

# Free Grace Broadcaster

ISSUE 189

## IDOLATRY

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*Little children, keep  
yourselves from  
idols. Amen.*

1 John 5:21

### Our Purpose

*“To humble the pride of man,  
to exalt the grace of God in salvation,  
and to promote real holiness in heart and life.”*

# Free Grace Broadcaster

## IDOLATRY

# 189

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Published by Chapel Library • 2603 West Wright St. • Pensacola, Florida 32505 USA

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# THE DEFINITION AND CAUSE OF IDOLATRY

J.C. Ryle (1816-1900)

*Wherefore, my dearly beloved, flee from idolatry.—1 Corinthians 10:14*

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” (Num 16:46)... 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... Truth about idolatry is, in the highest sense, truth for the times.

Let me, then, 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, or it may closely border on truth and admit of being most speciously defended...

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, O Israel,” 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 to the LORD” (Exo 32:4-5)... We should observe [that] 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...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 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...

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.”

**Let me show...*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, adulteries, fornications, 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...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 [appease] 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.<sup>1</sup> He would fain 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...

*[The] 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 4:24).

Booklet available from CHAPEL LIBRARY.

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**J. C. Ryle** (1816-1900): English Anglican bishop and author; born in Macclesfield, Cheshire County, UK.

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<sup>1</sup> **divinity** – theology.

# SOUL IDOLATRY EXCLUDES MEN OUT OF HEAVEN

David Clarkson (c. 1621-1686)

*For this ye know, that no whoremonger, nor unclean person, nor covetous man, who is an idolater, hath any inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and of God.—Ephesians 5:5*

A COVETOUS man—and the like may be understood of the rest—is an idolater...Not only the covetous, but the unclean, are idolaters. For the apostle, who here makes covetousness to be idolatry, counts voluptuous<sup>1</sup> persons idolaters also, where he speaks of some who make their belly their God (Phi 3:19). Indeed, every reigning lust is an idol; and every person in whom it reigns is an idolater. “The lust of the flesh, and the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life” (1Jo 2:16), i.e., pleasures, and riches, and honors, are the carnal man’s trinity, the three great idols of worldly men, to which they prostrate their souls. And giving that to them which is due only to God, they hereby become guilty of idolatry...That this may be more evident, that covetousness, uncleanness, and other lusts are idolatry, let us consider what it is and the several kinds of it.

Idolatry is...to give that honor and worship to the creature which is due only to God (Rom 1:25)...Now when this worship is made common, communicated to other things, whatever they are, we hereby make them idols and commit idolatry. Now this worship due to God only is not only given by heathens to their false gods; and by papists to angels, saints, images, etc.; but also by carnal men to their *lusts*. For there is a twofold worship...due only to God, internal and external:

1. ***External, which consists in acts and gestures of the body.*** When a man bows to or prostrates himself before a thing, this is the worship of the body. And when these gestures of bowing, prostration are used, not out of a civil, but a religious respect, with an intention to testify divine honor, then it is worship due only to God.

2. ***Internal, which consists in the acts of the soul and actions answerable thereto.*** When the mind is most taken up with an object and the heart and affections most set upon it, this is *soul* worship; and this is due only to God. For He being the chief good and the last end of intel-

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<sup>1</sup> **voluptuous** – given to excessive sensual gratification.

ligent creatures, it is His due, proper to Him alone, to be most minded and most affected. It is the honor due only to the Lord to have the first, the highest place, both in our minds and hearts and endeavors.

Now according to this distinction of worship there are two sorts of idolatry:

1. *Open, outward idolatry*, when men, out of a religious respect, bow to or prostrate themselves before anything besides God. This is the idolatry of the heathens and part of the idolatry of papists.

2. *Secret and soul idolatry*, when the mind and heart is set upon anything more than God; when anything is more valued, more intended; anything more trusted, more loved, or our endeavors more for any other thing than God. Then is that soul worship, which is due only to God...

Hence, secret idolaters shall have no inheritance in the kingdom of God. Soul idolatry will exclude men out of heaven as well as open idolatry. He that serves his lusts is as incapable of heaven as he that serves or worships idols of wood or stone.

Before we come to confirm and apply this truth, it will be requisite to make a more clear discovery of this secret idolatry...In order thereunto, observe, there are thirteen acts of soul worship...:

1. **Esteem.** That which we *most highly value* we make our god. For estimation is an act of soul worship...Worship is the mind's esteem of a thing as most excellent. Now the Lord challenges the highest esteem, as an act of honor and worship due only to Himself. Therefore, to have a high esteem of other things, when we have low thoughts of God, is idolatry. To have a high opinion of ourselves, of our parts and accomplishments, of our relations and enjoyments, of riches and honors, or those that are rich and honorable, or anything of like nature, when we have low apprehensions of God, is to advance these things into the place of God, to make them idols and give them that honor and worship which is due only to the divine Majesty. What we most esteem, we make our god. If other things are of higher esteem, ye are idolaters (Job 21:14).

2. **Mindfulness.**<sup>2</sup> That which we are *most mindful of* we make our god. To be most remembered, to be most minded, is an act of worship which is proper to God, and which He requires as due to Himself alone (Ecc 12:1). Other things may be minded; but if they be more minded than God, it is idolatry—the worship of God is given to the creature. When ye mind yourselves, mind your estates and interests,

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<sup>2</sup> **mindfulness** – what our minds are fixed upon; what we are attentive to.

mind your profits or pleasures more than God, you set these up as idols in the place of God. When that time, which should be taken up with thoughts of God, is spent in thoughts of other things; when God is not in all your thoughts; or if He sometimes be there, yet if other things take place of Him in your thoughts; if when ye are called to think of God—as sometimes every day we should do with all seriousness—if ordinarily and willingly you make these thoughts of God give place to other things, it is idolatry.

If either you do not think of God or think otherwise of Him than He is—think Him all mercy, not minding His justice; think Him all pity and compassion, not minding His purity and holiness; think of His faithfulness in performing promises, not at all minding His truth in execution of threatenings; think Him all love, not regarding His sovereignty—this is to set up an idol instead of God. Thinking otherwise of God than He has revealed Himself or minding other things as much or more than God is idolatry.

**3. Intention.** That which we *most intend* we make our god, for to be most intended is an act of worship due only to the true God. For He being the chief good must be the last end. Now the last end must be our chief aim, i.e., it must be intended and aimed at for itself; and all other things must be aimed at for its sake...in a subserviency<sup>3</sup> to it.

Now, when we make other things our chief aim or main design, we set them up in the stead of God and make them idols. When our chief design is to be rich, or great, or safe, or famous, or powerful; when our great aim is our own ease, or pleasure, or credit, or profit and advantage; when we aim at, or intend any [thing] more, or anything so much, as the glorifying and enjoying of God; this is soul idolatry...

**4. Resolution.** What we are *most resolved for* we worship as God. Resolvedness for God, above all things, is an act of worship which He challenges as due to Himself alone. To communicate it to other things is to give the worship of God unto them and so to make them gods. When we are fully resolved for other things, for our lusts, humors,<sup>4</sup> outward advantages, and but faintly resolved for God, His ways, honor, service...; when [we] resolve presently for other things, but refer our resolves for God to the future—“Let me get enough of the world, of my pleasure, of my lusts, now; I will think of God hereafter, in old age, in sickness, on a deathbed”—these are idolatrous resolutions. God is thrust down, the creatures and your lusts advanced into the place of God, and that honor which is due only to Him you give unto them.

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<sup>3</sup> **subserviency** – service in submission.

<sup>4</sup> **humors** – dispositions.

This is unquestionable idolatry.

5. **Love.** That which we *must love*, we worship as our god; for love is an act of soul-worship...To love and to adore are sometimes both one...That which one loves, he worships. This is undoubtedly true, if we intend hereby that love which is superlative<sup>5</sup> and transcendent;<sup>6</sup> for to be loved above all things is an act of honor and worship, which the Lord challenges as His due in peculiar (Deu 6:5). In this the Lord Christ comprised all that worship which is required of man (Mat 22:37). Other things may be loved, but He will be loved above all other things. He is to be loved transcendentally, absolutely, and for Himself. All other things are to be loved in Him and for Him. He looks upon us as not worshipping Him at all, not taking Him for a God, when we love other things more or as much as Himself (1Jo 2:15)...Love, whenever it is inordinate,<sup>7</sup> it is an idolatrous affection.

6. **Trust.** That which we *most trust* we make our god; for confidence and dependence is an act of worship, which the Lord calls for as due only to Himself. And what act of worship is there which the Lord more requires than this soul-dependence upon Him alone? "Trust in the LORD with all thine heart" (Pro 3:5). He will have no place there left for confidence in anything else. Therefore, it is idolatry to trust in ourselves, to rely upon our own wisdom, judgments, parts, accomplishments. The Lord forbids it (Pro 3:5)...

*To trust in wealth or riches.* Job disclaims this and reckons it amongst those idolatrous acts that were punishable by the Judge (Job 31:24-28). David joins this and the disclaiming of God together (Psa 52:7); and our apostle, who calls covetousness idolatry, dissuades<sup>8</sup> from this confidence in riches as inconsistent with confidence in God (1Ti 6:17).

*To trust in friends though many and mighty.* He fixes a curse upon this as being a departing from, a renouncing of God, an advancing of that [which] we trust into the room of God (Psa 146:3)...“It is better to trust in the LORD than to put confidence in man. It is better to trust in the LORD than to put confidence in princes” (Psalm 118:8-9)...The idolatry of this confidence is expressed, in that the true God is laid aside. Trust in the creature is always idolatrous.

7. **Fear.** That which we *most fear* we worship as our god, for fear is an act of worship...He that does fear, does worship that which is feared, which is unquestionable when his fear is transcendent. The

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<sup>5</sup> **superlative** – of the highest degree.

<sup>6</sup> **transcendent** – superior in excellence.

<sup>7</sup> **inordinate** – not limited to the rules prescribed.

<sup>8</sup> **dissuades** – persuades someone not to do or think something.

whole worship of God is frequently in Scripture expressed by this one word *fear* (Mat 4:10 with Deu 6:13); and the Lord challenges this worship, this fear, as due to Him alone (Isa 51:12-19). That is our god which is our fear and dread (Luk 12:4-5). If you fear others more than Him, you give that worship to them which is due only to God, and this is plain idolatry...

**8. Hope.** That which we make our *hope* we worship as god, for hope is an act of worship...and worship is due only to God. It is His prerogative to be the hope of His people (Jer 17:13; Rom 15:13). When we make other things our hope, we give them the honor due only to God. It is a forsaking of the Lord the fountain and advancing of broken cisterns into His place (Jer 2:13), hereby worshipping them as God...Thus do the papists openly, when they call the virgin mother, the wooden cross, and saints departed, their hope. And thus do others amongst us, who make their prayers, their sorrow for sin, their works of charity, or any acts of religion or righteousness, their hope, when men expect hereby to satisfy justice, to pacify God's displeasure, to procure heaven. Nothing can effect this, but that which is infinite—the righteousness of God. And this we have only in and from Christ. He is therefore called our hope (1Ti 1:1), our “hope of glory” (Col 1:27). Those that make their own righteousness the foundation of their hope, they exalt it into the place of Christ and honor it as God...

**9. Desire.** That which we *most desire*, we worship as our god; for that which is chiefly desired is the chief good in his account who so desires it. And what he counts his chief good, that he makes his god. Desire is an act of worship..., and to be most desired is that worship, that honor, which is due only to God. To desire anything *more* or so much *as* the enjoyment of God is to idolize it, to prostrate the heart to it, and worship it as God only should be worshipped. He only should be that one thing desirable to us above all things, as to David (Psa 27:4)...

**10. Delight.** That which we *most delight* and rejoice in, that we worship as god; for transcendent delight is an act of worship due only to God. And this affection in its height and elevation is called glorying. That which is our delight above all things, we glory in it; and this is the prerogative which the Lord challenges (1Co 1:31; Jer 9:23-24). To rejoice more in our wisdom, strength, riches, than in the Lord, is to idolize them. To take more delight in relations, wife, or children, in outward comforts and accommodations, than in God, is to worship them, as we ought only to worship God. To take more pleasure in any way of sin, uncleanness, intemperance,<sup>9</sup> earthly employments, than in

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<sup>9</sup> **intemperance** – lack of moderation and self-restraint.

the holy ways of God, than in those spiritual and heavenly services wherein we may enjoy God, is idolatry...

**11. Zeal.** That for which we are *most zealous*, we worship as god; for such a zeal is an act of worship due only to God. Therefore, it is idolatrous to be more zealous for our own things than for the things of God—to be eager in our own cause, and careless in the cause of God; to be more vehement for our own credit, interests, advantages, than for the truths, ways, honor of God; to be fervent in spirit, in following our own business, promoting our designs, but lukewarm and indifferent in the service of God; to count it intolerable for ourselves to be reproached, slandered, reviled, but manifest no indignation when God is dishonored, His name, Sabbaths, worship, profaned; His truths, ways, people, reviled—this is idolatrous...

**12. Gratitude.** That to which we are *most grateful*, that we worship as god; for gratitude is an act of worship... We worship that to which we are most thankful. We may be thankful to men, we may acknowledge the helpfulness of means and instruments; but if we rest here and rise not higher in our thanks and acknowledgments; if the Lord be not remembered as Him without whom all these are nothing; it is idolatry. For this the Lord menaces those idolaters (Hos 2:5, 8). Thus when we ascribe our plenty and riches to our care and industry; our success to our prudence and diligence; our deliverances to friends, means, and instruments, without looking higher, or not so much to God as unto these, we idolize them—sacrifice to them—as the prophet expresses it (Hab 1:16). To ascribe that which comes from God unto the creatures is to set them in the place of God and so to worship them...

**13. When our *care and industry* is more for other things than for God.** No man can serve two masters. We cannot serve God and mammon,<sup>10</sup> God and our lusts too, because this service of ourselves, of the world, takes up that care, that industry, those endeavors, which the Lord must have of necessity, if we will serve Him as God. And when these are laid out upon the world and our lusts, we serve them as the Lord ought to be served, and so make them our gods. When you are more careful and industrious to please men or yourselves, than to please God; to provide for yourselves and posterity, than to be serviceable unto God; more careful what you shall eat, drink, or wherewith [you may] be clothed than how you may honor and enjoy God; to make provision for the flesh, to fulfill the lusts thereof, than how to fulfill the will of God; more industrious to promote your own interests, than the designs of God; to be rich, or great, or respected amongst

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<sup>10</sup> **mammon** – wealth; riches.

men, than that God may be honored and advanced in the world; more careful how to get the things of the world, than how to employ them for God; rise early, go to bed late, eat the bread of carefulness, that your outward estate may prosper, while the cause, and ways, and interests of Christ have few or none of your endeavors, this is to idolize the world, yourselves, your lusts, your relations, while the God of heaven is neglected. And the worship and service due unto *Him alone* is hereby idolatrously given to other things...

He that makes Christ his chief aim, if at length he finds Him Whom his soul loveth, this quiets his heart, whatever he want, whatever he lose besides. He counts this a full recompense for all his tears, prayers, inquiries, waitings, and endeavors.

From "Soul Idolatry Excludes Men out of Heaven," in *The Works of David Clarkson*, Vol. II, reprinted by The Banner of Truth Trust.

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**David Clarkson** (c. 1621-1686): Puritan preacher and author. Colleague of John Owen and successor to Owen's pulpit. Born in Bradford, Yorkshire, England.



If the holy anger of the Lord Jesus was stirred when He beheld the profanation of that House which was to be a "house of prayer," if the idolatrous commercialization of it caused Him to cleanse it in such a drastic manner, how must He now regard many of the edifices which have been consecrated to His name! How tragically does history repeat itself! The things which are now done in so many church-houses—the ice cream suppers, the bazaars, the moving picture shows, and other forms of entertainment—what are these but idolatrous commercialization of these "houses of prayer"? No wonder that such places are devoid of spirituality and strangers to the power of God. The Lord will not tolerate an unholy mixture of worldly things with spiritual.—*A. W. Pink*

# IDOLATRY CONDEMNED

Charles Spurgeon (1834-1892)

*Little children, keep yourselves from idols. Amen.—1 John 5:21*

**J**OHN has, in this epistle, written much concerning the love of Jesus, as well he might, for he knew more about that love than any other man knew. And yet, when he had written concerning love to Jesus, he was moved to an intense jealousy lest by any means the hearts of those to whom he wrote should be turned aside from that dear Lover of their souls Who deserved their entire affection. And, therefore, not only love to them, but also love to Jesus made him wind up his letter with these significant words, “Little children, keep yourselves from idols”...

**First, keep yourselves from worshipping yourselves.** Alas, how many fall into this gross sin! *Some do it by indulgence at the table.* How much of eating, and especially of drinking, is there which, correctly speaking, is nothing better than gluttony and drunkenness! There are professing Christians who perhaps never are regarded as intoxicated, yet they sip and sip and sip until, if they do not lose the control of their brain, they cause observers to raise the question whether they ever had any at all. It is almost a pity for some professing Christians that they can thus indulge themselves at home...It is a scandalous thing when there is such a sin as this in the Church of God...I urge all of you, beloved, to see to it that you offer no sacrifices to gluttony nor pour out libations to Bacchus.<sup>1</sup> For if you do, you prove that you are idolaters worshipping your own bellies and that God’s love dwelleth not within you.

*There are others who worship themselves by living a life of indolence.*<sup>2</sup> They have nothing to do, and they seem to do it very thoroughly. They take their ease, and that is the main thing in which they take any interest. They flit from pleasure to pleasure, from show to show, from vanity to vanity, as if this life were only a garden in which butterflies might fly from flower to flower, and not a sphere where serious work was to be done and all-important business for eternity was to be accomplished. Worship not yourselves by trifling as these indolent people do.

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<sup>1</sup> **Bacchus** – the mythological god of wine.

<sup>2</sup> **indolence** – habitual laziness; sloth.

*Some worship themselves by decorating their bodies most elaborately. Their first and their last thought being, "What shall we wear?" Fall not into that idolatry.*

**Then there are some people who make idols of their wealth.** Getting money seems to be the main purpose of their lives. Now it is right that a Christian man should be diligent in business. He should not be second to anybody in the diligence with which he attends to the affairs of this life. But it is always a pity when we can be truthfully told, "So-and-so is getting richer every year, but he has got stingier also. He gives less now than he gave when he had only half as much as he now has." We meet occasionally with people like the man who, when he was comparatively poor, gave his guinea; but when he grew rich, he only gave a shilling...

**Some worship the pursuit which they have undertaken.** They give their whole soul up to their art or their particular calling, whatever it may be. In a certain sense, this is a right thing to do; yet we must never forget that the first and great commandment is, "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind" (Mat 22:37). This must always have the first place.

Let me here touch a very tender point. **There are some who make idols of their dearest relatives and friends.** Some have done this with their children. I remember reading a story of a good man who seemed as if he could never forgive God for taking away his child. He sat in a Quakers' meeting, bowed down and sorrowful, and his time of deliverance came when a sister rose [and] uttered these words, "Verily, I perceive that children are idols," and then resumed her seat. Such a message as that is often needed; yet it is a pity that it should be. Make no idol of your child or your wife or your husband; for by putting them into Christ's place, you really provoke Him to take them from you. Love them as much as you please—I would that some loved their children, their husbands, or their wives more than they do—but always love them in such a fashion that Christ shall have the first place in your hearts.

The catalogue of idols that we are apt to worship is a very long one...It would take me a very long while to make a list of the various forms which the idolatry of the heart will take. But in a sentence let me say to you: *remember that God has a right to your whole being.* There is nothing, and there can be nothing which ought to be supreme in your affections save your Lord. And if you worship anything or any ideal whatever it may be, if you love that more than you love your God, you are an idolater; and you are disobeying the command of the

text, “Little children, keep yourselves from idols”...

I would say to you, beloved, in closing my observations upon this point: in the matter of your faith, **be sure to keep yourselves from the idol of the hour**. Some of us have lived long enough to see the world’s idols altered any number of times. Just now, in some professedly Christian churches, the idol is “intellectualism,” “culture,” “modern thought.” Whatever name it bears, it has no right to be in a Christian church, for it believes very little that appertains to Christ. Now I have some sort of respect for a downright honest infidel, like Voltaire<sup>3</sup> or Tom Paine.<sup>4</sup> But I have none for the man who goes to college to be trained for the Christian ministry, and then claims to be free to doubt the deity of Christ, the need of conversion, the punishment of the wicked, and other truths that seem to me to be essential to a full proclamation of the gospel of Christ. Such a man must have strange views of honesty. And so has the minister who goes into a pulpit and addresses people when he knows that he does not believe any of the doctrines that are dearer to them than their own lives. Yet, the moment he is called to account for his unbelief, he cries out, “Persecution! Persecution! Bigotry! Bigotry!” A burglar, if I found him outside my bedroom door and held him till the policeman came, might consider me to be very bigoted because I did not care to have my property stolen by him and because I interfered with his liberty. So, in like manner, I am called bigoted because I will not allow a man to come and assail from my own pulpit the truths which are dearer to me than my life. I am quite willing to give that man liberty to go and publish his views somewhere else and at his own expense. But it shall not be done at my expense nor in the midst of a congregation gathered by me for the worship of God and the proclamation of the truth as it is revealed in the Scriptures. Keep yourselves from this idol of the times; for it is the precursor of death to any church that gives it admittance...

Believe me, my brethren, that the Church of Christ, if not the world, shall yet learn that the highest culture is a heart that is cultivated by divine grace; that the truest science is...Jesus Christ and Him crucified; and that the greatest thought and the deepest of all metaphysics are found at the foot of the cross; and that the men who will

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<sup>3</sup> **Voltaire (1694-1778)** – French writer and philosopher. One of the central figures of the Age of Enlightenment, a fervent anti-Christian, and deist. Once said that within twenty-five years the Bible would be forgotten and Christianity a thing of the past. Forty years after his death, the Bible and Christian literature were being published in his former home.

<sup>4</sup> **Tom Paine (1737-1809)** – British-born American political philosopher and writer who argued for American independence from Britain. His writings influenced both the American War of Independence and the French Revolution.

keep on simply and earnestly preaching the old-fashioned gospel, and the people who will stand fast in the old paths are they who will most certainly win the victory. When those who are sailing in a frail bark,<sup>5</sup> which they or their fellow-sinners have constructed, without a rudder, without a pilot at the helm, shall drift away and be dashed to pieces upon the rocks, they who trust in the Lord and have Him as their Pilot shall be kept clear of the rocks on which others have made shipwreck and shall be safely steered into the haven of peace and there be at rest for ever.

From a sermon delivered, at The Metropolitan Tabernacle,  
Newington, on Lord's-Day Evening, Sept. 6th, 1874.

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**Charles H. Spurgeon** (1834-1892): Influential Baptist minister in England. History's most widely read preacher (apart from those found in Scripture). Today, there is available more material written by Spurgeon than by any other Christian author, living or dead. Born at Kelvedon, Essex.



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<sup>5</sup> **bark** – a small ship.

# KEEP YOURSELVES FROM IDOLS

David Martyn Lloyd-Jones (1899-1981)

*Little children, keep yourselves from idols. Amen.—1 John 5:21*

**T**HERE are authorities who would say that these are probably the last words in the entire Scripture, if you take Scripture in chronological order. This point cannot be proved, but there is a good deal to be said for it. In any case, these are the last words of this old man [John] who was so concerned about the life and the future of these Christians to whom he was writing. The words of an old man are always worthy of respect and consideration; they are words that are based upon a long lifetime's experience. The last words of all people are important, but the last words of great people are of exceptional importance, and the last words of an apostle of the Lord Jesus Christ are of supreme importance...

Here is a man out of this great and mighty experience saying a last word. He is an old man; he knows the end is at hand, and he sees this group of people in a hostile world, and he wants them to live a life of victory. He wants them to have a joy that may be full, and this is his final word to them: "Little children, keep yourselves from idols"...

There are constantly things in this life and world that threaten to come between us and...[the] knowledge of God. In other words, whether we like it or not, it is a warfare, it is a fight of faith; there is an enemy set against us. We have just been reminded of that—"that wicked one" that John speaks of towards the end of the letter; and the supreme object of that evil one is to come between us and this knowledge. And the way he does that, of course, is to try to get us to fix our mind and our attention and our heart upon something else. So it is in order to warn us against that terrible danger that John ends on this note.

Let me, therefore, put this in the form of three propositions.

The first is that *the greatest enemy that confronts us in the spiritual life is the worshipping of idols*. The greatest danger confronting us all is not a matter of deeds or of actions, but of idolatry...

What is idolatry? Well, an idol can be defined most simply in this way: an idol is anything in our lives that occupies the place that should be occupied by God alone...Anything that holds a controlling position in my life is an idol...

Of course, an idol may indeed be an actual idol. But it does not stop at that; would to God it did! No; idolatry may consist of having false notions of God. If I am worshipping my own idea of God and not the true and living God, that is idolatry...

But let me go on to point out that idolatry can take many other forms. It is possible for us to worship our religion instead of worshipping God. How subtle a thing this idolatry is! We may think that we are worshipping God, but really we are simply worshipping our own religious observances and devotions. It is an error always of every Catholic type of religion that lays stress upon doing particular things in particular ways, such as getting up and going to early-morning Communion. The emphasis may be more upon the observance of this rather than upon the worship of God.

I give that as but an illustration. It is not confined to the Catholic type; it is also found in the most evangelical circles. It is possible for us to worship not only our own religion but our own church, our own communion, our own religious body, our own particular community, our own particular sect, our own particular point of view—these are the things we may be worshipping. Theology has often become an idol to many people; they have really been worshipping ideas and not worshipping God. What a terrible thing this is; and yet, and I am sure we all must agree, how easy it is to forget the person of the Lord Jesus Christ and to stop at the ideas and the theories and the teaching concerning Him...

Also, there are people who worship their own experiences. They do not talk about God; they talk about themselves and what has happened to them—always self in the foreground rather than God.

Further, the idol in the case of some people is their own country—there are people who worship it. Are we guiltless of that? There are people who worship the state or certain people in the state; there is a kind of mysticism that has often been developed...There are people still who worship the state—the power of the state and what the state can do for them; they live for it—it is their idol, their god...

But perhaps the supreme idol is self, for I suppose that in the last analysis we can trace all the others back to self. The people, for instance, who worship their country do so because it is *their* country. They do not worship another country, and that is for one reason only: they happen to have been born in this one rather than in that one. It is really themselves. And the same is true with children: it is because they are *your* children. And this other person? Well, it is the relationship in which that one person is something to *you*—it is always *self*. All

the saints throughout the centuries have recognized this. The ultimate idol about which we have to be so careful is this horrible *self*—this concern about myself, putting myself where God ought to be. Everything revolving around *myself*, *my* interest, *my* position, *my* development, myself and all the things that result from that...

The greatest danger in the spiritual life is idolatry, and it comes into all our activities. It comes into our Christian work; it is the greatest danger confronting a man standing in a pulpit preaching, a concern that he should preach in a particular manner. It comes into the activities we are engaged in. Let us examine ourselves as we think about these things...

**So the second principle is that *we must guard ourselves against this.*** “Keep yourselves,” says John, which really means that we must guard ourselves as if we were in a garrison against this horrible danger of idolatry. Now you will notice that John tells us this is something that *we* have to do; it is not done for us. “Keep yourselves from idols.” You do not “let go and let God.” No, you are always on guard—you watch and pray. You realize this terrible danger; *you* have to do it. At first sight John seems to be contradicting himself, because in the eighteenth verse he says, “We know that whosoever is born of God sinneth not; but he that is begotten of God keepeth himself, and that wicked one toucheth him not”...Is he contradicting himself? No; these things form the perfect balance that we always find in Scripture from beginning to end. It is simply John’s way of saying, “Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling. For it is God which worketh in you...” (Phi 2:12–13)...

In other words, we must keep ourselves in right relationship to Him. If you and I keep our minds on the Lord Jesus Christ by the Holy Spirit, we need not worry. The Son of God will keep us, and the evil one will not be able to touch us. We do not have to meet the evil one in single combat; I am not fighting the devil directly, as it were. What I do is I keep myself in that right relationship with Christ, and He will defeat the enemy for me. I must be careful that some idol is not receiving my time and energy and the things that should be given to God. I must be constantly on the watch...I must guard my mind and understanding; I must watch my spirit and my heart. This is the most subtle thing in the world. It is the central temptation, so that I constantly have to watch and pray and ever and always be on my guard.

But that brings me to the last proposition, which is essentially practical. *How is this to be done? How am I thus to guard myself from idols?* It seems to me that the principles are quite simple.

*The first thing we must always do is to remember the truth about ourselves.* We must remember that we are God's people, that we are those whom Christ has purchased at the price and cost of His own precious blood. We must remember our destiny and the kind of life in which we are engaged and in which we walk. We must remember, as John has reminded us in the nineteenth verse that "we are of God, and the whole world lieth in wickedness." In other words, if we are of God and belong to God, then we must live for God, and we must not live for any of those other things. It does not matter what they are—I must not live for anything in this life and world. I can use them but not abuse them. God has given me these gifts; but if I turn any of them into my god, I am abusing them—I am worshipping the creature rather than the Creator. Oh, the tragedy that we should be doing that! The way to avoid that is to realize what I am; I am to exercise this "understanding" that Christ has given me through the Holy Spirit, as we saw in verse 20. I am to remember that I am not of this world, and therefore I must not live for or worship anything that belongs to it.

*Or we can put that in the form of a second principle: I must remember the true nature of idols.* That is the way to avoid worshipping them and a very good way of guarding yourself against idolatry. Just look and consider what they are, and there again is something we need to be reminded of constantly. Look at the things to which we tend to give our worship and our adoration. Even if we put them at their highest and their best, are they worthy of it? Is there anything in this world of time which is worthy of our worship and our devotion? We know full well there is not. There is nothing in this world that lasts. Everything is only temporary; everything is moving on to an end. There is nothing lasting and eternal; they are thus unworthy of our worship. They are all gifts given to us by God, so let us use them as such. Let us not regard them as worthy of our entire devotion. Is it not tragic to think of a human soul worshipping money, possession, position, success, any person, children, or anything else of this life and world? It is all passing away. There is one alone who is worthy, and that is God.

And that is the last thing to remember. The way ultimately to keep ourselves from idols is to remember the truth about God and to live in communion with Him. Whenever we are tempted to engage in idolatry, let us think again of the nature and the being of God. Let us remember that the privilege that is offered to us is to worship Him and to walk with Him, to know Him, and to commune and converse with Him, to be a child of God, and to go on and spend eternity in His holy presence...

It is as we realize this wondrous possibility of knowing God that

everything else should pale into insignificance. In other words, the apostle's final advice, it seems to me, can be put like this: we must strive without ceasing to realize the presence and the fellowship and the communion of God...To realize His nearness and His presence, to realize His companionship, to know that we are with Him and in Him, and to see to it always and ever that nothing and no one shall ever come between us and Him.

From *Life in God* (Volume Five) in *Life in Christ: Studies in 1 John* by David Martyn Lloyd-Jones, © 2002. Used by permission of Crossway Books, a division of Good News Publishers, Wheaton, IL 60187, [www.crosswaybooks.org](http://www.crosswaybooks.org).

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**David Martyn Lloyd-Jones** (1899-1981): Perhaps the greatest expository preacher of the 20th century. After successful medical studies he nearly became a physician when called by God to preach the gospel. Successor to G. Campbell Morgan as minister of Westminster Chapel, London, England, 1938-68. Born in Wales.



We must all be on our guard. We must take nothing for granted. 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 extenuate and palliate 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.—*J. C. Ryle*

# IMPIETY OF ATTRIBUTING A VISIBLE FORM TO GOD

John Calvin (1509-1564)

1. God is opposed to idols, that all may know He is the only fit witness to Himself. He expressly forbids any attempt to represent Him by a **bodily shape**. As Scripture, in accommodation to the rude and gross intellect of man, usually speaks in popular terms, so whenever its object is to discriminate between the true God and false deities, it opposes Him in particular to idols. Not that it approves of what is taught more elegantly and subtly by philosophers, but that it may the better expose the folly, nay, madness of the world in its inquiries after God, so long as every one clings to his own speculations. This exclusive definition, which we uniformly meet with in Scripture, annihilates every deity which men frame for themselves of their own accord—*God Himself being the only fit witness to Himself*. Meanwhile, seeing that this brutish stupidity has overspread the globe, men longing after visible forms of God, and so forming deities of wood and stone, silver and gold, or of any other dead and corruptible matter, we must hold it as a first principle that *as often as any form is assigned to God, His glory is corrupted by an impious<sup>1</sup> lie*. In the Law, accordingly, after God had claimed the glory of divinity for Himself alone, when He comes to show what kind of worship He approves and rejects, He immediately adds, “Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image, or any likeness of any thing that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth” (Exo 20:4). By these words He curbs any licentious<sup>2</sup> attempt we might make to represent Him by a visible shape, and briefly enumerates all the forms by which superstition had begun, even long before, to turn His truth into a lie. For we know that the sun was worshipped by the Persians. As many stars as the foolish nations saw in the sky, so many gods they imagined them to be. Then to the Egyptians, every animal was a figure of God. The Greeks, again, plumed themselves on their superior wisdom in worshipping God under the human form...But God makes no comparison between images as if one were more and another less befitting. He rejects without exception all shapes and pictures and other symbols by which the super-

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<sup>1</sup> **impious** – irreverent toward God; contemptuous toward God and His Law.

<sup>2</sup> **licentious** – unrestrained by law or morality.

stitious imagine they can bring Him near to them.

**2. Reasons for this prohibition from Moses, Isaiah, and Paul.** This may easily be inferred from the reasons which He annexes to His prohibition. First, it is said in the books of Moses, “Take ye therefore good heed unto yourselves; for ye saw no manner of similitude in the day that the LORD spake unto you in Horeb out of the midst of the fire: lest ye corrupt yourselves, and make you a graven image, the similitude of any figure,” etc. (Deu 4:15-16). We see how plainly God declares against all figures, to make us aware that all longing after such visible shapes is rebellion against Him. Of the prophets, it will be sufficient to mention Isaiah, who is the most copious<sup>3</sup> on this subject (Isa 40:18; 41:7, 29; 45:9; 46:5), in order to show how the majesty of God is defiled by an absurd and indecorous<sup>4</sup> fiction, when He who is incorporeal<sup>5</sup> is assimilated to corporeal<sup>6</sup> matter; He who is invisible to a visible image; He who is a spirit to an inanimate<sup>7</sup> object; and He who fills all space to a bit of paltry wood, or stone, or gold. Paul, too, reasons in the same way, “Forasmuch then as we are the offspring of God, we ought not to think that the Godhead is like unto gold, or silver, or stone, graven by art and man’s device,” (Act 17:29). Hence, it is manifest that whatever statues are set up or pictures painted to represent God are utterly displeasing to Him, as a kind of insults to His majesty. And is it strange that the Holy Spirit thunders such responses from heaven, when He compels even blind and miserable idolaters to make a similar confession on the earth? Seneca’s<sup>8</sup> complaint, as given by Augustine<sup>9</sup> is well known. He says “The sacred, immortal, and invisible gods, they exhibit in the meanest and most ignoble materials, and dress them in the clothing of men and beasts; some confound the sexes, and form a compound out of different bodies, giving the name of deities to objects, which, if they were met alive, would be deemed monsters.”<sup>10</sup> Hence, again, it is obvious, that the defenders of images resort to a paltry quibbling evasion,<sup>11</sup> when they pretend that the Jews were forbidden to use them on account of their proneness to superstition; as if a prohibition, which the Lord founds on His own eternal

<sup>3</sup> **copious** – abounding in thoughts or words.

<sup>4</sup> **indecorous** – unbecoming; inappropriate.

<sup>5</sup> **incorporeal** – not composed of matter; having no material existence.

<sup>6</sup> **corporeal** – bodily.

<sup>7</sup> **inanimate** – not living; destitute of life.

<sup>8</sup> **Lucius Annaeus Seneca** (c. 4 BC-AD 65) – Roman Stoic philosopher and statesman.

<sup>9</sup> **Augustine** (AD 354-430) – Bishop of Hippo, early church theologian known by many as the father of orthodox theology; born in Tagaste, North Africa.

<sup>10</sup> Aurelius Augustine, *City of God*, Book 6 chapter 10.

<sup>11</sup> **paltry quibbling evasion** – avoidance of truth by raising trivial, insignificant objections.

essence and the uniform course of nature, could be restricted to a single nation. Besides, when Paul refuted the error of giving a bodily shape to God, he was addressing not Jews, but Athenians.

From *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Vol I, xi. Beveridge Translation (1845).

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**John Calvin** (1509-1564): the father of Reformed theology. During his ministry in Geneva, lasting nearly twenty-five years, Calvin lectured to theological students and preached an average of five sermons a week. He wrote commentaries on nearly every book of the Bible and numerous treatises on theological topics. His correspondence fills eleven volumes. Born in Noyon, Picardie, France.



# A TREATISE ON MENTAL IMAGES<sup>1</sup>

Ralph Erskine (1685-1752)

**W**HEN false worship had prevailed in the church of old unto its ruin, God showed and represented it unto his prophets under the name and appearance of a chamber of imagery (Eze 8:12). For therein were portrayed all the abominations wherewith the worship of God was defiled and religion corrupted. Most of my work at present is to take a view of some chambers of imagery yet more secret and hidden, namely, retired mental ones in which we may see many abominations wherewith both the spiritual doctrine of faith and the divine worship of the gospel are corrupted and the Christian religion in danger of being ruined. From this secret chamber of mental or internal imagery hath come forth all the external gross imagery that ever was in the world, and especially in the Christian church by which means the church of Rome became antichristian. These imaginary ideas, which are but vain imaginations and about corporeal<sup>2</sup> objects, brought in now by Mr. Robe<sup>3</sup> as belonging to the...object of faith, are in my opinion like a new opening of the bottomless pit, out of the smoke whereof came locusts upon the earth (Rev 9:2-3) because in so far as these ideas are brought out of their own natural place and supposed to be helpful in the supernatural subjects of divinity, they are no better than a smoke out of the pit, darkening the sun and the air, corrupting the doctrine, obscuring the light of the truth of God, and...tending in themselves to cover the face of the earth with the darkness of gross error and delusion...

[These ideas] lay anew a foundation for the spreading of idolatry and superstition by filling the minds of people with natural, carnal notions of Christ as man and of His doing and dying as human actions

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<sup>1</sup> During the Evangelical Awakening of the 1740s, a controversy erupted in Scotland over the issue of mental images. The question "Can a mental image of Christ be idolatrous?" was the heart of the issue. Men mightily used of God were divided on this subject. A pamphlet war broke out between James Robe (1688-1753), a man used of God in the Scottish revivals, and Ralph Erskine (1685-1752), one of the most well-known preachers of his day. This pamphlet war never satisfactorily concluded and simply burned out. Our sympathies in the main lie with Erskine. However, while Mt. Zion does not endorse everything Erskine argues, we believe his arguments in this excerpt represent a proper view from God's Word regarding mental images.

<sup>2</sup> **corporeal** – of a material nature.

<sup>3</sup> **James Robe** (1688-1753) – Presbyterian preacher in evangelical Church of Scotland; minister in Kilsyth, Scotland. Used of the Lord during the times of revival in that period, but believed that an imaginary idea of Christ's manhood was necessary to faith.

and sufferings, as if these notions were helpful to apprehend Christ the God-man in His mediatorial works exhibited in the gospel...Yet the glory of the gospel is spiritual and invisible, not obvious to the senses and imaginations of men. There is nothing in the gospel visible but unto faith, as the light of the sun is nothing to them who have no eyes. A dog and a staff are of more use to a blind man than the sun in the firmament. Such as are spiritually blind and want<sup>4</sup> the eyes of faith—or have lost the use and exercise thereof—can see nothing in the gospel, however great and glorious things are spoken of it. The light shines in darkness, and their darkness comprehends it not. The image of Christ as God in our nature, represented to us in the light of the gospel, which is the only glass wherein we can behold His glory (2Co 3:18), is of such a nature that no image of His human body formed in the brain can stand before it any more than Dagon could stand before the ark of God (1Sa 5:1-12). As Christ is present in the gospel and present like Himself in His personal, mediatorial,<sup>5</sup> and matchless glory, so He is present there only to our faith and spiritual understanding. The word is nigh unto us, even the word of faith (Rom 10:6-8) insomuch that none need say He is absent. And who shall ascend into heaven to bring Him down from thence or descend into the deep to bring Him up from the dead? Christ by His human body was once here present to natural sense. By His divine Spirit He is sometimes present to spiritual sense and experience. But He is no way present to our faith but in the gospel, which [though] it be a view through a glass darkly, yet in such a way and manner that it is the best view of Him that can be had till we see Him face to face (1Co 13:12).

But Mr. Robe has told us of another way of Christ's being present, namely to fancy<sup>6</sup> and imagination, as to His human nature now in heaven: [that we should think of it] in the same way and manner we think of any other absent man, and that this is absolutely *necessary* and greatly helpful to faith. This is the strange and fantastical doctrine published in Mr. Robe's fourth letter to Mr. Fisher<sup>7</sup>; and we have what I may call the sum and substance of it in the following paragraph of that letter (p. 30-31):

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<sup>4</sup> **want** – lack.

<sup>5</sup> **mediatorial** – referring to Christ's role as Mediator, or go-between, as Prophet, Priest, and King.

<sup>6</sup> **fancy** – the mental faculty which forms images, visions, and fantasies. While often used as a synonym for imagination, imagination is rather the power of combining and modifying our conceptions.

<sup>7</sup> **James Fisher** (1697-1775) – one of the founders of the Secession Church in Scotland. He did not view the revivals of Cambuslang as authentic works of God. Publicly criticized James Robe's doctrine as did Erskine.

“...I asserted and do assert that we cannot think upon Jesus Christ really as He is—God and man in two distinct natures and one person for ever—without an imaginary idea of Him...in His human nature, consisting of a true body and a reasonable soul. The grounds and reasons of this are that as we would not have a just conception of the glorious Mediator, if we have not a conception and idea of Him as the very true and eternal God as well as true and real man; so we cannot have a just conception of Him, if we have not a conception and idea of Him as true and real man as well as the true and eternal God...The Mediator is as really man as He is God. And as we ought to form no imaginary idea of Him as He is *God*—a pure conception without any form of representation of Him as God in our minds—so we can no more conceive and have an idea of Him in our understandings as *man*, but what is called an *imaginary idea*...of Him in our minds by the exercise of our imagination, than we can of Enoch or Elias or any other man who is now in heaven. For this reason: our Lord’s human nature and particularly His glorified and superexalted<sup>8</sup> body hath all the essential properties of any other body and no other. And therefore, if we can never think of any other human nature or human body, through our natural constitution and the nature of bodies, but by an imaginary idea when absent from us—as indeed we cannot—[then] we can never think upon the Mediator as man and His body now in heaven by any other idea. So then, when we think upon the Lord Jesus Christ, as He is God and man in two distinct natures and one person for ever, I must conceive of Him to be true and real man. This is what is called an imaginary idea of Him. I must further, by a mere act of my understanding, conceive of Him as not only man but the very true and eternal God. And, thirdly, I must conceive the manhood personally united with the Godhead in the second person. If any of these three be wanting, I have not such an idea of the Mediator God-man as should be...[Mr. Fisher], you’ll please tell the honest well-meaning people in your next warning, that the plain Scots of what I asserted here was that *we cannot think upon Jesus Christ as He really is*—God-man—*without thinking of Him as man* as really as God, and that by the exercise of the same faculties and powers I think and conceive of other men.” Here is a swatch<sup>9</sup> of Mr. Robe’s strange divinity<sup>10</sup> and philosophy...

Mr. Robe says, “To make an image of the second Person or of God, is indeed expressly forbidden. But to forbid *making* a true image would

<sup>8</sup> **superexalted** – to elevate and magnify in praise to a superior degree.

<sup>9</sup> **swatch** – a piece cut from material and used as a sample.

<sup>10</sup> **divinity** – the science of divine things; theology.

be to forbid an impossibility; neither is it forbidden as gross idolatry. To *worship* such an image is the idolatry forbidden. The making [of] the image is forbidden upon another account. We do not charge the Lutherans with gross idolatry because they *make* such images, though we do the Papists, who *worship* them.”

**Remark:** Mr. Robe cannot free himself from the charge of gross idolatry he here mentions because he not only allows the making in his mind an image of Christ’s human nature, but he allows divine worship to be given to it. For he makes it a part of the object of faith, which faith is the leading and principal part of divine worship. So that here upon the matter, he proves himself to be an idolater. He condemns not the Lutherans for being image-makers, but the Papists for being image-worshippers. But in the concern of religion, both the making *and* worshipping of any graven image are expressly forbidden in the Second Commandment. And yet if a mental image of Christ’s human nature by an imaginary idea be allowed as *necessary* to faith...it would seem that a molten image is preferable to a mental image and the Popish way most eligible. Why? Because according to the Popish argument..., “The seeing of things is more moving and affecting than the hearing of them.” Even so likewise, the sight of the eye gives a clearer view and more affecting knowledge of things, than any imaginary notion and mental image thereof. Thus the sight of the sun with the eye is a far better view than when one shuts his eyes and only perceives it in his fancy and imagination; or when the sun is absent, and at midnight he forms an image of it in his mind.

In like manner, suppose two men come into a house, the one with a mask upon his face and the other without any mask. The sensitive<sup>11</sup> idea we have of the unmasked face is much more plain and clear than the imaginative idea we have of the face behind the mask, which we can only imagine to be a face like that of some other man. But [we] can have no such clear notion of it as of the other. All which proves that mere corporeity<sup>12</sup> or a human body can be better represented to the mind by an outward corporeal image set before the bodily eye, than it can be by any inward mental image formed by the help of an imaginary idea. And consequently [it] may be supposed to be much more helpful than Mr. Robe’s internal imagery, which ought to be the more abominate, as it is the mother, the spring, and source of the former.

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<sup>11</sup> **sensitive** – pertaining to the sense; having the capacity of receiving impressions from external objects.

<sup>12</sup> **corporeity** – the state of being material or corporeal; having physical existence.

Yea, it is the root on which all the gross idolatry in the world did grow, as I have hinted already. Hence Charnock,<sup>13</sup> speaking of Romans 1:21, 23 says, “They set up vain images of God in their fancy, before they set up idolatrous representations of Him in their temples.” And a few lines above he says, “We set that active power of imagination on work, and there comes out a god, (a calf) whom we own for a notion of God...there are as many carved images of God as there are minds of men, and as many monstrous shapes as these corruptions into which they would transform Him.” Then he shows how these vain imaginations relating to God are worse than idolatry and atheism.<sup>14</sup> Gross idolatry in the heathen world is not more owing to vain pictures of God in the imagination than in the Christian world it is owing to vain images of Christ’s human body in the brain. [These] so abuse the understanding and darken the mind as to mar all rational and intellectual views, and consequently all spiritual and believing contemplations of Christ’s glorious person...

Mr. Robe owns again, “It is impossible to have any true imaginary idea of God.” But he says, “That to assert that we cannot receive Christ, as offered in the gospel, without an imaginary conception of Him as man, hath a tendency to lead people off from the true Christ in the Word to a false Christ upon the imagination—this is what you, [Mr. Fisher], have not made the least essay<sup>15</sup> to prove, and what you shall never be able to do.”

*Remark:* One would think it is very easy to prove what Mr. Robe so boldly thinks can never be done. This I do by the following argument in common form: To assert that a man cannot believe in Christ without that which necessarily presents a false Christ to his imagination hath a native tendency to lead people off from the true Christ in the Word to a false Christ in the imagination. *But* to assert that a man cannot believe in Christ, without an imaginary conception or idea of Him as man, is to assert that we cannot believe without that which necessarily presents a false Christ to the imagination. Therefore, it follows that to assert [that] we cannot believe in Christ as offered in the Gospel without an imaginary idea of Him as man hath a native tendency to lead people off from the true Christ in the Word to a false Christ in the imagination. I know nothing Mr. Robe can deny here, but that...his imaginary idea of Christ as man necessarily presents a

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<sup>13</sup> **Stephen Charnock** (1628-1680) – Puritan author of the well-known *The Existence and Attributes of God*, reprinted 1979 by Baker Book House Company. This quote is from Vol 1, pp. 155, 156.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 157, 158.

<sup>15</sup> *essay* – try; attempt.

false Christ to the imagination and consequently hath a tendency to lead people off from the true Christ in the Word to a false Christ in the imagination. Therefore I prove this by the following arguments:

(1.) **The true Christ in the Word is some *other* thing than a corporeal object:** But an imaginary conception of Christ as man hath no other thing *but* a corporeal object. Therefore, an imaginary conception of Christ as man hath a native tendency to lead people off from the true Christ in the Word to a false Christ in the imagination.

(2.) **The true Christ in the Word is the...*God*-man.** But Christ represented in the imaginary conception as man is not the...*God*-man. Therefore, it follows as above, that it leads to a false Christ in the imagination.

(3.) **The true Christ held forth in the Word is exhibited there as a Prophet, Priest, and King.** But no imaginary conception can have any offices or relations whatsoever for its object. Therefore it leads to a false Christ in the imagination.

(4.) **The true Christ can be seen by faith nowhere but in the Word.** But an imaginary idea or conception cannot see Him in the Word, which is spirit and truth, the object only of rational knowledge and faith. Therefore, that idea leads to a false Christ in the imagination.

(5.) **The true Christ in the Word is a whole Christ.** The imaginary conception of Him as man is not a conceiving of a whole Christ, but of a mere human body. Therefore, it leads to a false Christ in the imagination.

(6.) **The true humanity of Christ in the Word is a divine humanity** as Augustine expresses it because the Word was made flesh and is God in our nature. But the imaginary conception of Christ as man can include nothing divine. Therefore an imaginary conception of Christ as man hath a tendency to lead people off from the true Christ and the true humanity of Christ in the Word to a false Christ and a false humanity in the imagination.

Arguments to this purpose might be multiplied. But any one of these is sufficient to prove what Mr. Robe says is impossible...

Again, there follows a master-piece of dreadful doctrine: "It is possible," says he, "to have an imaginary idea of Christ in His human nature, and it is not possible that we can think of the human nature of the true Christ in the Word without a conception of Him or an idea of Him in the mind by the help and assistance of that faculty called the imagination; which is what is all along called an 'imaginary idea.' And this is as true a Christ as Christ in the Word, if it be an idea of Him as

held forth in the Word. For instance: the true Christ is held forth to us in that Word, ‘For there is one God, and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus’” (1Ti 2:5)...

To what is said above I answer: here is very strange language and two very absurd and abominable suppositions.

The first is *that we may have an imaginary idea of Christ as held forth in the Word*. [This] is impossible according to Mr. Robe’s own explication<sup>16</sup> of that idea unless Christ held forth in the Word were nothing else but a corporeal object. If the words of Christ are spirit and life (Joh 6:65), then His Word is a spiritual object, and cannot be apprehended by corporeal, but spiritual powers...The *Word* is the object of that knowledge and faith that can perceive truths, which are all spiritual things, but cannot be the object of that fancy that can perceive nothing but the images of things which are all corporeal.

2ndly, he supposes, yea, plainly asserts, that the Christ perceived by an imaginary idea is as true a Christ as Christ in the Word, if it be an idea of Him as held forth in the Word. I have showed that an imaginary idea of Christ as held forth in the Word is absurd and impossible. And now I am to show that the other expression is vile and abominable. And I have scarce patience to read such horrible doctrine, importing that a representation of Christ by an image of Him in the brain of a man is as true a Christ as the Christ represented in the Word of God. How strangely must the man be attached to his imaginary notions, which makes the representation of Christ therein as true as the representation of Him in the divine Word? He makes his imaginary idea to give us as true a picture of Christ in the fancy as the infallible truth of God gives us in the Word. If so, then a corporeal Christ in the imagination is as truly the object of faith as the true Christ, Immanuel, God with us, is in the Word. And so a Christ within us is as good as a Christ without us. Here is a wide door opened to dreadful enthusiasm<sup>17</sup> and damnable Quakerism.<sup>18</sup> For if the Christ we may see in the fancy be as true a Christ as the Christ we read of in the Word, then He is reckoned no other but a fantastical<sup>19</sup> Christ according to the dream

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<sup>16</sup> **explication** – explanation.

<sup>17</sup> **enthusiasm** – the Greek from which this word derives means “possession by a divine spirit.” Came to mean the belief that someone receives direct, personal revelation from God.

<sup>18</sup> **Quakerism** –founded by George Fox in 1668. Their primary feature is a belief in Inner Light, direct illumination from God, which they elevate to a place of spiritual authority, superior even to Scripture.

<sup>19</sup> **fantastical** – imaginary; not real; produced only in the imagination.

of the old heretics Marcion<sup>20</sup> and Valentinus<sup>21</sup>....

We are sure, that Christ is the very same thing the Word of faith declares Him to be. But if Christ, as represented in whatever nature by any idea and in His human nature by an imaginary idea be as true a Christ, then...(1.) Christ and the imaginary idea of Him are one and the same; or...Christ is an imaginary idea, which is dreadful; (2.) According to the number of imaginary ideas, such the number of Christs— that is, consequently there is no Christ at all;...(3.) The imaginary idea or image of Christ in the head is the object of faith and worship and is to be deified and adored, which is the grossest idolatry; (4.) Every one can make a Christ to himself out of his own head, whenever he pleases...

Christ dwells in the heart by faith (Eph 3:17), that is, by faith in His Word, where alone by that faith the believer sees the true Christ. But he cannot see Him in his heart or affections, far less in his head or imaginations. Indeed a true believer may sometimes feel Christ joyfully in his heart after he hath believed (Eph 1:13), but he can never *see* Him believably there. For faith can see His perfect picture *nowhere but in His Word*. Nowhere else is the true Christ to be seen as the object of faith: “The righteousness which is of faith speaketh on this wise, Say not in thine heart, Who shall ascend into heaven? (that is, to bring Christ down from above:) Or, Who shall descend into the deep? (that is, to bring up Christ again from the dead.) But what saith it? The word is nigh thee, even in thy mouth, and in thy heart: that is, the word of faith, which we preach” (Rom 10:6-8). On which words...the author of the sermon entitled *How Is the Practical Love of Truth the Best Preservative against Popery* hath these words following: “The inquiry is, How we may be made partakers of Christ and righteousness by Him? Or how we may have Him present with us? This, says the apostle, is done by the word of the gospel, which is preached, which is nigh unto us, in our mouths, and in our hearts. ‘No’, say these men; ‘we cannot understand how it should be so; we do not find that it is so, that Christ is made nigh unto us, present to us by this Word: Wherefore we will ascend into heaven, to bring Christ down from above; for we will make images of Him in His glorious state in heaven, and thereby He will be present to us or nigh unto us; and we will descend into the deep, to bring Christ up again from the dead: And we will do

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<sup>20</sup> **Marcion** (d. c. 160) – 2nd century heretic and founder of churches that rivaled orthodox Christianity. According to Marcion, Christ was not born but simply appeared; did not have a real body; only seemed to suffer; and raised Himself from the dead.

<sup>21</sup> **Valentinus** (c. 100-c. 175) – 2nd century Gnostic leader in Alexandria, Egypt, and author of the most influential Gnostic system. His Christ only had an apparent body.

it, by making first crucifixes, and then images of His glorious resurrection, bringing Him again unto us from the dead. This shall be in the place and room of that Word of the gospel, which you pretend to be alone useful and effectual unto these ends.”<sup>22</sup> And a little above are these words: “Their minds being dark, carnal, and prone to superstition, as are the minds of all men by nature, they would see nothing in the spiritual representation of Him (namely, Christ) in the gospel, that had any power on them, or did in any measure affect them. In these images, by the means of sight and imagination, they found that which did really work upon the affections, and, as they thought, did excite them unto the love of Christ.”

Here is the spring and root of all image-worship in the world, whether mental or external; none of which can give the representation of the true Christ of Whom we have only the true and spiritual representation in the Word of the gospel...

May this generation be delivered from an imaginary faith, religion, and conversion, which will neither unite them to the true Christ, nor bring them to the true heaven, nor keep them out of the true hell! And may the Lord deliver all His people from the influence of gross delusion, instead of gospel-doctrine; from carnal trash, instead of spiritual truth; and from the truth as it is in men’s fancy and imagination, instead of the truth as it is in Jesus and in His blessed Word, the only rule to direct us how we may glorify and enjoy God.

From *Faith No Fancy: or, A Treatise of Mental Images*, W. & T. Ruddimans, Edinburgh

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**Ralph Erskine** (1685-1752): one of the most popular preachers in the Church of Scotland in his day. A participant with Thomas Boston in the Marrow Controversy; his sermons were full of the love of God and the calls of Christ in the gospel. His most extensive publication was *Faith No Fancy: or, A Treatise of Mental Images*. Born in Monilaws, Scotland.



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<sup>22</sup> John Owen, “How Is the Practical Love of Truth the Best Preservative against Popery?”, *Puritan Sermons 1659-1689, Being the Morning Exercises at Cripplegate*, Vol. 3, p. 217.

# IDOLATROUS WORSHIP

John Flavel (c. 1630-1691)

**T**OUCH not with idolatry and superstition under what name or notion soever it be presented to you...Here you had need be exceeding cautelous,<sup>1</sup> and circumspect,<sup>2</sup>

(1) **Because it is a creeping thing which works in itself by plausible pretences and insinuations** (2Pe 2:1; Eph 4:14; Col 2:23). In which respect [mystery] is written in the whore's forehead (Rev 17:5). For as Dr. Usher<sup>3</sup> well observes, "The Roman apostasy stole into the church disguised and by degrees." It is a mystery of iniquity, saith the apostle, and a working mystery (2Th 2:7)...Iniquity, but a mystical iniquity, because palliated<sup>4</sup> and cloaked under the name and pretence of piety and fidelity. Idolatrous practices have a show of wisdom (Col 2:23). Saith Davenant<sup>5</sup> on [this passage]: "They are more modest than to pretend an immediate revelation of the Spirit." Yet lest their placets<sup>6</sup> and inventions should want a pretext<sup>7</sup> of Divine wisdom, they are wont<sup>8</sup> to say, that their doctrines and traditions are not indeed consigned to writing by the apostles, but delivered by lively voice, according to that, "We speak wisdom among them that are perfect" (1Co 2:6). And by the name of this wisdom, every one calls his own fictions. Saith Irenaeus<sup>9</sup>, "Thus sometimes under the pretext of wisdom, order, decency, apostolical traditions, antiquity, the power of the church, etc., it steals upon men insensibly, especially being so advantaged by the proneness of corrupt nature to it." To this purpose it is observable that Babylon, the mother of harlots, is said to give the wine of her fornication in a golden cup (Rev 17:4). Wine in itself is temptingly pleasant, but more so when presented in a golden cup; the brims whereof are sugared and

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<sup>1</sup> **cautelous** – cautious; wary.

<sup>2</sup> **circumspect** – watchful on all sides; examining carefully all the circumstances.

<sup>3</sup> **James Ussher** (1581-1656) – Irish Protestant churchman and scholar. A vehement opponent of Roman Catholicism, yet he was respected by all parties for his sweet temper and the astonishing range of his scholarship.

<sup>4</sup> **palliated** – softened by favorable representations.

<sup>5</sup> **John Davenant** (1572-1641) – Puritan minister; author of a famous commentary on Colossians.

<sup>6</sup> **placets** – decrees.

<sup>7</sup> **want a pretext** – lack a reason given for doing something that conceals the real reason.

<sup>8</sup> **wont** – accustomed.

<sup>9</sup> **Irenaeus** (c. 140-c. 202) – bishop of Lyons in Gaul in the late 2nd century. Considered by many to be the first systematic theologian.

sweetened to make it the more grateful.<sup>10</sup> Therefore, little children, I mean you simple, plain, credulous<sup>11</sup> souls, apt to be taken with fine glittering things, look to yourselves.

**(2) Because nothing more provokes and inflames the fiery wrath of the Lord, Who is a jealous God, than this doth.** It makes His anger come up in His face as that expression is and kindles consuming wrath (Eze 38:18; 43:7-9). Upon this account the blessed God complains after the manner of men as if His heart were broken, “I am broken with their whorish heart, which hath departed from me, and with their eyes, which go a whoring after their idols” (Eze 6:9). If it be but an unchaste glance upon an idol, it goes to the very heart of God. When He seeth His people yielding to the temptations of it, He shrieks as it were and cries out, “Oh! Do not this abominable thing that I hate!” Oh! If there be in you the hearts of children, do not that which doth, as it were, break the heart of your father.

**Question:** But what mean you by idolatry and superstition? We hope there are no such things practiced among us. Pagans and papists may be guilty of it.

**Answer:** Give me leave here to open these things unto you, and then perhaps, you may see them nearer to you than you are aware of; and that this caution is a word in season.

*Idolatry* then, according to the true and generally received definition of it, is a religious worship given either to that which is not the true God or to the true God Himself, but otherwise than He hath prescribed in His Word. From hence we plainly see that worship may be idolatrous two ways:

**(1) In respect of the *object*:** if it have any thing besides the true God for its object, it is gross idolatry such as the First Commandment condemns, i.e., pagan idolatry, which the light of the gospel hath long since profligated<sup>12</sup> and expelled out of these parts of the world. Or,

**(2) In respect of *the manner*:** when we worship the true God, but in a way and manner which He hath not prescribed in His word, but is invented and devised by ourselves. And this is condemned as idolatry in the Second Commandment: “*Thou shalt not make unto thee,*” i.e., out of thine own brain or of thine own head, “*any graven image*” under which title all human inventions, corrupting the pure and simple worship of God, are prohibited as idolatrous...This inventing or making to our-

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<sup>10</sup> **grateful** – pleasing to taste; delicious.

<sup>11</sup> **credulous** – disposed to believe too readily; gullible.

<sup>12</sup> **profligated** – driven away.

selves is that which makes it idolatry (Amo 5:26; Num 15:39). Hence the molten calf became an idol to the Israelites—not because it was the object of their worship, for it is plain it was Jehovah, the true God, they intended to worship by it, [which] appears from Exodus 32:4-5: “Tomorrow is a feast to the LORD.”...But yet it being a way or manner of worshipping the true God, which was of their own devising, it became idolatry.

**And this worship of God in ways of our own invention becomes idolatrous upon a double ground:** (1) *As it is will worship*, i.e., such worship as hath no other ground or warrant but the will of man (Col 2:23); and so dethrones God by setting up the will of the creature above His and bestowing the peculiar honor and incommunicable sovereignty and glory of the blessed God upon the creatures. For the absolute sovereignty of God, which is His glory (1Ti 6:15) is manifested in two things especially: in His decrees (Rom 9:20) and in His laws (Isa 33:22; Jam 4:12). The Lord is our King and Lawgiver, and there is one Lawgiver. Now by prescribing any thing by our own authority in the worship of God, the commands of God are made void (Mat 15:6), His royal Law is slighted, the throne of God invaded by the creatures, who will be a lawgiver too, which can no more be borne than the heavens can bear two suns; and God is hereby forgotten, as Hosea 8:14 [says]: “Israel hath forgotten his Maker, and buildeth temples;” i.e. by building [temples] when God had appointed but one temple...And upon this account it is, that the indignation and wrath of God smoke so dreadfully against such usurpers, as in the sad story of Nadab and Abihu...because God is a jealous God, and jealousy is the rage of a man...This, God looks upon as the greatest and most daring wickedness that a creature can lightly commit. “All their wickedness is in Gilgal” (Hos 9:15), i.e., the height of their wickedness is there, because there they worshipped Him according to their own devices, which was such an affront to the wisdom and sovereignty of God that He could by no means bear it. This is called a setting our threshold besides the Lord’s threshold (Eze 43:8). And the nearer this comes to Him, the more it provokes Him. Therefore, it is said in the same text, There was a “wall between me and them,” i.e., either it caused a wall of separation betwixt me and them as it is generally expounded; or else it notes how God is provoked by bringing their own inventions so near Him. For in the Hebrew it is, “There was but a wall betwixt me and them.” And hence it is evident that doctrinal, symbolical ceremonies—I mean such rites and ceremonies as are brought into the worship of God with a spiritual signification, merely upon the authority of man—are idolatrous mixtures and additions and such by which the Lord is dreadfully provoked...All the liberty that Scripture

gives us is but this: to observe and perform those things which God hath instituted in an orderly and comely manner (1Co 15:46) and not to innovate new things, what, and as many as we please.

And then, (2) it becomes idolatrous upon this ground also, because this daring impudence of men in worshipping God in their own way argues gross and carnal notions and conceptions of God. When we devise a carnal, pompous way of worship for Him, it is an argument we have set up an idol...first in our imaginations, one like ourselves and utterly unlike the true God, Who is a most simple, pure, spiritual Being; and as such will be worshipped (Joh 4:24). But by devising such a fleshly way of worship, I say it is manifest, we have fancied to ourselves another god, altogether different from that God revealed to us in the Word. Hence it was that Joshua told the people, "Ye cannot serve the LORD: for...he is a jealous God; he will not forgive your...sins" (Jos 24:19). You cannot serve the true God, till you have gotten right apprehensions of Him. You fancy to yourselves a God made up of all mercy, as if He had no justice or righteousness to call you to an account for your sins and so do but worship an idol, formed in your own imagination instead of the true God. And if the thing be duly weighed, it will appear as well idolatry to submit to and acknowledge the sovereign authority of a creature in appointing laws for worship or falling down before an imaginary god or idol, formed in our own fantasy, as to bow to and worship a graven image or the stock of a tree.

Now hence you may come to see at once both the nature of this second sort of idolatry and also the rise and original of it. [It] is nothing else but the proud and carnal heart of men, which not willing to contain itself within the limits of the Word, wherein a plain, simple, and spiritual way of worship is ruled out, invents to itself new rites, ceremonies, and ways of worshipping God more suitable and pleasing to the flesh. And hence it is that idolatry is in Scripture reckoned a work of the flesh (Gal 5:20) because man naturally, having a proud heart and a working imagination, which depending upon sense, and not elevated and rectified by faith, first forms to itself carnal conceptions and notions of God, and then deviseth a way of worship suitable to those notions of Him. So that as one well observes, "This is the fountain and principle of all error, that men think that those which please them, must needs please God; and what displeaseth them must also displease Him." So that this brat, idolatry, is begotten betwixt a proud, carnal heart and the devil; who, since he cannot draw men to the former sort of idolatry, endeavors all he can to entangle and defile them with this, and that partly out of malice to God, knowing what a dear thing His worship is to Him, and partly out of a design of ruining such as he can entice to it. For he

knows their sorrows shall be multiplied, and God seldom lets it escape without some remarkable stroke (Psa 16:4).

Upon the whole then, you plainly see, worship may be right as to its object, and yet idolatrous in respect of the manner because the assuming of a despotical<sup>13</sup> power in this case, is not only a slighting of that...royal Law, but as high a piece of treason against Jesus Christ, as can lightly be committed by a creature...

The instituting of any, though the smallest part of worship, in and by our own authority without Scripture-warrant, makes it idolatrous as well as if we worshipped an idol...So that if that worship you perform to God be corrupted by a mixture of mere human, doctrinal, symbolical rites and ceremonies, which God hath not appointed in His worship by the Word, though your worship be right for the object, yet it is idolatrous in the manner. Here you had need to be advised and careful, for you are upon a ticklish<sup>14</sup> point...

All and every part of God's instituted worship depends entirely upon His own sovereign will and pleasure. So that no man can appoint any part of it, but God alone, forasmuch as no man knows what will be acceptable to God, but God Himself. That which is highly esteemed among men is an abomination to God (Luk 16:15)...

The will of God, which is the foundation and rule of His worship, is only revealed to us in the Scriptures; whence it is manifest, that in worship all men are bound to keep close to the Word...

Hence then you may see the door at which superstition enters, even addition of new and uncommanded things. When we invent new rites and ceremonies, and bring them into the worship of God, with a spiritual signification and use, this is superstition; being...something above and beyond what God appoints and requires. And as all the water in the Tiber cannot wash the papists from the filth of their idolatry and superstition, in their mass, altars, surplice, cross, etc., so neither can any thing besides the blood of Jesus, cleanse *us* from the same, if we do like them.

From "Antipharumacum Saluberrimum: or A Serious and Seasonable Caveat to All the Saints in This Hour of Temptation," in *The Works of John Flavel*, Vol IV, The Banner of Truth Trust.

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**John Flavel** (c. 1630-1691): English Presbyterian minister; born in Bromagrove, Worcester, UK.



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<sup>13</sup> **despotical** – absolute in power.

<sup>14</sup> **ticklish** – difficult; critical.

# THE IDOL OF FREE-WILL

John Owen (1616-1683)

OUR next task is to take a view of the idol himself, of this great deity of FREE-WILL, whose original being not well known. He is pretended, like the Ephesian image of Diana,<sup>1</sup> to have fallen down from heaven and to have his endowments from above (Act 19:24-35). But yet considering what a nothing he was at his first discovery in comparison of that vast giant-like hugeness to which now he is grown, we may say of him as the painter said of his monstrous picture, which he had mended or rather marred according to every one's fancy,...“It is the issue<sup>2</sup> of the people's brain.” Origen<sup>3</sup> is supposed to have brought him first into the church; but among those many sincere worshippers of divine grace, this setter forth of new demons found but little entertainment. It was looked upon but like the stump of Dagon with his head and hands laid down before the ark of God without whose help he could neither know nor do that which is good in any kind, still accounted but...“a fig-tree log, an unprofitable piece of wood.” The fathers of the succeeding ages had much debate to what use they should put it, and though some exalted it a degree or two above its merits, yet the most concluded to keep it a block still until at length there arose a stout champion,<sup>4</sup> challenging on his behalf the whole church of God, and like a knight-errant,<sup>5</sup> wandered from the west to the east to grapple with any that should oppose his idol; who, though he met with divers adversaries, one especially,<sup>6</sup> who in the behalf of the grace of God continually foiled him and cast him to the ground, and that in the judgment of all the lawful judges assembled in councils and in the opinion of most of the Christian bystanders. Yet

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<sup>1</sup> **Diana** – Greek goddess of the moon; her temple at Ephesus was one of the seven wonders of the ancient world.

<sup>2</sup> **issue** – the flowing out, therefore, the product.

<sup>3</sup> **Origen** (c. 185-c. 254) – theologian and Biblical scholar of the early Greek Church.

<sup>4</sup> **Pelagius** (c. 354-c. 420) – British monk, who argued for a totally free human will to do good and held that divine grace was bestowed in relation to human merit. His views were condemned as heresy by the Council of Ephesus (431).

<sup>5</sup> **knight-errant** – a wandering knight; a knight who traveled in search of adventures for the purpose of exhibiting military skill, prowess, and generosity.

<sup>6</sup> **Augustine 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.

by his cunning insinuation,<sup>7</sup> he planted such an opinion of his idol's deity and self-sufficiency in the hearts of divers<sup>8</sup> that to this day it could never be rooted out.

Now after the decease of his Pelagian worshippers, some of the corrupter schoolmen,<sup>9</sup> seeing him thus from his birth exposed without shelter to wind and weather, to all assaults, out of mere charity and self-love built him a temple and adorned it with natural lights, merits, uncontrolled independent operations, [and] many other gay attendances. But in the beginning of the Reformation—that fatal time for idolatry and superstition together with abbeys and monasteries—the zeal and learning of our forefathers with the help of God's Word demolished this temple and brake this building down to the ground. In the rubbish whereof we well hoped the idol himself had been so deeply buried as that his head should never more have been exalted to the trouble of the Church of God, until not long since some curious wits, whose weak stomachs were clogged with manna and loathed the sincere milk of the Word, raking all dunghills for novelties, lighted unhappily upon this idol, and presently with no less joy than did the mathematician at the discovery of a new geometrical proportion exclaim, "We have found it! We have found it!" And without more ado, up they erected a shrine, and until this day continue offering of praise and thanks for all the good they do to this work of their own hands.<sup>10</sup>

And that the idol may be free from ruin, to which in himself they have found by experience that he is subject, they have matched him to *contingency*,<sup>11</sup> a new goddess of their own creation, who having proved very fruitful in monstrous births upon their conjunctions,<sup>12</sup> they nothing doubt they shall never [lack] one to set on the throne and make president of all human actions. So that after he hath, with various success at least twelve hundred years, contended with the providence and grace of God, he boasteth now as if he had obtained a total victory. But yet all his prevailing is to be attributed to the diligence and varnish of his new abettors<sup>13</sup> with—to our shame be it spoken!—the negligence of

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<sup>7</sup> **insinuation** – to work one's self into favor subtly; to introduce gradually and by clever means.

<sup>8</sup> **divers** – several; more than one but not a great number.

<sup>9</sup> **schoolmen** – a term for the teachers of philosophy and theology in the Middle Ages. Also known as *scholastics*, examples would be Thomas Aquinas (1225-74) and John Duns Scotus (c. 1265-1308).

<sup>10</sup> A reference to the followers of Arminius.

<sup>11</sup> **contingency** – the absence of necessity; something that occurs only as a result of something else.

<sup>12</sup> **conjunctions** – joining together, meaning the union of free-will and contingency.

<sup>13</sup> **abettors** – assistants in a criminal act.

his adversaries. In him and his cause there is no more real worth than was when by the ancient fathers he was exploded and cursed out of the church. So that they who can attain through the many winding labyrinths of curious distinctions to look upon the thing itself, shall find that they have been, like Egyptian novices, brought through many stately frontispieces<sup>14</sup> and goodly fabrics, with much show of zeal and devotion, to the image of an ugly ape.

Yet here observe, that we do not absolutely oppose free-will, as if it were...a mere figment [or as if] there is no such thing in the world, *but only in that sense the Pelagians and Arminians*<sup>15</sup> *do assert it*. About words we will not contend. We grant man in the substance of all his actions as much power, liberty, and freedom as a mere created nature is capable of. We grant him to be free in his choice from all *outward* coercion<sup>16</sup> or *inward* natural necessity to work according to [choice] and deliberation, spontaneously embracing what seemeth good unto him. Now call this power *free-will* or what you please, [as long as] you make it not supreme, independent, and boundless, we are not at all troubled. The imposition of names depends upon the discretion of their inventors.

Again, even in spiritual things, we deny that our wills are at all debarred<sup>17</sup> or deprived of their proper liberty. But here we say, indeed, that we are not properly free *until the Son makes us free* (Joh 8:36)...We do not claim such a liberty as should make us despise the grace of God, whereby we may attain true liberty indeed, which addeth to, but taketh nothing from, our original freedom. But of this, after I have showed what an idol the Arminians make of free-will. Only take notice in the entrance that we speak of it now, not as it was *at first* by God created, but as it is *now* by sin corrupted. Yet being considered in that estate also, they ascribe more unto it than it was ever capable of...

“Herein,” saith Arminius, “consisteth the liberty of the will, that all things required to enable it to will anything being accomplished, it still remains indifferent<sup>18</sup> to will or not.” And all of them at the Syn-

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<sup>14</sup> **frontispiece** – the ornamental façade or face of a building.

<sup>15</sup> **Arminians** – followers of Jacobus Arminius (1560-1609), Dutch theologian, born in Oudewater, The Netherlands. He rejected the Reformers’ understanding of predestination, teaching instead that God’s predestination of individuals was based on His foreknowledge of their accepting or rejecting Christ by their own free-will.

<sup>16</sup> **coaction** – force; urging to action by moral pressure.

<sup>17</sup> **debarred** – hindered or prevented.

<sup>18</sup> **indifferent** – impartial.

od:<sup>19</sup> “There is,” say they, “accompanying the will of man an inseparable property, which we call liberty, from whence the will is termed a power, which when all things preredquired as necessary to operation are fulfilled, may will anything or not will it.” That is, our free-wills have such an absolute and uncontrollable power in the territory of all human actions, that no influence of God’s providence, no certainty of His decree, no unchangeableness of His purpose can sway it at all in its free determinations or have any power with His highness to cause him to will or resolve on any such act as God by him intendeth to produce! Take an instance in the great work of our conversion. “All unregenerate men,” saith Arminius, “have by virtue of their free-will a power of resisting the Holy Spirit, of rejecting the offered grace of God, of contemning<sup>20</sup> the counsel of God concerning themselves, of refusing the gospel of grace, of not opening the heart to Him that knocketh.” What a stout idol is this, whom neither the Holy Spirit, the grace and counsel of God, the calling of the gospel, the knocking at the door of the heart, can move at all, or in the least measure prevail against him! Woe be unto us then, if when God calls us, our free-will be not in good temper and well disposed to hearken unto Him! For it seems there is no dealing with it by any other ways, though powerful and almighty. “For grant,” saith Corvinus,<sup>21</sup> “all the operations of grace which God can use in our conversion, yet conversion remaineth so *in our own free power* that we can be not converted; that is, we can either turn or not turn ourselves,” where the idol plainly challengeth the Lord to work His utmost and tells Him that after He hath so done, he will do what he please. His infallible prescience,<sup>22</sup> His powerful predetermination, the moral efficacy of the gospel, the infusion of grace, the effectual operation of the Holy Spirit, *all are nothing*, not at all available in helping or furthering our independent wills in their proceedings. Well, then in what estate will you have the idol placed?

“In such a one wherein he may be suffered to sin or to do well at his pleasure,” as the same author intimates. It seems then as to sin, so nothing is required for him to be able to do good but God’s permission? No! For the Remonstrants<sup>23</sup> “do always suppose a free power of obeying or not obeying, as well in those who do obey as in those who

<sup>19</sup> **Synod of Dort** (1618-19) – the gathering of Reformed theologians at Dordrecht (Dort) in the Netherlands to counter and condemn the teachings of Jacobus Arminius and his followers (Remonstrants). The quote here is from the Remonstrants or Arminians.

<sup>20</sup> **contemning** – treating as despicable; rejecting as disdained.

<sup>21</sup> **Johannes Arnoldus Corvinus** – supporter of Arminius and signer of the Remonstrance.

<sup>22</sup> **prescience** – knowledge of actions or events before they occur.

<sup>23</sup> **Remonstrants** (lit. *objectors* or *rejectors*) – Dutch followers of Jacobus Arminius who rejected the teaching of the Reformed churches and provoked the Synod of Dort.

do not obey”...where all the praise of our obedience, whereby we are made to differ from others, is ascribed to ourselves alone, and that free power that is in us.

Now, this they mean not of any one act of obedience, but of faith itself, and the whole consummation thereof. “For if a man should say, that every man in the world hath a power of believing if he will, and of attaining salvation, and that this power is settled in his nature, what argument have you to confute<sup>24</sup> him?” saith Arminius triumphantly to Perkins,<sup>25</sup> where the sophistical innovator<sup>26</sup> as plainly confounds grace and nature as ever did Pelagius. That, then, which the Arminians claim here in behalf of their free-will is, an *absolute independence* of God’s providence in doing anything, and of His grace in doing that which is good—a self-sufficiency in all its operations, a plenary indifference<sup>27</sup> of doing what we will, this or that, as being neither determined to the one nor inclined to the other by any overruling influence from heaven. So that the good acts of our wills have no dependence on God’s providence as they are acts, nor on His grace as they are good, but in both regards proceed from such a principle within us as is no way moved by any superior agent.

Now, the first of these we deny unto our wills because they are *created*; and the second because they are *corrupted*. Their *creation* hinders them from doing anything of themselves without the assistance of God’s providence; and their *corruption* from doing anything that is good without His grace. A self-sufficiency for operation without the effectual motion of Almighty God, the first cause of all things, we can allow neither to men nor angels *unless we intend to make them gods*. And a power of doing good equal unto that they have of doing evil, we must not grant to man by nature unless we will deny the fall of Adam and fancy ourselves still in Paradise....

Endued we are with such a liberty of will as is free from all outward compulsion and inward necessity, having an elective faculty of applying itself unto that which seems good unto it, in which it is a free choice. Notwithstanding, it is subservient to the decree of God, as I showed before...Most free it is in all its acts, both in regard of the object it chooseth and in regard of that vital power and faculty whereby it worketh, infallibly complying with God’s providence and working

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<sup>24</sup> **confute** – refute decisively.

<sup>25</sup> **William Perkins** (1558-1602) – influential English Puritan theologian. Referred to by some as the “principle architect of Elizabethan Puritanism.”

<sup>26</sup> **sophistical innovator** – one who introduces something new with elaborate and devious arguments. The reference is to Arminius.

<sup>27</sup> **plenary indifference** – a complete impartiality or neutrality.

by virtue of the motion thereof. But surely to assert such a supreme independency and every way unbounded indifferency as the Arminians claim, whereby, all other things requisite being presupposed, it should remain absolutely in our own power to will or not to will, to do anything or not to do it, *is plainly to deny that our wills are subject to the rule of the Most High*...And against its exaltation to this height of independency, I oppose—

*First*, Everything that is independent of any else in operation is purely active, and so consequently a god; for nothing but a divine will can be a pure act, possessing such a liberty by virtue of its own essence. Every created will must have a liberty by participation, which includeth such an imperfect potentiality as cannot be brought into act without some pre-motion<sup>28</sup>...of a superior agent. Neither doth this motion being extrinsical<sup>29</sup> at all prejudice the true liberty of the will, which requireth indeed that the internal principle of operation be active and free, but not that that principle be not moved to that operation by an outward superior agent. Nothing in this sense can have an independent principle of operation which hath not an independent being...

*Secondly*, if the free acts of our wills are so subservient to the providence of God as that He useth them to what end He will and by them effecteth many of His purposes, then they cannot of themselves be so absolutely independent as to have in their own power every necessary circumstance and condition, that they may use or not use at their pleasure. Now the former is proved by all those reasons and texts of Scripture I before produced to show that the providence of God overruleth the actions and determineth the wills of men freely to do that which He hath appointed. And, truly, were it otherwise, God's dominion over the most things that are in the world [would be] quite excluded. He had not power to determine that any one thing should ever come to pass which hath any reference to the wills of men.

*Thirdly*, all the acts of the will being positive entities, were it not previously moved by God Himself, in whom “we live, and move, and have our being” (Act 17:28), must needs have their essence and existence solely from the will itself; which is thereby made...a first and supreme cause, endued with an underived<sup>30</sup> being.

**Let us now, in the second place, look upon the power of our free-will in doing that which is morally good, where we shall find not only**

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<sup>28</sup> **pre-motion** – a previous motion or excitement to action.

<sup>29</sup> **extrinsical** – external; outward.

<sup>30</sup> **underived** – not obtained from another source.

an essential imperfection, inasmuch as it is *created*, but also a contracted effect, inasmuch as it is *corrupted*. The ability which the Arminians ascribe unto it in this kind—of doing that which is morally and spiritually good—is as large as themselves will confess to be competent unto it in the state of innocence, even a power of believing and a power of resisting the gospel, of obeying and not obeying, of turning or of not being converted.

The Scripture, as I observed before, hath no such term at all nor anything equivalent unto it. But the expressions it useth concerning our nature and all the faculties thereof in this state of sin and unregeneration seem to imply the quite contrary: as that we are in “bondage” (Heb 2:15); “dead in...sins” (Eph 2:1); and so “free from righteousness” (Rom 6:20); “servants of sin” (v. 17); under the “reign” and “dominion” thereof, (vv. 12, 14); all our members being “instruments of unrighteousness” (v. 13); not “free indeed” until the Son make us free (Joh 8:36); so that this idol of FREE-WILL, in respect of spiritual things, is not one whit better than the other idols of the heathen.

From “A Display of Arminianism,” in *The Works of John Owen*,  
Vol X, reprinted by The Banner of Truth Trust.

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**John Owen** (1616-1683): called “The Prince of the Puritans” and committed to the Congregational way of church government. He was a chaplain in the army of Oliver Cromwell and vice-chancellor of Oxford University, but most of his life he served as a minister in Congregational churches. His written works span forty years and run to twenty-four volumes representing among the best resources for theology in the English language. Born to Puritan parents in the Oxfordshire village of Stadham.



# IDOLS ABOLISHED

Charles Spurgeon (1834-1892)

*Ephraim shall say, What have I to do any more with idols?—Hosea 14:8*

THERE is in our text an *implied confession*. Ephraim shall say, “What have I to do any more with idols?” “Any *more* with idols?” Then, Ephraim, you have had a good deal to do with idols up till now? “Ay,” saith he with the tears in his eyes, “that I have.” Hypocrites mean less than their language expresses, but true penitents mean much more than their bare words can convey. The confession of the text is all the more hearty because it is tacit,<sup>1</sup> and as it were, slips out unintentionally.

*Attend earnestly, dear hearers, for perhaps some of you may be worshipping idols now.* We will go into the temple of your heart and see whether we can find a false god there. I go into one heart, and, as I look up, I see a gigantic idol; it is gilded all over and clothed in shining robes. Its eyes seem to be jewels, and its forehead is “as bright ivory overlaid with sapphires” (Song 5:14). It is a very lovely idol to look upon. Come not too close, do not examine too severely, nor so much as dream of looking inside the hollow sham. Within it you will find all manner of rottenness and filthiness, but the outside of the idol is adorned with the greatest art and skill, and you may even become enamored of it as you stand and gaze upon it.

What is its name? Its name is *self-righteousness*. Well do I remember when I used to worship this image which my own hands had made, till one morning my god had his head broken off, and by-and-by I found his hands were gone, and soon I found that the worm was devouring it, and my god that I worshipped and trusted in turned out to be a heap of dross and dung, whereas I had thought it to be a mass of solid gold, with eyes of diamonds. Alas, there are many men to whom no such revelation has been given. Their idol is still in first-rate condition. True, perhaps, at Christmas-time it gets a little out of order, and they feel that they did not quite behave as they ought when the bottle went round so freely, but they have called in the goldsmith to overlay the idol with new gold and gild the chipped places afresh. Have they not been to church since then? Did they not go on Christmas morning to a place of worship and make it all right? Have they not repeated extra

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<sup>1</sup> **tacit** – not spoken; implied.

prayers and given a little more away in charity? So they have furnished their god up again, and he looks very respectable. Ah, it is easy to tinker him up, my brethren, until the ark of the Lord comes in, and then all the smiths in the world cannot keep this god erect. If the gospel of Jesus Christ once enters into the soul, then, straightway, this wonderful god begins to bow himself, and, like Dagon, who was broken before the ark of the Lord, self-righteousness is dashed to pieces. But there are thousands all over this world who worship this god, and I will tell you how they pray to it. They say, "God, I thank thee, that I am not as other men are" (Luk 18:11), and so on, not exactly in the Pharisee's language, but after the same style. "Lord, I thank thee that I pay everybody twenty shillings in the pound, and have brought up my children respectably. God, I thank thee that I have been a regular churchgoing or chapel-going man all my life. God, I thank thee that I am not a swearer, nor yet a drunkard, nor anything of that kind. I am far better than most people; and if I do not get to heaven it will be very bad for my neighbors, for they are not half as good as I am." In this manner is this monstrous deity adored. I am not speaking of what is done in Hindustan, but of an idolatry very fashionable in England. The god of self-righteousness is lord paramount<sup>2</sup> in millions of hearts. Oh, that every worshipper of that god may be led to say, "What have I to do any more with this abominable idol?"...

*Others have some other darling sin.* I need not mention all; in fact I could not, for the cheek of modesty would tingle, if we were to mention certain of the vices which men and women feel that they could not cease from. They would fain<sup>3</sup> be saved *in* their sins, not *from* their sins. They would worship God after a fashion, but the first place must be given to this darling lust of theirs. O sir, I care not what idol it is, but if there is anything in this world that thou lovest better than Christ, thou canst never see the face of God with joy. If there is any sin that thou wouldst persevere in, I beseech thee change thy mind about it and cut it off, though it be a right hand and pluck it out though it be a right eye. It were better for thee to enter into life maimed and with one eye than having both hands and both eyes to be cast into hell fire. Darling sins must be abjured if Christ is to be enjoyed...

*In some men's hearts I see the love of pleasure.* That god is seated on the throne of many hearts. They are overcome not so much by the grosser sins as by their natural levity<sup>4</sup> and trifling.<sup>5</sup> They cannot think; they

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<sup>2</sup> **paramount** – having the highest rank, power, or authority.

<sup>3</sup> **fain** – gladly; willingly.

<sup>4</sup> **levity** – lack of seriousness; lightness of manner or speech.

<sup>5</sup> **trifling** – acting or talking without being earnest or without seriousness.

do not want to think. They say they are “dull” if they have to be quiet for awhile. They like to be always amused, gratified, excited...But to be a lover of pleasure rather than a lover of God is to be dead while you live...

*Some...have set up unlawful attachments.* They form connections which are forbidden by the Word of God. For instance, I have known some who profess to be Christians—God knows whether they ever were or not—who have put altogether out of court the command of our Lord not to be unequally yoked together with unbelievers and have followed the dictates of the flesh by joining in marriage with the ungodly. It is a dreadful thing to be married to one from whom you know you must be soon separated for ever, one who loves not God, and therefore can never be your companion in heaven. If that is your case already, your prayers should day and night go up to heaven for the partner of your bosom that he or she may be brought to Christ. But for any young person willfully to form such a tie is to set up an idol in the place of God. Weeping and wailing will come of it ere long...Any form of love which divides the heart from Jesus is idolatry...

**A great number of persons worship an idol called the praise of men.** They speak after this fashion, “Oh, yes, you are right enough, but you see I could not do it.” Well, why not? “Why, I do not know what my uncle would say about it, or I could not tell how my wife would like it. I am not sure how my grandfather might be pleased with me.” The fear of relatives and the dread of public opinion hold many in mental and moral bondage, and the fear of men holds many more. I pity those who dare not do what they believe to be right. It seems to me to be the grandest of all liberties, the liberty wherewith Christ makes us free, the liberty to do and dare anything which conscience commands in His name. But numbers of people have to ask other people to allow them to breathe, to allow them to think, to allow them to believe anything; and there is nothing they are so frightened of as Mrs. Grundy. The little society in which they live is all in all to them. What will So-and-so think of it? The working man dares not go to a place of worship because the carpenters in the shop would be down upon him. The men that work with him would be saying to him, “Halloa!<sup>6</sup> What, are you one of those methodistical<sup>7</sup> fellows?” Many men who are six feet high are cowards and are afraid of some little body half their height. They are afraid that some worthless fellow would make a joke at their ex-

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<sup>6</sup> **halloa** – a shout to catch someone’s attention.

<sup>7</sup> **methodistical** – taken from “Methodist,” used in those days as an insult or jibe against one who lived in strict observance of religious duties.

pense and to be joked at seems to be something dreadful. O poor souls! Poor souls!...We are alive after all the assaults which were made upon us and not much the worse for them; and so will you be, too, dear friends, if you have the heart and the courage to do and dare for the Lord Jesus Christ. This idol of the fear of man devours thousands of souls. This is a bloodthirsty idol, as cruel as any of the idols of the Hindus—this “fear of man [which] bringeth a snare” (Pro 29:25). Some of you know that you are altogether mean in spirit and dare not do what you know you ought to do, for fear somebody or other should make a remark about how strange and how odd you are. God help you to have done with that idol...

The last point is to be *the resolute question*, “What have I to do any more with idols?” Let us put it this way, “What have I to do any more with them? I have had enough to do with them. What have my sins done for me already?” Brothers and sisters, look at what sin has done for us and all our race. It made that beautiful Eden, which was our garden of delight, to be a wilderness and made us to be the children of toil and sorrow. What has sin done for us? It has stripped us of our beauty; it has put us away from God. It has set the flaming cherubim with the drawn sword to keep us back from coming near to God as long as we live in sin. Sin has wounded us, spoiled us, killed us, corrupted us. Sin has brought disease into the world and digged the grave and bred the worm. O sin, thou art the mother of all the griefs and groans and sighs and tears that ever befell men and women in this world. O wretched sin, what have we to do any more with thee? We have had more than enough of thee.

*And have not you and I personally had quite enough to do with our idols?* I had enough to do with my self-righteousness, I do boldly say; for, oh, how I loathe to think that I should ever have been such a fool as to think that there was anything good in me—to think that I could ever have dreamed of coming before God with a righteousness of my own. Oh, how I abhor the thought! God forbid for one single moment that I should ever be other than ashamed of having boasted in aught that I could do or feel or be. Do you not feel yourselves humiliated at the remembrance of such pride and presumption? What have you to do any more with the idol of righteous self? Nothing! We can never bow down before that any more.

*With regard to other idols, have you not smarted enough about them?* The convert who was once a drunkard will say, “I have had enough to do with the cup of intoxication.” “Who hath woe?...Who hath redness of eyes? They that tarry long at the wine”; [the] “men of strength to mingle strong drink” (Pro 23:29-30; Isa 5:22). The wine-bibber has had

enough to do with that. He has paid heavy smart money, and now he has done with rioting and excess forever. The man who has plunged into vice will often have to say, “It has injured me in body, mind, and estate. What more can I have to do with it?” “Ah,” said one to me the other day, “when I lived in sin it was so expensive to me that it will take me years to recover what I have wasted upon the devil and myself. I am not the man for the service of God that I should have been if it had not been for that.” Ah, we have all had enough of it—more than enough of it. There is no cup of sin, however sweet it was in the day of our unregeneracy,<sup>8</sup> but we feel that we want no more of it, not even with all its beaded bubbles sparkling on the brim when it moveth itself aright. We are sick of it—sick to the death, and the very name of it causes nausea in our soul. What have I to do any more with idols, when I consider what idols have done for me?

But there is another view of it. “What have I to do any more with idols?” Do you see, and can you bear to look upon, that strange sight yonder: three gibbets set upon a hill and on the center one a wondrous man in fearful agony nailed to the cross. If you look at Him you will see that there is such a mixture of majesty in His misery that you discover Him at once to be your Lord. Lo, it is the Bridegroom of your soul, your heart’s best Beloved, and He is nailed up there like a felon gibbeted<sup>9</sup> to die. Who nailed Him there? Who nailed Him there, I say? Where is the hammer? Whence came the nails? Who nailed Him there? And the answer is—*our idols nailed Him there*. Our sins pierced His heart! Ah, then, what have I to do any more with them? If I had a favorite knife and with it a murderer had killed my wife, do you think I would use it at my table or carry it about with me? Away with the accursed thing! How I should loathe the very sight of it. And sin has murdered Christ! Our idols have put our Lord to death! Stand at the foot of the cross and see His murdered, mangled body, bleeding with its five great wounds, and you will say, “What have I to do any more with idols?” The vinegar and gall, the bloody sweat and death pangs have divorced my soul from all its ancient loves and wedded my heart for ever to the Well-beloved, even the King of kings. “What have I to do any more with idols?” Nothing separates a man from sin like a sense of the love and the sufferings of Jesus. Redeeming grace and dying love—these ring the death-knells of our lusts and idols.

*Soon as faith the Lord can see, Bleeding on a cross for me,  
Quick my idols all depart, Jesus gets and fills my heart.*

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<sup>8</sup> **unregeneracy** – unrenewed heart, not born of God’s Spirit.

<sup>9</sup> **gibbeted** – hanged upon a gallows and left as a spectacle.

Now, you may recollect again that we must have no more to do with idols, for the same sins which put our Lord to death will put us to death if they can. *O child of God, you never sin without injuring yourself.* The smallest sin that ever creeps into your heart is a robber seeking to kill and to destroy. You never profited by sin and never can. No, it is poison, deadly poison to your spirit. Do not, therefore, tolerate it for an instant. What have you to do with it? You know it is to be evil, only evil, and that continually. You know that it injures your faith, destroys your enjoyment, withers up your peace, weakens you in prayer, prevents your example being beneficial to others; and for all these reasons what have you to do any more with idols?...

Within a few months some of us will be in heaven, perhaps within a few weeks. What have we to do with idols? Even while we are here the Lord has raised us up together and made us sit together in the heavenlies in Christ. What have we to do any more with idols? This day are we accepted in the Beloved, the elect of God justified by faith with our names written on the palms of Jesus' hands. What have we to do any more with idols? Truly the question answers itself. We have nothing to do with them except to loathe them, and whenever they are set up in our hearts even for a moment to break them down by the power of the eternal Spirit.

Now beloved, if God has wrought a great work in you and changed your hearts so that the idols you once worshipped you now detest, I would ask you to keep away from the idols all you can. If you have nothing to do with them do not go into the places where they are had in honor. "What have I to do any more with idols?" If I knew that a street was infected with small-pox I should not go out of my way to ride down it. I had rather go round about to avoid the plague. Let it be so with your once darling sin. Get as far away from it as you can, even as you would keep clear of a leper. You have nothing more to do with idols, therefore do not enter their temples or make a league with their worshippers...Keep as far off from sin as ever you can. If you have learned to say, "What have I to do any more with idols?" avoid the very appearance of evil and all those communications which corrupt good manners. The ale-house, the dancing saloon, and the theater are not for you. I loathe to hear Christian people say, "What do you think of this and that foolish amusement?"...

Well, my dear friend, if you enjoy anything that has any filth in it, I question whether you know anything about the love of God at all. You

remember Rowland Hill's<sup>10</sup> observation to the person who said he liked to go the theater. The person said, "Well, you know, Mr. Hill, I am a member of the church, but I do not go often, I only go once or twice a year, just for a treat." "Ah," said Mr. Hill, "you are worse a great deal than I thought you were. Suppose it were reported commonly that Mr. Hill fed on carrion and was very fond of eating rotten meat. And suppose somebody came to me and said 'I hear, Mr. Hill, that you are very fond of eating carrion.' 'Oh, no,' I say, 'Not at all. I do not regularly feed on it; I only eat a dish of it once or twice a year for a treat!' Then everybody would say, 'You are fonder of it than we thought. For if poor creatures have to eat it every day because they cannot get anything better, their taste is not so vitiated<sup>11</sup> as yours who turn away from wholesome food, and find rottenness to be a dainty dish.'" If you can find your pleasure and delight where sin of the worst kind is always very near at hand, where religion would be out of place, and where Christ your Master could not be expected to come, you have not learned to say with Ephraim, "What have I to do any more with idols?"

Run away from anything which has the least taint of sin, and may God help you so to do even to the end. Is this in order that you may be saved? God forbid! I am only speaking to you who are saved already. If you are not saved, the first thing is to have a renewed heart by faith in Jesus Christ, and after that we lay no bondage on you, and exact no tax from you by way of duty, but it will be your joy, your delight, your privilege, to keep near to your Master and to say, "What have I to do any more with idols?" God bless you for Christ's sake.

Delivered at The Metropolitan Tabernacle, Newington.



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<sup>10</sup> **Rowland Hill** (1744-1833) – Anglican preacher who ministered at Surrey Chapel in Southwark, London. An aristocratic convert to Evangelicalism and an enthusiastic champion of itinerant preaching. Often quoted by Charles Spurgeon.

<sup>11</sup> **vitiated** – corrupted; debased.

# IDOLATRY TODAY—WHERE IS IT?

J.C. Ryle (1816-1900)

*Flee from idolatry.—1 Corinthians 10:14*

LET me show...*the forms which idolatry has assumed and does assume in the visible church [today]*. Where is it?...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 them” (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)...

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 of wood: which neither can see, nor hear, nor walk” (Rev 9:20)...I...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 prophesying about the heathen, who never heard the gospel...

And now, if we turn from the Bible to [historical] 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.”...There we read how, even in the *fourth century*, Jerome complains “that the errors of images have come in, and passed to the Christians from the Gentiles”; and Eusebius 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 Nicaea 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.

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. 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...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.

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*.

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*.

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 tittle of foundation in the Word of God. And if this be so..., I say there is *idolatry in the Church of Rome*.

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 and the elevation of the Host in my recollection, I say there is *idolatry in the Church of Rome*.

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 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...

I believe and hope that many a Roman Catholic is in heart inconsistent with his profession and is better than the church to which he belongs...I believe that many a poor [Roman Catholic] 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...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...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...

**And now let me show...*the ultimate abolition of all idolatry*.** What will end it?...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...*

The second coming of our Lord Jesus Christ is that blessed hope which should ever comfort the children of God under the present dispensation...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...

If these things be so, men need not wonder that we warn them to beware of all leanings towards the Church of Rome...

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...

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...

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...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...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...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). 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” (Col 1:15); “the express image of his person” (Heb 1:3); 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, almsdeeds, 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...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...shall fall down. *Christ rightly known, Christ truly believed, and Christ heartily loved is the true preservative against ritualism, Romanism, and every form of idolatry.*

Booklet available from CHAPEL LIBRARY.

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**J. C. Ryle** (1816-1900): English Anglican bishop and author; born in Macclesfield, Cheshire County, UK.

