

Institute of Christian Growth

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Evangelism and Today's Idolatry

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I wrote about political religions, which are one form of idolatry, in my previous newsletter. I wrote about idolatry in detail in an even earlier one. The Lord has given me new thoughts about this subject, so now I am expanding on the view of today's idolatry. I belatedly realize it is a major problem that we have not faced in the Christian world. I know it is important because God warns us against worshipping idols 164 times in his Word. This is why I am writing about it again.

From the very beginning, God commanded his people not to worship any other gods. He then continued to warn the people against idolatry through his prophets. Elijah was one of them. He was such a thorn in Ahab's and Jezebel's flesh that she tried to have him killed. Nevertheless, Elijah was bold enough to propose a contest between the reality of Jehovah and an impotent Baal. It was a "fixed fight." Elijah knew God would win and he did. Jezebel was, though, not deterred by God's victory. She still wanted to kill Elijah, especially after he had the priests of Baal put to death.

Isaiah and Jeremiah warned the people over and over not to worship idols, but Ezekiel was especially vehement in his condemnation. Of the minor prophets, Hosea was the most vocal. Hosea, Amos and the other minor prophets were the least vocal. They did not, however, fail to warn the country about idolatry.

In the New Testament Jesus did not even mention idols except to intimate that money is an idol. Paul emphasized this too. "Put to death, therefore, whatever belongs to your earthly nature: sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires and greed, which is idolatry" (Colossians 3:5). In Acts and the Epistles, the main concern was they should not eat food that had been sacrificed to idols. Apparently, some believed that the meat from sacrifices could be contaminated by demons, too. The apostle John was the only one who specifically warned against worshiping idols.

Today we hear little about idolatry. It must be that since we have been taught that there are no supernatural gods (Satan and his minions) we do not have to worry about people worshiping idols. It follows that people are not warned against idolatry. But that is a delusion! If we believe that idolatry is not practiced we are wrong. Idolatry is as rampant today as it was in the times of the Old Testament.

Idolatry is defined as an immoderate attachment or devotion to some thing or gods other than the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. The idols that were warned against in the Bible were most often images of animals or

anthropomorphic beings. It was assumed that the “god” inhabited an image fashioned by human hands or stones or poles. In animistic religion, “gods” (spirits) inhabit all things. New Testament authors agreed with Old Testament prophets. Therefore, if a person worships idols he is actually worshiping a demon. Many Christians today believe that Satan takes advantage of this propensity of man to worship idols to infest them with his demons.

In a like manner, we are told when a person recites his/her mantra while doing transcendental meditation, he is calling his personal spirit (demon) to come and infect him. This is true even in the American “import” version of it. If one includes worship of the Hindu gods in Yoga, the practitioner is doing the same thing. Both of these are derivatives of Hinduism in which many different demons are worshiped. In the Western world, Hinduism has limited the number to which attention is called.

Satan is behind all idolatry. His goal is to lead people away from the worship of the One True God. He desired to rule above God (Ezekiel 28:1-19), but there was evil in him, and God threw him out of heaven (Luke 10:18). On the earth, he desires to turn people away from the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, and guide and direct their lives. He does this very effectively. Jesus said Satan was a murderer and a liar from his creation (John 8:44); therefore the evil that exists in the world is his doing.

It is manifest, in one way, by the promotion of false religions that are acceptable to the culture in which he is working. Satan did this in biblical days using the gods of the pagan people who lived in and near the countries that the Israelis took over when they came from Egypt. Today, he especially uses political religions, humanism, environmentalism, Buddhism, Hinduism, native religions, materialism, psychoanalysis, sex, abortion, witchcraft, and even bibliolatry to distract people from the worship of the one true God.

Recently, Jim Abrahamson, a Bible scholar and minister friend of mine, further observed that when a minister begins to worship his church or denomination instead of Christ, he too is committing idolatry. This would apply then to people who worship their houses or cars, etc.

Satan understands that mankind has a biological need to worship someone or something, and thus uses this knowledge to lead them away. Why does he do this? The answer is that he knows God loves us and wants us to acknowledge and love him as our father. Therefore, if he can lead us away to our destruction he will get even with God for banishing him to the earth as well as satisfy his desire to be worshiped.

Now I am sure that by this time you are asking, as I did, why does God not put a stop to all of this by destroying Satan? I have to admit I did not get an answer when I asked God that question. I must accept the fact that his thoughts are not

my thoughts and his ways are not my ways (Isaiah 55:8), and I will have to wait for an answer until I see him face to face. I do, therefore, have to recognize Satan's existence and be in spiritual warfare with him as my enemy.

Evangelism is one of our chief weapons in spiritual warfare. Sadly, we are not doing what needs to be done. Our weapons are mighty, and if properly used, will bring success. We need to proclaim the gospel more energetically. I am sure that Satan is responsible for the decline of our evangelical effort. He convinced us that evangelism is done by especially gifted persons in large venues and in churches.

It is a fact that a small percentage of people come into the kingdom by this method. As I read *Decision* magazine, I am told that thousands of persons accept the Lord in crusades. They, however, are just a small percentage of the population in that area who are lost. We then read about churches having membership drives, and some of these are successful. The only problem is what they are doing is moving "sheep" from one fold to another. I do not know how many churches I have been in where the members tell me that they came from another denomination. They did not get fed where they were so they came to the church where I was speaking because they could get fed in that church. Very few come on profession of faith.

Now, if Christians are not getting the job done why is this so? **The answer is that evangelism is the responsibility of every person in the church and they are not doing it.** It is a fact that from the very beginning of the church most people who came into the church were brought into the kingdom by the witness of another believer. The church came into being in homes, neighborhoods and the market place, not by evangelical crusades or revivals in a church.

It is true that most churches were in homes and neighbors were invited to come to eat and hear the witness of the homeowners, so in a way they did come to the Lord in the church. Even so, in homes, the work place and other social situations, people were evangelized on a one-on-one basis and the church grew explosively because every member was doing evangelism.

Some evangelism was also done by street preaching, but again it produced only a few converts who then passed it on. The personal evangelism of the early church has again worked wonderfully well today in modern South Korea. Almost 30% of South Koreans are now born again Christians.

What should we be doing? Jesus summed it up in Luke nine and ten, when he first sent out his 12 disciples, and then 72 others to proclaim the gospel, heal the sick, cast out demons and raise the dead.

Now, the proclamation of the gospel can take place in many ways. The most effective is to witness in life and lip. Witnessing is nothing more than sharing

what God has done in our lives. It is most effective when the witness shares their spiritual state before encountering Christ, then their initial encounter with Christ, their surrender to his lordship, and then how their lives were transformed. If, as we witness, the love of the Lord anoints our message, it is highly likely the listener will want to access the same transformation.

Listeners can do this by praying a prayer in which they ask the Lord into their lives. This method is highly effective when other evangelical methods have failed. For example: I once was involved in a training session for medical students where we were teaching them how to do a Campus Crusade type of confrontational evangelism. The medical student who I was supervising did an excellent job of offering our patient the opportunity to live a Spirit filled life in a presentation that included the four spiritual laws. The patient, however, flatly refused to buy his pitch.

We discovered the patient was a church musician who had end stage kidney disease. He had two transplants in the past that were rejected, and he was on dialysis with many of the complications that long term dialysis brings about. He had been married, but his wife died leaving him with two children aged 12 and 10. He knew he was dying, and he was very anxious and depressed as he faced his demise and was concerned about the future of his children.

After he had rejected the offer to live a Spirit filled life, the Holy Spirit moved me to tell him what God had done in my life. During the next twelve minutes I told him how I had been successful, but my life had no meaning. I told him I had tried a lot of different activities in an effort to find meaning. I also told him I had sinned, and I felt ashamed and guilty of my sins. Then I told him how God had sovereignly reached down and immersed me in his love. I related how God transformed my life from that moment on. When I finished, I noticed he was in tears. I then asked him if he would like to reconsider the offer we made earlier. He eagerly assented and prayed to receive Christ. He was soundly saved.

I must say that Campus Crusade has been very successful using their confrontational "Four Spiritual Laws," but it is not my style to be confrontational about a person's faith. I know when I was a pagan I resented being confronted, so I have feelings about it. One of the things that the human will does not tolerate is the imposition of another's will above their own. People only respond to an appeal to their will. Jesus was very good at making appeals. One appeal was reflected in his statement, "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest." He, of course, was confrontational, but he never demanded that people accept him as their Lord and master. He always issued an appeal after he confronted them about the reality of their existence.

There are three existential states in which most people find themselves at some time of their life.

- The first is that their life has no meaning. Most people have tried a number of worldly things like sex, alcohol, drugs, civic activities, religion, psychology, cults, environmentalism, pro-choice, social action, etc. None of these things will suffice, for they only give life transitory meaning. What all mankind tries to do is to satisfy a biologically determined radical need for God with worldly activity. He created this radical need in us for himself, and a relationship with him is the only thing that will permanently satisfy that need. This search for meaning will be especially active at adolescence, in mid life and in old age.
- The second state is that unregenerate man has no control over their morality. Most of them realize at some time that they are slaves to sin. They have desperately tried to escape from the bondage that they find themselves in to no avail. For many of them suicide is the only way out and they choose it. Having treated alcoholics, drug addicts, prostitutes, madams and criminals of all kinds I know of what I speak. Jesus is the only way out and many do not choose that way. A heroin addict who had OD'd five times told me that he had no hope for the future or for healing. He begged me to tell him that there was hope. When I told him that Jesus was the only hope he had, he told me he did not want me to tell him that. When I then asked him where he was going after he got out of the institution where he was incarcerated, he told me there was no place to go. He could not go back home because they thought he was a "dope fiend," and he could not go back to the street because all they wanted to

do was sell him heroin. He tearfully told me, "There is no place to go. I have already OD'd five times and the next time I am going to do it right." And he did two months after release.

On the other hand, a young prostitute who was also a heroin addict came to salvation in that same institution. She told me she had hope. She said, "I have Jesus." She was sure God had a place for her to go when she got out, and it would not be back to the streets. He did! She went to a Christian healing community.

- The third existential problem is that of death. We are all future oriented and infinitely interested in existing. Some people can repress this interest and believe they will be extinguished, so they do not have to worry about an afterlife – but these are exceptions and not the rule.

A friend of mine developed cancer of the lung, and it was inoperable. It was slow growing so he wisely chose to reject chemotherapy and radiation treatment. He was told these interventions would only lengthen his life about six months. After he found out he had cancer, his wife developed an undiagnosed cancer and died in six months. A short while later, he despaired and spent an entire week crying and lamenting his selfish and self centered life. I volunteered to go and counsel him. When I got there, he told me about a life in which he was vocationally successful, but his selfishness and self centeredness had resulted in everyone

disliking him. This included his mother, his wife, and his children as well as his coworkers. Socially he was a despicable person.

Included in his story was an experience with the Lord when he was 18 years old, but he turned his back on him after about six months, and he returned to the world and worshiped himself for the next 50 years. After I listened to him, he asked what I thought. Being confrontational when dealing with personality deviations in my patients, I let him have it. I told him exactly what I had observed in him. He agreed. He had realized what I said was true, and he was truly sorry, tears emphasizing his sorrow. I told him Jesus would forgive him for being so prideful, but he had to rededicate his life and promise to amend his ways. He wanted desperately to become a new person, and as he prayed to accept Christ he was transformed.

After his regeneration I did spend at least an hour a week for six months with him doing Bible studies and praying. He grew in his faith. He was no longer depressed. When his cancer finally took him to the emergency room in a terminal state, he told all who would listen that he was not afraid to die because he knew where he was going, and that they all should make sure they had the same future that he had. He told them how to get that assurance.

No one wants to be lost in their sins or to continue carrying the emotional scars they have accumulated in the past. We know Jesus heals and can remove the

scars, set them free from their bondage to sin, and provide them with the promise of an afterlife with him. Let me say that we will not be extinguished. There is a heaven and a hell, and hell is no vacation place. It is what Jesus described it to be so everyone should do the only thing that will guarantee them an escape. They should make Jesus the Lord of their life.

It is, then, important for us to evangelize the lost. We need to have a passion to bring lost souls into the kingdom. When we do this, we are not trying to help our church grow. We want the kingdom to have new citizens. When they become citizens, they will want to come to a church, and if our church is a place where they can continue their salvation it will be the place for them.

The Billy Graham Evangelistic Association is promoting market place evangelism these days. They have at last realized that crusade evangelism is going to reach only a small part of the lost population. When we had a Billy Graham crusade in our area for five nights, we had an average of 3,500 people a night come to Christ. This is not an insignificant number, but it was only a small part of the million or so people who lived in our area and of the millions who lived in our state.

To be evangelists we must have a passion for souls. But we will not have that passion unless we are empowered by the Holy Spirit. We can be empowered by him if we maintain our spirituality. As a famous evangelist said, we may be filled

with the Holy Spirit, but we leak. We can renew the power by praying, reading our Bible, celebrating communion and worshiping in an alive church. These are called the means of Grace. Each of them can bring us into encounters with Christ which will empower us or renew our power.

Years ago, I interviewed a number of effective believers to find out how often they practiced the means of Grace. I found that most of them prayed about two hours a day, studied their Bibles a minimum of 30 minutes a day, and regularly celebrated communion. They included in their prayers the names of the lost persons they wanted to evangelize. When they led people to Christ, they also disciplined them. They were imitating their Master as best they were able.

Now I am fully aware that the average church member is not going to pray two hours a day. George Gallup found they only pray an average of 1 minute a day, but if anyone wants to be productive for the kingdom they are going to pray more, study their Bible more, and worship in Spirit and truth. All of us must encounter Christ frequently.

Knowledge of the gospel is necessary if we are to proclaim it. The following are the subjects that are included in the gospel.

1. The gospel is about God. It tells us who he is, what his character is, what his standards are, and what he requires of us.

2. The gospel is about sin. It tells us we have fallen short of God's standard and what we should do about it. It calls us to repent, to ask for forgiveness, and to ask Christ to take control of our lives and let us serve him.

The points I have listed of course need to be expanded, and there are books to expand your knowledge. J. I. Packer's book, *Evangelism and the Sovereignty of God*, is available and well worth reading.

It is time for the church to wake up and begin to do what Jesus called us to do. Go into the world and make disciples! I am appealing to you in this letter to seek empowerment. When you get it, begin to witness to the people with whom you regularly associate. Lost people will not come to you. You need to go to them. In my next newsletter, I will tell you how to be an effective witness.