

THE CASE FOR IDOLATRY:  
Why Evangelical Christians Can Worship Idols

APOLOGETICS   GAY CHRISTIAN   GENERAL   PARENTS   GAY CHRISTIAN   IDOLS   PARODY  
SATIRE   WORSHIP  
February 24, 2016

By Andrew Wilson | Wednesday 12 November 2014

I really hope it's obvious that this is a parody, but if not: it is.

For as long as I can remember, I've wanted to worship idols. It's not that my parents raised me that way, because they didn't; I was brought up in a loving, secure, Christian home. But from childhood until today, my heart has been drawn to idolatry. In fact, if I'm honest, one of the defining features of my identity has been my desire to put something else – popularity, money, influence, sex, success – in place of God.

THAT'S JUST WHO I AM.

For many years, I was taught that idolatry was sinful. As a good Christian, I fought the desire to commit idolatry, and repented when I got it wrong. But the desire to worship idols never went away.

*I wanted it to, but it didn't.*

So it has been such a blessing to discover that **worshipping one God, and him alone, isn't for everyone.** There are thousands of Christians out there who have found faithful, loving ways of expressing worship both to God and to idols, without compromising either their faith or their view of Scripture. In recent years, I have finally summoned the courage to admit that I am one of them. Let me give you a few reasons why I believe that idolatry and Christianity are compatible.

I start with **my own story**, and the stories of many others like me. I am an evangelical, and I have a very high view of the Bible – I am currently studying for a PhD in biblical studies at King's College London, which will be my third theology degree – as well as knowing both the ancient languages and the state of scholarly research. Yet, after much prayerful study, I have discovered the liberating truth that it is possible to be an idolatrous Christian. That, at least, is evidence that *you can be an evangelical and an idolater.*

Not only that, but a number of evangelical writers have been challenging the monolatrous narrative in a series of scholarly books. A number of these provide a powerful case for listening to the diversity of the ancient witnesses in their original contexts, and call for a **Christlike approach of humility, openness and inclusion towards our idolatrous brothers and sisters.**

Some, on hearing this, will of course want to rush straight to the “clobber passages” in Paul's letters (which we will consider in a moment), in a bid to secure the fundamentalist ramparts and shut down future dialogue. But as we consider the scriptural material, two things stand out. Firstly, **the vast majority of references to idols and idolatry in the Bible come in the Old Testament** – the same Old Testament that tells us we can't eat shellfish or gather sticks on Saturdays. When advocates of monolatry eat bacon

sandwiches and drive cars at the weekend, they indicate that we should move beyond Old Testament commandments in the new covenant, and rightly so.

Secondly, and even more significantly, we need to read the whole Bible with reference to the approach of Jesus. To be a Christian is to be a Jesus-person: one whose life is based on his priorities, not on the priorities of subsequent theologians. And when we look at Jesus, we notice that he welcomed everyone who came to him, including those people that the (one-God worshipping) religious leaders rejected – and that *Jesus said absolutely nothing about idols in any of the four Gospels*. Conservative theologians, many of whom are friends of mine, often miss this point in the cut-and-thrust of debate, but for those who love Jesus, it should be at the very heart of the discussion.

JESUS HAD NO PROBLEM WITH IDOLATRY.

He included everyone, however many gods they worshipped.

If we want to be like him, then we should adopt the same inclusive approach.

We should also remember that, as we have discovered more about the human brain, we have found out all sorts of things about idolatry that the biblical writers simply did not know. The prophets and apostles knew nothing of cortexes and neurons, and had no idea that some people are pre-wired to commit idolatry, so they never talked about it. But as we have learned more about genetics, neural pathways, hormones and so on, we have come to realize that some tendencies – alcoholism, for example – scientifically result from the way we are made, and therefore cannot be the basis for moral disapproval or condemnation. *To disregard the findings of science on this point is like*

<sup>r</sup> *continuing to insist that the world is flat.*

With all of these preliminary ideas in place, we can finally turn to Paul, who has sadly been used as a judgmental battering ram by monolaters for centuries. When we do, what immediately strikes us is that in the ultimate “clobber passage”, namely Romans 1, the problem isn’t really idol-worship at all! The problem, as Paul puts it, is not that people worship idols, but that they “exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images” (1:23). *Paul isn’t talking about people who are idolatrous by nature.* He is talking about people who were naturally worshippers of Israel’s God, and exchanged it for the worship of idols. What else could the word “exchange” here possibly mean?

Not only that, but none of his references apply to idolatry as we know it today: putting something above God in our affections. Paul, as a Hellenistic Roman citizen, simply would not have had a category for that kind of thing. In his world, idolatry meant physically bowing down to tribal or household deities – statues and images made of bronze or wood or stone – and as such, the worship of power or money or sex or popularity had nothing to do with his prohibitions. (Some see an exception in the way he talks about coveting as idolatry in Ephesians 5:5 and Colossians 3:5, but these obviously reflect his desire, as a first century Jew, to honor the Ten Commandments.)

In other words, when Paul talks about idolatry, **he is not talking about the worship of idols as we know it today.** As a Christ-follower, he would be just as horrified as Jesus if he saw the way his words have been twisted to exclude modern idolaters like me, and like many friends of mine. For centuries, the church has silenced the voice of idolaters (just like it has silenced the voice of slaves, and women), and it is about time we recognized that neither Jesus, nor Paul, had any problem with idolatry.

Obviously this is a contribution to an ongoing conversation, rather than the last word on the subject. But I hope you will all search the scriptures,

search your hearts, and consider the evidence afresh – and avoid judging those who disagree in the meantime! Maybe, just maybe, we can make space in the church for those who, like me, have spent a lifetime wrestling with the challenge of idolatry.