents were idolaters.

II. Loss of “Light Bearing” for God – “I will hide My face from them.”

Literally, “I will reject them” has the idea of God “removing His Shekinah” from them. Shekinah is an Aramaic word indicating God’s presence somewhere, or reflecting an attribute of His presence.

¹⁹ Philo, Special Laws 1.28-29, & Decalogue 76, 1st Century A.D.

²⁰ G.K. Beale, We Become What We Worship, pg. 156

The Shekinah Glory of God was seen by the Israelites as God inhabited the tabernacle and the temple. This radiant Divine glory can be reflected by others such as when it was seen in the face of Moses coming down from Mt. Sinai (Ex. 34:29).

When the Israelites rejected the Law of Moses they rejected the glory of God...and thus the rebellious Israelites forfeited the privilege of reflecting the glory of God to the nations as God planned. They were no longer “a light to the nations.”

III. Generational Slide – the children reflect their parents

As we will learn as we now look at Isaiah 6, the descendants of the wilderness generation entered into a whole new phase of demonic idolatry, going so far as to engage the senses in perverse immorality in the temple itself. They, like their parents before them, would pay the price for idolatry and incur the judgment of God.

Within each generation of Israelites, there remained a “faithful remnant” as we shall also see from looking at Isaiah 6. We need to understand the point at which one group departed from the faith, and the other stayed true to Yahweh.

“Sensory Organ Malfunction” – Part 1 **The Golden Calf at Mount Sinai - Exodus 32**

UR OF THE CHALDEE, is the city which Terah and **Abram** left to go to Harran and on to the promised land. The Chaldeans were a Semitic people known in Babylonia from at least the end of the 2nd millennium BC. Eupolemus (c. 150 B.C.) refers to Ur as a city in Babylonia called Camarina (‘the moon’). Excavations at this site in 1922-34 by the joint British Museum and University Museum, Philadelphia, traced the history of the site from the 5th millennium B.C. until it was abandoned about 300 B.C. Many spectacular discoveries were made, especially in the royal cemeteries of the early Dynastic 3 period (c. 2500 BC). The ruins of the temple tower (*ziggurat*) built by Ur-Nammu, the founder of the prosperous 3rd Dynasty (c. 2150-2050 BC) still dominate the site (*also known as BABEL*). The history and economy of the city is well known from thousands of inscribed tablets and the many buildings found at the site. The principal deity was Nannar (Semitic Sin or *Su’en*), who was also worshipped at Harran. The city was later ruled by the Neo-Babylonian (Chaldean) kings of Babylonia.

From the initial call of Abram, idolatry has been seen in Israel’s history.

Abram was born approx. 2166 B.C. Abram was a pagan idol worshipper in a land of pagan idols when God called him and blessed him. When the Lord “called” Abram, He called him out of Ur to a “land he did not know.” Abram “believed God and was reckoned as righteous” before God. Abram left Ur, never to return but idolatry followed him throughout the history his descendants.

Egyptian bondage: Approximately 765 years later, the descendants of Abraham and Joseph found themselves in Egyptian bondage under a later Pharaoh who “did not know Joseph” nor the prominent place he held in Egyptian history. The Hebrew family was multiplying so fast they became a presumed threat to Egyptian internal security. It was under these circumstances that Moses was discovered by the daughter of Pharaoh along a river bank among the reeds as a result of his mother’s plan to save him.

Adopting the idolatry of Egypt: During 400 years of Egyptian bondage, the descendants of Abraham witnessed Egyptian idolatry and the plethora of “gods” they worshipped.

An idolatrous “mouth washing” ritual was widespread in the ancient Near East, being attested both in Egypt and Mesopotamia. This ritual was done to prepare the idol for the gods to dwell in them. The Egyptian opening of the idol’s mouth ritual was supposed to open not only the mouth of the statue, but the eyes and the ears as well, endowing the idol with the faculties of a living person.

In addition to an elaborate ritual of actually manufacturing the idol in a workshop, there was also the process of setting it up in a temple and letting the gods bring the idol to life. The gods were seen as the ultimate makers of the idol. The mouth cleansing rite enabled the mouth of the image to be opened and to become the conduit through which the god spoke. Generally the ritual activated the image’s senses and caused the human senses (smell, taste, seeing, and hearing) to become enlivened so that the image became both human-like and a representation of the divine.

One could say that the image mystically becomes the god that it represents without limiting that god, so that the god remains transcendent; hence the image was like a theophany transubstantiated (the essence of the god was literally in the statue).²¹ Generations of Israelis witnessed these practices on a regular basis and thus had a history of familiarity with idolatry before leaving Egypt under Moses.

²¹ Christopher Walker and Michael B. Dick; *The Induction of the Cult Image in Ancient Mesopotamia*. State Archives of Assyria, pg. 17, 29-30, University of Helsinki

The Golden Calf at Mount Sinai:

The roots of the irony of idolatry are to be found as early as Israel's first generation that emerged out of Egypt. And so the wilderness generation and later Isaiah's generation, are people who are becoming like the idols they are worshipping, and that likeness mortally injures them.²²

But why did Israel create at Sinai a calf idol instead of an image of some other animal?

The likely reason is that a calf or a bull was among the most important of the Egyptian animal images that represented Egypt's gods (e.g. it was held to represent the god Ptah), and the Israelites had worshipped Egypt's gods before coming out of Egypt, presumably including Ptah.²³ A Bull image not only represented Ptah in Egypt but also Re (the Sun god). Amon-Re was repeatedly referred to as a "bull."²⁴

The people mistakenly thought (and I use the term lightly!) that the true divine glory was possessed by their pathetic calf god instead of by Yahweh.

Exodus 32 illustrates the kind of "sensory organ malfunction" that is in mind in Deuteronomy 29:4; ("The Lord has not given you a heart to know, nor eyes to see, nor ears to hear.")

Exodus 32:1-10

The Golden Calf

- 1 Now when the people saw that Moses delayed to come down from the mountain, the people assembled about Aaron and said to him, "Come, make us a god who will go before us; as for this Moses, the man who brought us up from the land of Egypt, we do not know what has become of him." 2 Aaron said to them, "Tear off the gold rings which are in the ears of your wives, your sons, and your daughters, and bring *them* to me."
- 3 Then all the people tore off the gold rings which were in their ears and brought *them* to Aaron. 4 He took *this* from their hand, and fashioned it with a graving tool and made it into a molten calf; and they said, "This is your god, O Israel, who brought you up from the land of Egypt." 5 Now when Aaron saw *this*, he built an altar before it; and Aaron made a proclamation and said, "Tomorrow *shall be* a feast to the LORD." 6 So the next day they rose early and offered burnt offerings, and brought peace offerings; and ^bthe people sat down to eat and to drink, and rose up to play.
- 7 Then the LORD spoke to Moses, "Go down at once, for your people, whom you brought up from the land of Egypt, have corrupted *themselves*. 8 "They have quickly turned aside from the way which I commanded them. They have made for themselves a molten calf, and have worshiped it and have sacrificed to it and said, 'This is your god, O Israel, who brought you up from the land of Egypt!' " 9 The LORD said to Moses, "I have seen this people, and behold, they are an obstinate (*lit.* 'stiff-necked') people. 10 "Now then, let Me alone that My anger may burn against them and that I may destroy them; and I will make of you a great nation."

The Lord's immediate response:

- God's anger immediately burned against them to the extent He wanted to destroy them. (i.e. When God needs space...give it to Him!)
- Moses interceded for the people and "the Lord changed His mind about the harm He would do to His people (Ex. 32:14)."
- However, Moses wasn't so merciful. He called out the perpetrators and "three thousand men of the people fell that day" under the sword of the Levites. (Ex. 32:28)
- The Lord ultimately denied that generation of Israelites access to the Promised Land. "To your descendants I will give it (Ex. 33:1)."

²² Beale, pg. 76

²³ Philo; *Posterity and Exile of Cain* 158; Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1935, pg. 528

²⁴ Beale, pg. 84-85, see extensive footnote on multiple sources for the identification of Re with the "bull" imagery.

Questions:

How does a people who've just come through the Red Sea unscathed, turn so quickly to an idol?

What was the process that led them to idolatry so soon after leaving Egypt?

What were the influences that contributed to this idolatry?

Aware verses unaware? The Lexus affect? Impatience?

Moses describes the “sensory organ malfunction” of Israel at Mt. Sinai.

Exodus 32 may be instructive, since it shows that when the first generation of Israel worshipped the golden calf, Moses describes them in a manner that sounds like they are being portrayed as wild calves or untrained cows: they became;

(1) “stiff necked/obstinate” (Ex. 32:9; 33:3, 5; 34:9) and would not obey

(2) but they were “let loose” because “Aaron had let them go loose” (Ex. 32:25),

(3) so that “they quickly turned aside from the way,” (Ex. 32:8) and they needed to be

(4) “gathered together” again “in the gate” (Ex. 32:26),

(5) so that Moses could “lead the people where” God told him to go (Ex. 32:34).

“The expression in Exodus 32:8, “they quickly turned aside from the way,” is placed directly before the phrase “they made for themselves a molten calf.” This is followed as portraying the people as “stiff necked” in verse 9, so that the three descriptions are inextricably linked.”²⁵

Moses describes Israel as “Stiff necked/obstinate.”

The golden calf would seem to be the picture of a cow that does not want to go in the direction its master’s desires, but responds with a stiff neck and wanders from the desired path. The notion is one of a recalcitrant, stubborn animal who is in the yoke and is fighting it. Oxen can either stiffen their necks or jerk or stop in their tracks altogether. They will do anything to stop the direction they are going, if they do not want to do it.

Nehemiah 9:16ff says, “Our fathers acted arrogantly; they became stubborn and would not listen to Your commandments...they refused to listen...they forgot Your deeds...they became stubborn and appointed a leader to return to their slavery in Egypt...they committed blasphemies...they turned a stubborn shoulder and stiffened their neck, and would not listen.”

Hosea 4:16 asks, “Since Israel is stubborn like a stubborn heifer, can the Lord now pasture them?”

What they had revered, they had come to resemble, and that resemblance was destroying them.

The phrase in Exodus 32:7 that because of idolatry the people had “corrupted themselves” further demonstrates the inner spiritual deterioration that had set in and had transformed their inner beings.

Hebrews 3:16-19 states the consequences: “Who provoked Him...those who came out of Egypt...

With whom was He angry for 40 years? Those who died in the wilderness.

And to whom did He swear they would not enter His rest, but those who were disobedient.

They were not able to enter because of unbelief.”

²⁵ Beale, pg. 77-78

“Sensory Organ Malfunction” – Part 2

Jeroboam’s Golden Calves – 1 Kings 12

Introduction: Following the death of Solomon, his son Rehoboam became the last king of the united tribes. However, the heavy taxation and building projects begun by Solomon had laid heavy taxes and labor burdens on the nation. When the ten northern tribes had reached the breaking point, a leader emerged named Jeroboam.

Jeroboam was appointed by the people to bring grievances before the king. When he first came to Rehoboam to try and resolve this taxation issue, he was met with an unexpected response from Rehoboam. After ignoring the advice of Solomon’s old counselors to give tax relief, Rehoboam arrogantly decided he would not only ignore the request, but increase the taxation.

At that point, the nation of Israel split into two nations with two kings. Judah, along with the tribe of Benjamin, under Rehoboam retained Jerusalem as their capital city. The ten northern tribes split with Judah and made Jeroboam their king. Jeroboam established two cities, Bethel and Dan as sites for worship.

Jeroboam brings back the golden calves.

Israel’s worship of the golden calf at Sinai at the beginning of its history is repeated at the beginning of northern Israel’s history. At this later time King Jeroboam, who himself had been in exile in Egypt, set up two golden calves for the nation to worship as Aaron had in the wilderness. He did this to keep his people from traveling to the temple in Jerusalem to worship the Yahweh, thus avoiding any competing allegiances to his rule. The Canaanite god Baal, is also seen as related to or having offspring that are bulls.

Jeroboam’s Idolatry

1 Kings 12:25-33

- 25 Then Jeroboam built Shechem in the hill country of Ephraim, and lived there. And he went out from there and built Penuel. Jeroboam said in his heart, “Now the kingdom will return to the house of David. “If this people go up to offer sacrifices in the house of the LORD at Jerusalem, then the heart of this people will return to their lord, *even* to Rehoboam king of Judah; and they will kill me and return to Rehoboam king of Judah.”
- 28 So the king consulted, and *made two golden calves*, and he said to them, “It is too much for you to go up to Jerusalem; *behold your gods, O Israel, that brought you up from the land of Egypt.*”
- 29 He set one in Bethel, and the other he put in Dan. Now this thing became a sin, for the people went *to worship* before the one as far as Dan. And he made houses on high places, and made priests from among all the people who were not of the sons of Levi.
- 32 Jeroboam instituted a feast in the eighth month on the fifteenth day of the month, like the feast which is in Judah, and he went up to the altar; thus he did in Bethel, *sacrificing to the calves* which he had made. And he stationed in Bethel the priests of the high places which he had made.
- 33 Then he went up to the altar which he had made in Bethel on the fifteenth day in the eighth month, even in the month which he had devised in his own heart; and he *instituted a feast* for the sons of Israel and went up to the altar to burn incense.

Jeroboam leads the people toward development of “sensory organ malfunction.”

Jeroboam exclaims to the people, “behold your gods, O Israel, that brought you up from Egypt.” Jeroboam also instituted a cultic feast as part of the worship of the golden calves, as Aaron had. Jeroboam failed to remember the vanity of following after idols.

The prophets would warn Israel to turn and repent of this idolatry or face judgment.

2 Kings 17:13-16

Yet the LORD warned Israel and Judah through all His prophets *and* every seer, saying, “Turn from your evil ways and keep My commandments, My statutes according to all the law which I commanded your fathers, and which I sent to you through My servants the prophets.”

However, they did not listen, but *stiffened their neck like their fathers*, who did not believe in the LORD their God. They rejected His statutes and His covenant which He made with their fathers and His warnings with which He warned them. And *they followed vanity and became vain*, and *went after the nations* which surrounded them, concerning which the LORD had commanded them not to do like them. They *forsook all the commandments of the LORD their God* and made for themselves *molten images, even two calves*, and made an Asherah and worshiped all the host of heaven and served Baal.

Then they *made their sons and their daughters pass through the fire*, and *practiced divination and enchantments*, and *sold themselves to do evil* in the sight of the LORD, provoking Him. So the LORD was very angry with Israel and removed them from His sight; none was left (via Assyrian exile in 722 B.C.) except the tribe of Judah.

REMEMBER:

“What we revere is what we resemble, either for our ruin or restoration.”

What we think, see, hear, and who we gather with all impact our sense of morality and our level of spiritual awareness and sensitivity either for good or evil.

Like idol, like follower!

- They became *“stiff necked”* as the wilderness generation had become. Reduced to domesticated animals mocked by God for their refusal to yield to the directional leading of the Lord God. They missed the promised land originally, and were exiled from it later.
- They *“followed vanity and became vain,”*
They became spiritually vain like the idols they worshipped.
- They *“followed after other nations”* against the command of God. Although God’s promise to Abraham was unconditional, Israel has been “set aside until the time of the Gentiles is fulfilled” in God’s plan for them as a Theocratically led nation. They were led into exile like animals prior to the coming of Christ. That setting aside has lasted 2400 years to this date in history and the clock is still running. A “faithful remnant” has always been present within Israel, and that “remnant” is within/members of the church in this age, though distinct from the church in the plan of God.
- *“Made their sons and daughters pass through the fire,”* (i.e. the fire in the belly of the iron god Molec). The nation was later made to do “pass through the fire” of captivity. God “removed them from His sight” by using the Assyrians and Babylonians.

Isaiah Explains the Foundational Problem with Idolatry

The Folly of Idolatry – Isaiah 44:9-20

- 9 Those who fashion a graven image are all of them futile, and their precious things are of no profit; even their own witnesses fail to see or know, so that they will be put to shame. Who has fashioned a god or cast an idol to no profit? Behold, all his companions will be put to shame, for the craftsmen themselves are mere men. Let them all assemble themselves, let them stand up, let them tremble, let them together be put to shame.
- 12 The man shapes iron into a cutting tool and does his work over the coals, fashioning it with hammers and working it with his strong arm. He also gets hungry and his strength fails; he drinks no water and becomes weary. *Another* shapes wood, he extends a measuring line; he outlines it with red chalk. He works it with planes and outlines it with a compass, and makes it like the form of a man, like the beauty of man, so that it may sit in a house. Surely he cuts cedars for himself, and takes a cypress or an oak and raises *it* for himself among the trees of the forest. He plants a fir, and the rain makes it grow. Then it becomes *something* for a man to burn, so he takes one of them and warms himself; he also makes a fire to bake bread. He also makes a god and worships it; he makes it a graven image and falls down before it. Half of it he burns in the fire; over *this* half he eats meat as he roasts a roast and is satisfied. He also warms himself and says, “Aha! I am warm, I have seen the fire.” But the rest of it he makes into a god, his graven image. He falls down before it and worships; he also prays to it and says, “Deliver me, for you are my god.”
- 18 They do not know, nor do they understand, for He has smeared over their eyes so that they cannot see and their hearts so that they cannot comprehend. No one recalls, nor is there knowledge or understanding to say, “I have burned half of it in the fire and also have baked bread over its coals. I roast meat and eat *it*. Then I make the rest of it into an abomination, I fall down before a block of wood!” He feeds on ashes; a deceived heart has turned him aside. And he cannot deliver himself, nor say, “Is there not a lie in my right hand?”

Isaiah again stresses the “sensory organ malfunction” resulting from idolatry.

The best use of wood is for baking bread, roasting a roast to be satisfied, and to get warm by the fire on a cold night. You might also enjoy wood working as a nice hobby. Beyond that, trees are made for “huggers” and shade and not much else.

Isaiah points out the utter foolishness even in the physical realm from creating idols.

Carving idols out of a tree limb will result in:

- looking foolish and shameful to your peers
- gaining nothing of any material value or profit
- working over hot coals
- getting hungry and thirsty to the point you can't go on as “your strength fails.”

Isaiah points out the reality of spiritual sensory damage:

- You'll experience futility
- The idol cannot see nor can its creator
- The idol's heart cannot comprehend, neither can its creator's heart
- The idol is a graven image, a block of wood, which cannot deliver anything or anyone.
- The idolater gains a deceived heart which turns him aside from God.
- He cannot deliver himself from his own foolishness.
- He cannot admit error when reality hits home; “He cannot say, ‘Is there not a lie in my hand?’”

Isaiah is a prophet who reveres God and therefore, resembles God's holiness, resulting in his own restoration and choice as a prophet. (Is. 6:5-7)

“Woe is me, for I am ruined!
Because I am a man of unclean lips,
And I live among a people of unclean lips;
For my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts.”
The reply...”Behold, this (*burning coal*) has touched your lips;
and your iniquity is taken away and your sin is forgiven.”

Isaiah 6:8-13 demonstrates the deadening affects of idolatry.

Isaiah's Commission

Isaiah 6:8-13

Then I heard the voice of the Lord, saying,
“Whom shall I send, and who will go for Us?”
Then I said, “Here am I. Send me!”
He said, “Go, and tell this people:
*‘Keep on listening, but do not perceive;
Keep on looking, but do not understand.’*
*“Render the hearts of this people insensitive,
Their ears dull, and their eyes dim,*
Otherwise they might see with their eyes,
Hear with their ears, understand with their hearts,
And return and be healed.”
Then I said, “Lord, how long?” And He answered,
“Until cities are devastated *and* without inhabitant,
Houses are without people and the land is utterly desolate,
The LORD has removed men far away,
And the forsaken places are many in the midst of the land.
Yet there will be a tenth portion in it, and it will again be *subject* to burning,
Like a Terebinth or an oak whose stump remains when it is felled.
The holy seed is its stump.”

“Isaiah is to tell these idolaters that they have been so unrepentant about their idol worship that God is going to make them as spiritually insensitive, as spiritually inanimate and lifeless, as the idols.”

“Isaiah 6:9-10 is a just judgment from God, not a capricious happening out of the divine blue. He is punishing them by means of their own sin. Their idols have physical eyes and ears, but they could not see or hear. But even more, the idols could not see or hear spiritually, though a god was supposed to be behind these idols. God is pronouncing through Isaiah that Israel will be judged by being made spiritually insensitive like the idols they worship.”²⁶

²⁶ G.K. Beale, *We Become What We Worship*, pg. 47

While this is a paramount example of the Old Testament legal principle of *lex talionis* (an eye for an eye)²⁷ there is mercy seen in the Lord's dealings with "the stump which remains when the tree is felled... The holy seed *that* is its stump."

The principle repeated:

If we worship idols, we will become like the idols, and that likeness will ruin us.

Isaiah 42:17-20 concludes:

They will be turned back *and* be utterly put to shame,
Who trust in idols, who say to molten images, "You are our gods."
Hear, you deaf! And look, you blind, that you may see.
Who is blind but My servant [Israel], or so deaf as My messenger [Israel] whom I send?
Who is so blind as he that is at peace *with Me*, or so blind as the servant of the LORD?
You have seen many things, but you do not observe *them*;
Your ears are open, but none hears.

The greater principle revealed:

Worshipping and reflecting the characteristics of an idol in a culture of idolatry is not the only option for a believer. Some within Israel were restored by reflecting the image of God through their ongoing faithfulness.

Within Israel, there has always been a "faithful remnant" who stuck with the Lord and His Word. These listened to the prophets and did not compromise through idolatry. This is demonstrated in Isaiah's mention of "the stump which remains when the tree is felled... the holy seed is its stump."

**This "holy stump" was the group that stayed true to the Lord throughout Israel's idolatrous history...that stood with Moses and not Aaron when the golden calf was introduced.
that stood with Joshua and Caleb when the others refused to go in and conquer the land.
that included David's men fleeing from Saul.
that listened to the prophets and repented of sin.
that God brought out of captivity to form the post-exilic nation.
that followed John the Baptist in anticipation of the coming Messiah.
that bore witness to the life, words, and miracles of Jesus and believed.
that made up the Jewish core of the first church in Jerusalem.
that responded to Peter and Paul's teaching and belonged to the first churches across the Mediterranean world.**

Members of this group of "completed Jews" make up the membership of churches in our day.

The faithful remnant will comprise the 144,000 of the tribulation period with whom the Visible and Triumphant Messiah, Jesus Christ will set up His kingdom on earth.

²⁷ Beale, pg. 47

Idolatry – a practice that “won’t hold water.”

Jeremiah 2:11-1

“Has a nation changed gods when they were not gods?

But My people have changed their glory for that which does not profit.

“Be appalled, O heavens, at this, and shudder, be very desolate,” declares the LORD.

“For My people have committed two evils:

They have forsaken Me, the fountain of living waters,

to hew for themselves cisterns, broken cisterns that can hold no water.

Israel has committed two evils:

1. They have forsaken God
2. They have manufactured and Isaiah 44 type god; ‘they hewn for themselves cisterns’
{a cistern is a large clay pot used for storing rain water}

Israel incurs a twofold result of these evils:

1. They are not able to share in the “living waters” that come from the “fountain” (Yahweh)
2. Like broken cisterns, they cannot hold water. They share in the “emptiness” of the false gods.

They can no longer share in the life that emanates from God, but only in the dead emptiness of idols.

Jeremiah 5 provides five dangers from idolatry present in the life of Israel:

- They refuse to take correction (Jer. 5:3)
- They do not know the way (Jer. 5:4)
- Israel is as those who “have broken and torn off their yokes.” (Jer. 5:5)
- Having broken loose, they roam in unprotected territory where they are exposed to the dangers of wild animals devouring them (Jer. 5:6)
- They were as well fed “lustly horses” with each one going after another’s wife. (Jer. 5:8)

Jeremiah 7:26 & 19:5-6,9,15 demonstrates the progressively degenerative effect of idol worship.

“They did not listen to Me *or incline their ear*, but stiffened their neck;

They did more evil than their fathers did.”

“Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, ‘Behold I am about to bring a calamity upon this place, *at which the ears of everyone that hears* of it will tingle.

Because they have forsaken Me and have made this an alien place and have burned sacrifices in it to other gods, *that neither they nor their forefathers nor the kings of Judah have ever known* and because they have filled this place with the blood of the innocent and have built the high places to Baal to burn their sons in the fire as burnt offerings to Baal, a thing which I never commanded or spoke of, nor did it ever enter My mind; therefore, behold, days are coming, declares the Lord, when this place will be called...the valley of Slaughter...

I shall make them eat the flesh of their sons and the flesh of their daughters (cannibalism as depicted in the Book of Lamentations, also written by Jeremiah), and they will one another’s flesh in the siege and in the distress with which their enemies and those who seek their life will distress them...I am about to bring this on this city....because...*they have stiffened their necks so as not to heed My words.*”

This is an example of ‘sensory organ malfunction’ bringing on the worst possible results. Their ‘stiff necks’ which led them to forsake God’s words, and follow practices that God never initiated nor endorsed, tells us why the Israelites committed the idolatrous sin of offering their children as burned offerings to Baal in the place called Topheth, which was to be renamed ‘valley of slaughter’ because that is in fact what the parents were doing to their children.

“It is plausible that the Israelite punishment of killing and eating one another in Jerusalem 19:9 is partly intended to resemble the figurative description of Baal eating the children they had earlier sacrificed to him. Hosea 9:10 notes, ‘Israel came to Baal-peor and devoted themselves to shame and they became as detestable as that which they loved.’”²⁸

***Israel had become like the thing they revered to their own ruin,
and to the ruin of their children!***

and yet...

Jeremiah remembered the promise of God as he sat among the ruins of Jerusalem.

“Surely my soul remembers and is bowed down within me.
This *I recall to my mind*, therefore I have hope.
The Lord’s lovingkindnesses (Hebrew; *hesed*= *loyal love*) indeed never cease,
For His compassion will never fail.
They are new every morning; Great is Your faithfulness.”

“For the Lord will not reject forever, for if He causes grief,
then He will have compassion according to His abundant lovingkindness.
He does not afflict willingly or grieve the sons of men...
to deprive a man of justice in the presence of the Most High...
Let us examine and probe our ways, and let us return to the Lord.”

Lamentations 3:20-23 & 31-33, 40

²⁸ G.K. Beale, *We Become What We Worship*, pg. 119-120

Recovering Reverence

“The trivialization of God inevitably leads to the trivialization of worship. The gods of our own creation – the God of my comfort; the God of my success; the God of my nation – fitting neatly within the borders of our cause or understanding or experience, and serving well our comfort or nation or success – in no way transcends us, and for this reason they neither terrify nor attract us.

Reverence can only be recovered in repentance. To repent, in the language of the Bible, means to turn around, to turn away from one thing and toward another. The good news of Jesus Christ calls us to turn from false gods toward the holy God. And this demands a constant turning – we are never finished with the movement of repentance! This does not mean we should have doubts about whether God’s grace continues to hold us. Anxiety has no place in our lives. God has begun a good work in our lives that will not fail.

Repentance for people of faith usually begins with remembrance – recalling who we are and Whose we are. Recollection is not only a necessary daily discipline, but an all important part of recovering reverence when God’s people gather together for worship. We pause long enough to become aware of our actual circumstances: our joyous gratitude, we discover, has led us into the throne room of the universe, and now we are in the presence of the Holy One who utterly transcends us, who holds together all creation from the smallest molecule to the largest galaxy, and all history from the first page to the last, who is burning in wrath against sin with a flame of purging love, who has claimed us in Jesus Christ and will keep us in the embrace of grace for all eternity – the God, in other words, who is far more than we thought we wanted but for that reason exactly what we really need to draw us out of ourselves and away from every trivial god.”²⁹

²⁹ Donald McCullough, *The Trivialization of God*; NavPress, 1995, pg. 110-111

Becoming Like What We Worship

...in the time of Jesus, Peter, Paul and the first century church.

“Actual idol worship continued on into the first century and early centuries of the church, and there is still traditionally conceived idol worship today. However, there were forms of idolatry in the first century that did not involve bowing down to literal images. When we read the Gospels, it is striking to find that Israel did not involve itself in idolatry like its ancestors did in the Old Testament. In fact, Israel prided itself in the fact that they were not like the other nations around them who did bow down to stone and wooden images (national pride was a form of idolatry in and of itself).

The fact that the Jewish generation that rejected Jesus as Messiah (Matt. 23:29-38) is viewed as being just as sinful as prior generations of disobedient Israelites also strongly suggests that idolatry of the previous generations carried over in some way to the first-century generation. Though Israel’s reliance on idols in Jesus’ day did not take the form of bowing down to images, nevertheless, they did put their trust in something else other than God, bringing judgment on themselves as it had come to earlier generations. Consequently, they were still idol worshippers in essence, though the outward form of it was expressed differently.

Paul’s himself affirms that idolatry may take such forms as trusting in money: immorality, uncleanness, passion, evil desire and greed, covetousness...which is idolatry (Col. 3:5).”³⁰

Jesus’ antidote for covetousness was contentment with Himself, something many have trouble accepting. Jesus drew the line in the sand with a major form of idolatry then and now, the love of money. Nothing plays on the human “sensory organs” like the things money brings; we can look good; we can afford to hear only what we want; we can rise above others and lord it over them; we can bring every creature comfort into our environment to bring pleasure and ‘security.’ Jesus said, “No one can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to one and despise the other. We cannot serve God and wealth (Matt. 6:24, Luke 16:13).”

I. Jesus Himself was tempted with idol worship

A. Jesus was tempted when hungry – the physical realm Matthew 4:3

The Tempter said to Him, “If You are God, command that these stones become bread.” (i.e. Don’t deny yourself physical pleasure.)

Jesus’ response:

- **“It is written...”** Remain focused on the Word of God
- **“Man shall not live by bread alone.”** Life is about more than physical fulfillment.
- Rather, man shall live **“on every word that proceeds out of the mouth of God.”** All of human existence should be focused around, and in accordance with, Scripture as the sole authoritative source.

³⁰ G.K. Beale, *We Become What We Worship*, pg. 162-163

B. Jesus was tempted with Power – the realm of the human ego/self

The devil took Him up to the pinnacle of the temple and said...”throw yourself off... God will send His angels to catch you...you won’t be injured.”
Take control of your own life.

Jesus’ response:

- He calls Satan on the misapplication of Scripture.
- Jesus reminds Satan that independent actions outside of the will of God (something Jesus completely understood) do not warrant God’s blessings.
- Jesus utilizes the authority of the Word of God to reprimand Satan
- Jesus follows the directives of the Word of God (Dt. 6:16) in His actions/ inaction

C. Jesus was tempted to worship an idol directly – the spiritual realm

The devil took Jesus up on a high mountain and offered Him the world if...
“You will fall down and worship me.”

Jesus’ response:

- He took authority over the spiritual battle occurring by directly commanding Satan to “Go!” He refuses to worship an idol.
- Jesus again falls back on the sole authority of the Word of God to rebuke Satan.
- Jesus directs His worship back toward His Father, the One True God.

The result: The devil left him...the angels came and ministered to His needs.
Jesus refused to deviate from true worship toward idolatry.
Jesus reflected the image of His Father, Whom He revered,
resulting in His own restoration.

Isaiah 6 Quoted in all four Gospels *Sensory organ malfunction – again!*

Jesus pronounces a spiritual judgment on Israel by quoting Isa. 6:9-10 in all four Gospels.

Matthew 13:10-15; (also quoted in Mark 4:12; Luke 8:10; John 12:39-40)

- 10 And the disciples came and said to Him, “Why do You speak to them in parables?”
- 11 Jesus answered them, “To you it has been granted to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been granted.
- 12 “For whoever has, to him *more* shall be given, and he will have an abundance; but whoever does not have, even what he has shall be taken away from him.
- 13 “Therefore I speak to them in parables; because while seeing they do not see, and while hearing they do not hear, nor do they understand.
- 14 **“In their case the prophecy of Isaiah is being fulfilled, which says,
‘YOU WILL KEEP ON HEARING, BUT WILL NOT UNDERSTAND;
YOU WILL KEEP ON SEEING, BUT WILL NOT PERCEIVE;
15 FOR THE HEART OF THIS PEOPLE HAS BECOME DULL,
WITH THEIR EARS THEY SCARCELY HEAR,
AND THEY HAVE CLOSED THEIR EYES,
OTHERWISE THEY WOULD SEE WITH THEIR EYES,
HEAR WITH THEIR EARS, AND UNDERSTAND WITH THEIR HEART AND RETURN,
AND I WOULD HEAL THEM.’**
- 16 “But blessed are your eyes, because they see; and your ears, because they hear.”
- 17 “For truly I say to you that many prophets and righteous men desired to see what you see, and did not see *it*, and to hear what you hear, and did not hear *it*.”

Kingdom Blindness: Matthew 13 is a chapter entirely made up of kingdom parables. Jesus was using parables for the first time in His earthly ministry. Having just been rejected by the Pharisees, and accused by them of “doing your works by the power of Satan,” Jesus confronts them saying, “He who is not for Me is against Me (Mt. 12:30).” His offer of the Kingdom as a then present reality for the Nation of Israel was put on hold at that moment in history and the saying, “whoever does the will of My Father in heaven is My brother and sister,” became the new rule for inclusion in the kingdom.

The sensory organ malfunction of the leaders of the Nation of Israel, certain Pharisees, was reflected in what they revered (The Law – tradition) to their ruin, which in this case meant a delay in the coming of the Kingdom on earth. Paul would later say, “a partial hardening has happened to Israel until the fullness of the Gentiles has come in (Romans 11:25b).” Why the delay? “Because they did not pursue it by faith (Romans 9:32).”

Jesus spoke in parables to a generation of Israelites who were spiritually blind, and deaf, and had become dull. They had profound “sensory organ malfunction!” The Jewish leadership revered the Law, rejected faith in Jesus, and were ruined by their decision to idolize the Law.

And Paul reminds us again, “there has also come to be at the present time a remnant (within first century Israel) according to God’s gracious choice (Romans 11:5).”

That remnant has always revered the Lord, and has always enjoyed restoration to the Image of God. They will one day inherit the Kingdom of God.

Isaiah 6 Quoted in Acts 28

Following the resurrection and ascension of Jesus Christ, Peter and Paul emerge as key figures in the establishment of the early church. Peter, though reluctantly discovering God's love for the Gentiles, finally gets the picture and brings them into the New Testament Church. Yet Peter's ministry is mostly in Jerusalem, and Judea. Paul on the other hand, went far beyond the realm of Jerusalem, Judea, and even Samaria to "the uttermost parts of the world." As a result, he was constantly encountering all kinds of idolatry and demonic worship in the cultures of the peoples he addressed.

Near the end of his life and under house arrest in Rome, Acts 28:17 tells us he "called together those who were the leading men of the Jews." "He was explaining to them by solemnly testifying about the kingdom of God and trying to persuade them concerning Jesus, from both the Law of Moses and from the Prophets, from morning until evening (Acts 28:23)." This effort met with mixed results. "Some were being persuaded by the things spoken, but others would not believe (Acts 28:24)."

As this fairly open minded group of Jews began to leave, Paul quotes Isaiah 6:9-10...

"The Holy Spirit rightly spoke through Isaiah the prophet to your fathers, saying,
'GO TO THIS PEOPLE AND SAY,
'YOU WILL KEEP ON HEARING, BUT WILL NOT UNDERSTAND;
AND YOU WILL KEEP ON SEEING, BUT WILL NOT PERCEIVE;
FOR THE HEART OF THIS PEOPLE HAS BECOME DULL,
AND WITH THEIR EARS THEY SCARCELY HEAR,
AND THEY HAVE CLOSED THEIR EYES;
OTHERWISE THEY MIGHT SEE WITH THEIR EYES,
AND HEAR WITH THEIR EARS,
AND UNDERSTAND WITH THEIR HEART AND RETURN,
AND I WOULD HEAL THEM.'"
"Therefore let it be known to you that this salvation of God
has been sent to the Gentiles; they will also listen."

Sensory organ malfunction is again the problem with the Jewish leadership of the Church age as it had been with Isaiah's own generation...they are spiritually deaf, hardened in heart, spiritually blind, and dull. This is a deliberate decision by the Jewish leadership as Paul quotes, "They have closed their eyes." This NT quote of an OT passage brings all the sins of the past to a new generation.

What would have happened had Isaiah's generation "seen, and heard, and believed" the prophets? What did later generations miss by the continued practice of idolizing the Law and tradition? "In Matthew 23:16, 24 Jesus calls the Pharisees "blind guides." This blindness is related to their wholehearted commitment to tradition, which again suggests that tradition is the object of their idolatrous lust."³¹ This generation was blind to the Messiah and the kingdom He offered.

The generation of Jews in Paul's day, reflected what they revered, to their own ruin.

A church age of Jews would live apart from the new birth in Christ Jesus.

A future generation of Jews will live through the torments of the tribulation before finally recognizing Jesus as their Messiah and coming to faith in massive numbers.

This is a high price to pay for revering and reflecting the wrong god. Pray for a larger "remnant!"

³¹ G.K. Beale, *We Become What We Worship*, pg. 170

Paul's View of Idolatry in Romans 1

No passage in the New Testament more fully addresses the prevailing idolatry of our day as does Paul's declaration in Romans 1:20-28. We are indeed a generation that has exchanged the worship of our Creator God for objects from within the realm of His creation. We have revered the creation and we are being ruined by that ongoing decision.

Romans 1:20-28

- 20 For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes, His eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly seen, being understood through what has been made, so that they are without excuse.
- 21 For even though they knew God, they did not honor Him as God or give thanks, but they became futile in their speculations, and their foolish heart was darkened.
- 22 Professing to be wise, they became fools,
- 23 and exchanged the glory of the incorruptible God for an image in the form of corruptible man and of birds and four-footed animals and crawling creatures.
- 24 Therefore God gave them over in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, so that their bodies would be dishonored among them.
- 25 For they exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever. Amen.
- 26 For this reason God gave them over to degrading passions; for their women exchanged the natural function for that which is unnatural,
- 27 and in the same way also the men abandoned the natural function of the woman and burned in their desire toward one another, men with men committing indecent acts and receiving in their own persons the due penalty of their error.
- 28 And just as they did not see fit to acknowledge God any longer, God gave them over to a depraved mind, to do those things which are not proper...

The ungodliness of mankind 1:20-28

Due to the excellence of a commentary by Dr. Thomas Constable of Dallas Theological Seminary, and my having sat under him during my time there, I have used his edited notes on this key passage due to the thoroughness for which Dr. Constable is known. (The full text can be viewed free of charge at www.Soniclight.com)

1:20 This verse begins a discussion of "natural revelation."

Natural revelation describes what everyone knows about God because of what God has revealed concerning Himself in nature. What He has revealed about Himself in Scripture is "special revelation." The creation bears testimony to its Maker, and every human being "hears" this witness (cf. Ps. 19).⁴³

Four things characterize this revelation.

First, it is a clear testimony; everyone is aware of it ("it is evident [plain]").

Second, everyone can understand it. We can draw conclusions about the Creator from His creation.⁴⁵

Third, it has gone out since the creation of the world in every generation.

Fourth, it is a limited revelation in that it does not reveal everything about God (e.g., His love and grace) but only some things (i.e., His power and deity).

⁴³ 43. See Bruce A. Baker, "Romans 1:18-21 and Presuppositional Apologetics," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 155:619 (July-September 1998):280-98.

⁴⁵ 45. "His invisible attributes . . . have been clearly seen" is an oxymoron.

Natural revelation makes man responsible to respond to his Creator in worship and submission.

However it does not give sufficient information for him to experience salvation. That is why everyone needs to hear the gospel. “Utter uncompromising, abandonment of hope in *man* is the first preliminary to understanding or preaching the gospel.”⁴⁶

1:21–23

Honoring God as God and giving Him thanks (v. 21) are our primary duties to God in view of who He is. Idolatry has resulted from man’s need to identify some power greater than himself and his refusal to acknowledge God as that power. Men and women have elevated themselves to God’s position. In our day, humanism has replaced the worship of individual human leaders in most western countries. Man has descended to the worship of animals as well.

Paul’s words have as much relevance for people who have made money or sex or fame their gods as for those who carved idols out of wood and stone.⁴⁷ Note the allusions to the creation story in the threefold division of the animal kingdom in verse 23.³²

1:24–25

The false religions that man has devised and to which Paul just referred constitute some of God’s judgment on mankind for turning from Him.

False religion is not in any sense good for mankind. It is a judgment from God, and it tends to keep people so distracted that they rarely deal with the true God. “God’s wrath mentioned in Romans 1 is not an active outpouring of divine displeasure but the removal of restraint that allows sinners to reap the just fruits of their rebellion.”⁴⁸

It is active in another sense, however. God gave man over (v. 24; cf. vv. 26, 28) by turning him over to the punishment his crime earned, as a judge does a prisoner. The third characteristic of man in rebellion against God that Paul identified after ignorance (v. 21) and idolatry (v. 23) is impurity (v. 24).

Here Paul evidently had natural forms of moral uncleanness in view such as adultery and harlotry. He went on in verses 26–27 to describe even worse immorality, namely unnatural acts such as homosexuality.⁴⁹ Mankind exchanged the truth of God for “the lie” (literally). The lie in view is the contention that we should venerate someone or something in place of the true God. Paul’s concluding doxology underlined this folly.³³

1:26-27

Because mankind “exchanged” the truth for the lie God allowed him to degrade himself through his passions. The result was that he “exchanged” natural human functions for what is unnatural. In the Greek text the words translated “women” (*thelus*; v. 26) and “men” (*arsen*, v. 27) mean “females” and “males.” Homosexuality is a perversion because it uses sex for a purpose contrary to those for which

⁴⁶ 46. Newell, p. 27.

⁴⁷ 47. Moo, p. 110. For a relevant exposition of verses 21–22, see Francis A. Schaeffer, *Death in the City*, pp. 79–123.

³² Tom Constable. (2003; 2003). *Tom Constable's Expository Notes on the Bible* (Ro 1:18-21). Galaxie Software.

⁴⁸ 48. Mounce, p. 80.

⁴⁹ 49. Natural here means in keeping with how God has designed people, and unnatural refers to behavior that is contrary to how God has made us.

³³ Tom Constable. (2003; 2003). *Tom Constable's Expository Notes on the Bible* (Ro 1:24). Galaxie Software.

God created and intended it (Gen. 1:28). “This need not demand the conclusion that every homosexual follows the practice in deliberate rebellion against God’s prescribed order. What is true historically and theologically is in measure true, however, experientially.”⁵⁰

AIDS, for example, is probably the consequence of man’s rebellion against God rather than a special judgment from God. The “due penalty” is what man experiences as a result of God giving him over and letting him indulge his sinful desires (cf. 6:23).⁵¹ “Sin comes from the mind, which perverts the judgment. The effect of retribution is to abandon the mind to that depravity.”⁵²

“A contextual and exegetical examination of Romans 1:26–27 reveals that attempts by some contemporary writers to do away with Paul’s prohibitions against present-day same-sex relations are false Paul did not impose Jewish customs and rules on his readers; instead he addressed same-sex relations from the trans-cultural perspective of God’s created order. God’s punishment for sin is rooted in a sinful reversal of the created order. Nor was homosexuality simply a sin practiced by idolaters in Paul’s day; it was a distorting consequence of the fall of the human race in the Garden of Eden. Neither did Paul describe homosexual acts by heterosexuals. Instead he wrote that homosexual activity was an exchange of the created order (heterosexuality) for a perversion (homosexuality), which is never presented in Scripture as an acceptable norm for sexuality. Also Hellenistic pederasty does not fully account for the terms and logic of Romans 1:26–27 which refers to adult-adult mutuality. Therefore it is clear that in Romans 1:26–27 Paul condemned homosexuality as a perversion of God’s design for human sexual relations.”⁵³

1:28

The second key word in verse 18, “unrighteousness” (v. 29), reappears at the head of this list of man’s sinful practices. It is a general word describing the evil effects in human relations that man’s suppressing the knowledge of God produces. In the Greek text there is a word play that highlights God’s just retribution. As people disapproved of the idea of retaining God in their thinking, so God gave them over to a disapproved mind (v. 28). This letting loose has led to all kinds of illogical and irrational behavior.

“People who have refused to acknowledge God end up with minds that are ‘disqualified’ from being able to understand and acknowledge the will of God. The result, of course, is that they do things that are ‘not proper.’” As in 1:21, Paul stresses that people who have turned from God are fundamentally unable to think and decide correctly about God and his will. This tragic incapacity is the explanation for the apparently inexplicable failure of people to comprehend, let alone practice, biblical ethical principles. Only the work of the Spirit in ‘renewing the mind [*nous*]’ (Rom. 12:2) can overcome this deep-seated blindness and perversity.”⁵⁴ The final step down in man’s degradation is his promotion of wickedness (v. 32).⁵⁶ It is bad to practice these things, but it is worse to encourage others to practice them.

What we revere we resemble, either to our ruin or our restoration.

⁵⁰ 50. Harrison, p. 25.

⁵¹ 51. See P. Michael Ukleja, “Homosexuality in the New Testament,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 140:560 (October-December 1983):350-58.

⁵² 52. Henri Maurier, *The Other Covenant*, p. 185.

⁵³ 53. David E. Malick, “The Condemnation of Homosexuality in Romans 1:26–27,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 150:599 (July-September 1993):340. Pederasty is a form of sodomy between males, especially as practiced by a man with a boy. See also Sherwood A. Cole, “Biology, Homosexuality, and Moral Culpability,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 154:615 (July-September 1997):355-66.

⁵⁴ 54. Moo, p. 118.

⁵⁶ 56. This is the longest list of this type in the New Testament. Its purpose is to show the scope of social evils that results when God hands people over to a depraved mind after they refuse to acknowledge Him.

