

The Church and Idolatry

By Jared Wilson, Ligonier Ministries

“Now set your mind and heart to seek the LORD your God” ([1 Chron. 22:19](#)). All sin is idolatry because every sin is an exercise in trust of something or someone other than the one true God to satisfy, fulfill, or bless. It is not difficult to see how violations of commandments two through ten are automatic violations of commandment one. This truth reveals that the hottest “worship war” going is the one taking place daily in the sanctuary of our own hearts. But we must wage this war because none of us is a bystander to idol worship.

In [Isaiah 44:12–17](#), we find a powerful and revelatory description of just how easy it is to slip into idolatry. We see in the passage that ironsmiths are simply working their tools over the coals, fashioning them with their hammers. Carpenters measure out cuts and notches. Artists capture the physical form in sketches and sculpture. Men chop down trees to build houses, then they plant more trees to replace them. They build fire, bake bread. Ah, look at what we’ve created.

The transition is seamless from everyday, workaday living to “he makes a god and worships it; he makes it an idol and falls down before it” (v. 15). Of the same fire he has used for warmth and cooking, the workman says, “Deliver me, for you are my god!” (v. 17).

The move is subtle. The switch from ordinary human achievement to blasphemy requires no explanation. It just flat out happens. [Isaiah 44:12–17](#) demonstrates that there is only one step to becoming an idolater, and it is simply to mind your own business.

The implication for our churches is huge. On Sundays, our sanctuaries fill with people seeking worship, and not one person comes in set to neutral. We must take great care, then, not to assume that even in our religious environments, where we put the Scriptures under so many noses, that it is Jesus the exalted Christ who is being worshiped.

Every weekend in churches everywhere, music is performed to the glory of human skill and artistry. Once upon a time, I sat through a little ditty in a church service in which the congregation was led to sing, “I can change the

world with these two hands,” and the question struck me like a lightning bolt: “Who exactly am I worshiping right now?”

Likewise, every weekend men and women file into church buildings in order to exult in the rhetorical skill of their preacher, to admire him and think of their church as his church, not Christ’s church. Many of us file in each week to enjoy the conspicuous spiritual exercises of our brethren. We worship the worship experience; we tithe with expectation of return from heaven’s slot machine; we dress to impress; and we serve and lead to compensate for the inadequacies in our hearts that only Christ can fill. Every weekend, hundreds of preachers extol a therapeutic gospel from the pages of the same Bible where the real gospel lies. We Reformed are not exempt, as too often our affections are poured totally into doctrine with only vague admiration reserved for doctrine’s Author.

A church will become idolatrous in a heartbeat because it’s already there. So, we cannot set our worship on autopilot. We cannot mistake the appearance of busy religiosity for worship in spirit and truth. We see in [Exodus 32:5](#) that even the worshipers of the golden calf ascribed their worship to the covenant Lord Yahweh.

The gospel imperative, then, is to return again and again to the gospel indicative. Our first duty is “gospel obedience” ([Rom. 10:16](#); [2 Thess. 1:8](#); [1 Peter 4:17](#)), which is to stand at attention to Christ upon the gospel’s “tenhut.” Our hearts and minds flow through the rut of idolatry, but the deliberate proclamation of Jesus at every possible turn will force us off our idolatrous course. Martin Luther advises us:

I must take counsel of the gospel. I must hearken to the gospel, which teacheth me, not what I ought to do, (for that is the proper office of the law), but what Jesus Christ the Son of God hath done for me: to wit, that He suffered and died to deliver me from sin and death. The gospel willeth me to receive this, and to believe it. And this is the truth of the gospel. It is also the principal article of all Christian doctrine, wherein the knowledge of all godliness consisteth. Most necessary it is, therefore, that we should know this article well, teach it unto others, and beat it into their heads continually.

Tim Keller elaborates: “So Luther says that even after you are converted by the gospel your heart will go back to operating on other principles unless you deliberately, repeatedly set it to gospel-mode.”

The proclamation of the good news of Jesus and the extolling of His eternal excellencies is always an interruption, always a disruption. It alone will bring the sword of division between where even our religious hearts are set and where they ought to be. For this reason, we cannot go about minding our own business any more. We must mind God's ([Col. 3:1-4](#)).