

Understanding Idolatry

Our worldview or belief system develops naturally from our formative years and these sets of beliefs become a foundation upon which we build our lives. As we mature and relate to others and the culture around us, our belief system develops further. When God reveals himself to us, our worldview starts to go through a major overhaul. This overhaul can be described as sanctification or transformation. Beliefs are central to us and when they change, our will and emotions change.

Pip and I used to run a training programme for Christians. On one occasion we had a speaker who was converted during a deep and powerful move of God in the Hebridian revival, on one of the Scottish islands. God was so strongly present amongst that community that when people came to salvation, the overhaul of their belief system was deep and sudden and the transformation in their lives was quick. It was as if their worldview was suddenly reversed from being self-centred to being God-centred. When this speaker finished his teaching session, he spoke to the group individually. Afterwards he came and spoke to me and said, *'I cannot understand that these believers have been Christians for years and yet they are still struggling with wrongful thinking and getting their lives in a mess.'* Not many of us have experienced such a deep conversion that so radically changed our lives as our speaker; but it did highlight the point that what needs to happen in every believer is a complete reversal of their core thinking.

How does our worldview relate to idolatry?

When we live our lives from any other worldview than the biblical one, we are replacing God with an alternative. These alternatives are called idols. When someone lives their life from a self-centred worldview they make themselves the idol. They live as though they are self-existent when in fact they are created and dependent upon God for their continued existence. This is sometimes referred to as 'self-esteem'. Self-esteem is living according to one's own estimation of who you are. This next verse explains 4 different ways of seeing yourself.

1 Corinthians 4:3-4

'But with me it is a very small thing that I should be judged by you or by a human court. In fact, I do not even judge myself. For I know of nothing against myself, yet I am not justified by this; but He who judges me is the Lord.'

The 4 differing approaches to self-assessment are...

1. I live according to what human culture thinks.
2. I live according to what other individuals think.
3. I live according to what I think.
4. I live according to what God thinks about me.

The first 3 approaches to self-assessment are false foundations. They are all fertile ground for pride. They are examples of idolatry. Only the fourth approach leaves no ground for pride since it acknowledges one's existence as an act of grace.

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Understanding Idolatry from Genesis 1:26

'Then God said, "let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness, let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, over the birds of the air and over the cattle, over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth."

We are created beings therefore we are dependent on the one who designed us. If we were self-existent then this would not be the case. We are hardwired to be dependent on another or to be like another. Since it is God who sustains our moment by moment existence, we cannot escape this dependence. Yet God in his design gave us free will. This means that even though we may choose not to worship him, we will still exist. Another way of saying this is that we are designed to worship, but we have freedom of choice as to who we worship or whose image we will reflect.

Where did Idolatry begin?

Isaiah 14 provides a description of the fall of Satan. Satan decided to exalt himself above the original position that God had assigned to him and he said to himself;—

'I will ascend into heaven, I will exalt my throne above the stars of God; I will also sit on the mount of the congregation on the farthest sides of the north; I will ascend above the heights of the clouds, I will be like the Most High.'

Satan esteemed himself as though he was self-existent. He acted independently of God thereby rejecting the reality that he was in fact a created and dependent being. As a result he lost his place before God and was cast out of heaven.

In **Genesis 3** following on from his own fall, Satan deceives Adam and Eve into doing the same thing. He entices them to act independently of God and live as though they are self-existent. He tempts them to eat of the forbidden tree so that they will '*be like God*'. This new stance of independence birthed the concept of self-esteem into humanity. As a result, humanity became separated from God in a similar way that Satan had been. Just as Satan was cast out of heaven, Adam and Eve were cast out of Eden which was God's dwelling place on earth. This had a knock on effect upon the God-given commission given to Adam and Eve to act in God's name and authority to bring his dominion over the earth. The corruption that was now in them through their sin meant that instead of God's kingdom extending across the earth, Satan was working through them to extend his kingdom. That is why Jesus referred to Satan as the '*ruler of this world*'. When we live our lives to improve our self-esteem we follow the same pattern of demonic delusion which caused Satan to be rejected from God's kingdom. This is sometimes hard to grasp and needs the help of Holy Spirit to highlight it to us.

The good news is that through the cross we are '*born again*'. Out of the power of our new life we can be set free from Satan's delusion and self-esteem no longer needs to be a driving force to direct our life. Instead, the will and glory of God becomes our heart's desire. The truth sets us free from the deception of sin and opens the door of eternal life that restores us back into God's presence.

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Idolatry and Demon Fellowship

1 Corinthians 10:14-22.

'Therefore, my beloved, flee from idolatry. I speak as to sensible people; judge for yourselves what I say. The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a participation in the blood of Christ? The bread that we break, is it not a participation in the body of Christ? Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread. Consider the people of Israel: are not those who eat the sacrifices participants in the altar? What do I imply then? That food offered to idols is anything, or that an idol is anything? No, I imply that what pagans sacrifice they offer to demons and not to God. I do not want you to be participants with demons. You cannot drink the cup of the Lord and the cup of demons. You cannot partake of the table of the Lord and the table of demons. Shall we provoke the Lord to jealousy? Are we stronger than he?'

What Paul is saying in these verses is that behind all forms of idolatry there is demonic spiritual power at work. This means that when we worship idols we are in fact fellowshipping with demons. In the same way, because self-esteem led to the fall of Satan, when self-esteem is the driving force for our lives we copy Satan and through his deception we are caught in his web. Satan will aim to feed our self-esteem in order to strengthen this deception and, as a consequence, strengthen our worship of him.

When we come to the communion table to celebrate the Lord's death and resurrection as the above passage mentions, we are declaring our oneness/our unity with Christ. We are declaring that we have separated ourselves from the worship of any idol. Paul is saying you cannot be one with God and at the same time be one with an idol. If you do this you '*provoke God to jealousy*'.

How does God work to free us from idolatry?

Romans 8:28

'And we know that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are the called according to His purpose.'

If you are seeking to follow God and do his will then he is working something in your life to bring goodness.

What good is God working in us?

Romans 8:29

'For whom He foreknew, He also predestined to be conformed to the image of His Son'

Being conformed to Christ sets you free from idolatry. This is a lifelong process that the Bible calls *sanctification* or *transformation*. Sanctification is therefore a refocusing of who I am so that I conform and reflect the image of Christ, not the ways of Satan.

In justification we are delivered from the *fact of sin* which means we are no longer under condemnation. In sanctification we are delivered from the *power of sin* as we move from idolatry or self-esteem to reflecting in greater measures the '*image of God*'. In glorification

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we come free from the *presence of sin* – we get a new body and our soul is finally delivered from the old way of sin / self-esteem.

What is the opposite of idolatry?

1 Corinthians 10:31

'In all that you do, do it for the glory of God'

The glory of God is fixed; we cannot add to it in any way, God does not change. We are designed to reflect his unchanging glory which means that our motivation is to be people who represent his glory through our lives. At the judgment seat we will be rewarded according to our commitment to this. God applies his discipline in our lives for this purpose. He is doing it for our good so that he may reward us for eternity.

God's discipline

Hebrews 12:1-11

'Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who endured from sinners such hostility against himself, so that you may not grow weary or fainthearted. In your struggle against sin you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood. And have you forgotten the exhortation that addresses you as sons?'

*"My son, do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord,
nor be weary when reproved by him.*

*For the Lord disciplines the one he loves,
and chastises every son whom he receives."*

It is for discipline that you have to endure. God is treating you as sons. For what son is there whom his father does not discipline? If you are left without discipline, in which all have participated, then you are illegitimate children and not sons. Besides this, we have had earthly fathers who disciplined us and we respected them. Shall we not much more be subject to the Father of spirits and live? For they disciplined us for a short time as it seemed best to them, but he disciplines us for our good, that we may share his holiness. For the moment all discipline seems painful rather than pleasant, but later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it.'

Note the following points about God's discipline from this passage

1. God's discipline originates from his love for you. The role of parents is to educate and discipline their children so they develop healthy minds and hearts. God does the same for us as his children.
2. Discipline is described as unpleasant, hard, a rebuke, a chastising.
3. Discipline produces a harvest of righteousness for those who choose to accept its lessons. A harvest describes a multiplication from what was originally sown. God is working multiplication in your life.

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I am not saying that all hardship is from God as a consequence of his discipline in our lives, but it can be. Often God will highlight our insecurity by shaking some aspect of our lives so that we ask the right questions and perhaps we are then more able to see our idolatry and repent of our false foundations.

Pip: part of God's leading in our lives has been to walk by faith regarding finance and to look to him and trust him for our daily provision. Our testimony over decades has been that at the end of day, month and year we see that he has provided for all our needs. However, walking by faith and not by sight is a daily choice as this testimony shows.

I went to the dentist only to find that I needed major work that would cost more money than we had. I couldn't sleep; I was anxious; I doubted God and became angry at my powerlessness. Through this particular circumstance the Lord showed me that I was more focused on money or the lack of it than I was on him. Money had become the idol and as a result, I had ended up contending against him. Darkness had entered my heart and I was in danger of detaching from the Lord. I've been here so many times you would think I would have learnt this lesson!

Romans 8:28 says '*And we know that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose.*'

As I walked into my next appointment I asked the Lord to work this circumstance together for good and to deepen my assurance of him when I have no ability to control the outcomes. The Lord answered prayer over this situation in quite a remarkable way. It is only through such tests that we see what is in our hearts and can then choose to respond to him in our weakness and failure. God's intent is to show us what 'other loves' come between us and him. Our fears often highlight our 'other loves'.

Additional Points

How do I know if I have idolatry in my life?

You will know there is idolatry in your life when your thoughts are directed or controlled by something or someone other than God. The apostle Paul gives an example of this in his rebuke to the Galatians over a false teaching that some of them were accepting and tells them they had been deceived by a demonic spiritual power ...

Galatians 3:1

'...who has bewitched you?'

How do I know if I am entering into idolatry?

You know you are entering into idolatry when your motives for what you do is in order to improve your self-esteem or to give allegiance to anyone or anything other than God.

But what God has given me to do does not seem significant!

It is easy to see your life as having little importance when you compare it with others. Yet if you are doing what God has given you to do then it is of great significance to God. You need

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to see your life according to how God sees it; not according to how you or others see it. Only then you can stand in confidence in what you are doing.

Leadership and Self-Esteem

Idolatry and self-esteem are not just individual issues; they shape the whole of society. For example, Hitler formed many Germans into his image and was then able to make them obedient to what he wanted them to do. Mao did this in China; Stalin did this in Russia. People may dress like the celebrity they admire or would like to be. All leadership can to some extent have the goal of forming others into the image that they have of themselves. God has designed us to be conformed to his image. Anything outside of that design will fail.