

What is an idol?

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Christian basics › Spiritual realm

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Those who know their Bible well, realize that there are large portions of Scripture devoted to prophecy against idols. Continually, the Israelites left their God and pursued other gods, despite the strict prohibition of idolatry (Exodus 20:1-5). Idolatry was the reason Israel and Judah were in the end led into exile (2 Kings 17). What is an idol and why is idolatry such a great temptation to people? This article will reflect on these questions.

An historical example

Exodus 32 is an important Bible chapter for understanding idolatry. All the elements of idolatry are there. What was going on? The people were bored in the desert. The Lord, their God, was invisible and Moses, the man who was in contact with Him, seemed to have disappeared from earth. Desperate for something certain and tangible, the people made an image of the God who had brought them out of Egypt. They entrusted themselves to this image and regarded it as their lord. But

their real Lord had forbidden the honoring of other gods and images just a few weeks earlier! What is this idolatry and why did the people of Israel fall for this sin again and again?

The human tendency to idolatry

People naturally look for something higher than themselves that gives them meaning. Idolatry is the replacement of this desire for the only true God with a desire for something from creation that you can control. After all, you can control a god that you make yourself. An idol is wonderfully predictable. You can manipulate it with sacrifices and adapt it to your wishes and desires. You drag it along to achieve a victory, as the Israelites thought when they took the ark with them in the battle against the Philistines (1 Samuel 4). Others used idols for their political ends, such as King Jeroboam who did not want the Israelites to go to Jerusalem for worship (1 Kings 12:26-33).

Idols draw you away from the true God

Idolatry is not harmless. Although idols do not exist in the real sense, they exert an enormous influence on those who honor them. Moreover, the treacherous element in idolatry is that man first creates an image in his own image and then he himself ironically degrades into the likeness of that image. For example, the promise of idols is that safety and security are within reach. The more Israel pursued idols, the more they were drawn away from God, the only One who can provide true protection and fulfillment. The idol promised freedom, but ensured bondage. The idol promised security, but caused uncertainty.

Those who are occupied by their ideals or idols become more and more like them. The Israelites began to look more and more like the calf they had made: stubborn, with a heart of stone, with eyes that could not see and ears that could not hear. In the same way, we too are becoming more and more like the ideals of our time: pleasure, enjoyment, commerce. As a result, we become superficial, vain and absorbed in material things. In the process, we lose sight of the one true God.

Are idols real?

Idolatry is in fact absurd. How is it logically possible to make the God who made you? Isaiah 44:14-17 ridicules this way of thinking and acting. Someone who serves idols is chasing an illusion, and his biggest problem is that he does not realize it:

“He cuts down cedars, or he chooses a cypress tree or an oak and lets it grow strong among the trees of the forest. He plants a cedar and the rain nourishes it. Then it becomes fuel for a man. He takes a part of it and warms himself; he kindles a fire and bakes bread. Also he makes a god and worships it; he makes it an idol and falls down before it. Half of it he burns in the fire. Over the half he eats meat; he roasts it and is satisfied. Also he warms himself and says, Aha, I am warm, I have seen the fire! And the rest of it he makes into a god, his idol, and falls down to it and worships it. He prays to it and says, Deliver me, for you are my god!”

Paul also states that idols do not exist and that we should not be frightened by them (1 Corinthians 8:4-6). Yet Paul

also points out that the devils and demons, the evil spiritual powers that do exist, eagerly exploit the human tendency to idolatry (1 Corinthians 10:13-22). We worship the devil through our idolatry. The devil is pleased when we spend our time on worldly or occult things.

The consequences of idolatry

In Romans 1:18-31 Paul describes the consequences of human idolatry. Humankind has exchanged the glory of the immortal God for an image of perishable creature. Truth has changed into lie, knowledge into folly, order into chaos, reverence into perversity. In short, man has exchanged the original (God) for an image and this has become fatal to him.

When someone makes an idol from a creature, he actually damages his creation as the image of God. Someone who loses himself in idolatry is exposed as a fallen person. His identity is perverted, obscured and lost. He has lost his true self. Consequently, we look for our self in the wrong place. We think we can find our identity in our feelings, our job, our values, our cultural sub-group, or whatever. In

all these things the root of idolatry can be present, about which the wrath of God is revealed from heaven (Romans 1:18).

Although most of us today do not worship a physical idol, there are many other spiritual idols that we adore. Some have already been mentioned above: money, influencers, credits, family and so on. You only have to look around you to see the enormous influence these things have. Not only unbelievers, but also Christians are often preoccupied with things that keep us away from God. Anything that takes the place of God is idolatry. Let us therefore look to Jesus, who is the true Image of God (Colossians 1:15) and who saves us from the dark power of idols (Colossians 1:13-14).

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