

Recycled Error & The Superior Promises Of Christ

By: Keith R. Keyser

A popular, well-worn adage opines: “The more things change, the more they stay the same.”ⁱ This is certainly true in regard to spiritual error. In keeping with the contemporary zeitgeist, Satan is a great recycler, recirculating old lies to gullible mankind.ⁱⁱ Take for example his time-honored tactic of idolatry coupled with sexual immorality. When the ancient mercenary-seer Balaam – a sort of “for profit-prophet” – was hired to curse the Israelites, God thwarted his efforts on three occasions. His imprecations were divinely turned to blessings; on his fourth utterance he even prophesied of their glorious destiny (see Num. 22-24.) During this unsuccessful spiritual attack, the Israelites were ignorant of the threat; nonetheless, God protected them from wickedness in high places. Unable to beat them through curses, Balaam resorted to baser tactics, counseling the Moabites to entice the Israelites to enrage the Lord through spiritual and physical fornication under the pretext of inviting them to a feast. Subsequently, many of them succumbed to idolatrous debauchery and incurred the Lord’s wrath.

To later generations of Israelites this sordid incident at Baal Peor was a cautionary tale of the dangers of mixing with pagans and their religions (e.g. Josh. 22:17.) Unfortunately, the memory of it did not prevent it from reoccurring in various forms in their history thereafter. Nor did it preclude an outbreak of such vile iniquity in the church at Pergamos.ⁱⁱⁱ Worst of all, the mixture of errant theology and immorality is far too prevalent within modern Christendom, even penetrating churches which profess to be evangelical. While such sin may seem tantalizingly pleasurable, it cannot compare with what the Lord Jesus offers to His followers.

Feast or Famine?

The Greco-Roman world’s ubiquitous idolatry is evidenced by 1 John’s closing admonition: “Little children, keep yourselves from idols. Amen” (1 Jn. 5:21.) Its insidious tentacles reached into every level of society, influencing politics, business, literature, entertainment, and sports. Not surprisingly, there are numerous other New Testament references to this sin and its excesses. Of course, idolatry is not limited to the veneration of stones and statues. Any erroneous concept of God that diminishes His character, person, or attributes is an idol. Anything put in place of God is an idol; therefore, Col. 3:5 equates covetousness with idolatry.

The True Face Of Idolatry

To think of idolatry as merely involving the adoration of images, metals, or other inanimate objects is overly simplistic. The essence of this sin is robbing the true God of His due by misconstruing His identity. God is sovereign and unique. As He says: *I am* the LORD, and *there is* no other; *There is* no God besides Me” (Isa. 45:5.) Robert Spender remarks: “The Bible

understands that idolatry extends beyond the worship of images and false gods. It is a matter of the heart, associated with pride, self-centeredness, greed, gluttony (Phil. 3:19), and a love for possessions (Matt. 6:24).”^{iv} Another writer explains idolatry’s core concepts this way:

Although it is difficult to reduce biblical teaching on idolatry to a simple formula, one element common to both models, the marital and the political, is worth noting. In both cases the notion of *exclusivity* is central: in one the exclusive claims of a husband to his wife’s love and affection; in the other the exclusive claims of a sovereign to protect and provide for his subjects and receive their trust and obedience in return. Thus idolatry is an attack on God’s exclusive rights to our love, trust and obedience.^v

Elsewhere the same author comments further:

What constitutes a god? Martin Luther’s answer, as he reflected on the first commandment in his larger catechism, was ‘whatever your heart clings to and relies upon, that is your God; trust and faith of the heart alone make both God and idol’. We wish to confirm his view, but also to emphasize love and service: a god is that which one loves, trusts and serves above all else. This definition suggests both the possibility and the urgency of making clear the relevance of idolatry to the modern world.^{vi}

Obviously, idolatry encompasses many things that modern westerners seek after and live for.

Enter The Wolves

Many commentators suppose that the church in Pergamos was struggling with issues similar to the idol meat controversy in Corinth (1 Cor. 8:4-13; 10:23-33.) They offer the possible scenarios of participating in feasts at an idol temple’s banqueting hall. Some writers assert that the business dinners of the region’s various trade guilds would involve eating meat sacrificed to false gods, as well as fornicating with ritual prostitutes. An interesting alternative view holds that these were meals given in honor of one’s deceased ancestors; the “idols” were images of the dead person, and so much wine was imbibed that these gatherings degenerated into orgies.^{vii} Whichever view one takes, it is not hard to see that the Lord did not exaggerate when He spoke of those who adhered to Balaam’s ancient teaching that it was permissible “...to eat things sacrificed to idols, and to commit sexual immorality” (Rev. 2:14.) Their licentious doctrine maintained that they could participate in egregious sin and God would not do anything to them because of it. Sadly, many of the modern “signs and wonders” preachers have imbibed the same poisonous doctrine; thus it is no surprise that they live decadent lives of material opulence and fleshly self-indulgence. Material and sensual things become their contemporary idols. Furthermore, the scandals that have rocked multiple corners of the evangelical world during the past quarter century make it clear that false theologies still lead to immoral lifestyles. Instead of “you are what you eat” one may now affirm “you are what you believe.”

The Abiding Appeal Of A Permissive God

The defective view of God held by some in Pergamos is all too familiar to one who is conversant with popular modern views of a higher power. Idolatry's popularity stems in part from its ability to add religious legitimacy to man's carnal instincts. One may freely engage in immorality and do so without guilt, provided one worships a deity who sanctions such behavior. The resurgent interest in nature gods and goddesses, as well as the academic repopularizing of Gnostic beliefs, demonstrates that modern people are yearning for a semi-supreme being – one who may be adored and supplicated, but not one who gets in the way of having a good time. New Age thought and eastern religions are also wildly popular for allowing one to be devout, but not “puritanical” (one of the worst modern sobriquets with which one may be tagged!)

Even among nominal “Christians” low views of God's holiness abound. This is evidenced by the absence of the doctrine of eternal punishment from most books about spirituality. The idea of a deity who sends people to hell is hopelessly old fashioned, and is even lampooned by some so-called clergy and theologians. Others reason that they can build up credit with the Lord by their good deeds and then commit the “occasional” sin. In other words, devotees of these worldviews can claim to be spiritual **and** still sin to their heart's content. The devoted disciples of Charles Manson, Jim Jones, David Koresh, Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh, and many other pseudo-Messiahs show that the fraudulent notion of a permissive God remains wildly popular in modern countries. Generally speaking, people have no concept of a holy and righteous God.

Of course, some idolatrous notions of the Lord offer a veneer of morality by their strict and abstemious practices. Their followers live outwardly pious, moral lives, and are fond of religion's rigorous devotion. This sort of idol enables people to indulge in the sins of pride and self-righteousness in their veneration. Whether it leads one to the grosser forms of iniquity or the more socially acceptable kinds of sin, idolatry deprives the true and living God of His rightful worship. As the Creator and Redeemer, He deserves absolute loyalty from His creatures. This is why the Law demands that man love the Lord with the entirety of his heart, soul, mind, and strength; anything less is an insult to the Almighty (Mk. 12:30.)

Religious Junk Food Versus Spiritually Satisfying Food

In contrast to the antinomian teachings of those who promoted the excesses of eating idol's food and enjoyment of sexual sin, the Lord Jesus offers His saints “the hidden manna” (Rev. 2:14.) Manna was the divinely provided staple of the Israelites' wilderness diet. Miraculously, the Lord daily fed them with bread from the sky for forty years. His material faithfulness was a harbinger of greater spiritual realities to come. Centuries later when the Lord Jesus arrived on the scene He told the Jews “I am the bread of life. He who comes to Me shall never hunger, and he who believes in Me shall never thirst” (Jn. 6:35.) In Christ provision is made for the satisfaction of the deepest hungering and thirsting of human beings. Every person has a choice: feast on the world's fleeting, forbidden dainties or eat the Lord's spiritually life-giving sustenance. Truly the

world can spread a banqueting table, but it cannot sate the unremitting famishment of the Christless human heart. Sin's pleasures are seasonal, and pass away all too quickly. In contrast, feeding on Christ gives one eternal life – both of quality and duration. Believers rejoice to feed on Him daily as they study His word and commune with Him in prayer.

The lesson for ancient or modern man is the same: the Lord is the true God – only He can save; only He can satisfy. Idols appear to enrich, bless, or fulfill their disciples, but in reality they only impoverish them. One may starve at this life's sordid feasts or dine with the Lord presently and at His future marriage supper (Rev. 19.) A relationship with the Living God through His Son, the Lord Jesus Christ, is the only reward worth seeking. Therefore, Christians delight to dig into God's Word, gleaning beautiful truths about the Lord and enjoying His fellowship as He reveals Himself from its sacred pages. Such believers place their affections on things above, not on earthly things like idols, because they have died and risen with Christ. Their true life is now hidden with Christ in God, and it will be manifested when He returns to earth in glory (Col. 3:1-4; 1 Jn. 3:1-2.) They feed on the hidden manna, the glorified Christ Himself!

ⁱ As best I can determine this phrase originated with a nineteenth-century French novelist named Alphonse Karr, and was later employed by the noted man of letters, George Bernard Shaw; see: <http://answers.yahoo.com/question/index?qid=20061128215508AAmVH9v>

ⁱⁱ Zeitgeist = "The spirit or genius which marks the thought or feeling of a period or age" *Oxford English Dictionary*; the dictionary entry reveals that the word itself is of German origin, & entered English as early as 1848 when it was employed by the essayist-literary critic, Matthew Arnold in a letter; he later used the term in his book *Literature & Dogma* (1873.)

ⁱⁱⁱ Spelled "Pergamum" in many modern versions: e.g. ASV, NASB, ESV, NIV, NLT, etc. Since I'm primarily using the NKJV for this article, I retain the spelling of "Pergamos" as used by the KJV, NKJV, & JND translations.

^{iv} Robert D. Spender, "Idol, Idolatry" in Elwell, Walter A., *Evangelical Dictionary of Biblical Theology*. electronic ed. Baker reference library; Logos Library System. Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1997.

^v B.S. Rosner, "Idol, Idolatry" in Alexander, T. Desmond, and Brian S. Rosner. *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology*. electronic ed. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2001. (Logos.)

^{vi} Ibid.

^{vii} For an excellent explanation of this view & the exegesis behind it, see Gordon Franz, "Meat Offered to Idols in Pergamum & Thyatira" at: <http://www.lifeandland.org/2009/02/meat-offered-to-idols-in-pergamon-and-thyatira-2/> . I recommend www.lifeandland.org as an excellent resource for articles dealing with the Bible, especially in reference to archaeology & ancient history.