



INSTITUTE of CHRISTIAN GROWTH

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COMMENTARY

Today we have “American Idols.” Entertainers compete to see who will be judged an “idol” and win a prize as well as the chance to be “worshiped” by people all over the country. The dictionary says that an idol is: “A representation or symbol of an object of worship; broadly: a false god. This false god is given undue honor and devotion.”” Does the name of the program on TV really say that the people who are competing are going to become idols? Should they become idols? Can living beings become Idols? Since idolatry is so often condemned in the Bible it is my intent to see what God says about idols, and then discuss the subject in detail since it seems to me that He would not have condemned it so if it was not important. If we are idolaters we are in deep, deep trouble for we are not obeying the third and fourth commandments.

Every culture has idols or potential idols. First there are those things that are inanimate. Things such as money (Jesus said it can be an idol), houses, vehicles (chariots, bicycles, boats and cars). I have even found people worshipping the Bible instead of him who inspired it. This is called bibliolatry. Then there are living beings such as kings, princes, movie stars, singers, politicians, preachers and sports stars. All of these can become idols if they are viewed with undue honor or devotion.

Throughout the Bible God warned his followers about practicing any kind of idolatry. In the Old

Testament most idols were of wood and stone and were usually the Gods of the people who lived around the Hebrews. Almost all of the prophets made derisive remarks about them and emphasized their impotence. They referred to them as worthless, and detestable. All the prophets referred to them, beginning with Moses and ending with Zechariah. Ezekiel was particularly scathing in his denunciation of those who worshiped idols.

One of the most moving encounters in the Bible is that of Elijah with the priests of Baal. Elijah showed the Israelites how impotent the God of Jezebel really was. Baal of Tyre, as you know, was the god worshiped by Jezebel who had images made, and the people worshiped these images. It was not surprising that Jezebel who was from Tyre had brought her god with her and that convinced Ahab to worship him too. Elijah demonstrated to the people how impotent Baal was.

He was impotent because he did not exist.

Idolatry

Book Reviews

- *Divorce & Remarriage in the Church* The
- *Divorce* wor-
- *What's so Great about Christianity* ship
- *The Politically Incorrect Guide to the Bible* of
- *House to House* Baal



Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image...

Exodus 20:4

form so they made representations of them of wood or clay or stone. This was in contrast to the God of

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the Hebrews who was spirit and could not and should not be anthropomorphized. Making an idol of the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob was strictly prohibited. This was in response to the 3rd and 4th commandments. “You shall have no other gods before me. You shall not make for yourself an image in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below. You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God, punishing the children for the sin of the parents to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me, but showing love to a thousand generations of those who love me and keep my commandments.” God was very emphatic in these commandments for he knew man’s propensity to worship other Gods. He knew from his experience with the Israelis and the Golden Calf that they would take up the religions of the people around them when they reached the Promised Land. The inhabitants had gods that were visible. It is difficult to worship an invisible God. So God warned them that they might forsake him, and that if they did he promised that they would be punished for their unfaithfulness (Deuteronomy 6:14, 7:4).

All religions have idols except Judaism and Islam. Christianity sadly has them, especially in the Roman Catholic Church where they have crucifixes and images of the Virgin Mary that they worship. They say that they are not idols, but they are according to the definition we cited above. The Orthodox Church has all kinds of icons. They too are idols. Some Protestant churches have paintings or prints portraying their image of Jesus hanging on their walls. They are found most often outside the sanctuary in other parts of the church. No matter where they display them all of these churches are ignoring the commandments that forbid them!

But there are more idols mentioned in the Bible than the pagan gods of Israel’s neighbors. There were all kinds of gods In Assyria, Persia, Egypt, Greece, and Rome. As Christianity spread outside of the Roman world they encountered many of the gods of the peoples of those lands just as the church does today. There have never been a people who did not at some time have some kind of God portrayed in idols. If one travels today in India, Nepal, Tibet or China one finds idols of the multiple Hindu gods and Buddha everywhere. One still finds the equivalent of Asherah poles (phallic symbols) especially in India and Nepal. We easily recognized the five penis shaped pillars each of which was under its canopy. We saw these in a temple in Kathmadu. At one of them the head of a water buffalo that had been sacrificed to the idol was laying before it. It had not been long since it was sacrificed for there was fresh blood on

the steps around it. Two dogs were licking it up. It appeared that these are probably fertility Idols.

But what about the people of our day? If man has such a propensity to worships idols do people in the Christianized western world worship them. If we asked the average church attendee most would not think that we do. There is no mention of idolatry in our churches or in common conversation; however, on close inspection we find that we really do worship idols. I have already mentioned the images found in Catholic churches. But all gods do not have to have representations of them in wood, stone, silver or gold. They can exist in the minds of men. For that is ultimately where all idols reside. Jesus obviously knew this when he said that mankind could not worship God and money. Paul said that greed (love of money) is idolatry. (Colossians 3:5) It is obvious when inspecting the current scene that the most common idol in our society today is money. Love of money and greed is rampant in all socioeconomic classes.

But that is not all. It is also possible to worship living beings. Herod was called a God by the people, but this resulted in his death. (Acts 12:21-23) It was said that Domitian the Roman emperor proclaimed himself a god and demanded that people worship him. He was murdered to end his reign. Other Roman emperors did the same. Almost all popes (after 1100) of the Catholic Church, while not proclaiming that they were gods have been worshiped. People knelt at their feet and kissed the papal ring. Some in the past even had their feet kissed. This act is said to be performed out of respect, but it is a form of worship because it is extravagant respect or devotion

Ancient Olympic athletes were also worshiped. Those that were stellar performers were often said to be the children of a God or were elevated to the status of a god. Statues of them were made and worshiped after their death. There is no record of Roman gladiators being given godlike status.

Thus we see in this brief review that there is a tendency for man to worship gods other than the God of Israel. They make representations to them and worship them.

Today man is no different today than he was in the past. He worships money, other gods, and living “celebrities” whether in the entertainment industry or sports world.

Let’s look at the evidence.

The Bible says: “For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil. Some people, eager for money, have wandered from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs” (1 Timothy 6:10). If it is the root of all evil it is because people



make it a false god. A lover of money will spend all his time trying to figure out how to obtain money. He may try to get it by legal or illegal means. Legally he can inherit it or work for it; he can play the stock market; he can put it in a bank and draw interest; he can establish a business and make it grow thus increasing his holdings. Some may compulsively gamble in an effort to increase their holdings. Unfortunately this is usually the best way to lose what they have. If he is successful in acquiring money there is no end to his acquisitiveness

Greed is a deadly sin. In the Bible it was first called covetousness. We are told not to covet (Exodus 20:17). When Paul was talking about a knowledge of sin (Romans 7 and 8) he used covetousness as an example. Certainly we see it in our society. Athletes demand huge salaries as do corporate executives. I look at the size of their salaries or their net worth and wonder what they will ever do with all that money. Why do they keep accumulating more and more? If you know how much money Warren Buffet has, you immediately wonder why he wishes to accumulate more and more since he plans to give it away. He does not plan to leave his children more than a small amount. Is it greed that motivates him or is it the thrill that comes with the accomplishment. Gamblers tell me that there is a thrill that comes with winning. One could ask the same question about many other billionaires.

There is though one caveat to the notion that we should make all we can. This fact is illustrated by the following anecdote. We had a witty neighbor who had a rich relative. He was so tight with his money that he squeaked when he walked. Once he was bragging about how much money he had so our neighbor said to him, "Uncle _____, what are you going to do with all the money you save? They don't attach a U-Haul to a hearse." He had no response. Money is the root of all evil. Most crime has to do with money. Many rich persons have messed up families. In most of these families it is money that messes up the children. First of all the preoccupation and love of money of the breadwinner prevents them from loving their wives and children rightly. It also distracts them from teaching their children how to work. Their children have all they need and want so they expect it to continue when they get out into the world on their own. When left their own devices they do not know how to earn a living through hard work or how to spend wisely. One thing is for sure you can't take it with you no matter how much you have. We are not to worship money for it can become an idol.



People are made into idols. One of the most remarkable phenomena of the last century was the emergence of the Beatles as entertainers. The response of their audiences was unbelievable. They screamed and swooned and tried to reach or touch them. Wherever they went they were treated as if they were some kind of god. They were worshiped. Their worshipers had posters of them on their walls; they bought their recordings by the millions and made them rich. But it was the adulation heaped upon them that was true worship. One could say the same thing about Elvis Presley who had the same effect on his audiences. He included sexually suggestive body movements to his performances that stimulated the adulation of young girls. At the present time we can observe Brittany Spears and her popularity. It has not reached the proportions that it did with the Beatles or Elvis, but she was worshiped by teenagers for a while. Her adulation lasted for only a short while though. She is a toppled idol.

Athletes are also worshiped as if they are gods. Persons like Michael Jordan, Alex Rodriguez or Kobe Bryant are the center of attention in the press and on TV. Like the Olympians of ancient Greece they are accorded god like status. We are preoccupied with them and follow their every move. Barry Bonds would have had the same status if he had not allegedly messed around with steroids. Football players are rarely accorded the same adulation received by basketball and baseball players.

A few military leaders have received godlike status. George Patton did as did Dwight Eisenhower. I think it would be right to say, though, that they garnered more respect than they did adulation.

We can now return to the questions we asked at the beginning of this essay and answer them. First of all, do the contestants on American Idol become real idols? The answer is no. They are not accorded idol status in the eyes of the public. The second question as to whether they should become idols has to be answered in the negative also. Then we asked can living beings become idols. The answer to this question is yes. I would say that Elvis Presley has attained godlike status. People come and worship at Graceland and view his possession with reverence. I would also say that Michael Jordan has attained the same level of adulation in a few people's eyes.

I feel compelled though to return to the subject of our most common idol for our greatest idols today are not persons. It is money. The worship of money is so pervasive that

it affects most persons in our society. God made it plain that it is a false god and it can only get the necessities of life. We should not worship it! How do we know that we are worshipping riches?

There are symptoms and signs. They are:

1. A money worshiper sees money as the center of life. Everything else: health, hobbies, love, recreation, family and contentment are subordinated to the urge to possess it.
2. He considers money as an end *per se*.
3. He fears being taken advantage of in money matters. This fear is out of proportion to the threat.
4. He receives demands or requests for money with indignation, fury or excitement.
5. He utters the statement “I cannot afford it” even when he can.
6. He views the possession of money as his reason for being. Its accumulation is his primary goal in life.

In contrast when we truly worship God:

1. We see him as the center of life. Everything else – health, love, recreation, family and contentment are subordinated to serving him.
2. God is the end *per se*.
3. A worshiper does not fear being taken advantage of, and when he is he is not bothered.
4. We are generous to a fault.
5. We view our faith as his reason for being.
6. We have a futurology that says we have eternal life.
7. We also realize that he takes nothing with him into the next life for we will not need it. Christianity is a far better deal than riches.

It is unfortunate that we do not give heed to the admonition not to have other gods. It would seem that because some of our modern day “prophets” do the opposite and preach a

prosperity gospel those appeals to the acquisitiveness that is part of our human nature that we are preaching heresy. The failure of the leaders of the church to condemn such ideology has caused me to wonder what is wrong with them. We see how these prosperity promoters rake in the dough, fly around in private jets, live in big houses, and pay themselves big salaries and wonder why no one cries out. When we inspect the lives of People like Whitefield, Wesley, and Billy Graham who have lived frugal lives, we see that they almost emulated our Lord who said, “Foxes have holes and birds have nests, but the Son of Man has no place to lay his head” (Matthew, 8:20).

What are we to do? I have said before and say again that we should do as Wesley told us to do. We should make all we can, save all we can and give all we can. This way we can leave this world as both Jesus and Wesley did. They died poor, but satisfied that they did not practice idolatry.



EDUCATIONAL ACTIVITIES

I have only my teaching at the seminary ongoing at the moment.



PERSONAL NOTES

Retirement from practice has had a deleterious effect on me. I am sometimes bored out of my socks. Fortunately God sent me a man in great spiritual distress. He was diagnosed with cancer of the lung and then lost his wife with a undiagnosed cancer. Since he was my youngest son’s father in law I volunteered to go talk to him. I had a number of contacts with him before this, but I did not interact with him since he seemed emotionally isolated. When I went to see him he was in spiritual distress. I confronted him with my evaluation of his problem and then listened to him as he confirmed my evaluation. He admitted to his problem and then began to repent which he did for a week. When I saw him again he was, with some persuasion, able to accept his forgiveness, and then rededicated his life to the Lord. He was healed spiritually with this and pain in his chest that he thought was due to his cancer left, and he was pain free. Today he was filled this joy and anticipates joining his wife in Heaven in the future.

I have had a wonderful time teaching marriage and family at the seminary this semester. I had not taught it before so

I had a lot of work to do in preparing my lectures. Even so it has gone well. One of my students is a Spirit filled Quaker pastor who has been in the ministry for over 50 years. He is a delight. His daughter who is a widow is taking the course too.

I have not had any invitations to speak, but I hope to have one in the spring. Who knows what there is out there for me though. I hope people realize that I am more available now since I retired from practice.

We (my webmistress and I) recently had to move our Website to a new ISP and it has been a job. Our ISP is going out of business in Burlington so we were forced to move. It meant that I had to move my email address to my home address. Hopefully the junk mail will decrease for a while. If you want to write me do so at williamwilson@verizon.net. Our Website URL is the same: www.InstChristianGrowth.org.

This will be our last newsletter before the first of the year. So we wish you a blessed Christmas. As you celebrate the birth of our savior take the time to give thanks for all that he has done for you. You gave thanks at Thanksgiving, but remember Paul's admonition to give thanks in all circumstances and at all times. Just think, Jesus who was fully God chose to become human so that we could, through his death and resurrection, be able to have eternal life. Thank you Lord!



Books Read

D*ivorce and Remarriage in the Church*, by David Instone-Brewer, is published by IVP. I wish I had found this book before I began practicing psychiatry. I had reached the conclusions about the legitimacy of divorce that the author came to in his study of the scriptures. After I had become a Christian I had minimal scriptural support for my conclusions that divorce was justified for adultery, neglect and abuse, but it seemed right to me. I often felt guilty for recommending divorce since much of the church said divorce was only justified on the grounds of adultery. It always bothered me that divorcees were shunned in the church, even though they were not guilty of wrongdoing. Most had husbands who had committed adultery repeatedly and had deserted their wives for another woman. Therefore there was no ministry to these women who needed as much support as widows.

The author has done a masterful job of exegeting the scriptures that relate to separation and divorce. Since there

are scriptures that relate to marriage vows he has included these in his writing and used them as a basis for his belief that divorce is justified when these vows are not honored.

I wanted to write a detailed commentary on the content of this book, but I feel that it is summed up in the above. I have to say that I appreciate the effort that went into his writing for it was an academic effort that is unparalleled in its completeness. It is a book that should be read by every pastor even if it antithetical to their current beliefs!

Divorce by Frank Retief was first published by Struick Christian Books in 1990. It has since been reprinted two times.

Frank is a South African pastor in Capetown, but the book is available in this country. I may have reviewed this little book years ago, but I feel it is worthwhile to review it again. I have required my students at the seminary to read it since it is the most complete consideration of the subject I have found. He looks at the causes of divorce as well as the effect it has on the spouses and children. The discusses the scriptural basis for divorce and reaches the same conclusions that David Instone-Brewer (see above) came to many years later. He also covers the problems that arise in life after the divorce and does so in an understanding way. You will find this one illuminating.

What's so Great About Christianity by Dinesh D'Souza is published by Regnery Publishing in 2007.

This book I am sure was written as a response to Christopher Hitchens and Richard Dawkins atheistic diatribes against Christianity. The author responds to all of the arguments of the opponents of the faith in a methodical way and refutes their prejudiced points of view. He deals with the negative aspects of the faith such as the inquisition, witch trials and crusades. He then addresses the subject of Christianity and science and points out the irrational aspects of science that claims to be rational. He also deals with philosophy and Christianity, and finally includes the subject of morality. He makes a good point about how atheists are often amoral. His coverage is so complete that the reader will be able to take on any critics of the faith.

The author did debate Christopher Hitchens face to face and it was the opinion of observers that he was forceful and effective in refuting the arch atheist's arguments.



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I cannot recommend this too highly. It is a must read for every Christian who wishes to deal with aggressive atheists or who are educators shaping young minds.

The Politically Incorrect Guide to the Bible by Robert J. Hutchinson is also published by Regnery Publishing Company in 2007.

This book is another response to the attack by atheists on the faith. Like D'Souza his book is an apologetic for the Word of God. He cites the archeological confirmation of the stories of the Bible. He shows why the Bible made modern science possible. He points out why biblical laws paved the way for democracy and limited government, and points out how the enemies of the Bible are enemies of true reason and tolerance.

In many ways Hutchinson's book reinforces D'Souza's book for they both believe that the Bible is truth as it claims to be. This is easy reading and you cannot go wrong in reading it.

House to House by David Bellavia is what it claims to be – an epic memoir of war. It is published by Free Press in 2007.

My second son gave this to me as a present for my 85th birthday. I hesitated to read it because I have had a fill of violence. War is always violent to that explains my hesitation, but because Ben gave it to me I felt I had to read it. I finally started, but when I had read the first chapter I found myself unable to put it down. The author is a staff sergeant in the Army and describes his part in the action around and in Fallujah Iraq. He takes you on the trip he took to rout out the insurgents in that embattled town.

Before he goes to Fallujah he is involved in Dyala province. They clean it up and then head for their primary objective. He then takes you house to house as they gradually overcome the insurgents in close combat.

He feels he is responsible for his men who he loves and does all he can to bring them through the battle alive. Finally he is successful and they clean out the town.

The language in the book is what one would expect in war. The F_____ word is used over and over. The Lord's name is often taken in vain. There are a few times when the Christian faith comes into the story. On one occasion a line from the movie The Exorcist "The power of Christ compels you" intrudes it self into his mind as he is preparing to go after two or three insurgents who are in a well protected advantageous site and threaten to wipe out his men. He propels himself into the area where the men are located fully aware that he was likely to be killed... Even so he goes and gets two of

them, but there is one hidden who he stalks and finally kills with his knife. For his fighting in these actions he gets a Silver and Bronze star.



ITINERARY

**BORED
Out of
My Socks!**