

“Reformation III: The Polemic Against Idolatry”
Exodus 20:4-6; Judges 8:22-28; Matthew 6:19-24
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We were studying the meaning of communion with our Catholic and Episcopal sisters and brothers across and down the street. And I gave the Presbyterian perspective: our real concern with the Catholic understanding of communion where the bread is transformed into the real presence of Christ is idolatry. The reason we don't bow before our table or call it an altar is idolatry. Calvin wrote that “humanity is a perpetual factory of idols” I told them. (Johnson 77) Idolatry is giving something in creation our total allegiance when it belongs to the Creator alone. Calvin thought that idolatry was at the root of so much superstition in the Church. And so when we see what looks to us like people kneeling and praying before a wafer in a box, or watch priests bowing before a table, we smell idolatry. “And that is why in our church,” I told the hushed room, “rather than praying in front of wafers, or bowing before the table - things that might lead us into idolatry – instead, we have Tiffany windows.”

Hypocrisy seems to be idolatry's first cousin which I suppose is how this congregation was able to build an edifice which is so atypically Presbyterian. The vaulted ceilings, the gilded accents, the Tiffany windows, the images carved in wood. The Reformers rejected ostentation of any kind warning that anything that doesn't direct us toward the worship of God directs us toward the worship of something other God. They got rid of vestments – what I'm wearing now would be way too priestly for the Reformers. They got rid of all images. The Swiss reformer, Zwingli, perhaps the most militant of all the Reformers, eliminated much church music. Legend has it that the organist of his church could be seen weeping over the rubble of the great organ that Zwingli had removed and destroyed.

There is a severity in the accusation of idolatry which probably explains our reluctance to even use the word. “I like the fact that we alternate the words that we use to open the Lord's Prayer each week,” several people told me when we first started that practice, “but when we explain this in the bulletin, do we have to use the word idolatry?” I gave into the pressure. We changed the language.

The Puritans were militant in their efforts to root out idolatry, which is probably one reason why we're not. In the Massachusetts Bay Colony some were persecuted for their apostasy.¹ Concerns over idolatry led some Puritans to oppose not just sex depicted in drama, but the elimination of all drama. Secular entertainment could lead us away from God. Gambling was outlawed. Celebrating Christmas was banned in Boston in 1659 calling it “residual Papist idolatry.”

But the Puritans also had legitimate concerns that some of us have come to adopt voluntarily. Long before the Internet, the Puritans observed correctly that the images that we see have consequence – they shape our desires and our wants. They

¹ Mary Dyer was executed in 1660 for violating the law against Quakerism.

were right to notice that simplicity can be an antidote to the materialism that consumes consumers. Long before there was a “black Friday” or Christmas shopping that begins before Thanksgiving they saw the danger of a religious holiday being hijacked by people looking to use religion to sell a product.

Some argue that this concern with idolatry is the very thing that gave democracy a chance to be born. “Earthly princes lay aside all their power when they rise up against God,” wrote Calvin. “We ought to defy than to obey them.”² (Johnson 111) Presbyterian minister John Witherspoon, the 3rd President of Princeton University and the only member of the clergy who signed the Declaration of Independence looked back to Calvin’s writings to support their conviction that the people have the right and the duty to overthrow unjust governments. Anti-Nazi churches in 1934, quoted the same scripture that Calvin had referenced almost 400 years earlier: “Fear God. Honor the Emperor.” “We reject the false doctrine,” they wrote, “as though the State, over and beyond its special commission, should and could become the single and totalitarian order of human life, thus fulfilling the church’s vocation as well.” Even Mary Daly, the great feminist, railed against a kind of idolatry in her quest to rid theology of its male assumptions about God. “If God is male,” she wrote in 1973, “then male is god.”

Paul Tillich, theologian in the 20th century, called this resistance to any claim to absolute truth the Protestant principle. It may be derived from the protests of Protestants against the Catholic Church, he said, but it contains “the divine and human protest against any absolute claim made for a relative reality.” “It is the judge,” he said, “of every religious and cultural reality including the religion and culture which calls itself Protestant.”³ Resistance to idolatry is baked into our tradition.

It is the reason some of us cringe when Americans sing God bless America at a sporting event as a song of entitlement instead of a fervent plea. It is the reason some of us wince when we hear religious leaders claiming to know who’s going to heaven and who’s going to hell as if they could know the mind of God or constrain God’s freedom. It is the reason the hair rose up on the back of my neck when Candidate Trump at the Republican National Convention told a nation not to put our trust in each other or in God but only in him. “I alone can fix it.” And it may be the reason that many of us question our own motives when it comes to our conspicuous consumption, or our chasing after middle class myths of what leads to happiness, or the rat race that threatens to consume our children. “No one can serve two masters,” Jesus said. “You cannot serve God and wealth.” The Protestant principle. That theological reflex against any one or anything that would claim a kind of healing, a kind of power, a kind of salvation that comes only from God. That reflex that rises up in a people who know that humanity is a perpetual factory of idols. That idolatry can sneak up on any of us, whether we claim to worship the true God or not.

² Calvin quoted in William Stacy Johnson, *John Calvin: Reformer for the 21st Century*, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press), 2009, p. 111.

³ Paul Tillich, *The Protestant Era*, p. 162 quoted in Patrick D. Miller, *The Ten Commandments* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press), 2009, p. 58.

It snuck up on Gideon. Gideon wasn't just any religious leader. He started out as an anti-idolatry activist. Called by God he tears down the altar to the pagan god Baal to begin his leadership campaign. From there his power grows as he goes after all those who are opposed to God's reign. He routs the Midianites. His campaign turns bloody and violent. The people turn to Gideon. "Rule over us" they shout! Unlike some leaders then and now, Gideon knows the right answer: "No, the Lord will rule over you." Yet even God seems to question Gideon's sincerity. At one point God reduces the size of Gideon's army to a ridiculously small number so that only God could be credited with the victory. Yet as Gideon charges into battle he shouts, "For God and for Gideon!" By the end of chapter 8, Gideon's anti-idolatry crusade has turned him into another tyrant, greedy for power, motivated by vengeance. A judge who claims more authority than he's actually been given. Gideon makes an idol that leads Israel astray again, and an idolatrous son whose name Abimelech, whose name means, "My Father is King." A hint that the anti-idolatry activist has become the idolater. We really are a perpetual factory of idols.

So although hypocrisy might explain this ornate structure, an odd kind of moderation could also be behind it. A recognition that sometimes the most zealous of anti-idolatry crusaders create a new kind of idolatry through their efforts. A recognition that while some images might lead us astray others could remind us that we worship a God larger than anyone of us – a God who cannot be manipulated. While some music might lead us to glorify ourselves, other music might open us to the mystery of God in ways beyond the reach of words. An architectural statement made in the presence of powers that they that they alone can fix us or our problems, that says this is the only One who is worthy of our worship, worthy of our ultimate allegiance.

This isn't a God who can be conjured at the 7th inning stretch, or the close of a speech, or the start of a war, and then packed away again until we decide we want a little divine intervention. This God is alive. Demanding, yes, but demanding of allegiance that would save us from the ruin that comes when we give too much authority to human beings or ideas or institutions that do not deserve it. Demanding of allegiance to the God who commands us to love each other as if we saw the image of God in each other. Demanding of allegiance to the God who liberates slaves, comforts grieving exiles, and gives the outcast a name better than sons and daughters. The only God worthy of our worship and praise.