

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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August 26, 2005
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Radical Monotheism

Part Five

The Problem with Polytheism

*For the LORD thy God is a consuming fire,
even a jealous God.*

—Deuteronomy 4:24

Yahweh is a jealous God. He insists that we worship Him alone. He is not willing to be one god among many, not even if He is the most important among many. To worship any other God is to reject Him as God.

The LORD is right to be jealous. He is infinitely valuable (and thus, infinitely worthy of worship) in Himself. Nothing else is like that. For example, a rose has a value because of its beauty, but the rose receives its beauty and then loses it again. Its beauty, and therefore its value, is contingent. All created goodness, beauty, and value are dependent and conditional. Indeed, the bare existence of created things is contingent, for they might not have been.

Yahweh alone is eternal, immortal, and self-existent. He has never been improved by anything outside of Himself, for He has never received anything from outside of Himself. His life, beneficence, splendor, and value are His own, and they are without limit. His majesty, wonder, dignity, and beauty are as infinite as they are exquisite. The marvels of His being surpass any created wonder. The knowledge of His character rightly evokes an overpowering

sense of astonishment, admiration, unworthiness, and something like dread. This is part of what the Bible calls the “fear of the Lord.”

False humility is a form of deceit. True humility is the willingness to represent one’s self exactly as one is. If God were to represent Himself as anything less than infinitely lovely, infinitely graceful, infinitely worthy of adoration, He would be dabbling in falsehoods. To be true to Himself, Yahweh must be a jealous God.

Our highest good is to recognize the infinite worth of the true and living God. Our souls were made to enjoy Him and to reflect His glory. In Him alone do we find true satisfaction and true happiness. When we worship idols, we discover them to be vanities, nothings, non-gods. We turn from them hollow, hungry, and unfilled. The worst thing that God could do to us would be to give us over to the worship of these vanities. To be true to us, Yahweh must be a jealous God.

Yahweh *is* a jealous God. His jealousy, however, is neither niggardly nor conceited. It is poles apart from pretension or narcissism. God’s jealousy flows from both His justice and His goodness. It reflects the multitude of His mercies as well as the strength of His sincerity.

Something is wrong with the person who tramples a flower, etches graffiti on a cathedral, or smears mud on a work of art. Something is wrong with the person who prefers landfills to sunsets or offal to gardens. People who worship idols are like that. They turn away from the piercing beauty of the true and living God in order to feed on ashes. God’s jealousy for His own glory is also jealousy for their wellbeing.

The LORD is right to be jealous. Truthfully, all gods are jealous. The ancients knew this. They knew that the gods entered into conflicts in which mortals were mere pawns. That was the premise of the Odyssey. The protagonist, Odysseus, was a worshipper of Zeus who inadvertently offended Poseidon. Once he was in Poseidon’s domain at sea, the affronted god took revenge. Zeus was powerless to help him. The Greeks understood that to be caught between the gods was a terrible thing.

The gods of modernity are no less jealous. Each one insists that worshippers devote themselves to it alone. This is true of all gods.

Consider people who try to worship both money and sensual pleasure. They quickly discover that amassing money requires hard work combined with the discipline to save and invest. This is exactly what their sensuality cannot accept. Sensuality requires leisure and it is expensive. Drugs cost money. Alcohol costs money. As for lewd behavior, Scripture itself declares that “by means of a whorish woman a man is brought to a piece of bread” (Prov. 6:26). All other things being equal, a person who lives for money must sacrifice sensual pleasures and vice versa. Both gods are jealous.

The same is true of a person who tries to live for both power and patriotism. On the one hand, a true patriot will sometimes be called upon to sacrifice power for the good of country. On the other hand, someone who lives for power will find occasions to manipulate country in order to gain it. One person cannot give undivided loyalty to both gods at once.

Both reason and experience confirm that no polytheist is able to live an integrated life. By definition every polytheist is divided in loyalty, divided in affections, and divided in mind. The satisfaction that the polytheist seeks from one god is invariably stolen by another. The

polytheist turns this way and that, first worshipping one idol but then pursuing its rival. This is precisely what James means when he declares that “a double minded man is unstable in all his ways” (Jas. 1:18).

The frustration of the polytheist quickly turns into resentment. Polytheists have been told that they can follow all manner of gods and enjoy all manner of satisfactions. They have been taught that they have a right to find fulfillment in their idols. Instead of satisfaction, however, they receive only emptiness. The deferral of hope sickens their hearts and they seek for a scapegoat. Since they believe that they have a right to satisfaction, they reason that someone must be defrauding them by denying their legitimate happiness. This dynamic fosters the victim mentality, which in turn leads to the therapeutic industry and the culture of resentment. These typify contemporary Western civilization. Polytheism has exacted a dreadful price.

People blame all sorts of things for the failure of their gods. Ultimately they come to blame God Himself. They see Yahweh as stingy and grasping because He insists that they worship Him alone. They begrudge His jealousy as if it were a mean thing, rather than perceiving that it is an expression of His infinite grace.

Yet when we leave our idols and pursue Yahweh He makes us unspeakably rich. He does this, not by filling our hands with gifts, but by filling our hearts with Himself. He delights to give Himself to us, to fill us and to satisfy us with His own presence. In the long run, the only truly happy person is the monotheist, and the more radical the monotheism, the more perfect the happiness. ✕

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.

The Sands of Time Are Sinking

Anne Cousin based on Samuel Rutherford’s words (c. 1661)

The sands of time are sinking,
The dawn of heaven breaks;
The summer morn I’ve sighed for -
The fair, sweet morn awakes:
Dark, dark had been the midnight
But dayspring is at hand,
And glory, glory dwelleth
In Emmanuel’s land.

The king there in His beauty,
Without a veil is seen:
It were a well-spent journey,
Though seven deaths lay between:
The Lamb with His fair army,
Doth on Mount Zion stand,
And glory, glory dwelleth
In Emmanuel's land.

O Christ, He is the fountain,
The deep, sweet well of love!
The streams on earth I've tasted
More deep I'll drink above:
There to an ocean fullness
His mercy doth expand,
And glory, glory dwelleth
In Emmanuel's land.

O I am my Beloved's
And my Beloved is mine!
He brings a poor vile sinner
Into His house of wine
I stand upon His merit -
I know no other stand,
Not e'en where glory dwelleth
In Emmanuel's land.

The bride eyes not her garment,
But her dear Bridegroom's face;
I will not gaze at glory
But on my King of grace.
Not at the crown He giveth
But on His pierced hand;
The Lamb is all the glory
Of Emmanuel's land. ✕

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