

Here Are Your Gods' Book Release Connects Idol Worship in Bible Times to Idolatry Today

In the News

In his recently released book, *'Here Are Your Gods': Faithful Discipleship in Idolatrous Times*, Old Testament scholar Christopher J.H. Wright invites the reader to consider how idolatry (by many other names) permeates our own culture. Wright delineates how the authors of the Bible defined idols, and suggests that we are tempted to worship idols that are similar to those people in biblical times were tempted to worship.

The word for idol comes from the Greek, *eidōlon*, meaning "image" or "fantasy." From this we understand that idolatry is the worship of images or appearances, which hide or pervert what those images purportedly depict. Idols may appear to portray deity or divinity, which they are incapable of portraying.

"Idolatry is nothing like the crude picture that springs to mind of a sculpture in some distant country," wrote apologist Richard Keyes. "Idols are not just on pagan altars, but in well-educated human hearts and minds."

Wright contends that idolatries of greed, sex, arrogance and abuse of political and economic power are as prevalent in our time as they are in the biblical narrative, though they may take different forms. He stresses that idolatry that is political in nature has been a particular problem in recent years.

"One of the horrendous blasphemies of the modern West has been the ease of using the name of God in association with national aggrandization," he writes. The temptation to court and trust in political power is nothing new, of course. The people of Israel struggled with that issue in Bible times as well.

The Mosaic assertion that there is only one God, and that people should serve only the one true God, flew in the face of polytheistic culture then just as it does now. Biblical writers routinely called out so-called gods as "not-gods" that lacked the traits of Yahweh. But those "not-gods" still impacted their human creators and worshipers, who attributed power and authority to them. "It is not impossible ... to answer the question, 'Are other gods something or nothing?' with the paradox 'Both,'" Wright said. "They are *nothing in relation to Yahweh*; they are *something in relation to their worshipers*."

"Although the West has been shaped by many (now-fading) biblical ideals," wrote ethicist Paul Copan, "we are witnessing a culture shot through with a host of idolatrous tendencies to put our trust in the wrong places -- in that which is not-God."

"God alone is uncreated, self-existent, noncontingent. God's being depends on nothing else outside God's own self," Wright states. "All other reality, by contrast, is created by God and therefore is dependent on God for existence and sustenance. The creation is contingent on God."

"Idolatry, then, is always polytheism, an aimless passing from one lord to another," wrote Pope Francis in *Lumen Fidei: Enciclica sulla Fede*. "Idolatry does not offer a journey but rather a plethora of paths leading nowhere and forming a vast labyrinth."

Brian Rosner, author of *Greed as Idolatry*, defines idolatry as "an attack on God's exclusive rights to our love, trust and obedience." Idolatry is dangerous, he maintains, because it almost always involves the offer of good things as substitutes for God.

Wright points out that idolatry often perverts something good, by elevating that good thing to the status that only God has the right to occupy. Timothy Keller, founder of Redeemer City to City, a training program for global urban ministry, agrees that idolatry is "taking a good thing and making it an ultimate thing."

In an interview about the content of his book, Wright gives the individual conscience as an example of a good thing that can become an idol. "Luther was right to champion the individual's right to stand by his or her own conscientious understanding of Scripture," Wright asserts. "But this easily degenerates into ... a form of 'rugged individualism' that rejects all legitimate authority."

Biblical authority, a vital aspect of our faith, is another example of something good that can be twisted into an idolatry of an interpretation of the Bible favored by a particular faction or leader.

Wright laments that some claim "true doctrine while living un-Christlike lives."

Wright's research leads us to conclude that when we attempt to place anything, no matter how innocent or laudable, in the place of God, it becomes an idol that must be dethroned, so that we may worship the one true God alone, as church reformer Martin Luther wrote, "Whatever your heart clings to and confides in, that is really your God."

More on this story can be found at these links:

[Our Attraction to Idols Remains the Same, Even When the Names Change. *Christianity Today*](#) (Note: A subscription is required to read this article.)

[Idolatry. *Jewish Virtual Library*](#)

[The Concept of Idolatry. *The Gospel Coalition*](#)

[Idolatry. *Bible Reasons*](#)

The Big Questions

1. How would you define idolatry? What constitutes an idol? Is an idol the same thing as a god? Explain.
2. In what sense are gods "real," and in what sense are they "unreal"?
3. How might an individual's idolatry compare and contrast with the idolatry of a group or community? How might an individual's idolatry impact that of a group or community, and vice versa?
4. What idols, if any, might Christians be particularly tempted to embrace?
5. What steps can Christians take, individually and as a group, to guard against idol worship?