

ΤΩ ΧΡΟΝΟΥ ΚΑΙΡΩ

“In the Nick of Time”

Occasional Essays
and Other Stuff
for Christian Students

Presented by the
President of

Central Baptist
Theological Seminary
of Minneapolis

American Christianity needs leaders. American Christianity needs *Christian* leaders. Christian leaders explain the Scriptures, bringing them to bear upon life's urgent questions. Christian leaders exemplify the life of faith, finding their ultimate satisfaction in God alone. They unite intellectual discipline with ordinate affection, turning their entire being toward the love of God. These essays are dedicated to the task of inviting today's Christian students to become tomorrow's Christian leaders.

—Kevin T. Bauder

“...Be instant in season, out of season; reprove, rebuke, exhort with all longsuffering and doctrine.”

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Radical Monotheism

Part Four

The Prevalence of Polytheism

For they also built them high places, and images, and groves on every high hill, and under every green tree.

—2 Kings 14:23

Idolatry is the worship of anything besides Yahweh. To worship a thing means to impute absolute value to it, to treat it as an end rather than as a means, to make it a center from which other things derive their value. Worship means to delight ourselves in a thing for its own sake, thus allowing that thing to define our identity.

God made all things to be used for His glory. As long as they fulfill that use, then they are right and proper. As soon as they are turned to some other use, however, they become part of idolatrous worship.

In order to become idolaters, we do not have to deny that the LORD is God. All that we have to do is to disconnect some aspect of our lives from Him and to treat that aspect as if it served its own purpose. We become idolaters whenever we compartmentalize our lives, allowing Yahweh sovereignty over some parts but not others. We can compartmentalize an object, an attitude, an activity, or a relationship: we are capable of turning literally anything into an idol.

In other words, our gods are whatever we live for, the ends and purposes of our existence. These things may be either noble or base in themselves—not all idols appear to be hideous. Whenever our focus is diverted from the true and living God, whenever we permit ourselves to live for something else besides Him—or even along side of Him—then we have made an idol. We may not carve its image in stone or wood, but we engrave its likeness upon our hearts.

We all know of people who live for money or sensuality or power. These are three common gods. But I also know people whose entire lives are centered upon a cabin at the lake. I have known young men whose whole interest was automobiles. I have seen a girl who was so focused upon a boy that she felt her life was worthless without him. I have met collectors who were willing to sacrifice their marriages in order to acquire a rare piece.

Some people live for inebriation. Some live for sensuality. Some live for family, and some live for their country. Whether the goal in itself is lofty or demeaning, when it is separated from God and His glory, it is an idol. The man who spends his life grooming the best lawn on the block is an idolater. The woman who lives to shop is an idolater. The drug addict who has to have the next fix is an idolater, and so is the teenager who cannot be pulled away from video games or chat rooms.

Idolatry often lurks behind a façade of high-mindedness. For example, a man who devotes his life to the wellbeing of his family or his country is usually thought of as a virtuous man. But if his sacrifice and patriotism are detached from the glory of the true and living God, then they have become ends rather than means. They now stand in the position of gods, and whoever pursues them becomes an idolater.

If we apply these teachings consistently, we will discover that Christian churches (even fundamentalist churches) are full of polytheists. In fact, if we examine our own lives in the light of radical monotheism, we will find that we, too, are idolaters. Without intending to, without even thinking about it, we are constantly detaching aspects of our lives from the service and glory of God. We begin to treat them as ends rather than as means. We find our satisfaction in God's gifts rather than in His person, and we delight in those things for their own sakes, as if they could become supplementary centers and foci of value for us. We find ourselves living for all sorts of things.

It is even possible for ministry to become an idol. Some people experience an emotional high when they lead a soul to Christ, and they can begin to live for the high. Others discover the aesthetic pleasure of a well-crafted sermon, and they begin to preach for the pleasure of preaching. Yet others fall in love with the prestige or the power that comes from leadership. Those who minister would seem to encounter special temptations toward idolatry.

There is only one way to be delivered from idolatry, and that is by discovering and destroying the idols. We destroy an idol *as an idol* when we subject it to the sovereignty of God and the lordship of Christ. This applies to all objects, attitudes, actions, and relationships. To worship God alone means to bring these all into subjection to Christ.

Discovering and breaking our idols is a big part of progressive sanctification. God's ultimate purpose in salvation is to bring us into full fellowship with Himself. That means that He intends us to become radical monotheists. His plan is to expose and to demolish every idol in our hearts until we find our delight and satisfaction in Him alone.

Sometimes we only realize that we are worshipping an idol when we are threatened with its loss. Here is one of the tests of idolatry: how do we respond when God takes away one of His gifts? When we are visited with infirmity, or when we lose a possession, or when we are untimely bereaved of a loved one, what is our attitude? Do we respond with submission, recognizing that God's gifts are means to His glory and that He has the right to dispose of them (and us) as He wills? Or do we grow grasping and bitter, denying God His rights? The latter reaction is the sure sign that we have been worshipping an idol.

This is one of the reasons that pain is irreplaceable in the life of the believer. Many of our idols are never exposed until God threatens them, and when God threatens an idol, by definition He threatens our self-identity. To lose the idol is in a sense to lose a bit of ourselves, a bit of our life and soul, a bit of our *psuche*. Part of us dies when the idol is broken, and it should. Not everything about us has a right to survive. Mortification is an inescapable aspect of progressive sanctification.

One of the worst tragedies of American Christianity is its portrayal of the life of faith as a chipper, cheerful, chirpy affair. No, we will not always be H-A-P-P-Y because we're S-A-V-E-D, and we will not always have the joy, joy, joy, joy down in our hearts (where?), at least not in the sense in which those trivial utterances imply. While we do discover a genuine and deep happiness and joy as we rest in the Lord, the demolition of our idols is likely to be agonizing.

True Christianity aims for radical monotheism, and that means recognizing that we still harbor idols in our hearts. God wants us to worship Him alone, and He will not stop until He has shattered every idol. We must reject polytheism and embrace the cleansing work of our Father, for Yahweh is a jealous God. ✖

This essay is by [Kevin T. Bauder](#), president of Central Baptist Theological Seminary. Not every one of Central Seminary's professors, students, or alumni necessarily agrees with every opinion that it expresses.

Beneath Thy Cross Christina Rossetti (1830 – 1894)

Am I a stone, and not a sheep,
That I can stand, O Christ, beneath thy cross,
To number drop by drop Thy Blood's slow loss,
And yet not weep?

Not so those women loved
Who with exceeding grief lamented Thee;
Not so fallen Peter weeping bitterly;
Not so the thief was moved;

Not so the Sun and Moon
Which hid their faces in a starless sky,
A horror of great darkness at broad noon--
I, only I.

Yet give not o'er,
But seek Thy sheep, true Shepherd of the flock;
Greater than Moses, turn and look once more
And smite a rock. ✠

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