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FLEE FROM IDOLATRY

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“Flee from idolatry”—1 Corinthians 10:14

THIS text may seem at first sight to be hardly needed in England. In an age of education and intelligence like this, we might almost fancy it is a waste of time to tell an Englishman to “flee from idolatry.”

I am bold to say that this is a great mistake. I believe that we have come to a time when the subject of idolatry demands a thorough and searching investigation. I believe that idolatry is near us, and about us, and in the midst of us, to a very fearful extent. The Second Commandment, in one word, is in peril. “The plague is begun.”

Without further preface, I propose in this paper to consider the four following points:

- I. The Definition of Idolatry. *What Is It?*
- II. The Cause of Idolatry. *Whence Comes It?*
- III. The Form Idolatry Assumes in the Visible Church of Christ. *Where Is It?*
- IV. The Ultimate Abolition of Idolatry. *What Will End It?*

I feel that the subject is encompassed with many difficulties. Our lot is cast in an age when truth is constantly in danger of being sacrificed to toleration, charity, and peace falsely so-called. Nevertheless, I cannot forget, as a clergy man, that the Church of England is a church which has “given no uncertain sound” on the subject of idolatry; and unless I am greatly mistaken, truth about idolatry is, in the highest sense, truth for the times.

I. What Idolatry Is

Let me, then, first of all, supply a *definition of idolatry*. Let me show WHAT IT IS. It is of the utmost importance that we should understand this. Unless I make this clear, I can do nothing with the subject. Vagueness and indistinctness prevail upon this point, as upon almost every other in religion. The Christian who would not be continually running aground in his spiritual voyage must have his channel well- buoyed, and his mind well-stored with clear definitions.

I say then that “idolatry is a worship in which the honor due to God in Trinity, and to Him only, is given to some of His creatures, or to some invention of His creatures.” It may vary exceedingly. It may assume exceedingly different forms, according to the ignorance or the knowledge, the civilization or the barbarism, of those who offer it. It may be grossly absurd and ludicrous,¹ or it may closely border on truth and admit of being most speciously² defended. But whether in the adoration of the idol of Juggernaut,³ or in the adoration of the Host in St. Peter’s at Rome, the principle of idolatry is in reality the same. (In either case the honor due to God is turned aside from Him and bestowed on that which is not God. And whenever this is done, whether in heathen temples or in professedly Christian churches, there is an act of idolatry.

It is not necessary for a man formally to deny God and Christ, in order to be an idolater. Far from it. Professed reverence for the God of the Bible and actual idolatry are perfectly compatible: They have often gone side by side, and they still do so. The children of Israel never thought of renouncing God when they persuaded Aaron to make the golden calf. “These be thy gods,” they said, “which brought thee up out of the land of Egypt.” And the feast in honor of the calf was kept as “a feast unto the LORD” (Exo 32:4, 5). Jeroboam, again, never pretended to ask the ten tribes to cast off their allegiance to the God of David and Solomon. When he set up the calves of gold in Dan and Bethel, he only said, “It is too much for you to go up to Jerusalem: behold thy gods, O Israel, which brought thee up out of the land of Egypt” (1Ki 12:28). In both instances, we should observe, the idol was not set up as a rival to God, but under the pretence of being a help—a stepping stone to His service. But, in both instances, a great sin was committed. The honor due to God was given to a visible representation of Him. The majesty of Jehovah was offended. The Second Commandment was broken. There was, in the eyes of God, a flagrant act of *idolatry*.

Let us mark this well. It is high time to dismiss from our minds those loose ideas about idolatry which are common in this day. We must not think, as many do, that there are only two sorts of idolatry—the spiritual idolatry of the man who loves his wife, or child, or money more than God; and the open, gross idolatry of the man who bows down to an image of wood, or metal, or stone because he knows no better. We may rest assured that idolatry is a sin which occupies a far wider field than this. It is not merely a thing in Hindustan⁴ that we may hear of and pity at missionary meetings; nor yet is it a thing confined to our own hearts that we may confess before the mercy-seat upon our knees. It is a pestilence that walks in the Church of Christ to a much greater extent than many suppose. It is an evil that, like the man of sin, “sits in the very temple of God” (2Th 2:4). It is a sin that we all need to watch and pray against continually. It creeps into our religious worship insensibly and is upon us before we are aware. Those are tremendous words which Isaiah spoke to the formal Jew—not to the worshipper of Baal,⁵ remember, but to the man who actually came to the temple: “He that killeth an ox is as if he slew a man; he that sacrificeth a lamb, as if he cut off a dog’s neck; he that offereth an oblation, as if he offered swine’s blood; he that burneth incense, as if he blessed an idol” (Isa 66:3).

This is that sin which God has especially denounced in His Word. One commandment out of ten is devoted to the prohibition of it. Not one of all the ten contains such a solemn declaration of God’s character and of His judgments against the disobedient—“I the Lord thy God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children unto the third and fourth generation of them that hate me” (Exo 20:5). Not one, perhaps, of all the ten is so emphatically repeated and amplified, and especially in the fourth chapter of the Book of Deuteronomy.

This is the sin of all others to which the Jews seem to have been most inclined before the destruction of Solomon’s temple. What is the history of Israel under their judges and kings but a melancholy record of repeated falling away into idolatry? Again and again we read of “high places” and false gods. Again and again we read of captivities and chastisements on account of idolatry. Again and again we read of a return to the old sin. It seems as if the love of idols among the Jews was naturally bone of their bone and flesh of their flesh. The besetting sin of the Old Testament church, in one word, was idolatry. In the face of the most elaborate ceremonial ordinances that God ever gave to His people, Israel was incessantly turning aside after idols and worshipping the work of men’s hands.

This is the sin of all others which has brought down the heaviest judgments on the visible church. It brought on Israel the armies of Egypt, Assyria, and Babylon. It scattered the ten tribes, burned up Jerusalem, and carried Judah and Benjamin into captivity. It brought on the Eastern churches, in later days, the overwhelming flood of the Saracenic⁶ invasion and turned many a spiritual garden into a wilderness. The desolation which reigns where Cypria⁷ and Augustine⁸ once preached, the living death in which the churches of Asia Minor and Syria are buried, are all attributable to this sin. All testify to the

¹ **ludicrous** – laughably absurd; ridiculous.

² **specious** – having the ring of truth, but actually false and deceptive.

³ **Juggernaut** – as early as 1321 at Puri in east-central India, the idol of Jagannath or Juggernaut, a form of the Hindu idol Krishna, is drawn on an enormous cart through the town. In the past, frenzied Hindu pilgrims have thrown themselves under the wheels of the cart, which crushed them to death. Hence, Juggernaut was used to describe an invincible, crushing force.

⁴ **Hindustan** – sometimes means the entire sub-continent of India and sometimes solely to the republic of India.

⁵ **Baal** – Hebrew noun *ba’al* means “master,” “possessor,” or “husband.” Often used with suffixes, such as Baal-peor or Baal-berith, the word may have retained something of its original sense; but in general Baal is a proper name in the OT, and refers to a specific deity, Hadad, the W Semitic storm-god, the most important deity in the Canaanite pantheon.

⁶ **Saracenic** – from *Saracens* which was an early name for Arabs, and by extension the Muslims during the Crusades.

⁷ **Caecilius Cyprianus** (200-258) – Bishop of Carthage, North Africa. His views were very influential in the early church and later Roman Catholicism.

⁸ **Aurelius Augustine**, Bishop of Hippo (354-430) – early church theologian born in Tagaste, North Africa. Known by many as the father of orthodox theology; taught the depravity of man and the grace of God in salvation.

same great truth which the Lord proclaims in Isaiah: “My glory will I not give to another” (Isa 42:8). Let us gather up these things in our minds and ponder them well. Idolatry is a subject which, in every church of Christ that would keep herself pure, should be thoroughly examined, understood, and known. It is not for nothing that St. Paul lays down the stern command, “Flee from idolatry.”

II. The Cause of Idolatry

Let me show, in the second place, *the cause to which idolatry may be traced*. WHENCE COMES IT? To the man who takes an extravagant and exalted view of human intellect and reason, idolatry may seem absurd. He fancies it too irrational for any but weak minds to be endangered by it. To a mere superficial thinker about Christianity, the peril of idolatry may seem very small. Whatever commandments are broken, such a man will tell us, professing Christians are not very likely to transgress the second.

Now, both these persons betray a woeful ignorance of human nature. They do not see that there are secret roots of idolatry within us all. The prevalence of idolatry in all ages among the heathen must necessarily puzzle the one—the warnings of Protestant ministers against idolatry in the Church must necessarily appear uncalled for to the other. Both are alike blind to its cause.

The cause of all idolatry is the natural corruption of man’s heart. That great family disease, with which all the children of Adam are infected from their birth, shows itself in this, as it does in a thousand other ways. Out of the same fountain from which “proceed evil thoughts, fornications, adulteries, murders, thefts, covetousness, wickedness, deceit,” and the like (Mar 7:21-22)—out of that same fountain arise false views of God, and false views of the worship due to Him; and therefore, when the Apostle Paul tells the Galatians what are the “works of the flesh,” he places prominently among them “idolatry” (Gal 5:19-20).

A religion of some kind, man will have. God has not left Himself without a witness in us all, fallen as we are. Like old inscriptions hidden under mounds of rubbish—like the almost obliterated under-writing of palimpsest⁹ manuscripts—even so there is a dim *something* engraven at the bottom of man’s heart, however faint and half-erased—a *something* which makes him feel he must have a religion and a worship of some kind. The proof of this is to be found in the history of voyages and travels in every part of the globe. The exceptions to the rule are so few, if indeed there are any, that they only confirm its truth. Man’s worship in some dark corner of the earth may rise no higher than a vague fear of an evil spirit, and a desire to propitiate¹⁰ him; but a worship of some kind, man will have.

But then comes in the effect of the fall. Ignorance of God, carnal and low conceptions of His nature and attributes, earthly and sensual notions of the service which is acceptable to Him, all characterize the religion of the natural man. There is a craving in his mind after something he can see, and feel, and touch in his divinity. He would fain¹¹ bring his God down to his own crawling level. He would make his religion a thing of sense and sight. He has no idea of the religion of heart, and faith, and spirit. In short, just as he is willing to live on God’s earth, but until renewed by grace, a fallen and degraded life; so he has no objection to worship after a fashion, but until renewed by the Holy Ghost, it is always with a fallen worship. In one word, idolatry is a natural product of man’s heart. It is a weed which, like the earth uncultivated, the heart is always ready to bring forth.

And now does it surprise us when we read of the constantly recurring idolatries of the Old Testament church—of Peor,¹² and Baal, and Moloch¹³ and Chemosh¹⁴ and Ashtarothe;¹⁵ of high places and hill altars, and groves and images—and this in the full light of the Mosaic ceremonial? Let us cease to be surprised. It can be accounted for. There is a cause.

Does it surprise us when we read in history how idolatry crept in by degrees into the Church of Christ, how little by little it thrust out gospel truth, until, in Canterbury,¹⁶ men offered more at the shrine of Thomas a’Becket¹⁷ than they did at that of the Virgin Mary, and more at that of the Virgin Mary than at that of Christ? Let us cease to be surprised. It is all intelligible. There is a cause.

⁹ **palimpsest** – A manuscript, typically of papyrus or parchment, that has been written on more than once, with the earlier writing incompletely erased and often legible.

¹⁰ **propitiate** – to appease; to reconcile someone who has been offended.

¹¹ **fain** – gladly; willingly.

¹² **Peor** – name of a deity, Baal-peor, to which the Israelites were attracted (Num 25:3) and for the worship of which they were severely punished.

¹³ **Moloch** – name of a deity, usually written Molech (Heb. molek), Melech (‘king’, melek), Malcham (‘their king’) or once Moloch; worshipped in the ancient Near East in the second millennium BC and associated with death and the underworld.

¹⁴ **Chemosh** – god of the Moabites, the people of Chemosh (Num 21:29; Jer 48:46). The sacrifice of children as a burnt-offering was part of his worship.

¹⁵ **Ashtorothe** – a mother goddess with aspects as goddess of fertility, love, and war, known to the Israelites through the Canaanites; also identified with Astarte, Ishtar, and Aphrodite.

¹⁶ **Canterbury** – town of southeast England on the Stour River east-southeast of London. Canterbury Cathedral (11th-16th centuries) is the seat of the archbishop and primate of the Anglican Communion.

¹⁷ **Thomas A’Becket** – English Roman Catholic martyr. Chancellor to Henry II, archbishop of Canterbury (1162), and murdered by four knights in Canterbury Cathedral.

Does it surprise us when we hear of men going over from Protestant churches to the Church of Rome in the present day? Do we think it unaccountable and feel as if we ourselves could never forsake a pure form of worship for one like that of the Pope? Let us cease to be surprised. There is a solution for the problem. There is a cause.

That cause is nothing else but the deep corruption of man's heart. There is a natural proneness and tendency in us all to give God a sensual, carnal worship, and not that which is commanded in His Word. We are ever ready, by reason of our sloth and unbelief, to devise visible helps and stepping stones in our approaches to Him, and ultimately to give these inventions of our own the honor due to Him. In fact, idolatry is all natural, downhill, easy, like the broad way. Spiritual worship is all of grace, all uphill, and all against the grain. Any worship whatsoever is more pleasing to the natural heart than worshipping God in the way which our Lord Christ describes, "in spirit and in truth" (Joh 4:23).

I, for one, am not surprised at the quantity of idolatry existing, both in the world and in the visible church. I believe it perfectly possible that we may yet live to see far more of it than some have ever dreamed of. It would never surprise me if some mighty personal antichrist were to arise before the end—mighty in intellect, mighty in talents for government, aye,¹⁸ and mighty, *perhaps*, in miraculous gifts too. It would never surprise me to see such an one as him setting up himself in opposition to Christ and forming an infidel conspiracy and combination against the gospel. I believe that many would rejoice to do him honor, who now glory in saying, "We will not have this Christ to reign over us." I believe that many would make a god of him, and reverence him as an incarnation of truth, and concentrate their idea of hero-worship on his person. I advance it as *a possibility*, and no more. But of this at least I am certain—that no man is less safe from danger of idolatry than the man who now sneers at every form of religion; and that from infidelity to credulity,¹⁹

From atheism to the grossest idolatry, there is but a single step. Let us not think, at all events, that idolatry is an old-fashioned sin, into which we are never likely to fall. "Let him that thinketh he standeth, take heed lest he fall." We shall do well to look into our own hearts: the seeds of idolatry are all there. We should remember the words of St. Paul: "Flee from idolatry."

III. The Forms of Idolatry

Let me show, in the third place, *the forms which idolatry has assumed, and does assume, in the visible church*. WHERE IS IT? I believe there never was a more baseless fabric than the theory which obtains favor with many—that the promises of perpetuity and preservation from apostasy belong to the visible church of Christ. It is a theory supported neither by Scripture nor by facts. The Church against which "the gates of hell shall never prevail," is not the visible church, but the whole body of the elect, the company of true believers out of every nation and people. The greater part of the visible church has frequently maintained gross heresies. The particular branches of it are never secure against deadly error, both of faith and practice. A departure from the faith—a falling away, a leaving of first love in any branch of the visible church—need never surprise a careful reader of the New Testament.

That idolatry would arise seems to have been the expectation of the apostles, even before the canon of the New Testament was closed. It is remarkable to observe how St. Paul dwells on this subject in his epistle to the Corinthians. If any Corinthian called a brother was an idolater, with such an one the members of the church were "not to eat" (1Co 5:11). "Neither be ye idolaters, as were some" of our fathers (1Co 10:7). He says again, in the text which heads this paper, "My dearly beloved, flee from idolatry" (1Co 10:14). When he writes to the Colossians, he warns them against "worshipping of angels" (Col 2:18). And St. John closes his first epistle with the solemn injunction, "Little children, keep yourselves from idols" (1Jo 5:21). It is impossible not to feel that all these passages imply an expectation that idolatry would arise, and that soon, among professing Christians.

The famous prophecy in the fourth chapter of the *First Epistle to Timothy* contains a passage which is even more directly to the point: "The Spirit speaketh expressly, that in the latter times some shall depart from the faith, giving heed to seducing spirits, and doctrines of devils" (1Ti 4:1). I will not detain my readers with any lengthy discussion of that remarkable expression, "doctrines of devils." It may be sufficient to say that our excellent translators of the Bible are considered for once to have missed the full meaning of the apostle in their rendering of the word translated as "devils" in our version, and that the true meaning of the expression is "doctrines about departed spirits." And in this view, which, I may as well say, is maintained by all those who have the best right to be heard on such a question, the passage becomes a direct prediction of the rise of that most specious form of idolatry, the *worship of dead saints*.

The last passage I will call attention to is the conclusion of the ninth chapter of Revelation. We there read, at the twentieth verse: "The rest of the men which were not killed by these plagues, yet repented not of the works of their hands, that they should not worship devils, and idols of gold, and silver, and brass, and stone, and wood: which neither can see, nor hear, nor walk." Now, I am not going to offer any comment on the chapter in which this verse occurs. I know well there is a difference of opinion as to the true interpretation of the plagues predicted in it. I only venture to assert that it is the highest probability these plagues are to fall upon the visible church of Christ; and the highest improbability that St. John was here

¹⁸ aye – yes.

¹⁹ incredulity – a disbelieving frame of mind.

prophesying about the heathen, who never heard the gospel. And this once conceded, the fact that idolatry is a *predicted sin of the visible church* does seem most conclusively and forever established.

And now, if we turn from the Bible to facts, what do we see? I reply unhesitatingly that there is unmistakable proof that Scripture warnings and predictions were not spoken without cause, and that idolatry has actually arisen in the visible church of Christ and does still exist.

The rise and progress of the evil in former days, we shall find well summed up in the homily of the Church of England on “Peril of Idolatry.” To that homily²⁰ I beg to refer all churchmen, reminding them once for all, that in the judgment of the Thirty-nine Articles,²¹ the *Book of Homilies* “contains a godly and wholesome doctrine, and necessary for these times.” There we read how, even in the *fourth century*, Jerome²² complains “that the errors of images have come in, and passed to the Christians from the Gentiles”; and Eusebius²³ says, “We do see that images of Peter and Paul, and of our Savior Himself, be made, and tables be painted, which I think to have been derived and kept indifferently by an heathenish custom.” There we may read how “Pontius Paulinus, Bishop of Nola, in the *fifth century*, caused the walls of the temples to be painted with stories taken out of the Old Testament; that the people beholding and considering these pictures, might the better abstain from too much surfeiting and riot. But from learning by painted stories, it came by little and little to idolatry.” There we may read how Gregory the First, Bishop of Rome, in the beginning of the *seventh century*, did allow the free having of images in churches. There we may read how Irene, mother of Constantine the Sixth, in the *eighth century*, assembled a council at Nicaea²⁴ and procured a decree that “images should be put up in all the churches of Greece, and that honor and worship should be given to the said images.” And there we may read the conclusion with which the homily winds up its historical summary that laity and clergy learned and unlearned, all ages, sorts, and degrees of men, women, and children of whole Christendom, have been at once drowned in abominable idolatry, of all other vices most detested of God, and most damnable to man, and that by the space of 800 years and more.

This is a mournful account, but it is only too true. There can be little doubt the evil began even before the time just mentioned by the homily writers. No man, I think, need wonder at the rise of idolatry in the primitive church, who considers calmly the excessive reverence which it paid, from the very first, to the visible parts of religion. I believe that no impartial man can read the language used by nearly all the Fathers about the Church, the bishops, the ministry, baptism, the Lord’s Supper, the martyrs, the dead saints generally—no man can read it without being struck with the wide difference between their language and the language of Scripture on such subjects. You seem at once to be in a new atmosphere. You feel that you are no longer treading on holy ground. You find that things which in the Bible are evidently of second-rate importance are here made of first-rate importance. You find the things of sense and sight exalted to a position in which Paul, and Peter, and James, and John, speaking by the Holy Ghost, never for a moment placed them. It is not merely the weakness of uninspired writings that you have to complain of; it is something worse: it is a new system. And what is the explanation of all this? It is, in one word, that you have got into a region where the malaria of idolatry has begun to arise. You perceive the first workings of the mystery of iniquity. You detect the buds of that huge system of idolatry which, as the homily describes, was afterwards formally acknowledged, and ultimately blossomed so luxuriantly in every part of Christendom.

Idolatry in the Visible Church²⁵

But let us now turn from the past to the present. Let us examine the question which most concerns ourselves. Let us consider in what form idolatry presents itself to us as a sin of the visible church of Christ in our own time. I find no difficulty in answering this question. I feel no hesitation in affirming that idolatry never yet assumed a more glaring form than it does *in the Church of Rome at this present day*.

And here I come to a subject on which it is hard to speak, because of the times we live in. But the whole truth ought to be spoken by ministers of Christ, without respect of times and prejudices. And I should not lie down in peace, after writing on idolatry, if I did not declare my solemn conviction that idolatry is one of the crying sins of which the Church of Rome is guilty. I say this in all sadness. I say it, acknowledging fully that we have our faults in the Protestant church; and practically, perhaps, in some quarters, not a little idolatry. But from formal, recognized, systematic idolatry, I believe we are almost entirely free. While, as for the Church of Rome, if there is not in her worship an enormous quantity of systematic, organized idolatry, I frankly confess I do not know what idolatry is.

(a) To my mind, it is idolatry to have images and pictures of saints in churches and to give them a reverence for which there is no warrant or precedent in Scripture. And if this be so, I say there is *idolatry in the Church of Rome*.

²⁰ **homily** – a sermon.

²¹ **Thirty-Nine Articles** – set of doctrinal statements generally accepted in the Anglican Communion as having primary doctrinal significance; devised in the Convocation of Canterbury of the Church of England in 1563.

²² **Jerome** (c. 347–419/420) – Biblical translator, monastic leader, often regarded as the most learned of the Latin churchmen. Known for his Latin translation of the Bible, the Vulgate.

²³ **Eusebius** of Caesarea (c. 260–c. 339) – theologian, church historian, and scholar. Quoted from his *Ecclesiastical History*.

²⁴ **Nicaea** – ancient city of Bithynia in northwest Asia Minor; the Nicene Creed was adopted at an ecumenical council convened here by Constantine I in A.D. 325.

²⁵ **visible church** – the outward visible church composed of professing “Christians,” some of whom may be false professors.

(b) To my mind, it is idolatry to invoke the Virgin Mary and the saints in glory and to address them in language never addressed in Scripture except to the Holy Trinity. And if this be so, I say there is *idolatry in the Church of Rome*.

(c) To my mind, it is idolatry to bow down to mere material things, and attribute to them a power and sanctity far exceeding that attached to the ark or altar of the Old Testament dispensation; and a power and sanctity too, for which there is not a tittle²⁶ of foundation in the Word of God. And if this be so with the holy coat of Treves,²⁷ and the wonderfully-multiplied wood of the true cross, and a thousand other so-called relics in my mind's eye, I say there is *idolatry in the Church of Rome*.

(d) To my mind, it is idolatry to worship that which man's hands have made—to call it God and adore it when lifted up before our eyes. And if this be so with the notorious doctrine of transubstantiation,²⁸ and the elevation of the Host in my recollection, I say there is *idolatry in the Church of Rome*.

(e) To my mind, it is idolatry to make ordained men mediators between ourselves and God, robbing, as it were, our Lord Christ of His office, and giving them an honor which even apostles and angels in Scripture flatly repudiate. And if this be so with the honor paid to popes and priests before my eyes, I say there is *idolatry in the Church of Rome*.

I know well that language like this jars the minds of many. Men love to shut their eyes against evils which it is disagreeable to allow. They will not see things which involve unpleasant consequences. That the Church of Rome is an *erring* church, they will acknowledge. That she is *idolatrous*, they will deny.

They tell us that the reverence which the Romish church gives to saints and images does not amount to idolatry. They inform us that there are distinctions between the worship of "latria"²⁹ and "dulia,"³⁰ between a mediation of redemption and a mediation of intercession, which clear her of the charge. My answer is that the Bible knows nothing of such distinctions; and that, in the actual practice of the great bulk of Roman Catholics, they have no existence at anxiety which the Church of Rome has often displayed to exclude that Second Commandment from her catechisms is of itself a great fact which speaks volumes to a candid observer.

They tell us that we have no evidence for the assertions we make on this subject; that we found our charges on the abuses which prevail among the ignorant members of the Romish communion; and that it is absurd to say that a church containing so many wise and learned men is guilty of idolatry. My answer is that the devotional books in common use among Roman Catholics supply us with unmistakable evidence. Let anyone examine that notorious book, *The Garden of the Soul*,³¹ if he doubts my assertion, and read the language there addressed to the Virgin Mary. Let him remember that this language is addressed to a woman who, though highly favored, and the mother of our Lord, was yet one of our fellow-sinners—to a woman who actually confesses her need of a Savior for herself. She says, "My spirit hath rejoiced in God my Saviour" (Luk 1:47). Let him examine this language in the light of the New Testament, and then let him tell us fairly whether the charge of idolatry is not fully made out.

But I answer, beside this, that we want no better evidence than that which is supplied in the city of Rome itself. What do men and women do under the light of the Pope's own countenance? What is the religion that prevails around St. Peter's and under the walls of the Vatican? What is Romanism at Rome, unfettered, unshackled, and free to develop itself in full perfection? Let a man honestly answer these questions, and I ask no more. Let him read such a book as Seymour's *Pilgrimage to Rome*,³² or *Alford's Letters*, and ask any visitor to Rome if the picture is too highly colored. Let him do this, I say, and I believe he cannot avoid the conclusion that Romanism in perfection is a gigantic system of church-worship, sacrament-worship, Mary-worship, saint-worship, image-worship, relic-worship, and priest-worship—that it is, in one word, *a huge organized idolatry*.

I know how painful these things sound to many ears. To me it is no pleasure to dwell on the shortcomings of any who profess and call themselves Christians. I can say truly that I have said what I have said with pain and sorrow.

They tell us that it is a mistake to suppose that Roman Catholics really worship the images and pictures before which they perform acts of adoration; that they only use them as helps to devotion, and in reality look far beyond them. My answer is that many a heathen could say just as much for his idolatry; that it is notorious, in former days, that they did say so; and that in Hindustan many idol-worshippers do say so at the present day. But the apology does not avail. The terms of the Second Commandment are too stringent.³³ It prohibits *bowing down*, as well as worshipping. I draw a wide distinction between the accredited dogmas of the Church of Rome and the private opinions of many of her members. I believe and hope that

²⁶ **tittle** – a small mark, such as an accent, a vowel mark, or a dot over an i; therefore, the tiniest bit.

²⁷ **Holy coat of Treves** – said to be the seamless coat of our Savior. Deposited at Treves by the Empress Helena, who discovered it in the fourth century.

²⁸ **transubstantiation** – Roman Catholic doctrine holding that the bread and wine of the Lord's Supper are transformed into the body and blood of Jesus, although their appearances remain the same.

²⁹ **latria** – in Roman Catholic language, the highest kind of worship which is due to God alone.

³⁰ **dulia** – the inferior kind of veneration paid by Roman Catholics to saints and angels.

³¹ **The Garden of the Soul** – written by Bishop Richard Challoner (1691 - 1781), English Roman Catholic churchman, born in Lewes, East Sussex.

³² **Pilgrimage to Rome** (London, Seeleys, 1849) – written by M. Hobart Seymour, an Anglican clergyman, cataloguing many of Rome's swindles regarding relics.

³³ **stringent** – rigorous; severe.

many a Roman Catholic is in heart inconsistent with his profession and is better than the church to which he belongs. I cannot forget the Jansenists,³⁴ and Quesnel,³⁵ and Martin Boos.³⁶

I believe that many a poor Italian at this day is worshipping with an idolatrous worship, simply because he knows no better. He has no Bible to instruct him. He has no faithful minister to teach him. He has the fear of the priest before his eyes, if he dares to think for himself. He has no money to enable him to get away from the bondage he lives under, even if he feels a desire. I remember all this; and I say that the Italian eminently deserves our sympathy and compassion. But all this must not prevent my saying that the Church of Rome is an *idolatrous church*.

I should not be faithful if I said less. The church of which I am a minister has spoken out most strongly on the subject. The homily on “Peril of Idolatry,” and the solemn protest following the rubrics at the end of our Prayer Book Communion Service, which denounces the adoration of the sacramental bread and wine as “idolatry to be abhorred of all faithful Christians,” are plain evidence that I have said no more than the mind of my own church. And in a day like this—when some are disposed to secede to the Church of Rome, and many are shutting their eyes to her real character and wanting us to be reunited to her—in a day like this, my own conscience would rebuke me if I did not warn men plainly that the Church of Rome is an idolatrous church, and that if they will join her they are “*joining themselves to idols*.”

But I may not dwell longer on this part of my subject. The main point I wish to impress on men’s minds is this—that idolatry has decidedly manifested itself in the visible church of Christ, and nowhere so decidedly as in the Church of Rome.

IV. The Abolition of All Idolatry

And now let me show, in the last place, *the ultimate abolition of all idolatry*. WHAT WILL END IT? I consider that man’s soul must be in an unhealthy state who does not long for the time when idolatry shall be no more. That heart can hardly be right with God which can think of the millions who are sunk in heathenism, or honor the false prophet Mahomet, or daily offer up prayers to the Virgin Mary, and not cry, “O my God, what shall be the end of these things? How long, O Lord, how long?”

Here, as in other subjects, the sure word of prophecy comes in to our aid. The end of all idolatry shall one day come. Its doom is fixed. Its overthrow is certain. Whether in heathen temples, or in so-called Christian churches, idolatry shall be destroyed at the second coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Then shall be fulfilled the prophecy of Isaiah, “The idols he shall utterly abolish” (Isa 2:18). Then shall be fulfilled the words of Micah: “Their graven images also will I cut off, and their standing images out of the midst of thee, and thou shalt no more worship the work of thine hands” (Mic 5:13). Then shall be fulfilled the prophecy of Zephaniah: “The LORD will be terrible unto them: for he will famish all the gods of the earth; and men shall worship him, every one from his place, even all the isles of the heathen” (Zep 2:11). Then shall be fulfilled the prophecy of Zechariah: “It shall come to pass at that day, saith the LORD of hosts, that I will cut off the names of the idols out of the land, and they shall no more be remembered” (Zec 13:2). In a word, the Ninety-seventh Psalm shall then receive its full accomplishment:

“The Lord reigneth; let the earth rejoice; let the multitude of isles be glad thereof. Clouds and darkness are round about him: righteousness and judgment are the habitation of his throne. A fire goeth before him, and burneth up his enemies round about. His lightnings enlightened the world: the earth saw, and trembled. The hills melted like wax at the presence of the Lord, at the presence of the LORD of the whole earth. The heavens declare his righteousness, and all the people see his glory. Confounded be all they that serve graven images, that boast themselves of idols: worship him, all ye gods” (Psa 97:1-7).

The second coming of our Lord Jesus Christ is that blessed hope which should ever comfort the children of God under the present dispensation. It is the polestar by which we must journey. It is the one point on which all our expectations should be concentrated.

“Yet a little while, and he that shall come will come, and will not tarry” (Heb 10:37). Our David shall no longer dwell in Adullam,³⁷ followed by a despised few, and rejected by the many. He shall take to Himself His great power, and reign, and cause every knee to bow before Him.

Till then our redemption is not perfectly enjoyed; as Paul tells the Ephesians, “We are sealed unto the day of redemption” (Eph 4:30). Till then our salvation is not completed; as Peter says, we “are kept by the power of God through faith unto salvation ready to be revealed in the last time” (1Pe 1:5). Till then our knowledge is still defective; as Paul tells the Corinthians: “Now we see through a glass darkly; but then face to face: now I know in part; then shall I know even also as I am known” (1Co 13:12). In short, our best things are yet to come.

³⁴ **Jansenists** – movement of religious reform especially important in 17th- and 18th-century France, which defended Augustine’s doctrine of predestination and grace; named after Cornelius Otto Jansen (1585-1638).

³⁵ **Pasquier Quesnel** (1634-1719) – Jansenist theologian.

³⁶ **Martin Boos** (1762-1825) – a Roman Catholic priest forced into exile and his followers persecuted, when he discovered that the truth of salvation lay not in the church, but in the atoning sacrifice of Jesus.

³⁷ **Adullam** – Canaanite city in Judah, identified with Tell eshSheikh Madhkur, midway between Jerusalem and Lachish, usually associated with the cave in which David hid when pursued by Saul (1 Sa. 22:1).

But in the day of our Lord's return every desire shall receive its full accomplishment. We shall no more be pressed down and worn out with the sense of constant failure, feebleness, and disappointment. In His presence we shall find there is a *fulness* of joy, if nowhere else; and when we awake up after His likeness we shall be *satisfied*, if we never were before (Psa 16:11; 17:15).

There are many abominations now in the visible church, over which we can only sigh and cry, like the faithful in Ezeiel's day (Eze 9:4). We cannot remove them. The wheat and the tares will grow together until the harvest. But a day comes when the Lord Jesus shall once more purify His temple and cast forth everything that defiles. He shall do that work of which the doings of Hezekiah and Josiah were a faint type long ago. He shall cast forth the images and purge out idolatry in every shape.

Who is there now that longs for the conversion of the heathen world? You will not see it in its fullness until the Lord's appearing. Then, and not till then, will that often-misapplied text be fulfilled: "A man shall cast his idols of silver, and his idols of gold, which they made each one for himself to worship, to the moles and to the bats" (Isa 2:20).

Who is there now that longs for the redemption of Israel? You will never see it in its perfection till the Redeemer comes to Zion. Idolatry in the professing church of Christ has been one of the mightiest stumbling blocks in the Jew's way. When it begins to fall, the veil over the heart of Israel shall begin to be taken away (Psa 102:16).

Who is there now that longs for the fall of Antichrist, and the purification of the Church of Rome? I believe that will never be until the winding up of this dispensation. That vast system of idolatry may be consumed and *wasted* by the Spirit of the Lord's mouth, but it shall never be *destroyed* excepting by the brightness of His coming (2Th 2:8).

Who is there now that longs for a perfect church—a church in which there shall not be the slightest taint of idolatry? You must wait for the Lord's return. Then, and not till then, shall we see a perfect church, a church having neither spot nor wrinkle, nor any such thing (Eph 5:27), a church of which all the members shall be regenerate, and everyone a child of God.

If these things be so, men need not wonder that we urge on them the study of prophecy, and that we charge them above all to grasp firmly the glorious doctrine of Christ's second appearing and kingdom. This is the "light shining in a dark place," to which we shall do well to take heed (2Pe 1:19). Let others indulge their fancy if they will, with the vision of an imaginary "Church of the future." Let the children of this world dream of some "coming man" who is to understand everything, and set everything right. They are only sowing to themselves bitter disappointment. They will awake to find their visions baseless and empty as a dream. It is to such as these that the prophet's words may be well applied: "Behold, all ye that kindle a fire, that compass yourselves about with sparks: walk in the light of your fire, and in the sparks that ye have kindled. This shall ye have of mine hand; ye shall lie down in sorrow" (Isa 50:11).

But let our eyes look right onward to the day of Christ's Second Advent. That is the only day when every abuse shall be rectified, and every corruption and source of sorrow completely purged away. Waiting for that day, let us each work on and serve our generation; not idle, as if nothing could be done to check evil, but not disheartened because we see not yet all things put under our Lord. After all, the night is far spent, and the day is at hand (Rom 13:12). Let us wait, I say, on the Lord.

If these things be so, men need not wonder that we warn them to beware of all leanings towards the Church of Rome. Surely, when the mind of God about idolatry is so plainly revealed to us in His Word, it seems the height of infatuation in anyone to join a church so steeped in idolatries as the Church of Rome. To enter into communion with her when God is saying, "Come out of her...that ye be not partakers of her sins, and receive not of her plagues" (Rev 18:4); to seek her when the Lord is warning us to leave her; to become her subjects when the Lord's voice is crying, "Escape for thy life, flee from the wrath to come" (Mat 3:7)—all this is mental blindness indeed—a blindness like that of him who, though forewarned, embarks in a sinking ship—a blindness which would be almost incredible, if our own eyes did not see examples of it continually.

We must all be on our guard. We must take nothing for granted. We must not hastily suppose that we are too wise to be ensnared and say, like Hazeal, "is thy servant a dog, that he should do this great thing?" (2Ki 8:13). Those who preach must cry aloud and spare not, and allow no false tenderness to make them hold their peace about the heresies of the day. Those who hear must have their loins girt about with truth, and their minds stored with clear prophetic views of the end to which all idol-worshippers must come. Let us all try to realize that the latter ends of the world are upon us, and that the abolition of all idolatry is hastening on. Is this a time for a man to draw nearer to Rome? Is it not rather a time to draw further back and stand clear, lest we be involved in her downfall? Is this a time to extenuate³⁸ and palliate³⁹ Rome's manifold corruptions, and refuse to see the reality of her sins? Surely we ought rather to be doubly jealous of everything of a Romish tendency in religion—doubly careful that we do not connive at any treason against our Lord Christ—and doubly ready to protest against unscriptural worship of every description. Once more, then, I say, let us remember that the destruction of all idolatry is certain, and remembering that, *beware of the Church of Rome*.

The subject I now touch upon is of deep and pressing importance, and demands the serious attention of all Protestant church-men. It is vain to deny that a large party of English clergy and laity in the present day are moving heaven and earth to reunite the Church of England with the idolatrous Church of Rome. The publication of that monstrous book, Dr. Pusey's

³⁸ **extenuate** – an attempt to lessen the seriousness of something by making excuses.

³⁹ **palliate** – to soften or to disguise the enormity of something wicked by favorable representations.

*Eirenicon*⁴⁰ and the formation of a “Society for Promoting the Union of Christendom” are plain evidence of what I mean. He that runs may read.

The existence of such a movement as this will not surprise any one who has carefully watched the history of the Church of England during the last forty years. The tendency of Tractarianism⁴¹ and ritualism has been steadily towards Rome. Hundreds of men and women have fairly and honestly left our ranks and become downright Papists. But many hundreds more have stayed behind and are yet nominal churchmen within our pale. The pompous semi-Romish ceremonial which has been introduced into many churches has prepared men’s minds for changes. An extravagantly theatrical and idolatrous mode of celebrating the Lord’s Supper has paved the way for transubstantiation. A regular process of un-Protestantizing has been long and successfully at work. The poor old Church of England stands on an inclined plane. Her very existence, as a Protestant church, is in peril.

I hold, for one, that this Romish movement ought to be steadily and firmly resisted. Notwithstanding the rank, the learning, and the devotedness of some of its advocates, I regard it as a most mischievous, soul-ruining, and unscriptural movement. To say that reunion with Rome would be an insult to our martyred Reformers is a very light thing; it is far more than this: it would be a sin and an offence against God! Rather than be reunited with the idolatrous Church of Rome, I would willingly see my own beloved church perish and go to pieces. Rather than become Popish once more, she had better die!

Unity in the abstract is no doubt an excellent thing: but unity without truth is useless. Peace and uniformity are beautiful and valuable: but peace without the gospel—peace based on a common episcopacy, and not on a common faith—is a worthless peace, not deserving of the name. When Rome has repealed the decrees of Trent, and her additions to the Creed; when Rome has recanted her false and unscriptural doctrines; when Rome has formally renounced image-worship, Mary-worship, and transubstantiation—then, and not till then, it will be time to talk of reunion with her. Till then there is a gulf between us which cannot be honestly bridged. Till then I call on all churchmen to resist to the death this idea of reunion with Rome. Till then let our watchwords be, “No peace with Rome! No communion with idolaters!” Well says the admirable Bishop Jewel,⁴² in his *Apology*, “We do not decline concord and peace with men; but we will not continue in a state of war with God that we might have peace with men! If the Pope does indeed desire we should be reconciled to him, he ought first to reconcile himself to God.”

This witness is true! Well would it be for the Church of England, if all her bishops had been like Jewel!

I write these things with sorrow. But the circumstances of the times make it absolutely necessary to speak out. To whatever quarter of the horizon I turn, I see grave reason for alarm. For the true church of Christ I have no fears at all. But for the Established Church of England, and for all the Protestant churches of Great Britain, I have very grave fears indeed. The tide of events seems running strongly against Protestantism and in favor of Rome. It looks as if God had a controversy with us as a nation, and was about to punish us for our sins.

I am no prophet. I know not where we are drifting. But at the rate we are going, I think it quite within the verge of possibility that in a few years the Church of England may be reunited to the Church of Rome. The Crown of England may be once more on the head of a Papist. Protestantism may be formally repudiated. A Romish archbishop may once more preside at Lambeth Palace. Mass may be once more said at Westminster Abbey and St. Paul’s. And one result will be that all Bible-reading Christians must either leave the Church of England or else sanction idol-worship and become idolaters! God grant we may never come to this state of things! But at the rate we are going, it seems to me quite possible.

How We May Be Safe from Idolatry

And now it only remains for me to conclude what I have been saying, by mentioning some safeguards for the souls of all who read this paper. We live in a time when the Church of Rome is walking amongst us with renewed strength and loudly boasting that she will soon win back the ground that she has lost. False doctrines of every kind are continually set before us in the most subtle and specious forms. It cannot be thought unseasonable if I offer some practical safeguards against idolatry. What it is, whence it comes, where it is, what will end it—all this we have seen. Let me point out how we may be safe from it, and I will say no more.

(1) *Let us arm ourselves, then, for one thing, with a thorough knowledge of the Word of God.* Let us read our Bibles more diligently than ever and become familiar with every part of them. Let the Word dwell in us richly. Let us beware of anything which would make us give less time, and less heart, to the perusal of its sacred pages. The Bible is the sword of the Spirit—let it never be laid aside. The Bible is the true lantern for a dark and cloudy time—let us beware of traveling without its light. I strongly suspect—if we did but know the secret history of the numerous secessions from our church to that of Rome, which we deplore—I strongly suspect that in almost every case, one of the most important steps in the downward road would be found to have been a neglected Bible—more attention to forms, sacraments, daily services, primitive Christi-

⁴⁰ *Eirenicon* – a three-part book written by Edward Bouverie Pusey (1800-1882), British clergyman and theologian, a leader of the Oxford movement; it was an attempt to find a meeting ground for uniting Roman Catholicism and Anglicanism.

⁴¹ **Tractarianism** – a system of Anglican High Church principles set forth in a series of tracts at Oxford, England. Leaders included Pusey and John Henry Newman, an Anglican priest who embraced and returned to Romanism.

⁴² **John Jewel** (1522-1571) – orthodox Anglican Bishop of Salisbury; Ryle’s reference is to Jewel’s book, *The Apology [Defense] of the Church of England; and an Epistle to Seignior Scipio a Venetian Gentleman, Concerning the Counsel of Trent*.

anity, and so forth, and diminished attention to the written Word of God. The Bible is the King's highway. If we once leave that for any bypath, however beautiful, and old, and frequented it may seem, we must never be surprised if we end with worshipping images and relics, and going regularly to a confessional.

(2) Let us arm ourselves, in the second place, with a godly jealousy about the least portion of the gospel. Let us beware of sanctioning the slightest attempt to keep back any jot or tittle of it, or to throw any part of it into the shade by exalting subordinate matters in religion. When Peter withdrew himself from eating with the Gentiles, it seemed but a little thing; yet Paul tells the Galatians, "I withstood him to the face, because he was to be blamed" (Gal 2:11). Let us count nothing little that concerns our souls. Let us be very particular whom we hear, where we go, and what we do, in all the matters of our own particular worship; and let us care nothing for the imputation of squeamishness and excessive scrupulosity. We live in days when great principles are involved in little acts, and things in religion, which fifty years ago were utterly indifferent, are now by circumstances rendered indifferent no longer. Let us beware of tampering with anything of a Romanizing tendency. It is foolishness to play with fire. I believe that many of our perverts and seceders began with thinking there could be no mighty harm in attaching a *little* more importance to certain outward things than they once did. But once launched on the downward course, they went on from one thing to another. They provoked God, and He left them to themselves! They were given over to strong delusion and allowed to believe a lie (2Th 2:11-12). They tempted the devil, and he came to them! They started with trifles, as many foolishly call them. They have ended with downright idolatry.

(3) Let us arm ourselves, last of all, with clear sound views of our Lord Jesus Christ, and of the salvation that is in Him. He is the "image of the invisible God"—the express "image of his person"—and the true preservative against all idolatry, when truly known. Let us build ourselves deep down on the strong foundation of His finished work upon the cross. Let us settle it firmly in our minds that Christ Jesus has done everything needful in order to present us without spot before the throne of God, and that simple, childlike faith on our part is the only thing required to give us an entire interest in the work of Christ. Let us not doubt that, having this faith, we are completely justified in the sight of God—will never be more justified if we live to the age of Methuselah and do the works of the Apostle Paul—and can add *nothing* to that complete justification by any acts, deeds, words, performances, fastings, prayers, alms-deeds, attendance on ordinances, or anything else of our own.

Above all, let us keep up continual communion with the person of the Lord Jesus! Let us abide in Him daily, feed on Him daily, look to Him daily, lean on Him daily, live upon Him daily, draw from His fullness daily. Let us realize this, and the idea of other mediators, other comforters, other intercessors, will seem utterly absurd. "What need is there?" we shall reply: "I have Christ, and in Him I have all. What have I to do with idols? I have Jesus in my heart, Jesus in the Bible, and Jesus in heaven, and I want nothing more!"

Once let the Lord Christ have His rightful place in our hearts, and all other things in our religion will soon fall into their right places. Church, ministers, sacraments, ordinances, all will go down and take the second place.

Except Christ sits as Priest and King upon the throne of our hearts, that little kingdom within will be in perpetual confusion. But only let Him be "all in all" there, and all will be well. Before Him every idol, every Dagon, shall fall down (1Sa 5:1-3). *Christ rightly known, Christ truly believed, and Christ heartily loved is the true preservative against ritualism, Romanism, and every form of idolatry.*

