

## **What is Idolatry?**

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It doesn't take long, when surveying the Lutheran Confessions and the American Edition of Luther's Works (especially on rapid access CD) to find that the Lutheran Church has a clear confession, not only of Jesus Christ the precious God-man Savior of the world, but also the problem of sin which is presented in Scriptures. One of those sins that is prominent in God's Law, the First Commandment, is idolatry.

### **1. Idolatry is the Condition of the Unregenerate Heart**

The prohibition of idolatry in the First Commandment shows us the chief sin and the source of every other sin against God. It is the reason for the curse of the human race and God's displeasure over it.

Idolatry is identified by Luther as the (original) sin of Eve. Luther writes:

The source of all sin truly is unbelief and doubt and abandonment of the Word. Because the world is full of these, it remains in idolatry, denies the truth of God, and invents a new god.

A monk is an idolater. He imagines that if he lives according to the rule of Francis or of Dominic, this is the way to the kingdom of God. But this is equivalent to inventing a new god and becoming an idolater, because the true God declares that the way to the kingdom of heaven is by believing in Christ. Therefore when faith has been lost, there follow unbelief and idolatry, which transfer the glory of God to works. Thus the Anabaptists, the Sacramentarians, and the papists are all idolaters—not because they worship stones and pieces of wood, but because they give up the Word and worship their own thoughts.

And so this passage helps us to learn that this temptation of the devil was the beginning of original sin, when he led Eve away from the Word of God to idolatry, contrary to the First, the Second, and the Third Commandments.

Here properly belong these words: "Did God actually command you?" This is an instance of the awful boldness of the devil, as he invents a new god and denies the former true and eternal God with such unconcern and assurance. It is as if he were to say: "Surely you are silly if you believe that God has given such a command, for it is not God's nature to be so deeply concerned whether you eat or not. Inasmuch as it is the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, how can such ill will come upon Him that He does not want you to be wise?"<sup>1</sup>

Note a few things from the above quote. Idolatry happens when God's Word is abandoned for other words. When other words are attributed to God than what God has said (revealed), the result is the invention of a 'new god.'

Luther significantly gives a progression of sin from First through Third Commandments. When a new teaching (false doctrine) is attributed to God, it is taking God's name in vain. Thus, when man dares to attribute to God a teaching or a name he does not reveal, God is offended and violated. Once a god

is invented, by definition he must have doctrine that opposes doctrine of the true God. And once this doctrine is embraced, God is not worshiped according to his commands. In Eve's case the name of God did not change, but the promise of death attached to the tree was replaced by the devil's lying promise (God knows that in the day you eat of it you shall be like God). This lie was attributed to God and taught in his name (Second Commandment). Her act of worship, eating, was sin, though she thought in her own mind it was good (Third Commandment).

Galatians 5:20 book ends its own list of works of the flesh with 'idolatry' and 'heresies.' These are the products of sin and ruination in the flesh of us and all people. It is a sin we each must confess, for daily we regard many things we do good that are wrong in God's eyes. Such are the works and evaluation of the flesh and spiritual blindness.

Please also here note that the terms 'false god' and 'idol' are synonyms. A false god is one whose promises are lies-false. As noted above these are inventions of the devil and sinful man. They exist in the false notions of god held by sinful man. God acknowledges the existence of 'other gods' as a part of his condescension to man in order to save man. He would not say in the First Commandment, "You shall have no other gods in my presence," if in his condescension he did not acknowledge the existence of false gods in the sick hearts of damned sinners. His warning would be hollow and the Commandment not honored, if we said, 'there are no other gods,' when we are surrounded by a world full of gods, the imaginings of man. It would be tantamount to saying of the First Commandment, "Hath God really said?"

## **2. Idolatry and the Natural Knowledge of God**

One could not be an idolater if he did not entertain in his heart the concept of God. This is stated by Paul in Romans 1:20-23

For since the creation of the world His invisible *attributes* are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, *even* His eternal power and Godhead, so that they are without excuse, because, although they knew God, they did not glorify *Him* as God, nor were thankful, but became futile in their thoughts, and their foolish hearts were darkened. Professing to be wise, they became fools, and changed the glory of the incorruptible God into an image made like corruptible man—and birds and four-footed animals and creeping things. (NKJV)

Luther is often quoted in his Romans commentary:

That to all people, and especially to idolaters, clear knowledge of God was available, as he says here, so that they are without excuse and it can be proved that they had known the invisible things of God, His divinity, likewise His eternal being and power, becomes apparent from the following: All those who set up idols and worship them and call them "gods," or even "God," believing that God is immortal, that is, eternal, powerful, and able to render help, clearly indicate that they have a knowledge of divinity in their hearts. For with what reason could they call an image or any other created thing God, or how could they believe that it resembled Him if they did not

know at all what God is and what pertains to Him? How could they attribute such qualities to a rock or to Him whom they thought to be like a rock, if they did not believe that these qualities were really suitable for Him? When they now hold that divinity is invisible (a quality to be sure, which they have assigned to many gods) and that he who possesses it is invisible, immortal, powerful, wise, just, and gracious to those who call upon him, when they hold fast to this idea so that they confess it also by works, by calling upon him, worshiping and adoring him of whom they think that divinity resides in him, then it follows most surely that they had a knowledge or notion of divinity which undoubtedly came to them from God, as our text tells us. This was their error, that they did not worship this divinity untouched but changed and adjusted it to their desires and needs. **Everyone** wanted to see the divinity in the one who appealed to him, and so they changed the truth of God into a lie. Thus they knew that the nature of divinity, or of God, is that He is powerful, invisible, just, immortal, and good. They knew the invisible things of God, His eternal power and divinity. This major premise of the “practical syllogism,” this theological “insight of the conscience,” is in all men and cannot be obscured. But in the minor premise they erred when they said and claimed: “Now, this one,” that is, Jupiter or any other who is like this image, “is of this type, etc.” This is where the error began and produced idolatry, for **everyone** wanted to subsume according to his own interests. If they had stayed with this feeling and had said: “Look, we know this: Whoever this God, or this Divinity, may be whose nature is to be immortal and powerful and able to hear those who call upon Him, let us worship and adore Him, let us not call Him Jupiter and say that He is like this or that image, but let us simply worship Him, no matter who He is (for He must have being),” then without a doubt they would have been saved, even though they had not recognized Him as the Creator of heaven and earth or taken note of any other specific work of His hands. You see, this is the meaning of the words “The things that are known of God are manifest in them.” But where and how? Answer: *The invisible things of God are clearly seen in the things that have been made.* One can see how one man helps another, one animal another, yes, how one thing helps and assists another, according as it has superior power and ability. At all times the higher and the more privileged one helps or suppresses the lower and less privileged one. Therefore, there must be that in the universe which is above all and helps all. People measure God by the blessings they receive. This is also the reason why people in ancient times made gods of those who showed them benevolence. In this way they wanted to thank them, as Pliny says.

21. *For although they knew God, they did not honor Him as God, etc.* If they did not honor Him as God, or as if He were God, did they honor Him in a different way than as God? Apparently the apostle wants to say this, and the following passage agrees with this meaning:

23. *And exchanged the glory, etc.* That means: They worshiped Him not as God but in the likeness of an image, and **so they worshiped not God but a figment of their own imagination.** I should be glad to agree with this interpretation, because even the Children of Israel were charged with having worshiped Baal and calves, even though it is clear that with these images and symbols they wanted to worship the true God, but this they were forbidden to do.<sup>2</sup>

Note from Luther that he acknowledges that in the human heart there is something that you can't not know. There is the knowledge of a true God. But this knowledge is INVARIABLY perverted and turned to sin by man's adding his own thoughts and speculations to this natural knowledge. These two things, the knowledge of God and man's sinful perversion of it CANNOT BE SEPARATED. It is the very definition of what it means to be born in sin. What is the effect of this natural knowledge in man?

First, it leaves natural man (**everyone**) without excuse. God has revealed himself to man. Man freely, of his own (sinful) will adds his own thoughts to what is holy and creates for himself his own gods. Thus, deprived of excuse, man is also by this resourced to fall deeper into sin, as one sin (idolatry) leads to every other sin as referenced to Eve above and Paul further recounts of human sin and depravity. This describes the very condition of being under God's curse; to be a son of Eve.

Also note that Luther states clearly that they DO NOT WORSHIP THE TRUE GOD, nor the image they made, but an imaginary (false) god. False gods are made and held by the evil imagination.

As we observe in the world, these false gods are not neutral to the true God. It is not as if the natural knowledge of God is merely some neutral but incomplete revelation of God just waiting innocently to be completed in the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Rather, the doctrines of these false gods are held as deeply and reverently and devotedly as the true doctrine is held in those converted to Christ. And these false doctrines of the false gods oppose the doctrines of Christ. Why?

This natural knowledge of God, whatever name it runs under, is Law. It believes that death is a problem with which God is involved. It believes in some love and blessing of God. It believes there is a salvation. It believes that there is right and wrong. But as a religion of the Law, it inevitably creates a god who is pleased or can be pleased by human works. Salvation is by the believer's own ability and responsibility to be good and to do good works; in essence to save himself. Do this. Such a god is always the figment of fallen human imagination and proud powerful man will not be deprived of such a god. The Law's promise of life (if you do it) is relied upon by the sinner but creates only death in the sinner. It is an addictive promise and pursuit that man cannot let go of on his own. That is why conversion is not completion of the natural knowledge of God (law), but death to that natural knowledge and creation of faith in God as he is actually revealed in the cross of Christ and worshiped according to his command around the preaching of that cross and its attending Sacraments.

### **3. Idolatry and the Cross - Conversion and Repentance**

Who are idolaters? We are all born idolaters. Who needs conversion? All people.

Special cases are sometimes suggested. Having rejected their Messiah, Jesus, do the Jews worship the true God, or do they need conversion? One must certainly acknowledge that they believe that the god they worship created the heavens and the earth. They have the revealed true names of God revealed in Old Testament history. But do they worship the God of the First Article of the Creed, the first person of the Trinity, God the Father Almighty?

Jesus says to the unbelieving Jews of his day (John 8:42), "If God were your Father, you would love Me, for I proceeded forth and came from God; nor have I come of Myself, but He sent Me. Why do

you not understand my speech? Because you are not able to listen to my Word. You are of your father, the devil, and the desires of your father, you want to do.” He identifies them by their clinging to lies instead of the truth. Remember the definition of idolatry; making god according to your thoughts and desires, and thus refusing (not being able to hear) God’s Word. He points to the hostility present in their idolatry. Idolatry is stubborn resistance to the truth. The desires of your father, you want to do. And they did when they killed him. That is the nature of idolatry in us all.

So...do we share the Father with the Jews? Not according to Christ. Can we say differently? Or, hath God really said??? If Jesus says this of the Jews, what of the other world religions?

All need converting. How is this done? Apologetics and witnessing are not the same thing, but they do have certain things in common. They both have the goal removing false gods from the heart of sinful lost man and they have the ultimate goal of witnessing of Christ to sinners, which is the Spirit's means of converting sinners.

It is foolish to say that one must believe in the One True God in order to be witnessed to and converted. Why? Because faith is not a pre-requisite of the Gospel. It is the creation of the Gospel. St. Paul says of preaching (2 Corinthians 4:6), "For it is the God who commanded light to shine in the darkness, who has shown in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ." He does not say that God uses or borrows anything in sinful man to save him, let alone his natural knowledge of God as some pre-requisite, but out of nothing through the Gospel (the bloody face of Jesus preached). To say other would be to deny infant baptism.

Apologetics is getting to know the contradictions necessarily contained in false theology and exposing them. Paul argues in Act 17 (Athens) from creation that God who creates is different in nature from what he created. It is a good argument to jar someone who wants to worship God in a block of wood. That is apologetics. It is not in order to argue to a belief in the true God but to jar the false god from his secure throne and frighten the unbeliever. It serves a Law function. Apologetics NEVER affirm false faith or acknowledge what is not true. For although Paul quotes pagan wisdom and references idols, he plainly calls the Athenian worship ignorant and calls them to repentance under impending judgement. He turned from apologetics, which seemed here to get him nowhere, to a witness of Christ so that 'some believed.' Although the door is left open by this to doing some apologetics in missionary contexts, it seems no accident that when he moved down the road to Corinth, St. Paul remembered that in Corinth (1 Corinthians 2), "I resolved to know nothing among you, but Christ and him crucified...", and this after he repudiates worldly wisdom in order to extol the wisdom of the cross, which alone can create faith and save (1 Corinthians 1:20-25).

Preaching the Gospel is the means which God has **commanded** to create faith (Romans 10). He says in all the Gospels to preach and to call all people from idols (false beliefs) to the true God. Preaching Christ crucified ends the search for God's favor by trying to do good to please him (Law promises). Preaching Christ tells sinners that in God's love Christ has died for us and rose again, so that we can die with him in God's grace and live with him in his kingdom. The Gospel converts those who are far away to being people of God and co-heirs with Christ. Preaching this cross is how God converts people. (Luke 24:46-47).

Without this witness and call to repentance no faith is possible. If a preacher withholds this Gospel while defending, endorsing, promoting or tolerating the false doctrine of errorists, then he does not confess Christ as the only savior of the world, but actually denies the same as St. Peter in the courtyard. Idolatry and worship of the true God MUST BE mutually exclusive for God's faithful.

#### **4. Idolatry and the Church Today**

Idolatry is embraced when God's Word is absent or rejected. The church is always at risk of falling into idolatry because all of its members, pastors and leaders have this tendency in their hearts. The modern church often wants to worship in order to stroke feelings in the worshiper, instead of according to how God wants to be worshiped. The chief worship of God is the faithful gathering of sinners around Jesus. In true worship Christ's presence to save sinners permeates all the words and activities in that worship. Our feelings are not God. Jesus is God. Feelings can become an idol in the church if what we do is in service to them and at the expense of Christ's saving presence.

The church is idolatrous when it is not Christ centered and Word centered. God makes us holy through his Word. Believers seek to be a confessional church because they are not fans of modernity, post modernity or any other cultural fad. Rather than anything contemporary, believers want something ancient, in fact eternal. Believers want the eternal God to speak. They want to hear his forgiving voice in the Words of Jesus. If people want something else, they are idolaters. And we must invite them to join us on our knees to confess idolatrous dissatisfaction with God's grace and Christ and their itching ears craving insatiably for something other than God in Christ to make them feel better about themselves.

The true Church of Christ hears the Biblical injunctions to 'take eat and take drink.' It hears the promise of Jesus to be present among the two or three. It hears the promise, 'if we confess our sins, God is faithful and just to forgive us our sin...' It hears the command, 'be baptized and wash away your sins.' And it treasures these words and the actions created by those words as if they were more important than all the universe, because they are. For heaven and earth, like yesterday, will pass away. But his Words will never. If we cannot be satisfied and gladdened by these, there can be no hope. God grant that we cling to them and confess them to the world, whether the world (or we ourselves in our sinfulness) like it or not!

#### **E\_N\_D\_N\_O\_T\_E\_S**

1.Luther, M. (1999, c1958). Vol. 1: Luther's works, vol. 1 : Lectures on Genesis: Chapters 1-5 (J. J. Pelikan, H. C. Oswald & H. T. Lehmann, Ed.). Luther's Works (Vol. 1, p. 149). Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House.

2.Luther, M. (1999, c1972). Vol. 25: Luther's works, vol. 25 : Lectures on Romans (J. J. Pelikan, H. C. Oswald & H. T. Lehmann, Ed.). Luther's Works (vol. 23, p. 158). Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House.