

Idolatry I

Living in a western culture it is hard not to see symptoms of idolatry all around. Fans at football games who 'bow' to their sports heroes, the 24/7 media fascination with celebrity and excessive tinkering with the human body (tattoos, reductions, enlargements, reshapings, suction etc.) all testify to a modern form of idolatry.

In this and our next Worldview, I want to think about idolatry, and how what we worship changes us. As Adventists, we are familiar with the concept that 'by beholding, we become changed.' We normally apply this in a positive sense, i.e. by beholding Jesus, we are changed into His likeness, but the opposite is also true – by beholding our idols, we are changed in a godless manner.

Let us begin with some basics. Every idol is intrinsically nothing. It is a block of wood or crafting of gold or melting of lead. Nothing more. The only way in which it can possibly seem to be anything, or have any characteristics, is in the mind of its worshippers. What the worshipper imagines the god to be, so it is, and this is all it can be. And whatever fears / hatreds / untrue imaginings are within the mind of the worshipper, these are all the imaginings the worshipper can attribute to the idol. Thus, every idol or false god is merely a reflection of the sum of its devotees. Leading on from this, every idolater is therefore his or her own false god. As each person engaging in idolatry is worshipping a reflection of themselves, idolatry is essentially self-worship.

As no false god / idol has its own character, so the only character that can attach itself to an idol or false god is that of the worshipper. And the only character the worshipper can provide to the idol or false god is at best a human, fallen character. Therefore, idolatry, and all false worship, is merely a worshipping of the worshippers' own selves, including their powers, traits and weaknesses. And the worshippers' characters, being separated from God by virtue of being unreconciled sinners to God, are intrinsically bent on evil. As a result, idolatry only confirms the false worshipper more and more in his or her own fallen nature, resulting in an inevitable downward degradation.

The psalmist recognizes this symbiotic link between idols and their worshippers: 'The idols of the nations are silver and gold, the work of human hands. They have mouths, but they do not speak; they have eyes, but they do not see; they have ears, but they do not hear, and there is no breath in their mouths. Those who make them and all who trust them shall become like them.' (Ps. 135.15-18)

The ancient Greeks were deeply philosophical. Their philosophy has shaped civilizations for millennia. Yet, their worship of the Greek pantheon, the Olympian heaven with its various deities, resulted in the worship of the combination of physical beauty combined with moral deformity....which correlates neatly with the modern worship of Hollywood stars and sports superstars.

However, beyond the names and rites, it is the worship of the sun that has been at the foundation of idolatry throughout known history. It is almost impossible to find a form of idolatry that is not

connected with the worship of the sun. We may go so far as to say that worship of the sun has not only been the principal form of worship for idolaters, but it has been the universal form of worship for idolaters. The names vary, but the underlying worship of the sun did not change.

- Babylon & Assyria: Bel and Shamas.
- Egypt: Ra, Osiris, Horus, Aten et al.
- Canaan & Phoenecia: Baal, Melcarth, Shemesh, Adonai and Moloch.
- Syria: Tammuz and Egalabalus.
- Moabites: Baal-Peor and Chemesh.
- Medes & Persians: Ormuzd and Mithra.
- India: Mitra, Mithra or Mithras.
- Greece & Rome: Adonis, Apollo, Bacchus and Hercules.

Noteworthy is the fact that in idolatry, the worship of the sun was always associated with the worship of a female deity. Sometimes this was the moon, sometimes the earth, sometimes the atmosphere, and sometimes simply the female principle in nature. Even amongst Adventist offshoots there has been the claim that the Holy Spirit, the *Sophia* principle of Proverbs 8, is the feminine aspect of God the Father.

Sometimes the male and female deities were blended into one, e.g. the Baalim. At other times, the male and female were represented as consorts, e.g. Osiris with Isis; Baal with Ashtaroth or Astarte; Venus with Adonis; Diana with Apollo; and Cybele with Atis. Those who understand modern paganism / Wicca / Druidism know that the practice of worshipping the male / female principles of nature is still with us, and is experiencing a resurgence in what were viewed as 'Christian' countries.

At the base of sun-worship is the worship of the power of reproduction, or fruitfulness. The sun cooperated with the earth to produce fruit, so idolatry came to focus on the mystery of reproduction, and thus the reproductive act. The mystery of birth and becoming was the deepest mystery of nature, and even today we cannot define life per se. To ancient pagan thinkers, and to modern man, the key to the hidden secret of the origin and preservation of the universe lay in the reproductive act. Two energies, one an active and generative, and the other a passive, were believed to combine for creative purposes, e.g. heaven and earth, sun and moon, night and day, all combine and cooperate in the production of being.

As a result, temple prostitution and sexual immorality was widespread amongst idolaters, in which devotees emulated and reproductive powers of the deity they worshipped. My great uncle, Dr Kenneth Vine, did his PhD in archaeology, focusing on the intricacies of pre-Exodus Baal worship in modern-day Lebanon, and his research showed the central role of immoral reproductive activities within pagan sun worship.

When God led His people out of Egypt, He had to give clear instructions to them regarding pagan worship. His people were not to engage in cross-dressing (Deut. 22.5) which was associated with the blending of masculinity and femininity in pagan idolatry. They were to cut down every Asherah pole in the land of Caanan. When they built the temple, the door through which people brought their sacrifices was east-facing. Thus, worshippers would turn their back

on the rising sun in order to sacrifice to Jehovah. Just before the final destruction of Jerusalem we read in Ezek. 8.16-18 that the men of Jerusalem were sitting in this very gate, with their backs to the temple, and facing the rising sun, to the east.

The Apostle Paul also recognized the inevitable downward moral spiral of idolaters: 'For though they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their senseless minds were darkened. Claiming to be wise, they became fools; and they exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling a mortal human being or birds or four-footed animals or reptiles. Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the degrading of their bodies among themselves, because they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever! Amen.' (Romans 1.21-25)

In the 2nd Commandment (Ex. 20.4-6), God taught His people to turn away from all forms of idolatry, which are essentially self-worship. Rather than ultimately worshipping and contemplating their own fallen and sinful natures via their physical idols, with inevitable compounding of such sinful natures in a downward spiral of degradation, God revealed Himself as the One alone worthy of worship.

He revealed Himself thus, 'The LORD passed before him, and proclaimed, "The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for the thousandth generation, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, yet by no means clearing the guilty, but visiting the iniquity of the parents upon the children and the children's children, to the third and the fourth generation." (Ex. 34.6-7)

No idolater has ever had this concept of God, because no idolater has ever had this holy character. Thus the worship of Jehovah God is unique, because it is a revealed worship.

How does this apply to us today? We live in a world in which gross sexual immorality is not only applauded, it is being legislated for in countries around the world, and those who seek to uphold morality as revealed by God are accused of hate speech and face possible prosecution.

Yet, the ever-downward and self-reinforcing moral degradation we witness around us is merely a symptom of the modern hardening of hearts against God and the ever more fervent worship of self. In this, modern man is no different to ancient man: both alike are idolaters, both ultimately engage in self-worship, and the result is no different: ever increasing moral degradation and confusion.

It is true that 'By beholding we become changed.' This works both ways. The worship of Jehovah God elevates, and all idolatry, because it is essentially self-worship, degrades. Next week I will look at this relationship in Scripture in a bit more detail, but for now I want to encourage each of us to reflect on a few simple questions:

- Where do I invest my mind's attention?
- Where do I invest my time?
- What do I feed my mind and soul with?

It is my prayer that as we reflect on these simple questions, the experience the Holy Spirit calls us to in 2 Cor. 3.18 will be ours: 'And all of us, with unveiled faces, seeing the glory of the Lord as though reflected in a mirror, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another; for this comes from the Lord, the Spirit.' (2 Cor. 3.18).

May God guide and transform us all into His image as we serve and live for Him.

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