

BASIC BIBLE PRINCIPLES

— IDOLATRY —

“You shall have no other gods before Me. You shall not make for yourself a carved image—any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth; you shall not bow down to them nor serve them” (Ex. 20:3-5).

“When Christ who is our life appears, then you also will appear with him in glory. Therefore put to death your members which are on the earth: fornication, uncleanness, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry” (Col. 3:4,5).

The children of Israel and idols

The Scriptures teach us that the God of the Bible is very aware of the ability of men and women to invent false gods—idols—and to ascribe to them powers that He and He alone possesses. God’s solemn instruction to Israel through Moses in the quotation from Exodus 20 above shows that nothing was to divert an Israelite from worshipping the true God. Nothing in the creation around them was to be used as a substitute for, or to replace, the God Who had delivered them from bondage in Israel.

The nation of Israel had been released from Egypt, a country with many false gods and idols, by the mighty power of an invisible God. Israel were to go the land of Canaan, a land occupied by nations who were idol worshippers, and surrounded by other nations who were also idol worshippers. God’s people were instructed not to follow such practices (Ex. 23:23-33; 34:10-17; Lev. 26:1; Deut. 7:1-6; 16:22).

The worship of idols was not something that was confined to religious activity. Belief in such false gods affected every aspect of life: commerce, agriculture, education and family life. And such influences and dangers were not restricted to Old Testament times: they did not disappear with the passing of the centuries.

Idolatry: New Testament times and today

In the New Testament period, many centuries later, the world was still dominated by idolatry. The gospel went out into the Roman Empire, into nations and cities filled with idolatry. The Acts of the Apostles records the way in which the preaching of the gospel dramatically impacted on idol worship. Such worship was ingrained into the very fabric of public and private life (Acts 14:8-18; 16:16-23; 19:23-28). For the first-century Christian it was not just a question of staying away from the pagan temples and the worship of false gods. The quotation from Colossians 3 shows that a wrong attitude of mind could also lead people into a form of idolatry. Paul equates covetousness—a greed for earthly possessions, a desire for material gain—with worshipping idols. The antidote for the early Christian believers was that they should have in their minds a picture of the return of Christ and the promise of the Kingdom and should use this as the motivation to discipline their natural desires (see also Ephesians 5:5). It is these natural desires that have driven men and women to invent false gods—idols—down through the centuries.

In the modern world of the twenty-first century that problem still exists. The world is full of false gods as well as false religions that divert attention away from the one true God and cause people to concentrate their time, energy and activities on fulfilling their own desires. The list of modern ‘idols’ is enormous, but some are easily recognised. Sport, entertainment,

wealth, evolution, humanism, scientific achievement and, even today, established religions have literal idols as part of their worship. Spending a life in pursuit of such things, whilst ignoring the true God and Christ as revealed in the Scriptures, is a modern form of idolatry.

Lessons from the past for the present

Two references in Jeremiah highlight for us important principles relating to the subject of idolatry. First, in Jeremiah 1:16, God shows how idolatry takes hold and what it leads to: “. . . concerning all their wickedness, because they have forsaken Me, burned incense to other gods, [they have] worshipped the works of their own hands.” Turning away from God inevitably leads men and women to invent their own false gods to worship; it is then a natural consequence for them to take pride in themselves.

Then, in Jeremiah 13:10, the message from God says that failing to hear His words leads to idolatry and pride. The world today is deaf to the Word of God, and most people “follow the dictates of their hearts,” creating false gods and then taking pride in them. It was for this reason that the northern kingdom of Israel was taken away into captivity never to return (Amos 5:25-27; on the southern kingdom of Judah see Jeremiah 7:17,18,24-26; 24:5). A faithful remnant was preserved and eventually returned in the time of Ezra and Nehemiah, after which the problem of idolatry as practised earlier does not seem to have reappeared in the restored nation.

The one true Image

In Old Testament and New Testament times, nations and people built idols and engaged in idolatry to provide a visible image or representation of their invisible gods. They looked to the natural world about them, or copied the practices of the nations around them, or used their own imaginations to produce a tangible object to worship.

Genesis 1 and some words of Jesus in Matthew 22 help us to understand God’s abhorrence of idolatry. At Creation it is recorded that God said: “Let us make man in our image, according to our likeness . . . in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them” (Gen. 1:26,27). Yet only part of this was fulfilled, since it was not possible, because of sin, for men and women to show the true likeness (or character) of God. To be godlike or godly, to display godliness, is a responsibility placed on all men and women. This is why God forbade any other images—idols—to be made or copied, because we are meant to be His image here on earth. Jesus teaches this in the well-known quotation: “Render therefore to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and to God the things that are God’s” (Mt. 22:21). The coin bore Caesar’s image, but mankind is supposed to bear God’s.

Paul says that Christ is “the image of the invisible God” (Col. 1:15); and Hebrews 1:3 says that Christ is “the brightness of [God’s] glory and the express image of His person.” So Jesus was able to say to Philip: “He who has seen me has seen the Father” (Jno. 14:9). Jesus is the example for us all; and as we await his return we are instructed to turn from idolatry, to put off the old man and to put on the new man “who is renewed in knowledge according to the image of Him Who created him” (Col. 3:8-11), in order that we might, in the day of his appearing, truly be changed to be like the Lord Jesus Christ.

(All quotations from the New King James Version)

This leaflet is produced by The Testimony Magazine, The Pines, Ling Common Road, Castle Rising, King’s Lynn, PE31 6AE, to encourage personal and ecclesial study of Bible principles. Further copying for distribution is encouraged.