

–Dear, Darling Idols: The Power of Idolatry–

1. Introduction: Contemplating Idolatry

‘To whom then will you liken God? Or what likeness compare with Him? The idol..’

Man has always been fascinated in imaging God. Whatever the reason, he will have an image whether graven, sculptured, moulded or visionary within the mind. It seems he must have an image of some kind, whether glorious or contemptible. Why he should want it one way or the other need not occupy us in this introduction. He must have worship of some kind. He must have an object of worship, even if in the last resort he has to revert to himself. At least, so it would seem.

Hence the subject of idolatry is incredibly fascinating. At the same time many refuse to accept the fact of idol-worship as a phenomenon of their lives. In fact the subject, as a subject, is highly distasteful.¹ Nevertheless idolatry as a pastime, an experience, and a way of life can be highly fascinating.

Isaiah’s question (Isaiah 40:18–19) still stands. What is there in the world to which God can be likened? The answer must be, ‘Nothing!’ All the representations of man and the maximal expression of likeness must be doomed to failure. Whatever glimpses man may have of God he is doomed to failure when he wishes to see God wholly. Nothing can image the Godhead.

Perhaps man believes that were he to see God imaged, then he would understand Him. Whatever may be the case, man is deeply related to idolatry as such.

This means we must define what that idolatry really means. We must see how and why man relates to idols. We must also examine the ways in which man may be separated from his idols and become a liberated creature in God’s free universe.

¹ N.C.P.I. some years ago issued a cassette (NS. 25) entitled *The Deadliness of Idolatry*. Almost none has been sold, and enquiries regarding it are nil. The title obviously is not attractive. Perhaps, also, the subject seems irrelevant to modern life.

2. The Origins of Idolatry

(i) Created Man in True Knowledge

In John 17:3 (cf. I John 1:3, 5:20) Jesus says that knowing God is actually life – eternal life. Life is relationships in general, and eternal life is eternal relationship in particular. To know the Father and the Son constitutes life, eternal life. Nothing more is needed. Here, of course, such knowledge comes through revelation. This knowledge is relational, and not only noetic or propositional, although it is not opposed to knowledge of the mind.

The loss of the knowledge of God must cause basic disorientation of the human personality. It must cause dissociation and dislocation within the person. Again, if the knowledge of God is offered and refused, then the problem is compounded. It is clear that God does not have to be likened to anything or anyone. He is God within Himself, within His own person. If man is created by Him then man may know Him at least as Creator, and this knowledge would be within the Creator–creature relationship. Biblically God is posited as essentially being Father (vis–a–vis the sonship of His Son), and also as being King, i.e. of all His creation. The human correlatives of Creator, Father, King are creature, child, subject. In this context man knows God because his knowledge concerns these elements. Within them is such scope of relationships and knowledge that man is unable to exhaust. His life may he lived fully within the true context of his manhood and personhood.

(ii) The Creation Declares God

Psalm 19:1–4 says, ‘The heavens declare the glory of God, the vault of heaven proclaims His handiwork; day discourses of it to day, night to night hands on the knowledge. No utterance at all, no speech, no sound that anyone can hear; yet their voice goes out through all the earth, and their message to the ends of the world.’ To declare the glory of God is to declare His essential nature. Likewise to proclaim His handiwork is not only to he that handiwork, but to declare the nature of the One creating. ‘Night to night hands on the knowledge’ must mean that God actively ensures the declaration of Himself, for the ‘voice’ goes on going out to the ends of the world, and the ‘message’ keeps on being proclaimed.

This is the thrust of Romans 1:19–20:– ‘For what can be known about God is perfectly plain to them since God has made it plain. Ever since God created the world His everlasting power and deity – however invisible – have been there for the mind to see in the things He has made. ‘ Paul means here that the Creator is not revealed simply by having created, but His true being is shown in and by the things He has created. That is, what they are, do, and the way they function, both particularly, and as a whole reveals the nature of God. In other words, the ways, modes and manners of operations of His creatures and His things show just the kind of One He is, and reveals His nature. The stipulation is primarily of the creation as it is essentially, although doubtless the redemptive and providential elements also show Who He is.

The main element is that man can know God. God has not, and does not, deny this knowledge. It is, so to speak, natural for man to know God.

(iii) The Rebellion of Man: The Origins of Idolatry

Genesis 3:1–6, Romans 5:12–13 and Romans 1:21ff, describe the rebellion of man, principally in Adam, and generally in all mankind. Paul includes both Jew and Gentile in this general rebellion, although the Jews did not think of themselves as rebels.

What then constituted this rebellion? For Adam it was the ambition to be as God. Already like God (Gen. 1:26), man coveted parity with God. To be like Him was to reflect Him. To be as Him was to be autonomous, thus rejecting the need for correlatives. By nature of the case this was wholly impossible. The deceit of sin deludes man into thinking he can obtain this. It was the same delusion Satan knew in thinking he could be like the Most High God. True knowledge of God would understand Him as being unique, incomparable ('To whom then will you liken God?'), and would reject notions of possible parity.

Genesis 3:7ff shows man as a fearful and ashamed creature, fearing God. Romans 5:12ff shows him as under the sway of death and the power of sin. Romans 1:21ff shows him as a creature who is now existentially awry. He is described as being 'futile in his thinking,' having 'a senseless mind that is darkened'. It is at this point that idolatry enters, and we shall see the significance of this shortly. For the rest, man is relationally confused, morally disoriented and impotent, and has his mind set continually against knowing God. He cannot afford, in this state, to know God.

A principle emerges:– Man, in refusing the knowledge of God, is pressed to know idols. This is seen from Romans 1:25, '... they exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshipped and served the creature rather than the Creator. This means, (a) The truth of God, man, and creation is denied. (b) A lie is formulated, namely that what the creation says (v.20) is not so. (c) In place of the essential truth a new rationalisation is made, namely that things as God created them are explainable, not on the grounds of the nature of God but on the grounds of the nature of idols. Idolatry is the lie of man on the creation of God!

That this is so is borne out by Paul's sermon on the Areopagus. This needs to be studied closely. He says (Acts 17:22–30) that the Athenian idolaters (at least in one case) worship what they do not know. The god they think is God has elements they do not know (but which Paul will show them). These elements are:–

- (a) God is creator of all things.
- (b) He is not worshipped idolatrously (i.e. in shrines, etc.)
- (c) Man cannot serve Him for He needs nothing. On the contrary He gives to men all they need. He is beneficent.
- (d) He has planned all things in regard to man, history, geography, and the knowledge of God. Man lives in contingency upon God.

Paul then shows that idolatry is futile because God is Father–Creator. Since He originates man no likeness can represent Him, and the thing by which He is represented is futile in that He being Father, no thing can Father man! God calls for repentance regarding such futile thinking and action (of idolatry).

We conclude then, that man does not choose idolatry arbitrarily, but is pressed to it. He must have a rationalisation of God, the creation and man, and idolatry is the only one which will provide this. Existentially he is bound to

choose idolatry.² Historically the Scriptures assert that man in rejecting God accepted idols. We need now to see how it is that man is bound to accept idols.

(iv) The Fact of Idols and the Nature of Idolatry

In Romans 1, Paul, from verse 18, is describing the current evil of man, and pointing to its origins. In verse 18 he says, ‘The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven upon all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men who are suppressing the truth in unrighteousness.’³ Verse 25 says they have exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and so are idolatrous. In other words, men, by acts of evil are suppressing (holding back, holding down) the true acts of righteousness and godliness. Verse 28 says they refuse the knowledge of God. Why then do they repress the action of truth, and why do they reject the nature and knowledge of God? The answer is that sinful man dare not be confronted by God, that is not in His acts or His Being, for such moral confrontation is too painful, too morally demanding, too traumatic.

We will see that there are not gods or idols essentially in creation, for – God could not have creation that way. Man, then, has to make them. He has to formulate his objects of worship so that he will not be traumatically confronted. Moral demands must not be beyond his scope or willingness.

What is not always appreciated is the fact that idolatrous and atheistic man has always to attack true godliness and righteousness as it essentially is, and as it actionally is. He is forced to attack. If he does not then the truth will be out, the reality will confront, the demand will be present. He must fight it, and his way is by either idolatry or atheism. He must be critical of God and His creation or he must reshape that creation or both.

As we will see one of the essential elements of created man is worship and service. We say ‘one’ because they are of the one piece, i.e. worship and service.⁴ Being a creature he has an undeniable drive to contingency. Refusing contingency upon God he must be contingent upon a god, or gods, some source of life, providence, guidance, etc. Hence he has a functional need for worship. This, on the positive side, is seen in such emotional passages as Psalms 42:1–3, 63:1ff, and 84:1–2. Adoration seems to be a need of man. He must express himself in it for some person, god, or object. Being critical of the true God does not mean he is critical of his own god. The True God (Biblically) demands true worship, and man is not prepared to give that kind of worship, for worship is his actual life–style, rightly understood. Hence he will have only a god (or gods) befitting his life–style, his service and his worship.

What we do know from Romans 1 and Acts 17 is that man’s life–style forms his gods, and is formed by them. It is other than the life–style God has given man which must conform with the true knowledge of God. Hence true morality resides

² Doubtless in Romans 1 Paul is referring to the Gentiles as idolaters. In ch. 2 he insists that Jews are also idolatrous. In Acts 7 Stephen insists that the Jews were always basically idolatrous. It is an illusion that the Greeks were intellectual and hence rejected idolatry as foolish. They were highly superstitious and atheism was frowned upon as a sort of heresy. Atheism needs a treatment all of its own. Atheism may even prove to be a protest against the tyranny of the gods! See *The Psychology of Atheism* by R. C. Sproule (Bethany Fellowship, Minneapolis, 1974).

³ The translation of the Jerusalem Bible is interesting: ‘The anger of God is being revealed from heaven against all the impiety and depravity of men who keep truth imprisoned in their wickedness.’

⁴ See LFS. 12, *Worship: Its Meaning, Significance and Experience*

in, and is expressed by true worship, and likewise immorality belongs to the life–style which accords with idolatry. If what we have just said is true then almost certainly idolatry is the greatest powerful factor in man for evil. Romans 1:18–32 must then be read as being the one piece, and having no breaks anywhere. Sexual immorality, sexual perversity, a reprobate mind, and the life of shattered relationships and deliberate evil must all accord with, and indeed spring from, man’s idolatry.

(v) The Clever Nature of Idolatry

When Romans 1 speaks of man as having a darkened mind, and a thinking which is senseless and futile, it is not saying that man has no ability to reason. He has. It is the direction or bias of thinking which is wrong. It is anti–God, anti–creation, anti–truth. Hence its rationalisations will have to be specious and tendentious. He will have to suppress or repress the truth, and do this actively. On the other hand, he will have his basic essential needs, so to speak, tugging at him, and he will have to satisfy them. The genius of evil, then, is idolatry. It gives a god but not the God. It gives a system of worship and service, but not the creational system. It even provides the other elements which belong to God, and channels them through idolatry. We will look at these needs, but even without seeing them in full we can realise that idolatry is man’s way of rationalising his universe. To worship the creature (the creation) and to serve and worship it rather than the Creator lets man out of his creational, and so, functional responsibilities. Man is free to go the way he has structured rather than the way God has commanded and designed him to go. Idolatry therefore is man’s substitute for everything.

Later we will speak on the rationalisations man has made of occultic (idolatrous) powers and so how he can account for the nature of things as they are, or seem to be, by speaking of their influence. We will see that there is a counterpart to the Biblical prophetism which God has provided, and how the gods design man’s fate as against God’s action of predestination, i.e. His setting of man’s destiny. For the moment, however, we conclude that idolatry rationalises all things for the idolater.

3. Idols, Gods and Images

What is a God or a god, an image, or an idol? Isaiah’s statement, ‘To whom then will you liken God, or what likeness compare Him?’ is a question which asserts that God is unique. Without going into confessional or credal statements about the God of the Scriptures God is generally understood as the One Who creates, sustains, and manages the universe, Who being above it is not locked out of it, Who being in it is not locked into it. He is immutable, unchangeable, having that power, knowledge and action which places Him in control of all things. The Scriptures advise that He has certain attributes such as love, goodness, holiness, righteousness and truth. Indeed He is these things and so is their source for whatever purposes they may be needed. Even so, the term God is not the name of the Deity but simply a word used to convey such a One.

When it comes to gods the understanding is somewhat different from that of God. In polytheism there is belief in many gods, and so none may be God, as such, or God may exist and other gods also. These gods are really lords having existence which is not human, which is supra–human, and so carrying powers and authorities which relate to the ordering and operating of the creation in some way or another.

Idols or images are representations of the God or the gods or elements related

to the God or the gods. Essentially they are not gods, but in practice have come to be seen as entities in themselves. For example, some religious Madonnas shaped as images have qualities which attach uniquely to one Madonna as against another, the other also having its own qualities. Idols then are representations, but representations of actual gods or entities, whether these have been imagined or otherwise. As concepts in the minds of one or more persons they have now been imaged; that is they have been physically formulated in order to convey the nature and character of the originals.

Normally speaking, the worship and service of God by humans should be commensurate with His nature, and arise from the true relationship humans have with Him. Likewise worship and service of a god should be consonant with the nature and practice of that god. Idols may be seen as media by which the God or gods are known, although, as we have said, they may themselves, as objects, come to be worshipped. The thing about a physical idol, as against a conceptual image, is that the first staticises the concept, it embodies it, it also freezes it, so that it at once limits it to the skill and ability of its artist or maker. The proof of this is in the productions, say, of Buddha or Madonna. The prohibition in Exodus 20 against making graven images of God or celestial and terrestrial persons, creatures, and things is primarily because the imaging of them limits them in ways that are damaging to man. We proceed to examine this.

In Romans 1:23 Paul says man ‘exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man or birds or animals or reptiles.’ He is saying that God is immortal, and that immortality sets the modes of true worship. To worship the mortal is not only to drop the levels of worship, but to defame true worship. Also even the images are not the true things, but are images or copies of the true things. They are man’s ideas of the true things. Even though man ‘worships the creature rather than the Creator’, yet he is not even giving true worth to the creation. This is because all of creation is functional and structural, and is correlative to its Creator. To give the functional and structural significance in itself and to pose that significance over and against the Creator is to distort both creation and Creator. In other words it is to reshape what is essentially so, so that it is posited as not being essentially so. This does not essentially alter creation but it does alter man’s understanding of it, and so his actions upon it and within it. Creation being structurally and functionally related to man will likewise suffer.

This brings us back to man the god. In Genesis 3 man is tempted to be ‘as God’, i.e. a god in himself even if not God in Himself. Thus in idolatry man disposes things as he wishes them to be and so usurps the prerogatives of the Creator, the true God. He thus rejects the primary relationship between himself and God and the secondary relationship between himself and all things of creation, including his fellow–man.

Man and God, the Gods, the Images and the Idols

When God said ‘Let us make man in our own image’ we must understand this to be a unique decision of God. He does not confer with others as some have supposed, e.g. with angelic beings or ‘the sons of God’, for in Isaiah 40:14 the question is asked, ‘With whom took He counsel?’ In other words, God determined the structural nature of man, and so has unique right over that structure. No other gods or lords have part in it. What then is that image or likeness? The answer will be, ‘Everything that God is, man is like that, and anything that God is, man is none of that.’ In other words, God is God, and man is man, and man is nothing of God, but he is structured functionally to image God within His creation.

We see now why the creation reveals God, for its entire concerted, inter–related, holistic, functional

operation is a reflection of the actional nature of God. In one sense it is the actuated expression, in another the revelation of Who God is by what He does. The clever way of obscuring that is to introduce some distortion into those operations or actions. Man himself would be the constant, actional and dynamic expression of God as the living image of the living God. In God's case the term 'living God' means He is (a) Life-giving to all things, and (b) Actional in relation to all things. Man cannot essentially give life or essentially be actional in all things, but he can reflect these things. God is the Fountain of Living Waters (Jer. 2:13); man is to keep his heart carefully for from it flow the issues of life. Thus we see that God is God in Himself and man is man truly only when contingent upon God.

The reality of the image is shown perfectly in Christ who was 'the visible expression of the invisible God'. As the Mediator of creation he was the expression of the Initiating Creator (John 1:1-3, Col. 1:16, Heb. 1:2, etc.). As the Son he was the visible expression of the Father. As the Mediator of redemption he was the visible expression of the Initiator of redemption: and so on. Man was intended to image God to all His creation but he was to do this as a viable, palpable, warm, dynamic and actional creature. Theologians have shown man as rational, having words which are conceptual and dynamic, whereas animals lack these things. Man is creative in a secondary sense, thus imaging God as creative in the primary sense. Man has moral sense as against the simple behaviourism of the animal world, and man has lordship as an intrinsic quality, so that to be in the image of God is to (be able to) have dominion over the earth.

It can be seen then that to give any kind of godhead to man in the essential sense is to take him out of contingency upon God and place him in essential action which no longer reflects God's being and actions but is the same.⁵ Man can only reflect God when he is contingent because the actions are by direction and relationship, and any (imagined) autonomy on the part of man will place him in incongruence with God. Thus he will not image God by reflection. This was the evil of wishing to know good and evil of himself, rather than having recourse to God for the same.

We conclude then that there can only be one God by definition of the term, and by nature of the case.⁶ Man to be truly man must be contingent and so be able to fulfil that for which he is structured. The creation, being functional, will naturally express the Creator, and the whole – man and all creation – will thus declare the glory of God. This being so it is powerfully clear that idolatry will be an attack upon the essential nature of the creation as upon God. It will bring with it distress, perversion, suffering, existential awryness and far-reaching distortion of all things. These are the things we wish to examine.

⁵ There is of course a relative or comparative sense in which man may be said to have godhead. This relates to his lordship in certain of its aspects. Hence, Jesus quotes 'You are gods' from Psalm 82:6 (cf. John 10:34ff). That Psalm speaks of those in the divine council being gods, yet also 'sons of God' and they will perish as men, i.e. they are men. Their being as gods is not essentially divine but human. Their lordship is delegated as to lords who have authority. The term lord and god is often interchangeable in Scripture, as in I Cor. 8:5-6. Indeed this reference shows the impossibility of any true godhead apart from the Godhead.

⁶ We are not claiming any proof of God here, but simply saying that Biblically this is how the case is. It is an argument within the Bible.

4. The Powers, Operations, and Processes of Idolatry

(i) Idolatry is Irrational, Emotional and Volitional

Idolatry is the expression of irrationality. This may be seen in many ways. We have seen that to worship the mortal elements and give them the status of deity is irrational vis-a-vis the fact and doctrine of creation. In the light of Genesis 3:6 and Romans 1:20ff it can be seen that there is enormous attraction in the perverse and illicit. When Eve sees that the tree of the knowledge of good and evil is 'good for food, pleasant to the eyes, and to be desired to make one wise', it must be the last element of the three which attracted her since every tree of the garden was 'pleasant to the eyes and good for food' (Gen. 2:9). The third element in Eve's thinking brought distortion of the other. John speaks of the world system as 'the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life'. Idolatry is taking anything in God's creation and in any way making it a substitute for Him. That is, it is giving worth (worship) to any creature, person or thing above or in the place of giving worth to God. Normally that worth should be given to anything commensurate with its place in God's creation and in its subordination to Him. It is interesting to note that both in the Hebrew and the Greek there are words which mean worship and serve at the same time. In any case, one worships and serves God, and in Romans 1:25, in contrast to worshipping and serving God, man worships and serves the creature.

This irrationality is not merely intellectual. It is also emotional and volitional. In fact the three are of the one piece. In Jeremiah 50:38 the prophet speaks of Babylon as 'a land of images, and they are mad over idols'. This is irrationality linked with passion. Likewise Paul can speak of the folk in Corinth as being 'moved by dumb idols'. The word 'moved' has the idea of 'irresistibly drawn' (Jerusalem Bible) or 'swept off to' (N.E.B.), so that it is a powerful attraction. Likewise God says of Ephraim, 'Let him alone: he is joined (wedded) to his idols' (Hosea 4:17). Here too the attraction is intense. In Psalm 81:11-12, after speaking of Israel and her gods, God says, 'But my people did not listen to my voice; Israel would have none of me. So I gave them over to their stubborn hearts, to follow their own counsel.' These counsels of course arose from the (irrational) devotion to the gods.

(ii) Devotion and Emotion in idolatry

One thing we need to realise is that when man perverted God in his thinking and necessarily did the same with creation, he could not alter anything essentially. Hence his powers of intellection, volition and feeling still remained. It is simply the direction of their use which altered. Man was made to love the Lord his God with all these faculties. So he must love, whatever! Hence he loves the gods. In the O.T. it is made clear that idolatry is adultery. In Deuteronomy 31:16 God tells Moses, 'Behold, you are about to sleep with your fathers; then this people will rise and play the harlot after the strange gods of the land.' Judges 2:17 indicates that they did, whilst Hosea 1:2 says, '... the land commits great harlotry by forsaking the Lord.' In Jeremiah 3:6-10 the prophet as God's spokesman speaks of the heathen worship places and how Israel (the Northern Kingdom) played the harlot with the gods, and Judah also to some extent. ... she polluted the land, committing adultery with stone and tree', the stones and trees of course being the idols. The thought is repeated often, e.g. Jer. 13:27.

Adultery is giving that relationship of union illicitly to one to whom it should not be given. It is giving love to a wrong object, so that the love itself becomes a wrong thing. John warns against loving the world and he uses

the verb **agapao**. One can have agape for the world. There are descriptions of gods who have been so kissed that they have worn away at that point. In both Old and New Testaments idolatry is linked with sexual orgies. Covetousness in the N.T. is primarily linked with sexual desire. The history of idolatry has been linked with nature—elements prominent of which are fecundity, fertility rites, male and female temple prostitution, and so on. Idolaters are spoken of as devotees of their idols.

We conclude that the principle of all this is that human beings must have an object of devotion because the true and only authentic object of devotion is the God who made them, but Him they cannot abide, so they must make or find other objects. That the will is gripped by such is not in doubt, and that the mind rationalises the god as authentic is obvious. That such idols grip man deeply and intensely in his emotions is the story of human history.

(iii) The Powers of the Idols

If an idol can grip the cognitional, affectional and volitional levels of man, then its tyranny is complete. Of idolaters Isaiah says, ‘They know not, nor do they discern; for he (the idol) has shut their eyes so that they cannot see, and their minds so that they cannot understand. No one considers, nor is there knowledge or discernment.... He (the idolater) feeds on ashes, a deluded mind has led him astray ...’ (44:18–20). The idol, then, in line with all evil has the innate power of deception. In another sense, of course, man has deceived himself via his idol. He has wanted the idol to tell him what he wants to know. In one sense he objectifies his idolatrous intentions through the idol. It images what he is about. This is underlined by Psalm 115:8, ‘Those who make them (the idols) are like them; so are all who trust in them.’ Nevertheless the idolater cannot escape this objectification of his thoughts. The idols always tyrannise.

The terms ‘idols’, ‘gods’ and ‘lords’ we have seen are really synonymous. In Isaiah 26:13 Israel says, ‘Other lords beside Thee have ruled over us’. In I Corinthians 8:5 Paul speaks of ‘lords many and gods many’, inferring their domination. In Galatians 4:8 he says, ‘Formerly, when you did not know God, you were in bondage to beings that by nature are no gods.’ He refers to the elemental spirits of the universe who are linked with such idols, and we will later examine these, but the point is made, the gods have powers, and they dominate them.

Politically the idols were always linked with peoples. In Joshua 24, Joshua exhorts his people to worship God. If they refuse then they have two alternatives, that is they may worship the gods of Egypt or of Canaan. Joshua knows they must worship some god or gods, and they will have to make their choice. The local gods have local powers. The powers of a nation reside in their gods. Throughout the story of Israel in Palestine is the account of the conflict of the gods. Israel chooses to serve Yahweh or other gods, and the political rise and fall of the nation is linked with its loyalty to Yahweh or loyalty to other gods.

Personally as we have seen, the idols have great power. This derives from two sources. The first is subjective. Man, in perverting the notions of Creator and creation, and in worshipping and serving the creation rather than the Creator, has done internal damage. He is a disoriented, dissociated, dislocated creature. His subjective alignment is irrational, and so his affectional and volitional elements are out of focus. His objectification of these internal elements in idols or images, whether material or mental, decides the pattern of his life and so his personal mores. In this sense he is the victim of himself. However, there is another factor at which we have previously only hinted. Idols are connected with spiritual powers and forces which are personal. It is these which hold man in their grip. He does not commit adultery with material objects. He comes into union with evil powers which relate to such idols.

(iv) The Idols and the Spirits

We have already seen in Galatians 4 that Paul links the gods and the elemental spirits of the world. In Deuteronomy 7:25–26 God enjoins Israel to utterly destroy the gods and idols they find in the new land, and not to save the material elements from which they are made. These things are unclean. In Deuteronomy 29:16ff God warns against being ensnared by the gods, for they bring with them a root of bitterness and bear poisonous and bitter fruit. In Leviticus 17:7 it is said that idolaters ‘slay their sacrifices for satyrs after whom they play the harlot’. ‘Satyrs’ here can be translated ‘demons’ and Paul undoubtedly refers to this passage when he says in I Corinthians 10:20, ‘... what pagans sacrifice they offer to demons and not to God’. He adds, ‘I do not want you to be partners with demons.’ Demons then lie behind the gods. This is reinforced by Deuteronomy 32: 17, ‘They sacrificed to demons which were no gods, to gods they had never known’, and accounts for the severity of Exodus 22:20, ‘Whoever sacrifices to any god, save the LORD only, shall be utterly destroyed.’

When John says, ‘The whole world lies in the Evil one’ (I John 5:19), he means what Paul means in Ephesians 2:1–3 that all mankind was deceived in the Fall into the power of Satan. That is, man is under the control of the prince of the power of the air. This means he cannot have his idols to himself. He can neither subjectify nor objectify his rejection of God without being incorporated into the whole system of evil. His idols then are infested with demonic powers and evil spirits. He has now to contend with fallen celestial creatures, and other supra–mundane elements. He cannot have his idolatry in mild forms.

Furthermore, the principalities and powers⁷ nominated in Scripture have to do with the political, national, and international affairs of men. Hence gods cannot be apolitical. Thus idolatry cannot be privatised, however personalised it may be. Idolatry relates to peoples as well as to persons, to nations as well as to individuals. In one sense, according to the O.T. and much other cultural history, the destinies of nations have been bound up in their gods.

5. The People of God, Images, Gods, and Idols

The history of idolatry in the O.T. is too vast even to scan in our study.⁸ We can only see it in principle. Briefly we note that idolatry as such has no direct mention in pre–Abrahamic history, which is itself an interesting fact. In regard to Abraham himself, Joshua records that Abraham’s ancestors worshipped gods, and that God had called him out of that. Stephen records (Acts 7:2) that God appeared to Abraham as the God of glory, and undoubtedly Abraham’s belief in Him is a radical change from the idolatry Abraham had known. If we take Romans 1 as an account of man’s turn to idolatry, then we must account Abraham’s belief in God as a radical departure from idolatry. Hence the Biblical view is not that man began with polytheism and graduated to monotheism, but that he commenced with the polytheism of his own choice, and requires faith and revelation to come truly to God.

⁷ This whole subject of authorities and their relationship to peoples and governments is dealt with in LFS. 5, The Nature of Authority and Obedience. We cannot deal with it here, in this paper.

⁸ Articles in Bible Dictionaries (see Bibliography) cover this well, although with differing textual and critical presuppositions.

In the account of Jacob and his wives there is mention of teraphim, but these may simply be family deeds. However, in Genesis 35:1–4 Jacob admonishes his wives to put away any foreign gods, for these are incongruous with his family faith. He cannot truly make an altar to God in the context of these.

Whilst Stephen in Acts 7 insists that the thrust to idolatry was always in Israel, yet the history of Israel is remarkable for its insistence upon the nature of God as excluding idols. In fact Deuteronomy 4:1–40 is a brilliant exposition of the God Who is no god, but God alone, and of the danger and evil of idols and images which are not God. It is given on the basis (v.12) that when Israel met God they saw no form. Also it is wrong to specify anything in creation as an object of worship since all things ‘The LORD your God has allotted to all the peoples under the whole heaven.’ In Deuteronomy the theme is continually brought through as follows:

- (a) You must worship only God, and formulate no thing as an image or idol.
- (b) This true worship and serving of God will give you excellence, well-being, and prosperity as a nation.
- (c) You will, sadly enough, be enticed by idols and will shape your images. This will mean judgement, failure as a nation, exile and punishment. There, in exile, you will realise the fatuity of idols and you will seek after the true God, and in finding Him, repent.
- (d) God will then return you to your land and restore you. Beware, even then, that you do not again come under the seduction of idolatry.

Joshua seems to doubt very much that Israel will truly follow the one true God. He seems cynical in Joshua 24, doubtless because of some of the prevalent idolatry in Canaan. Judges reveals the lapse of Israel into idolatry, and this is confirmed by the prophetic books of I and II Samuel, and the Kings and Chronicles. At the same time, although there is a rise and fall in the intensity and quantity of idolatry, special accounts of idolatry such as that, say, in Judges 19, do not mean that true worship of the Lord did not obtain, nor that a significant segment of Israel was never pure in its worship.

It must be seen that the prohibition against formulating things or objects is in the context of worshipping them. The building of the tabernacle and (later) the Temple with its various artistic representations makes it clear that art as such was not prohibited, but art with a view to idolatry. The golden calf made in the wilderness was undoubtedly some representation of Yahweh and more reprehensible because of that. Likewise golden calves made by Jeroboam after the division of Israel (cf. I Kings 12:28) were probably similar in intention. Some see them as pedestals over which the unseen Lord was to dwell, as He did between the cherubim on the ark of the covenant. Idolatry made the brass snake of Moses and even the ephod of the high priest into idolatrous objects against God’s intention (cf. Judges 8:27, II Kings 18:4).

For the rest, the books of the former prophets are filled with accounts of Israel’s idolatrous practices as also the latter prophets in their denunciations of the same. The tragic story of Israel is its fluctuations between true and false worship. Solomon marries many strange wives and brings their gods and temples into Jerusalem, and the rot spreads. However much Israel may have overcome the deities of Canaan it is powerfully influenced by the exotic deities. In the books of the Kings we see their intrusion. The story of Elijah on Mt. Carmel is a climax in which hundreds of false prophets, or rather prophets of the

false gods are destroyed. Jezebel is a devotee of exotic deities. Finally Israel is in idolatry which mixes both the indigenous and foreign gods. Hence the political disintegration of first the Northern, and then the Southern Kingdoms. The matter is further complicated in that Israel fails to trust its true God, for in playing politics with other nations it really adverts to their gods. It indicates that the gods of Egypt are more powerful than Yahweh. Often the invaders sneer at Yahweh as incompetent. He cannot stand against their gods, and so on. It is in this way Israel profanes God in the sight of the other nations.

When Israel is viewed in the New Testament it is seen that idolatry is utterly abandoned. This picture is also given in the minor prophets. The only danger in the latter period of Israel's history lay in intermarriage with pagans who were idolaters. In the Gospels it is evident that there is no extrinsic idolatry. However, it is not apparent that there is no intrinsic idolatry. Christ's famous dictum – 'You cannot serve God and Mammon' – indicates the intrinsic idolatry of riches and possessions. He speaks constantly against riches and the social oppression that they bring. However, it is the fact of demons which is so obvious. In a way never explicitly described in the O.T. demons are present. In Luke 11:14–26 the matter is discussed, and Jesus infers that Israel is like a man possessed by one demon which leaves him or is exorcised, only to return, bringing with him seven demons worse than himself. In other words, Israel may be cleansed of extrinsic idolatry but in fact be worse than before that cleansing. If demons relate to extrinsic images, then they must relate no less powerfully to intrinsic images.

Christ as the Son of the Kingdom deals with evil, and men and women are liberated from demonic powers, both in the Gospels and the Acts. However, there is the deadly idolatry of covetousness of which the Epistles speak. Idolatry then can be the constant danger a Christian faces. Also Christians with weak faith and weak consciences ought not to eat meat offered to idols for fear they come under the power of the same.

The Book of the Revelation says quite a bit about idolatry. In chapter 18 it speaks of the world system, Babylon, and says that it has fallen and become the haunt of every foul spirit. Evil spirit–forces are freed from the bottomless pit in chapter 9, and they infest mankind. In chapter 13 there is commanded worship of the image of the beast, that is the beast is worshipped through the image.

The ultimate all evil powers are judged and destroyed, and so idolatry is also finished, but the principle of idolatry always remains a force which has to be contended with by the people of God.

6. The Fatuity of Idols and Idolatry

It is clear from our examination of Romans 1:20ff and Acts 17:24ff, that idolatry represents man's insulation against confrontation by God. Man, so to speak, fragments the totality of God in the multitude of his idols, and demeans the nature of creation by separating it from its affinity with God, serving and worshipping it and its components as he wills, and so destroying or perverting its essential, functional nature. From all of this we can see that man cannot make to be essentially so what is not essentially so. Hence his attempt is fatuous. It can produce nothing of lasting worth or value.

The Scriptures point out the fatuity of the idols in themselves, and also the powers that lie behind them. The idols are vain and empty. The gods so-called are no-gods. In passages which point out the dangers of idols and gods there is no suggestion that their fatuous nature renders them harmless, but their intrinsic fatuity should make the true worshipper unafraid and scornful. Such scorn will be insulation against giving the idols and gods any personal integrity.

In Isaiah 2:8 the prophet disparages the man who worships the work of his own hands – idols. In Isaiah 40:18–20 the prophet derides those who, being rich, make a god out of gold and silver, commensurate with their affluence, whilst the poor man makes his from plain, though durable, timber. God Himself cannot be made thus, seeing He is unique. To make a god of Him is impossible. So all idol-making is fatuous. In Isaiah 41:6–7 the prophet laughs at the intricate work the artisans use to effect a special result in the idol. In 44:1–20 the prophet waxes sarcastic. What does a man in fact create when he makes an idol? The timber he uses for mundane purposes, and the remainder he uses to make a god. In making it he grows weak, thirsty, hungry. He shapes it as he will. He cooks, using the wood for fuel. He fashions the same timber and asks his god to deliver him, to do good things for him. He never says to himself, ‘What an idiot I am. The very timber I use for fuel, for warming me, and cooking my food is exactly the timber I use for my god!’ The prophet concludes that the idol-maker lacks commonsense. His mind is deluded. He feeds on ashes. What can such an idol do for him? Jeremiah also continues the theme of ridicule. This is seen in 10:1–10. Showing that idols are of purely human origin, Jeremiah repeats the criticism of Isaiah and adds, ‘They are like scarecrows in a cucumber field!’ In verse 10 he contrasts them with the dynamic of the true and living God who speaks and moves and acts. The Psalmist many times repeats equivalent ridicule in such passages as Psalms 115 and 135. The idols have graven organs but they cannot see or hear, and so on.

In Isaiah 46:1–2 the prophet indulges in humour. He pictures the gods loaded on beasts and cattle. They are being taken with the conquered people into captivity. ‘Well, now,’ he says, ‘what can they do? They are as the prisoners: how can they help?’

In 48:3–8 there is a stronger attack upon the idols. They make some claim to prophetic powers. Of course, as we shall see, the prophetic, occultic, and idolatrous all link together. God imagines things happening and that the idols and their prophets would like to claim they had predicted such happenings, and so the happenings stem from the idols themselves. God says He alone will tell them, and tell them even before the idols come into being. Or, the idols having been made, He will suddenly announce so that the idols and listeners will see the thing on the very heels of the prophecy. In this way the fatuity of the idols is further shown.

Ezekiel shows the weakness of the idols in that Yahweh destroys the worshippers of these gods. Also the prophet uses the term *gillulim* which means ‘dung-pellets’, and the word *elilim* which means things of nothing, or ‘godlets’. Both terms are used derisively.

In the N.T. the idols and gods are called vain, i.e. empty, pointless, worth-less. Thus Paul admonishes the crowd at Lystra to ‘turn from these vain things’. In I Corinthians 12:2 he calls them ‘dumb idols’. In I Thessalonians 1:9 he contrasts the idols with ‘the true and living God’, thus exposing the emptiness of the idols.

The fatuity of idolatry is shown time and again. We saw in Psalm 115 (cf. Psalm 135) that those who make gods and idols become like them. The fruitless harlotry and adultery ascribed to idolaters simply inflames their hunger, thirst and appetites, but never satisfies the same. It is a restless quest and search which ends in futility. In Jeremiah 2:26 and 27 the prophet says, ‘As a thief is shamed when caught, so the house of Israel shall be ashamed, they, their kings, their princes, their priests and their prophets, who say to a tree, "You are my father," and to a stone, "You have begotten me."’ Doubtless Jeremiah is referring back to Deuteronomy 32:6, ‘Is He not your Father who has created you, Who made and

established you?’ and the reference to worshipping new gods and being unmindful of ‘The Rock that begot you, and the God who gave you birth.’ To read the preceding portion of Jeremiah 2:23–25 is to read an account of deep lusting and equally deep dissatisfaction. The very facts of having no hunger appeased, no thirst satiated will show them the futility of idolatry. The deeper the drive for the fulfilment the deeper the frustration and bitterness which comes with failure. This is the real story of idols and idolatry.

7. The Judgement Upon Idols and Idolatry

In Ezekiel’s prophecy the whole book rings with judgements on idols and idolatry. The idols are everywhere. They are mentioned some 38 times. In 14:1–23 the original judgements given in Deuteronomy (e.g. Deut. 28:15–46, 29:16ff, 31:16ff, 32:15ff) and also in Joshua 24:14ff, now become powerful prophecies promising exile and humiliation to Israel. God is indeed a jealous God, but His jealousy is the expression of His holy love. He cannot abide the spiritual adultery of His people. He has given them a heart to love Him (Deut. 30:6, cf. Exodus 20:1ff) and their evil is that they deny this love from Him and (responsively) to Him, playing falsely with Him and His goodness. The utterness of this punishment is spelled out many times in Ezekiel, nowhere more powerful in detail than in the 14th chapter.

Ezekiel speaks of idols in the heart (14:7), in the very disposition of Israel as an historical principle and fact (16:1–63), and indeed in the very temple itself (ch. 8). The major portion of this book is given over to the judgements which will come upon Israel. Related to her political action are the idols, for Israel has regard to the power of the idols of other peoples.

In the personal realm, idolatry is deeply punished. In the Decalogue (Exodus 20) God visits the sins of the fathers upon the children of idolaters to the third and fourth generations, those generations of course being idolatrous themselves. The mercy God has is shown to a thousand (or, thousands of) generations, by contrast. Yet in Jeremiah 31 and Ezekiel 18 God refutes the complaint that the judgements which have come upon Israel are for the sins of the fathers. This is not so: for God punishes those who sin, and if punishment comes, then those who receive it have also sinned. God’s judgements are not only national but personal. Ezekiel 14:7–8 says, ‘For any one of the house of Israel, or of the strangers that sojourn in Israel, who separates himself from Me, taking his idols into his heart and putting the stumbling block of his iniquity before his face, and yet comes to a prophet to inquire for himself of Me, I the Lord will answer him Myself; and I will set My face against that man, I will make him a sign and a byword and cut him off from the midst of My people; and you shall know that I am the Lord.’ God’s jealousy is not only for a nation but for persons within that nation. Perhaps it is Ezekiel of all the prophets who emphasises this.

When it comes to the effects of idolatry upon the person and life of idolaters, the judgements are terrible. Romans 1:18–32 indicates this. God’s wrath is upon the idolaters. They are compelled to ‘repress the truth in acts of unrighteousness by their own evil. Thus they are seeking to suppress God Himself! Hence God gives them up to their evil, and the experience of being given up is the very wrath of God in action.

In the N.T. idolatry is amongst the works of the flesh (Gal. 5:19–21) and Paul warns that those who commit these shall not inherit the Kingdom of God. Covetousness likewise is idolatry and again the covet or shall not inherit the Kingdom (I Cor. 6:9–10, Col. 3:5–6, Ephes. 5:5). The idea that God will permit idolatry must arise from the most devilish deceit of Satan and sin. No idolater has any place in the Kingdom of God.

Finally, the judgements given on idolatry are there to turn the hearts of Israel and all God's people back to Him. We will proceed shortly to examine the grace of God even towards idolaters, but God's woe is upon those who do not respond. In Revelation chs. 5–9 the seals are opened, judgements come upon mankind, and woes are pronounced. Fierce suffering is brought to sinful mankind, and yet in 9:20–21 we read of the obstinate impenitence of the idolaters; 'The rest of mankind, who were not killed by these plagues, did not repent of the works of their hands nor give up worshipping demons and idols of gold and silver and bronze and stone and wood, which cannot either see or hear or walk; nor did they repent of their murders or their sorceries or their immorality or their thefts.' Idolatry brings its own hardening, its perpetuating with the human spirit. Most of all it brings bitterness and defiance, a devastation of that which God has created to be serene, beautiful, purposive and eternal. The disorientation of created man by his fixing upon unworthy objects of devotion and service causes his inner dissociation and dislocation to be accelerated and enlarged. All moves inevitably towards an horrific climax which is the ultimate destruction of what God has created to be man, and which idolatry has horribly destroyed.

If these statements seem exaggerated then we ought to read the judgements God prophesied for Israel in Deuteronomy, chapters 28 to 32. Whilst not all judgements are specifically upon idolatry, the whole principle of refusing God's given law is distinctly related to it, for worship and service of God is the whole of man.

We conclude then that God's judgements upon idolatry are not light ones. Nor does He in any way ameliorate that judgement. Nothing but repentance will bring deliverance. In fact the judgements are initially designed to bring idolaters to the fear of the Lord which is the beginning of wisdom. Only then are they prepared for the riches of God's grace.

8. Cleansing and Liberation From Idols

We have seen how powerful are the idols. They fascinate. They draw breathless worship and adoration from their devotees. In their presence humans clap and dance and bow down, and even flagellate themselves. They carry on in lewd and lustful ways, or in the rapture of silent devotion. They may kiss the idol, implore it, seek to subject themselves to its powers. In all these things the idols are tyrannous. They accept the worship of their devotees and lay hard burdens upon them. The gods are capricious, arbitrary, fickle, and cruel. In fact they are the very reflections of those who made them, and the channels of evil powers who inhabit them.

How does man escape the idols? In Ezekiel 36:25 the prophet brings God's promise that, 'I will sprinkle clean water upon you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses, and from all your idols I will cleanse you.' He adds, 'A new heart will I give you, and a new spirit will I put within you: and I will take out of your flesh the heart of stone and will give you a heart of flesh.'

There is very little of this in Deuteronomy. To promise beyond judgement a grace which would regenerate Israel might have weakened the very sanctions God was pronouncing. There are hints that such exile and suffering will bring His people to repentance but prophets such as Jeremiah and Ezekiel were where the people were suffering. Earlier Isaiah had promised the Messianic Kingdom, and the renewal of a nation which was decaying because of idolatry and rebellion.

As we have seen, extrinsic idolatry had disappeared in Israel by the time of the N.T. happenings. In that sense there is no need to liberate from idols. Yet intrinsic idolatry is still prevalent. Jesus' pronouncements about the dangers of wealth did not endear him to the leaders of the day. The Sadducees, who mainly

controlled the Temple were commercially minded for the main part, and many Pharisees no less. The idolatry that Jesus warned against was Mammon, i.e. the principle of money and possessions. The principle of idolatry is dependence upon things and persons other than God. The Sermon on the Mount was given mainly to recall men and women to dependence upon the heavenly Father, the great King of the Kingdom, and to walk in the simple ways of that Kingdom.

Christ came to deliver from every form of bondage (Luke 4:17f, John 8:31–36, Luke 11:21ff) and one form is idolatry. Hence freedom from guilt becomes freedom from idols. Liberation is also the cause of man's love for God. II Corinthians 5:14–15 clearly shows this. Likewise I John 4:9–19. Man being freed from idols now turns his worship to God. On Mt. Sinai they had not seen His form. Jesus had told the woman at the well in Samaria that God was Spirit and they that would worship Him must do so in spirit (the Holy Spirit) and truth. At the same time he had informed her that God is Father. He desires the worship of His true children. There can be no idolatry, either intrinsic or extrinsic. The new people of God have affinity with Him in His Fatherhood and their familyhood, in His affinity with them in the Spirit, and they in their affinity with Him in the Spirit. He is the true God, as against the idols, and they are living and walking in the truth. True worship is thus possible and mandatory.

The Gospel is that which liberates man. In I Thessalonians 1:9 Paul says, you turned to God from idols, to serve a living and true God, and to wait for His Son from heaven, whom He raised from the dead, Jesus who delivers us from the wrath to come.' Here Paul has in mind the ultimate judgement upon sin and idolatry. In Romans 1:18–32 he expounds the current wrath which is upon man. There, as we have seen, idolatry is the immediate result of the rejection of God and from it follow all the evils man experiences. There are two passages which describe Paul's proclamation of the Gospel to pagan idolaters. The first – Acts 14:15–16 – describes the creational kindness of God in giving rain from heavens, fruitful seasons, satisfying the hearts of men with food and gladness. In this way God always gave witness to Himself – a witness which the pagans had not cared to read. In Acts 17:24–31 Paul speaks similarly, but in greater detail. God has made all things, and man is contingent upon Him for living. God has planned man's affairs so that he will have a thrust to seek God. Most of all, God is Father. Idols are reprehensible because how can idols be the Father or a father? This ignorance of man God has overlooked. That is, He has not come upon man in sudden judgement. Now that 'overlooking' has changed. Jesus Christ has come. He has done something which has changed the situation. God has appointed him as Judge of all the earth. He has attested him by raising him from the dead. On this basis He commands all men everywhere to repent. Repentance is primarily from idolatry.

To sum up: God had promised Israel He would deliver them from the idols. In Christ, through the Cross, He has defeated the idols, as He has defeated all things. In erasing the guilt of man He has set him free, that is from idols and all things. In regenerating him (John 3:3f, II Cor. 5:15–16, Titus 3:3–7) He has given him a new heart, and so new true worship of the living God as against old false worship of the dead idols. Man has been released from the old tortuous experience of being at variance with God and His creation. Formerly being in bondage to those who were by nature no gods although they gave themselves out as such, man is now freed from the elemental spirits of the world (Gal. 4:8–10). He is no longer under the legalisms of the idolatrous world-system (Col. 2:15–23). Such liberation is a mighty miracle of God for man is idol-prone, a point Stephen emphasises heavily in Acts 7 when he is speaking to the Jewish Sanhedrin.

9. God's People Living In The Midst of Idols

John's final injunction in his first Epistle (5:21) is, 'Little children, keep yourselves from idols.' The danger of idolatry is all about and around the early church. Prior to this John has said the whole world lies in the Evil One, and adds that the knowledge of the true God and Christ His Son is the true life, eternal life. To live this life fully one keeps rejecting the false counterparts of God, the idols. In Matthew 6:13, part of the Lord's prayer is, 'Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the Evil One.' The Evil One keeps seeking to seduce man by the idols.

Deliverance from idols demands constant vigilance against them. In I Corinthians 10:1–11:1 Paul deals with the matter of idolatry, especially as it relates to eating meat offered to idols. Previously, in chapter 8, Paul has said the idols are nothing. 'There are gods many and lords many, but for us there is one God, the Father, and one Lord, Jesus Christ.' Hence food offered to idols is just food, and surely because of that may be eaten without itself being intrinsically evil. However, those with weak consciences and faith, if they eat, will identify with idols. In love it is better for those with strong consciences not to eat and thus cause a brother to stumble.

The interesting point is that weak brethren always stand in danger of the idols. Thus in chapter 10 Paul points to the example of Israel as it became idolatrous in the wilderness. God's present children stand in the same danger. They are not to think that they stand victorious in themselves. They too may fall into idolatry. This will especially be in the realm of immorality. Paul sees revelling, sexual immorality, tempting God, and grumbling all concomitants of idolatry. Elsewhere he parallels covetousness with idolatry. Also he includes idolatry with the works of the flesh, something which is to be considered foreign to life in Christ. The flesh-principle and idolatry are closely linked. The flesh-principle is man against God, and idolatry is that which replaces God. Peter points out that idolatry is of one piece with licentiousness, passions, drunkenness, revels, and carousing (see I Peter 4:3). The Gentiles take umbrage when Christians do not join them in these things. Paul says clearly, 'Shun the worship of idols'. No one is, of himself, proof against the blandishments of this seductive evil.

Believers will not always be left to make their private choices. We have seen that from I Peter 4:3, but more than this the Book of the Revelation shows the principle that distinguishes idolaters from God-worshippers. The beast of the 13th chapter is the representative of the dragon (Satan) who is worshipped. Because of authority given to him by the dragon, the beast is worshipped. He in turn has an image made of himself and this is worshipped. Those who do not have the mark or name of the beast on their foreheads are persecuted and deprived of the right to a living. The true worshippers have the mark or name of God on their foreheads (cf. 9:4, 14:1, etc.). There will, then, be an idolatry which will be universal, and evil will make it mandatory for men to participate in idolatry. A clear example of this is shown in the time of the Caesars, when those who refused to worship the Emperor were persecuted.

10. Idolatry – The Attack of Evil Upon God, His Creation, People and Kingdom

If we trace the rise of idolatry it is centred in the original temptation which man faced. Idolatry is giving worth to anything in God's creation which rightly belongs to God. It is giving place to it, putting trust in it as an entity in itself. Paul Tillich said it is being ultimately concerned with that which is not ultimate. John Wesley put it, 'We have set up idols in our hearts... we worship ourselves when we pay that honour to ourselves which is due to God alone. Therefore all pride is idolatry....'

Man was tempted to be as God, i.e. to be autonomous and not dependent. This accords with Romans 1:18–32 where man rejects God and makes his own idols out of the creation. However, a number of Scriptures show us that 'that old serpent the devil' led man into idolatry and thus established power over him. He stole the

worship which belongs to God. He gave worth to things of the creation which rightly belongs to God. To make an image of a thing is to remove that thing from immediacy in relation. The image gives its priest-servants power over those who use their god. Likewise Satan has power over all that relate to images. We have seen that idolatry relates to all forms of evil. We have seen that idolatry has both its extrinsic and intrinsic idols. They relate to the works of the flesh. Whilst many cultures espouse gods which are linked with fecundity of crops, animals and humans, and often have rituals which have sexual immorality, yet idolatry in the heart has its links, eventually, with all forms of the flesh and its works.

In these ways Satan seeks to triumph over God. He is insistent on producing the same sort of things that God produces. Hence the idols have their own devotee-prophets. The story of Elijah on Mt. Carmel is an evidence of this, but then occultic elements such as necromancy, divination, sorcery and the like are linked with idolatry. This is clear from Deuteronomy 18:9-22 where Moses contrasts practices linked with idolatry and consequent false prophecy. He speaks of the true and the false. Isaiah 41:5-7, 26-27, 44:7, 46:1-2, and 48:3-5 show that the idols are helpless to predict correctly – through their prophets, of course. However man wishes to know the universe is operated by powers other than God. Hence his worship of the planets, his astrology, occultic divination or the like (cf. Deut. 17:2-5, II Kings 17:10, 21:3-5, etc.). Man seeks to know the future, to believe that in some way existence is planned, what are the portents both favourable and unfavourable, and so on. Yet this desire for such is part of man's rebellion against God. It is in the same camp, hence Samuel tells King Saul, 'Rebellion is as the sin of divination, and stubbornness is as iniquity and idolatry.'

All this endeavour on the part of Satan is to obtain the worship of himself by creation. He wishes to usurp God's prerogatives.⁹ II Thessalonians 2:3f says, '...the son of perdition who opposes and exalts himself against every so-called god or object of worship so that he takes his seat in the temple of God, proclaiming himself to be God.' The history of evil then is the attempt to counter God, to win the worship of creation by means of idolatry. Satan is compulsive to obtain this worship by any and every means. This is shown in the temptation of Christ by him.

God declares, 'I am the Lord, that is My Name: My glory I give to no other, nor My praise to graven images.'

It is clear from our study of idolatry that Satan seeks to hide from man the Fatherhood of God, or to filch fatherhood for himself (I John 3:10, John 8:44, Ephes. 2:2-3, etc.). We saw that rejection of God as He really is brought immediate idolatry. In Acts 17:28-30 Paul sees the evil of idolatry in its ascribing Fatherhood to idols. This is the point that Jeremiah makes in 2:26-27, and this is against the principles of God as Father of Israel in Deuteronomy 32:5-6, 17-21. Likewise in chapter 3, Jeremiah shows that idolatry is rejection of true Fatherhood.

It is to counter this evil delusion that Christ patiently gives his Sermon on the Mount. In fact it is to give the lie to all that man has believed and Satan has posed that the Father sends the Son. It is to destroy the lie that the Holy Spirit comes as the Spirit of truth. We need, then, to see the titanic struggle on the part of evil to topple God, subvert His creation from Him, and to take the reins of the government in this universe. We must understand Who God is, and what He is about in His work of creation¹⁰

⁹ For a fuller treatment see *The Dominion of Darkness and the Victory of God*, by Geoffrey C. Bingham (NCPI). The subject is extremely complex.

¹⁰ Studies LFS. 11, 14, 21, 34, 37, and 38 are recommended in studying the plan of God. Also CS. 8, *The Plan and Purpose of God*, and BSSH. 3-18, *Salvation History*, all obtainable from NCPI.

God, His People, Kingdom, ‘and Purpose

The fact that God is love is the paramount truth of the Scriptures. It is in love that He creates, redeems and finally renews His creation. It is to show Himself as the God of grace and love that He plans the ultimate holiness of man, and the Family of His people. The nature of His love, and the dimensions of the same are so incredible that sinful humanity cannot by any means know them. This is because man has exchanged the truth of God for a lie. Constant reading of Deuteronomy 32 and similar passages reveals the intensity of His love as Creator–Father. It reveals that His jealousy springs from His love, and so is as intense as that love.

When God will not abide the worship of idols it is not because of petty jealousy but the deep jealousy of love. He really loves His creation. Simple as that statement is it is the essence of the whole matter. Satan and evil is fearful lest this revelation burst upon humanity. Were it to do so it would wrest the gains of evil and lying. What then is that truth?

It is that God is essentially Father. He is above all, and through all and in all (Ephes. 4:6), and from Him all fatherhood and familyhood in heaven and earth is named. He has planned His people and community, His elect family, and to them He purposes to reveal His eternal love. He covets the worship of His people as much for their sakes as for His own. They are destroyed for lack of knowledge of Him. They are redeemed through that knowledge.

The Gospel then is the work of the Godhead, Father, Son, and Spirit to bring revelation to man of the lie of idolatry, and the dreadful purposes of evil. It is to reveal the true nature of God. Hence the Spirit of truth must lead into all the truth. Otherwise man will perish within the lie he believes. Understanding the Sermon on the Mount is not merely a profitable exercise but a dire necessity. Knowing the Son, and so the Father is not a mere option, but indispensable to man’s salvation, and his eternal security. The Kingdom of God is over all creation, and all history, and its triumph will climax the history of mankind and creation. Man must submit, for every knee will bow and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of the Father, for the Son, having made the kingdoms of this world his own will turn and give them to the Father, that God may be all in all. Then the hideous lie of Satan will be wholly uncovered, and the shame of the powers of evil and rebellious humanity will be complete.

11. Conclusion: The Image and The Images

When God said, ‘Let us make man in our own image’, His purpose was just that. Man was to reflect God, and to be in union with Him in His actions. Man’s total dependency was to be God. Any god or lord or idol represents to man that which God should represent, that is the source of life, joy, serenity, comfort, purpose of–being, and so on. The idols of drugs, alcohol, money, persons or possessions (amongst many others) represent just that to billions of human beings. The image of God is dulled by such dependencies.

I Corinthians 2:6–10, Ephesians 1:3–7, Romans 8:28–30, I John 3:1–3, Philippians 3:21, 1 Corinthians 15:51ff, are some of the Scriptures which portray the ultimate of man, i.e. as glorified in the true image of God. II Corinthians 5:17, Titus 3:3–5, Ezekiel 36:24–28, Jeremiah 31:31–34 and similar passages show that man is renewed by the Cross, through the Word and the Spirit. II Corinthians 3:18, II Corinthians 4:16ff, Colossians 3:10 and similar passages indicate that redeemed man is in the process of renewal, and this after the image of God. Hence man will be utterly in the image of God and fully relate to Him.

The truth is that Christ came to show the full image of God. He came as ‘the visible expression of the invisible God’, i.e. ‘the image of the invisible God’ (Col. 1:15). That is why John says, ‘the Word became flesh and dwelt among us.... the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth’ (John 1:14). This is why he, and he alone could fully declare Him (John 1:18). ‘He reflects the glory of God and bears the very stamp of His nature’ (Heb. 1:3).

Christ shows us the dreadful nature of idolatry, the hideous suggestion that anything can represent God or part of Him. The most diabolical thing visited upon man and resident in man is idolatry. It gives worth to things in creation, be they material, inanimate or animate that has worth only when it is truly congruent with, and subject to, God. God alone must be adored as Creator, as Father, as Redeemer, as Lord. To Him alone must worship and service be given. When man adores God and serves Him lie then serves His creation, His created humanity and himself – and all this in its true context and perspective.

That God should not destroy man for His idolatry is His great grace and longsuffering. That He should send the Very Image of Himself to reveal Himself is His incredible love, and His dimensionless grace. That He should restore man to the fulness of the image and make him shine forth in eternity as witness to His great grace is of utter love.

How then can man, even idolatrous man, not respond?

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– **APPENDIX ONE** –

Art and The First Two Commandments

The first two commandments forbid having any god but God, and prohibit the making of images or representations of things celestial or terrestrial. The point, as we have seen, is that the living God cannot be represented in part or in whole by any aspect of His creation, and in fact art, even in its most dynamic forms, is also static in that it freezes the aspect, however dynamic it may be in itself. Also it cannot show it in relation to the whole, and thus gives an atomistic view of God and His creation.

Whatever the truth in this view may be, the key to all idolatry lies in the statement, ‘You shall not make to yourself any graven image ...etc.’ The idol is something one makes to oneself, one’s community, one’s nation. One has something invested in that action of codifying what one desires. The commandment then forbids bowing down to it or worshipping it. Thus this use of art is idolatrous. One has much invested in the image or representation. We have also seen that God is dynamic and actional, and that man has been made to be the image of this, so that a representation of man could only be, at best, an image of the image. Christ is the true and living image, and an image of him would also be inadequate, especially if the image were worshipped.

The use of art is not forbidden in Scripture, but the use of art for idolatry. It is clear from the O.T. that Israel used art in the Tabernacle, in the furniture, the fabrics, and so on. It is also true that the artisans were men filled with the Holy Spirit (e.g. Exodus 31:1–11). Art was used in the music of the Temple, the playing of instruments and singing. Art, put very simply, is the use of a skill or gift for conveying to mankind things–as–they–really–are. We do not mean by this a formal photographic communication. Romans 1:19–20 makes it clear that the creation itself is communicating in all its living and dynamic forms. The artist has the gift of interpretation, of underlining and emphasising, and especially of communicating what he sees.

The earth is the Lord’s, and the fulness thereof. Any artist has the right to convey what he sees. However, the problem remains that man is rarely truthful. We mean that Romans 1:21ff shows man has rejected the nature of things–as–they–really–are, hence he will tend to show things–as–they–really–are–not. The bias of sin will blind him to the reality of what is there. At the same time he may do a service by communicating things as he sees them. At least that communication also gives a view of the communicator himself. However, whether what he communicates is helpful, or unedifying is not the point. His artistry is not directly idolatrous.

On the positive side it can be seen that art is the reflection of God’s capacity to create. Man, strictly speaking, does not create. Only God can do that. Man, in a sense, procreates. This goes for his art, as for his offspring. When man exercises ‘art for art’s sake’, then the exercise is selfish. All of life, rightly speaking, is a ministry and service to God, man, creation, and one’s self. When it is only for one’s self then it is ‘making to one’s self’, and is idolatry.

The artist who is a Christian has the way clear to communicate that which the Scriptures claim, namely that the heavens declare the glory of God, and the firmament shows His handiwork. He can listen to what one day passes on to the

next. He can see and hear Who God is, and what He is about. He can gain this truth both from the creation, and the Gospel. There is no end to the scope presented to him. It is not ‘art for art’s sake’. It is art for God’s sake, and for man’s sake. In this there is no idolatry.

–APPENDIX TWO –

Worship Without Idolatry

Jesus’ word to a creature – Satan – was, ‘You shall worship the Lord your God, and Him only shall you serve.’ This was a quote from Deuteronomy 6:13. It embodies the first and second commandments. The whole creation was made to worship, and Paul in Romans 8:18f refers to the frustration which the same creation knows in not, as yet, being able fully to express that worship. What is clear is that all things are made for worship. Worship is a functional necessity for the creation. ‘All Thy works praise Thee,’ is an affirmation of this.

So we must worship. As we have seen, worship and service are the one. A fine passage on this principle is Romans 12:1–2. We have seen that fallen man conducts an irrational worship in his idolatry. He re-rationalises the creation, God and himself to fit his new patterns of worship. He has rejected God. Hence, when he must worship (as worship he must) he is caught up in his irrationality, and seeks in the midst of the idols and their powers to accomplish that service which he desires. However, he cannot worship ‘in spirit (Spirit) and in truth (the Truth).’ Hence the only will he knows is his own, and the will of the idols. He hopes that these two are congruent.

Romans 12:1–2 represents the reverse of man’s idolatry. It represents what happens when one ‘turns from vain idols to serve the living God’. Nothing now is vain or empty. All is reality. We have reflected on the intense emotional thrust there is in worship because in fact it is given agape (love). It is the mind-and-heart thrust of essential man. False worship does enormous damage to man. True worship is his whole being, and that in fulfilment. Hence deliverance from the idols is gloriously liberating. The focus of worship changes. The mode of worship changes. The object of worship is now God. Man makes idols in his own image, and making them thus becomes like them. They reflect him. He reflects them. But see what happens when he escapes this sterile operation, for such never produces essential fruit, though it may bring forth all kinds of actions.

In Romans 12:1–2 we see the following:

- (i) The basis of the exhortation to true worship is the mercies of God. These Paul has described in Romans 1:16–11:36. They are many.
- (ii) Under such motivation man presents his body. Before the body related to the idols: now it is to God.
- (iii) This is the true, acceptable sacrifice, i.e. the body which is not static and dead upon an altar but living and operative, showing by its actions (eating, drinking, seeing, listening, walking, talking, etc.) the God in Whose image it is made, and Whom it reflects. Such is spirit worship, or rational service.

The principle of Hebrews 9:14, Revelation 7:14 and I Thessalonians 1:9–10 is that the grace of God moves to the response of true service for now there is union with the Living God. This sacrifice is holy, acceptable unto God and living, whereas sacrifice to idols was unacceptable to God, unholy before Him, and dead, for the actions were those of a dead creature.

Paul concludes in verse 2 that this brings about a transformation of the mind (metamorphosis) and person. Thus the person progresses in 'rational worship', and in this process and life knows the will of God, testing it out and finding it for himself to be 'good, acceptable, and perfect'. There is nothing to equal the thrill of knowing that will is not difficult for man, not perverse (as the gods and lords and idols would tell), but is, as God Himself, just fitted for man to do, for man is fitted to be like God in His actions.

No wonder worship is the richest, deepest exercise and experience a man may know. No wonder his great powers of love and adoration find their flowing fulfilment in the true object, God Himself, the one True God, the Living Father, Creator, and Redeemer. In the light of this knowledge the passages of Scripture in both Old and New Testaments do not seem exaggerated. We sense their majesty, their light and joy, their grandeur, their simplicity, and their sweetness. By contrast we see the barrenness of the gods, lords and idols. We see their tyranny, their grotesque incongruity with the real, their falsity and their damaging dominion.

To live is to truly worship God and His Son, and the Spirit of Them Both.

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