

# CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

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## Perfecting The Saints (Part III)

Recently, David Powlison of the Christian Counseling & Educational Foundation (CCEF) wrote a very perceptive article on the continuing dangers of idolatry with particular reference to 1 John 5:21 “Beloved children, keep yourselves from idols”. The relevance of massive chunks of Scripture hangs on our understanding of idolatry. But let me focus the question through a particular verse in the New Testament which long troubled me. In a 105-verse treatise on living in vital fellowship with Jesus, the Son of God, how on earth does that unexpected command merit being the final word? Is it perhaps a scribal emendation? Is it an awkward faux pas by a writer who typically weaves dense and orderly tapestries of meaning with simple, repetitive language? Is it a culture-bound, practical application tacked onto the end of one of the most timeless and heaven-dwelling epistles? Each of these alternatives misses the integrity and power of John’s final words. Instead, John’s last line properly leaves us with that most basic question which God continually poses to each human heart. *Has something or someone besides Jesus the Christ taken title to your heart’s trust, preoccupation, loyalty, service, fear and delight?* It is a question bearing on the immediate motivation for one’s behavior, thoughts, and feelings. In the Bible’s conceptualization, the motivation question is the lordship question. *Who or what “rules” my behavior, the Lord or a substitute?* The undesirable answers to this question – answers which inform our understanding of the “idolatry” we are to avoid - are most graphically presented in 1 John 2:15-17, 3:7-10, 4:1-6, and 5:19. It is striking how these verses portray a confluence of the “sociological,” the “psychological,” and the “demonological” perspectives on idolatrous motivation. *The inwardness of motivation* is captured by the inordinate and proud “desires of the flesh” (1 John 2:16), our inertial self-centeredness, the wants, hopes, fears, expectations, “needs” that crowd our hearts. *The externality of motivation* is captured by “the world” (1 John 2:15-17, 4:1-6), all that invites, models, reinforces, and conditions us into such inertia, teaching us lies. *The “demonological” dimension of motivation* is the Devil’s behavior-determining lordship (1 John 3:7-10, 5:19), standing as a ruler over his kingdom of flesh and world. In contrast, to “keep yourself from idols” is to live with a whole heart of faith in Jesus. It is to be controlled by all that lies behind the address “Beloved children” (see especially 1 John 3:1-3, 4:7-5:12). The alternative to Jesus, the swarm of alternatives, whether approached through the lens of flesh, world, or the Evil One, is idolatry.<sup>1</sup> Sadly, *many* self-proclaimed *Evangelical* churches are, in fact, idol factories. How so? What is happening is that in an increasing number of evangelical churches the Christian faith is being distinctly framed by psychological models and not by the biblical one (which is decidedly theological). Almost everything that is distinctive to historic Christianity is being jettisoned in favor of a revamped new model that is shaped and formed by the world’s standards. We need to pay close attention to texts like 1 John 5:21 and Exod. 20:5. “I the Lord your God am a jealous God.” Rightly understood, the idea of jealousy is central to any true concept of God. It is, as Boice points out, “analogous to a proper jealousy within marriage. A married person ought not to allow any third person to enter into the inner relationship. Similarly, God rejects every attack on his sole rights as Lord of his creation. The holiness of God is therefore not only an absolute difference of nature, but it is an active self-differentiation, the willed energy with which God asserts and maintains the fact that He is Wholly Other against all else. The absoluteness of this difference becomes the absoluteness of his holy will, which is supreme and unique.”<sup>2</sup> The God who has chosen to reveal Himself

in Scripture is a very jealous God. He condemns as idolatry any attempt to add to or subtract from His revealed nature. This is so important that God devoted the first two Commandments of the Decalogue to a condemnation of all attempts to mold God into a manmade image. “It does not matter,” as Morey has noted, “if the image is mental or metal, wooden or woolly, all manmade ideas of God are idolatry.”<sup>3</sup>

## I. THE FIRST COMMANDMENT: A CHOICE

In the First Commandment God tells us, “You shall have no other gods before Me” (Exodus 20:3).

In this commandment we find that:

- A. There is only one God.
- B. The God who has revealed Himself in Scripture is this God.
- C. He alone is to be worshipped, feared, loved, and obeyed.
- D. We are not free to make up any ideas on our own of what God is like. It does not matter if our ideas seem “reasonable” or “practical” to us. We cannot have any ideas of God except those revealed in Scripture.
- E. Man is not a god-maker or a god-in-the-making. Any concept of the “divinity of man” is idolatrous.
- F. God is His own interpreter. He has revealed Himself and interpreted this self-revelation in Scripture.
- G. Any and all forms of religion are hereby condemned as idolatry for they would exalt man’s opinion over God’s self-revelation as given in Scripture.

**NOTE:** The one God and the many Religions—What about the devotees of the other world religions? Do they worship a different God? Yes. You will hear people say things like—“We all worship the same God, each in his or her own way—but by whatever name we use, we all worship the same God.” We cannot agree with this conclusion. The unbridgeable gulf between the Christian faith and other religions can be identified in various ways, but in our opinion, the clearest way is by asking the central question in Scripture: “What do you think about the Christ?” (Matt. 22:42). If we see Him as one prophet among many others, one of many manifestations of the supreme being in this world, then putting Christianity on a par with other world religions is required and inevitable. Why would Jesus be unique if there is also a Mohammed who demands for himself a place alongside Abraham, Moses, and Jesus as (the highest) prophet? However, if Jesus is not a prophet standing on the same level as other prophets, but the Christ, the Son of the living God (Matt. 16:13-17), then putting Christianity alongside other religions is impossible. The same must be said of Judaism, even though it is based on the Old Testament. For those committed to Judaism deny that Jesus is the Messiah who is one with the Father in an absolutely unique way (John 1:1,3,14; 10:30; Rom. 9:5). This unity between the Son and the Father has consequences for reading the first commandment. We can no longer speak about Yahweh, about God, except as the Father of Jesus Christ. Their indissoluble unity makes it impossible to fill the word “God” in any other way than Christ has filled it.<sup>4</sup>

## II. THE UNIQUE PLACE OF THE SECOND COMMANDMENT

William Plumer, one of the great Presbyterian preachers of the last century commented, “God never gave a command more solemn in its terms, or in the sanction connected with it. Nor are we left in doubt respecting the vast importance of this precept. On this point other parts of God’s word are full and urgent.” The first and second commandments deal with different subjects, idol worship, and self-willed worship of Yahweh. Thereby we do not deny the very strong connection between them. The idols were not served apart from images, and images of Yahweh inevitably became “other gods.” Therefore, it is no wonder that in the Old Testament, images of Yahweh and of idols are mentioned together. Think of the images Jeroboam made. They may have been intended as images of Yahweh, but Yahweh Himself views them as obtaining “other gods,” with the result that they turned their backs on *Him* (1 Kings 14:9)!<sup>5</sup>

### A. The Significance of an Image

Even though we do not have images like those described in Acts 17:29, we still have idolatrous hearts. Calvin rightly declared, “The commandment has two parts. The first restrains our license from daring to subject God, who is incomprehensible, to our sense perceptions, or to represent

him by any form. The second part forbids us to worship any images in the name of religion. But he briefly lists all the forms with which profane and superstitious peoples customarily represent God. By those things which are in heaven he means the sun, moon, other luminaries, and perhaps birds; as in Deut. 4, expressing his mind, he mentions both birds and stars (vs. 17, 19). I would not have noted this if I had not observed that some undiscerningly apply the expression to the angels. Therefore I pass over the remaining parts because they are known of themselves. We have already thought with sufficient clarity in Book I that whatever visible forms of God man devises are diametrically opposed to His nature; therefore, as soon as idols appear, true religion is corrupted and adulterated.”<sup>6</sup>

**B. Why No Images?**

1. To try and capture God in an image is to misunderstand His *freedom*. Images attempt to make the incomprehensible comprehensible.
2. To try and capture God in an image is to misunderstand His *majesty*. Image worship evokes ridicule and sarcasm. God will not tolerate being compared (Isa. 40:18; 41:7). He is dishonored, for images obscure His glory. As Packer has observed, “The point here is not just that an image represents God as having body and parts, whereas in reality He has neither. If this were the only ground of objection to images, representations of Christ would be blameless. But the point really goes much deeper. The heart of the objection to pictures and images is that they inevitably conceal most, if not all, of the truth about the personal nature and character of the divine Being whom they represent.”<sup>7</sup>
3. To try and capture God in an image is to misunderstand His *covenant*. How so? You may not make images on account of God’s freedom, you cannot make images on account of God’s majesty, but you need not make images on account of Yahweh’s covenant with Israel. The bond between God and His people does not need to be established (via images), for it has already been established. “The freedom and majesty of Yahweh do not mean that He is unreachable and acts capriciously—something Israel would then have to neutralize by controlling divine power by means of an image of Yahweh. For Yahweh has covenanted Himself in faithfulness to Israel.”<sup>8</sup>

**CONCLUSION:** The late James Boice wrote these very relevant remarks shortly before his death. “A few years ago, Professor Martin Marty, always a shrewd observer of the American church, said in a magazine interview that, in judgment, evangelicals would be “the most worldly people in America” by the end of the century. Marty’s observations are not always right, in my opinion, but in this case he is on target. Evangelicals have embraced worldliness in the same ways that it was embraced by the liberal churches. Like those liberals of past years evangelicals today: (1) *Pursue the world’s wisdom*. Evangelicals are not heretics, of course, at least not consciously. If they are asked whether the Bible is the authoritative and inerrant Word of God, most will answer affirmatively. But many have abandoned the Bible all the same because they do not think it is adequate for the challenges we face as we enter a new millennium. They do not think it is sufficient for winning people to Christ, so they turn to felt-need sermons, to entertainment, or to “signs and wonders.” They do not think the Scriptures are sufficient for achieving genuine Christian growth, so they turn to therapy groups or defer to Christian counseling. They do not think the Bible is sufficient for discovering the will of God for their lives, so they look for mystical signs or subjective feelings. They do not think it is sufficient for impacting the secular society that surrounds us, so they fund lobby groups in Washington or throw their efforts into electing increasingly larger numbers of “born-again” government officials. (2) *Embrace the world’s theology*. Like the liberals before us, evangelicals use the Bible’s words but give them new meanings. Sin becomes “dysfunctional behavior.” Salvation becomes “self-esteem” or “wholeness.” Faith becomes “possibility thinking.” Jesus becomes more of an example for right living than our Savior from sin. People are told how to succeed in business, have happy marriages, and raise nice children, but not how to get right with an offended God. (3) *Follow the world’s agenda*. The world’s major agenda is not hunger, racism, the redistribution of wealth, or ecology. The world’s major agenda is being happy, and happiness is achieving the maximum amount of personal peace and sufficient prosperity to enjoy it. But is that not the bottom line of much evangelical preaching today? Being happy? Being content? Being satisfied? Francis Schaeffer saw it and called the evangelical church to repentance, but we are too self-

satisfied to do that. Far be it from us to preach a Gospel that would expose our liberal-like sins and drive us to the Savior. (4) *Employ the world's methods*. Evangelicals have become like liberals in this area, too. How else are we to explain the stress so many place on numerical growth and money? How else are we to explain that so many pastors tone down the hard edges of Bible truth in order to attract greater numbers to their services... A recent column in the *New Yorker* magazine bemoaned what it called the “brave, new audience-driven preaching” of our day. “The preacher, instead of looking out upon the world, looks out upon public opinion, trying to find out about the world, discovers nothing but its own reflection. The unexamined world, meanwhile, drifts blindly into the future.”<sup>9</sup> To put it concisely, all that Boice has described amounts to idolatry. Say what you will about evangelical zeal and evangelistic energy, idolatry is something that not only dishonors the God we claim to worship and serve, but it also provokes His judgment because He is a jealous God.

## ENDNOTES

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<sup>1</sup> David Powlison, <http://www.ccef.org/print/590>

<sup>2</sup> J. M. Boice, *The Sovereign God: Foundations of the Christian Faith* (IVP, 1979), p. 164.

<sup>3</sup> R. A. Morey, *Battle of the Gods* (Crown, 1989), p. 143.

<sup>4</sup> W. S. Plumer, *The Law of God* (rpt. Sprinkle, 1996), P. 167.

<sup>5</sup> J. Douma, *The Ten Commandments: Manual for the Christian Life* (P & R, 1996), p. 30.

<sup>6</sup> *Calvin: Institutes of the Christian Religion* Bk. II, Ch. VIII, sec. 17. I would urge all of you to read Calvin’s discussion on idols and images.

<sup>7</sup> J. I. Packer, *Knowing God* (IVP, 1974), p. 40.

<sup>8</sup> Douma, *op.cit.* p. 42.

<sup>9</sup> J. M. Boice, “Running With Wolves”, *Table Talk* (Aug. 2000), p. 14.