

PREACHING THAT REACHES BEYOND SECULAR MYTHS AND IDOLS

Kenneth W. Smith
First Baptist Church of Shelton
Shelton, Connecticut

ABSTRACT

The belief system from which the secularized West draws its life rests upon a sea of unexamined myths, metaphors, images, and idols. This paper asserts that modern preachers may find guidance for preparing sermons from ancient biblical preachers and authors. The Prophets and Apostles first exposed and evaluated the beliefs and actions of their contemporaries. Then under divine inspiration, they harnessed poetry's power, using metaphor and imagery, to proclaim God's truth.

INTRODUCTION

Find the Hidden Coin

There is a children's game called "Find the Hidden Coin." The object of the game is for one player who is "It" to find a coin that the other players have hidden while "It" was out of the room. The coin must be hidden in plain view. It cannot be placed under or behind another object. As "It" moves about the room, the other players call out "you're getting hotter" whenever "It" is nearing the coin, and "you're getting colder" whenever "It" is moving further away. What makes the game fun is the fact that the coin is hidden in plain view—sometimes right under "Its" nose, though he or she cannot see it.

We live in a culture that hides many things in plain view. Of all the things hidden in plain view the deadliest things are a society's idols. Idols make fools both of those who make them and of those who worship them. Although they have no more life in them than the idols of old—which were fashioned out of wood, stone, and precious metals—today's idols threaten to bring as much disaster upon us as their wooden ancestors brought upon the ancients.

When we speak of modern forms of idolatry, the term idol could be applied to virtually anything in the created world to which people give undue value and worship. Anything that takes the place of God in our lives—money, sex, power, sports, automobiles, hobbies, work, personal achievement, ideas, even family and friends—can become an idol to us. By no means do we wish to downplay the significance and destructive force that these idols play in modern life. However, for the purposes of this study we will look primarily at the particular idols that represent actual ancient false gods—idols to which the ancient Greeks and Romans gave names and whose characters they described in their mythologies.

Our Task

In the remaining pages we will look at the problem of idolatry in the western mind. We will pay particular attention to the masks that are placed over some of the most influential and pervasive idols around which our culture organizes itself. We will consider the accompanying mythology required to gain followers for the leading gods of post-Enlightenment civilization. We will then consider the nature of our role as preachers in dealing with idolatry, both within the church and within the wider society. Then we will look at some of the strategies employed by the prophets and apostles to expose and confront ancient idolatries, and consider how these might inform our efforts to confront their modern counterparts.

UNMASKING THE GODS*May I Borrow Your Gods*

We assert that the gods and goddesses of the Greek and Roman pantheons still exert a powerful influence over even our most secular institutions today—albeit in a far more abstract and sophisticated form than they did in the ancient world. The reason for their present influence is simple—when the Enlightenment thinkers needed a paradigm of culture with which to replace the jettisoned Judaeo-Christian paradigm, they went back to the classical period of ancient Greece and Rome for inspiration. There they found Iustia, Fortuna, and the Fates to name but a few.

Plato and Aristotle began the process of disembodiment of the whimsical gods and goddesses, transforming them into abstract and idealized principles. Once these goddesses became hidden in abstractions, they became more respectable. Their new depersonalized stature made them more suitable for transfer to our secular age. Wayne Oates notes:

Aristotle discusses chance and spontaneity in his work *Physics*. He attempts to classify explanations of events in the universe. He describes chance as the “indefinite law...inscrutable to man.” He uses analogies from human relations. However, in modern physics the element of fortuitous and spontaneous events is also discussed. (Oates 1995, 42)

The Threat that Modern Versions of Idolatry Pose

For a number of reasons modern idols still threaten great harm to those who worship them. First, God hates idolatry! To put it plainly, although some people may think that the God who threatened disaster through the prophets has been tamed in our times, the reality is that when it comes to tolerating idolatry, God has not changed. A “kinder and gentler” God—who looks the other way while people worship and serve his rivals—does not exist. Such a god is nothing more than an idol hidden in plain view. When God gave Moses the Ten Commandments he warned, “Do not worship any other god, for the LORD, whose name is Jealous, is a jealous God.” (Exodus 34:14)

Second, idols are pervasive. They proliferate throughout the culture in which they are fashioned, infecting every institution. At one time it took a wood-worker, a sculptor, or a gold- or silversmith to fashion an idol. Nowadays idols are just as likely to be objects of the heart and mind. Many are engineered by academics, politicians, and industry leaders. The temples in which they are erected are often the hallowed institutions of human reason and power. Hosea noted that once people turn away from God and serve idols, there is a general degradation of the accompanying cultural institutions:

Israel cries out to me, “O our God, we acknowledge you!” But Israel has rejected what is good; an enemy will pursue him. They set up kings without my consent; they choose princes without my approval. With their silver and gold they make idols for themselves to their own destruction. (Hosea 8:2-4)

The problem is that when we eject God from his rightful place as the recipient of our worship and obedience, we ultimately replace him with *ourselves*. God hates it when we do that. Therefore, speaking through the prophet Hosea, God protested when his people “rejected what is good” and “set up kings without [his] consent.”

When we worship ourselves, we exchange the truth of God—the Word of God—for a lie. We declare our independence. We no longer are willing to take his Word for it—to trust his Word above our own imagination and desires. Seeking to become *like* him is never enough, we want to *be* him. Luther called this *enthusiasm*:

All this is the old devil and the old serpent who made enthusiasts of Adam and Eve. He led them from the external Word of God to spiritualizing and to their own imaginations, and he did this through other external words. Even so, the enthusiasts of our day condemn the external word, yet they do not remain silent but fill the world with their chattering and scribbling, as if the Spirit could not come through the Scriptures or the spoken word of the apostles but must come through their own writings and words....In short, enthusiasm clings to Adam and his descendants from the beginning to the end of the world. It is a poison implanted and inoculated in men by the old dragon, and is the source, strength, and power of all heresy.... (Forde 2007, 67)

Once we abandon the Word of God, *we* replace him as the arbiter of what is good and right, true and false. Yet something within us faintly recognizes the need that the transcendent God alone can fill. Those who refuse to leave the rebellion and turn back to the transcendent God will direct their worship to anyone or anything but him. That’s where the idols come in. Idol worship provides counterfeit joy and counterfeit transcendence. Worshipping lesser gods creates the feeling of reaching for the transcendent—someone who stands apart from the creation—without actually doing so. Worshipping created things rather than the true Creator also helps us retain a sense of autonomy and independence. Thus we come full circle to self-worship. Idolatry always leads its followers around in circles.

Like their splintery ancestors, the idols of contemporary culture nearly always turn out to be cruel taskmasters. They consume the minds, hearts, time, energy, and goods of both those who make them and those who worship them. They demand much and they give nothing of value in return. It is not that idols have intrinsic power to demand anything—they represent things that don't really exist. In a real sense devotees to a given idol are taken prisoner in such a way that the prisoners become their own jailers. Ironically, people turn to idols to get away from God hoping to gain freedom and wisdom, but instead they end up as prisoners and slaves. According to Lutheran theologian Gerhard Forde, Luther referred to this misplaced effort to gain freedom as “the bondage of the will.” (Forde 2007, 154-156)

Those who are best at fashioning and defending the temple of their god tend to accumulate the most power, and with that power they exercise control over their fellow inmates. Writing concerning the expansion of bureaucratic influence and control of an elite class of leaders within such a system, Herbert Schlossberg writes:

To a large extent, the new class dominates in matters of value. Not content to claim competence only in technical matters too arcane for ordinary people, the redistributive and regulatory mechanisms insist on affecting every area of life, the elite being secure in the superiority of their values....The political authorities and their mentors of the new class consistently and deliberately fail to say that their policies are intended to exercise their will over the masses. (Schlossberg 1990, 122)

Third, although idols of old required child sacrifice only rarely, their modern descendants claim victims routinely—some literally and others figuratively. Young modern idol worshippers all too often begin to confuse imaginary cyber-worlds with reality, and sometimes with deadly consequences, as was the case in Columbine, and more recently at Virginia Tech. For a few minutes, a young person with a gun who has decided he is on the wrong end of the power spectrum feels powerful—like a god granting life or death during his fifteen minutes of fame.

Other young people make the mistake of responding to the wrong messages from a media that sends confusing and contradictory messages. Enticed by movies, television shows, or video games, they feel the itch to do something outrageous. After all, there are no lasting negative consequences in the imaginary world portrayed hour after hour on the LCD screen. However, they soon find out the hard way where authority ultimately rests. The blindfolded Lady Justice is about to throw the book at them.

A recent report in the newspaper “The Oregonian” tells this story of woe for two thirteen year-old boys:

The two boys tore down the hall of Patton Middle School after lunch, swatting the bottoms of girls as they ran—what some kids later said was a common form of greeting. But bottom-slapping is against policy in McMinnville Public Schools. So a teacher's aide sent the gawky seventh-graders to the office, where the vice

principal and a police officer stationed at the school soon interrogated them. After hours of interviews with students the day of the February incident, the officer read the boys their Miranda rights and hauled them off in handcuffs to juvenile jail, where they spent the next five days. Now, Cory Mashburn and Ryan Cornelison, both 13, face the prospect of 10 years in juvenile detention and a lifetime on the sex offender registry in a case that poses a fundamental question: When is horseplay a crime? ...The documents also show that the boys face 10 misdemeanor charges—five sex abuse counts, five harassment counts—reduced from initial charges of felony sex abuse. The boys are scheduled to go on trial Aug. 20. (Goldsmith 2007)

Few would disagree that the boy's actions were inappropriate, or that they warrant some disciplinary action from the school and their parents. However, ten years in juvenile detention and a life sentence of wearing the label *sex offender*—the twenty-first century equivalent of wearing the scarlet letter—demonstrates just how harsh a taskmaster the idol of *blind justice* can be. The boys and their families have run into one of the most sacred idols of our national pantheon of gods and goddesses—and one that is clearly hidden in plain view. In the present day, the courts of justice are supposed to be a place where only the truth is declared. Justice is supposed to be an *ideal*—a sacred *principle*. In the ancient world justice was a goddess who meted out reward or punishment with supposed impartiality:

Lady Justice (Iustitia, the Roman Goddess of Justice and sometimes, simply “Justice”) is an allegorical personification of the moral force that underlies the legal system. Since the Renaissance, **Justitia** has frequently been depicted as a bare-breasted woman carrying a sword and scales, and sometimes wearing a blindfold. Her modern iconography, which frequently adorns courthouses and courtrooms, conflates the attributes of several goddesses who embodied Right Rule for Greeks and Romans, blending Roman blindfolded Fortuna with Hellenistic Greek Tyche...Lady Justice is often depicted wearing a blindfold. This is done in order to indicate that justice is (or should be) meted out objectively, without fear or favor, regardless of the identity, power, or weakness of the individuals brought before the bar. (Lady Justice, 8/1/2007)

Lady Justice in the ideal is supposed to be blind to favoritism—not to proportionality and common sense. Her relationship to good and bad fortune is an important one. As we will see, Fortuna, goddess of fortune, hides herself well all over the place in Western civilization. Although the two thirteen year-old boys have not yet come to trial, one thing is clear—the boys have up to this point in time been most *unfortunate*. Of all the prosecutors America has to offer, they drew one who cannot tell the difference between an inappropriate adolescent prank and a serious sex offense.

UNMASKING A NEW MYTHOLOGY

If Not God, Then Whom Shall We Serve?

Idols do not just float in a cultural vacuum. They demand a story—a mythology, a cultural paradigm—in which to embed themselves. The inter-relationships between the ancient gods and goddesses helped people to make sense out of their everyday experience. For instance, which god had more power than the next, or to put it differently, which one had more influence in a given situation? In their new setting in contemporary culture, the ancient gods have been reduced down from their personal and divine stature to disembodied principles, values, and impersonal forces. But even in their new disembodied form, the relationship between competing forces, values, and laws must still be sorted out in a kind of hierarchy of values.

The fascinating thing about the contemporary pantheon of secular gods and their mythological home is that they have been fashioned recently in a literate civilization. In other words, there is a record of their production. We can trace their genesis. We can also see how their new home was constructed for them by Enlightenment builders. Once we recognize these re-treaded deities and note the places where they hide in plain view, we can expose them for what they are—frauds and thieves who rob people of their time, talent, treasure, and human dignity.

An Age of Enlightenment or of RePaganization?

One of the greatest misnomers of modern intellectual history may be to call the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries an age of *Enlightenment*. It would be more accurate to call this period the age of *re-paganization* of Western civilization. During the course of the Enlightenment and in the succeeding centuries, there has been a concerted effort, first to loosen the grip of the Church and biblical faith on institutions of reason and power, and then to marginalize and perhaps even erase Christian influence altogether. In the process, some of the earlier Enlightenment thinkers found it necessary to push God aside, as well.

The problem then became who or what to replace him with. As the house of faith was renovated into a house of reason, it did not take long to find new tenants. In the early years, the most forward-thinking intellectuals simply looked back to the pre-Christian civilization of the Greco-Roman period—the period that gave birth to the *Renaissance*—the rebirth of what they considered to be the highest achievements attained by human civilization.

It's difficult to imagine a period of greater human achievement at least in the West than the classical Greek and Roman period. If God was to be replaced, then what better model was there with which to replace him than the grand ideas of those centuries that were esteemed as the golden age of human reason and progress? The question is, can you really import the ideas from their ancient setting to modern society without letting the gods in the door with them? We've seen what Justice can do when she runs amok. She miscarries instead of giving birth to truth and fairness. Now we will look at paganism's

best attempts to conceive knowledge when God is no longer welcome in the laboratory or in the institutions of learning and reason.

At first, it appears that Enlightenment thinkers were content to study the phenomena of nature intrinsically—that is, as things in themselves. This was done under the name of *nature* or *natural science*.

The word “nature” derives from the Latin word *natura*, or “the course of things, natural character.” *Natura* was a Latin translation of the Greek word *physis*... which originally related to the intrinsic characteristics that plants, animals, and other features of the world develop of their own accord.... The concept of nature as a whole, the physical universe, is one of several expansions of the original notion; it began with certain core applications of the word [*physis*] by pre-Socratic philosophers, and has steadily gained currency ever since. This usage was confirmed during the advent of modern scientific method in the last several centuries. (Nature 7/30/2007)

The concept “nature” began innocently enough as a mere word or concept. However, in the course of time Nature’s role did indeed expand into that of a *personified agent*—*Mother Nature* or just *Nature*. Serious thinkers and scientists began to say things like, “that’s Nature’s way of improving the gene pool.”

But Nature cannot really do anything purposeful or intentional—only living beings can act purposefully. *Nature* is a personification, a poetic device. As an intentional agent *Nature* does not exist. If on account of his personhood, God is not allowed in the game of explaining the inner workings of plants and animals, then why should Nature be permitted to play? Although never *officially* recognized as a divine personage, Nature is regularly given the privilege of acting in a god-like role. Like her ancient sisters Justice and Fortuna, Nature is like a coin hiding in plain view.

Creating a Myth in Which the Gods Could Hide

As long as Enlightenment philosophers and scientists were content to study how things worked, they could limit their investigation to the inner workings of plants and animals. It’s true that Nature did not really have a right to enter the game, but after all, it was only a game. The problem came when these philosophers and scientists began to ask fundamental questions about human origins and of the essence of human nature in the absence of the *imago Dei*. Sooner or later all civilizations get around to asking “where do we come from, and what is our place in the Universe?” What was needed was a grand story to tie things together and make sense of the phenomena these children of the Enlightenment were studying. To them a new star was born, a son of the Enlightenment who was relatively unfettered by ancient religious stories of our genesis. His name was Jean Jacques Rousseau, and he dreamed in secular-color.

Rousseau’s contribution to the Enlightenment was a critical one. He re-wrote the ancient story. He gave to the Enlightenment and to contemporary society a new pre-history in which humans are viewed as “noble savages,” free of responsibility to God or even to one another. It was every man and woman for themselves. Without the need to appeal to any authority higher than himself, Rousseau recast the story by which humans would now

understand and describe themselves. Many of his writings are still in vogue, and have greatly influenced numerous seminal thinkers for good or ill between his day and the present, including Robespierre of the French Revolution, Marx and Engels, and Sigmund Freud. (Rousseau 1992, xviii; Rousseau 1979, 16)

Because we are separated by little more than two centuries from the time of his writing, we can trace major portions of the myths we now live by to their origin in the Enlightenment. The relatively brief span of time that this encompasses within Western intellectual history and development, coupled with the fact that Rousseau's brand new version of our grand story was written down immediately in a literate culture versus an oral one, gives us a unique window through which to peer into the creation of a myth. Ancient myths and stories were first conceived and transmitted by memory through many successive generations. But with Rousseau we have the text! This will be of great assistance when we examine the source of authority by which Rousseau usurped the biblical worldview with his naturalistic one.

Rousseau was an ideal candidate to re-write the human story. He was willing to give lip service to a Creator—one who vaguely resembled the transcendent God of the Bible—but not real service or obedience. By the time Rousseau had finished writing his story, God was relieved of all but light duty in the design of the universe. Nowhere was God's role as Creator lightened and reduced more than it was with respect to the creation of human beings. Rousseau did not dismiss God altogether. Instead, his object seemed to be to loosen the grip of the biblical worldview on the minds and consciences of his peers. God was not so much *denied*, as *barred from the game* of explaining our origins. Consider these words as Rousseau attempts to theorize what humans living in a state of nature must have been like:

Thus, *without having recourse to the supernatural knowledge we have on this point* [italics added] ...I will suppose him [Man living in the state of nature] to have been formed from all time as I see him today: walking on two feet, using his hands as we use ours, directing his gaze over all of nature, and measuring with his eyes the vast expanse of the heavens. When I strip that being, thus constituted, of all the *supernatural gifts he could have received* [italics added] and of all the artificial faculties he could have acquired only through long progress; when I consider him, in a word as he must have *left the hands of nature* [italics added], I see an animal less strong than some, less agile than others, but all in all, the most advantageously organized of all. I see him satisfying his hunger under an oak tree, quenching his thirst at the first stream, finding his bed at the foot of the same tree that supplied his meal; and thus all his needs are satisfied. (Rousseau 1992, 19)

From this and other passages in his writings it is clear that God is not the only one who receives a reduction in status as Rousseau replaces the biblical account of Creation with his own version. Humanity's stature is significantly reduced as well. Humans are no longer presented as a crowning achievement of God's handiwork. In Rousseau's account humans are reduced to the status of animals. The ability to think, to communicate, and to love are not intrinsically human qualities in Rousseau's conception. Rather these are accidental by-products of humans living in a state of society—an unnatural state brought about by the demands of survival.

Savage man, left by nature to instinct alone...will therefore begin with purely animal functions. Perceiving and feeling will be his first state, which he will have in common with all animals....His imagination depicts nothing to him; his heart asks nothing of him. His modest needs are so easily found at hand, and he is so far from the degree of knowledge necessary to make him desire to acquire greater knowledge, that he can have neither foresight nor curiosity. The spectacle of nature becomes a matter of indifference to him by dint of its becoming familiar to him. He does not have a mind for marveling at the greatest wonders....His soul, agitated by nothing, is given over to the single feeling of his own present existence, without any idea of the future, however near it may be....(Rousseau 1992, 26-27)

In Contrast to Rousseau's vision of the origins and significance of humanity's higher functions, the Scriptures present humans as special creatures uniquely designed and created in the image of God, and wired for significant relationship. As sentient beings humans possess a special capacity for language and relationship that enables us to commune with God and to reflect his glory. These same qualities also make us capable of communing with other human beings. However, Rousseau will have none of this in his mythological vision of humans living in a state of nature:

...the fact of the matter is that in that primitive state, since nobody had houses or huts or property of any kind, each one bedded down in some random spot and often for only one night. Males and females came together fortuitously as a result of chance encounters, occasion, and desire, without there being any great need for words to express what they had to say to one another. They left one another with the same nonchalance. (Rousseau 1992, 29-30)

Such is Rousseau's description of the essence of our humanity. His description is meant to form the basis for a new line of reasoning with respect to what it means to be truly human. According to this reasoning, most of humanity's ills can be blamed on society's damaging influence upon the solitary noble savages that once populated the Earth. This stripped-down version of humanity was created in the imagination of one man dreaming of how things might have been in a pre-historic period before anyone possessed the means to write anything down. He writes in his preface to *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality*:

I have begun some lines of reasoning; I have hazarded some guesses, less in the hope of resolving the question than with the intention of clarifying it and reducing it to its true state. Others will easily be able to go farther on this same route, though it will not be easy for anyone to reach the end of it. For it is no light undertaking to separate what is original from what is artificial in the present nature of man, and *to have a proper understanding of a state which no longer exists, which perhaps never existed, which probably never will exist, and yet about which it is necessary to have accurate notions in order to properly understand our own present state* [emphasis added]. (Rousseau 1992, 11-12)

Rousseau is claiming that he has created an alternative account to explain the origins of our humanity. The source of his account of humankind living in a state of nature is his own imagination—not divine revelation, not his own or anyone else’s direct observation, not scientific research or investigation—but his own ability to *imagine* what *possibly* could have happened. The most that he can reasonably claim for his theoretical “state of nature” is that such a state of existence was a possibility. However, he claims a good deal more than the mere possibility that his imagined state of nature may have existed. He claims that it is a state “...about which it is necessary to have accurate notions in order to properly understand our own present state.” By “present state” he apparently means humanity living in a state of society.

Rousseau’s storytelling has resulted in a modern mythological setting that is seldom scrutinized or even noticed. His version of events in human pre-history are simply *assumed* to be an accurate account of what it *must* have been like. Those who would preach in the secularized West should be willing to challenge the veracity and accuracy of Rousseau’s story. It is fair to ask where the evidence is to support his view of reality. Does his story of the development of those traits that appear to make us unique among all the species of the world correspond to reality? Rousseau was never forced to prove his theory. Given the greater understanding we now have of human cognitive development and social functioning, it’s time to subject his paradigm to careful inquiry.

UNMASKING THE GODS IN CONTEMPORARY INSTITUTIONS

The Role of Fortune and the Fates in Contemporary Institutions

Once *Nature* was fully personified, and settled in the new home that Rousseau had built for her—the prehistoric state of nature—it was time to bring her sisters, Fortuna and Fate, to live with her. Nature would need their help to finish the house that Rousseau had only partially built. He had left some important questions unanswered. His theorizing had never taken him all the way back to the very beginning to describe how the universe was formed or how life itself, human or otherwise, could have come into being by purely natural means. It appears that Rousseau was content to leave those tasks alone for the Creator to perform.

Other more radical thinkers and scientists who have come after Rousseau are not content either to allow an intelligent Creator into Nature’s home or to leave such questions unanswered. These theorists believe that the natural world is a closed system of cause-and-effect events that are governed by natural law (though these theorists deny the existence of a lawgiver). Belief in a cause-and-effect universe governed by natural law enables the expansion of knowledge through reproducible experiments. Confidence in natural law lends to science an essential deterministic viewpoint—one that was also familiar to the ancient thinkers in Greece and Rome. As with other principles and ideals drawn from the ancient world, there was a personal and divine character affiliated with the original conception:

In Greek religion, the goddesses of fate, or destiny, were called the Moirai; they determined the course of human life. The three individual goddesses of the Moirai were (1) Clotho (the Spinner), who spins the thread of life; (2) Lachesis (the Disposer of Fate), who determines the length of life; and (3) Atropos (Inflexible) who cuts life off in death....In later Greek tradition, these goddesses gave rise to the picture of three old women: one who spun out people's destinies, one who drew them out over the life span, and the other who cut people's destinies off in death. (Oates 1995, 27-28)

The role that fate plays in our thinking and in science should not be underestimated. Nearly every time someone says, "it was not meant to be," he or she is invoking fate, even if reciting those words does not summon the image of three old women spinning the thread of our destiny and cutting it off wherever they choose. Along the way, the role of fate expanded vastly. Fate was no longer restricted to determining the destinies of individuals. Fate's authority expanded to determine the destinies of larger entities and historical events such as battles and wars. In more recent times she has quietly transferred a sense of inevitability to historical and biological progress and processes. But as fate's power grew she had to give up her personal appearance. She became a disembodied principle and a force. There was little fanfare about the transition. She slipped quietly into the background, and eventually took the forms of natural law and inevitable progress. Wayne Oates observes:

Today these goddesses are only occasionally worshiped in cults as such, but the belief in fate is very much in force. The past is deified in behavioral scientists' determinism focused on heredity in the DNA and the changeless impact of childhood development on the rest of life. (Oates 1995, 28)

But whether we are considering the role of fate either in the ancient or in the modern world, fate's power has never been quite absolute. Other deities would sometimes meddle in the affairs of humans in ancient days, especially Fortuna, goddess of chance or luck. Her character is described this way:

Of all the pagan deities, Fortune was the most absolute and the most universally worshiped; for she kept all men at her feet, the prosperous through fear and the unfortunate through hope. She was also an eccentric goddess, not only favoring the brave...but likewise being decidedly partial to fools.... Among the ancients, a lucky event, something opportune occurring unexpectedly, was ascribed to a sudden caprice or whim on the part of the goddess, while success in an undertaking was thought to be due to her favor when in a sober mood....Pliny, in discoursing about the religious beliefs current in his time, says: "All over the world, in all places and at all times, Fortune is the only God whom every one invokes: she alone is spoken of; she alone is accused and is supposed to be guilty; she alone is in our thoughts, is praised and blamed, and is loaded with reproaches; wavering as she is, conceived by the generality of mankind to be blind, wandering, inconstant, uncertain, variable, and often favoring the unworthy. To her are referred all our losses and all our gains, and, in casting up the accounts of mortals, she alone balances the two pages of our sheet. We are so much in the

power of chance, that chance itself is considered as a God.” (Lawrence 1898, 143-145)

In the modern world, Fortuna has increased in the breadth of her influence in exchange for giving up her personal appearance, as happened with Fate. In her disembodied form Fortuna, better known as *Chance*, becomes an unpredictable force that sometimes countermands the decisions of fate. The evidence for this eclipse of fate’s power can be seen in everyday life in the form of unpredictable occurrences and events. Oates continues:

The elements of chance in the present are epitomized in the statistical odds associated with disease, accidents, and unpredictable occurrences. The future is divined by astrology, various forms of fortune telling, gambling, computer projection, and poll taking. (Oates 1995, 28)

Once again, the word “chance” does not evoke the image of a goddess whimsically running about blindfolded and dispensing fortune and misfortune on whomever wanders into her path, but at the root of the concept of random chance, there she is—an idol hidden in plain view. She plays an essential role in her secularized and disembodied form. She helps to explain the unpredictable and chaotic events and phenomena in the world. In the minds of secularized Westerners she represents a certain measure of hope and freedom from the hard dictates of deterministic fate. The hope she offers is often false hope, foolish hope. She is the patron saint of those who would sell themselves to blind, unthinking and misguided forms of optimism. She is a reminder of the psalmist’s warning that: “Those who make them will be like them, and so will all who trust in them.” Psalm 115:8

The Role of Chance and Fate in Science

In recent years there have been numerous scientific books written describing the origins of the universe and the origins of life itself. Authors writing on both topics wonder at the extreme odds against our being here by chance alone.

Extreme Physics

For instance, over the past century science has arrived at a much deeper understanding of the extreme physics required to make our world what it is. The specifications of several forces and laws that can each be described in mathematical terms must be astronomically precise or we wouldn’t be here. Martin Rees writes:

These six numbers constitute a ‘recipe’ for a universe. Moreover, the outcome is sensitive to their values: if any one of them were to be ‘untuned’, there would be no stars and no life. Is this tuning just a brute fact, a coincidence? Or is it the providence of a divine creator? I take the view that it is neither. An infinity of other universes may well exist where the numbers are different. Most would be stillborn or sterile. We could only have emerged (and therefore we naturally now find ourselves) in a universe with the ‘right’ combination. (Rees 2000, 4)

Rees takes the position that there must be multiple universes (this idea is called the *Multiverse Theory*). He suggests that there may be an infinite number of universes, given the extreme unlikelihood that the one we live in could have popped into existence by mere “coincidence.” In this case “coincidence” is another way of saying by *chance*. Rees admits:

These universes would never be directly observable; we couldn't even meaningfully say whether they existed ‘before,’ ‘after,’ or ‘alongside’ our own. The input assumptions that predict multiple universes are still speculative. (Rees 2000, 168)

Brian Greene also favors the idea of the multiverse. Like Rees, he too admits:

It will be extremely hard, if not impossible, for us ever to know if the multiverse picture is true. Even if there are other universes, we can imagine that we will never come into contact with any of them. (Greene 1999, 368)

What both Rees and Greene are attempting to avoid, by positing the idea of a multiverse, is the irrational belief that *chance* could have produced our universe. For if they were to admit that ours is the only universe there is or ever has been, then they would also be forced to admit that the odds against its emergence—unplanned, unguided, on its own, as it is, purely by chance—are astronomically large. The odds against a chance emergence of our universe are great because the physics that make the universe capable of sustaining any living organism must be and in fact are extremely fine-tuned within specified parameters.

Both Rees and Greene like to talk about chance in their books. They draw analogies from extremely unlikely chance events in order to underscore the difficulty of explaining our unlikely universe without recourse to a notion like the multiverse. Rees refers to someone standing before a firing squad with fifty marksmen who all miss. (Rees 2000, 166) Greene uses the analogy of “the winners of a mass game of Russian roulette” who are surprised at having won at such a dangerous game of chance, but since they are still alive to wonder about it, their reliance on chance must be okay. (Greene 1999, 368)

Rees and Greene face a true dilemma. The origin of the laws of physics that govern the universe is a part of the very thing that these authors are trying to explain. The question becomes, what unintelligent cause could have *caused* a universe with such precisely tuned physics to explode into existence against such extreme odds? Before the Big Bang the laws of physics did not exist, therefore the laws of physics cannot be employed to help explain how they (the laws of physics) came into being along with the universe they govern. An effect cannot cause itself. Only a cause can cause an effect. If a providential intelligent being is barred from the discussion, then an unguided, unspecified event or entity must have been the cause. Such a random entity is generally referred to as *chance*. Yet, chance is too whimsical to account for the production of such highly specified, precisely tuned, and necessary sets of laws and forces contained within the physics that characterize our universe. This is especially true if our universe is the only one.

The solution that Rees and Greene select is to expand the playing field. It is amazing to think that a universe that stretches nearly 15,000,000,000 light years from end to end is too small to contain their naturalistic explanation of our unlikely existence. Their predecessors used to think it was large enough.

The philosophical naturalists' invention of imaginary universes doesn't seem fair. To use a sports analogy, there is a minute left to go in the game. The intelligent design team has been down by four points for some time, but they have the ball at the opponents' two-yard line, and it's third down. All of a sudden, the philosophical naturalist team calls a timeout and protests that the field isn't long enough. They want the game moved to a stadium with a two-hundred yard playing field. They don't know whether such a stadium actually exists, and they doubt whether they can ever know for sure. They've never seen one, but they imagine that one could exist somewhere in the world and that's the one they want to play in.

The above analogy describes what Greene and Rees are in effect doing by positing the idea of a multiverse. By opening the discussion to the possibility of an *infinite* number of unobservable universes, Rees and Greene open a backdoor by which chance may sneak back into the discussion unobserved. In an infinite number of universes anything can happen no matter how unlikely. The concept of the "infinite" overwhelms the imagination.

For Theists, the only thing that is infinite is God. Rees and Greene don't want to talk about him, so they turn quietly to a lesser god who is really Chance in her disembodied form. Officially, Chance is not welcome in the house of reason where natural law is the lady of the house. But Chance is fun and whimsical, and in any case she is needed to explain how things turned out as they did. You can blame just about anything on Chance.

Extreme Biology

The Philosophical Naturalists have their champions in the biological sciences as well. Richard Dawkins has written several books defending Darwinism. He exudes a terrific amount of confidence in Darwinism when he writes:

I want to inspire the reader with a vision of our own existence as, on the face of it, a spine-chilling mystery; and simultaneously to convey the full excitement of the fact that it is a mystery with an elegant solution which is within our grasp. More, I want to persuade the reader, not just that the Darwinian world-view *happens* to be true, but that it is the only known theory that *could*, in principle, solve the mystery of our existence. (Dawkins 1996, xiv)

Dawkins relies heavily on fate (generally referred to as the *law of natural Selection*) and chance (generally referred to as *random* mutations) to offer his purely naturalistic account of life's origin and subsequent variation. However, he seeks to minimize the role that chance plays in the evolutionary process. The role of chance is downplayed on account of

the vastly expanded understanding that biologists have of the complexity of even the simplest cells since the discovery of DNA. Dawkins observes:

[The mitochondria of each cell] can be thought of as a chemical factory which, in the course of delivering its primary product of usable energy, processes more than 700 different chemical substances, in long, interweaving assembly-lines strung out along the surface of its intricately folded membranes. Each nucleus...contains a digitally coded database larger, in information content, than all 30 volumes of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* put together. (Dawkins 1996, 17-18)

Dawkins does not want to dispense with the role chance plays in the form of random mutations. He simply wants to reduce the role of chance to a smaller part and enlarge the role that fate (natural selection) plays in the evolutionary process. He breaks the role of chance up into the tiniest parts possible:

We have seen that living things are too improbable and too beautifully ‘designed’ to have come into existence by chance. How, then, did they come into existence? The answer, Darwin’s answer, is by gradual, step-by-step transformations from simple beginnings, from primordial entities sufficiently simple to have come into existence by chance. Each successive change in the gradual evolutionary process was simple enough, *relative to its predecessor*, to have arisen by chance. But the whole sequence of cumulative steps constitutes anything but a chance process, when you consider the complexity of the end-product relative to the original starting point. The cumulative process is directed by nonrandom survival. (Dawkins 1996, 43)

Dawkins vehemently insists that all appearance of design to the contrary, the perception of design in the evolutionary process is only *apparent* and not true design by any intelligent agent. (Dawkins 1996, 4-5)

One of the key faults in Dawkins’ explanations of the evolutionary process is his heavy reliance upon inappropriate analogies to explain what he calls cumulative selection. He freely imports his analogies from unrelated scientific domains involving purposeful human behaviors in order to illustrate non-purposeful natural processes of selection. Paul Davies, a committed Darwinist, underscores the mystery of life’s origin based upon our present level of knowledge:

“...the problem of the origin of life reduces to one of understanding how encoded software emerged spontaneously from hardware. How did it happen? How did nature “go digital”? We are dealing here not with a simple matter of refinement and adaptation, an amplification of complexity, or even the husbanding of information, but a *fundamental change of concept*.... Can the laws of nature as we presently comprehend them account for such a transition? I do not believe they can.” (Davies 1999, 115)

Davies also raises the issue of a logical disconnect when scientists use purposeful human behavior to describe non-purposeful natural evolutionary processes—a problem that becomes especially acute when these analogies pretend to answer the question of the origin of the genetic coding in the very first living organisms:

How, in the phase before Darwinian evolution kicked in, could a *very particular* sort of information have been scavenged from the nonliving environment and deposited in something like a genome?...And the problems are not purely technical. Thorny philosophical problems loom too. Concepts like information and software do not come from the natural sciences at all, but from communication theory...and involve qualifiers like context and mode of description—notions that are quite alien to the physicist’s description of the world. Yet most scientists accept that informational concepts do legitimately apply to biological systems, and they cheerfully treat semantic information as if it were a natural quantity like energy. Unfortunately, “meaning” sounds perilously close to purpose, an utterly taboo subject in biology. So we are left with a contradiction that we need to apply concepts from purposeful human activities (communication, meaning, context, semantics) to biological processes that certainly appear purposeful, but in fact are not (or are not supposed to be). (Davies 1999, 121-122)

The relative merits of Darwin’s theory are beyond our scope. What concerns us is the way that some of Darwinism’s more ardent atheistic defenders assert a totally unguided, non-purposeful brand of evolution by using poetic devices such as metaphor, similes, and personification. These poetic devices conceal their reliance upon principles and forces in nature that were once considered to be the whimsical providence of the fickle goddesses of Fate and Fortune.

Theists are frequently accused of appealing to the *God-of-the-gaps* explanation when confronted with some of nature’s mysteries. But could the reverse be said of the philosophical naturalists? Are some scientists appealing to the *gaps-of-the-gods* explanation by which they unduly complicate the discussion about our true origins? It appears that fickle Fate and Fortune are hidden in their arguments as they try to claim sole ownership of the house that God built—the universe in which we live. A fundamental operating principle of science called “Ockham’s razor... says we should not multiply causes beyond what’s necessary to explain the effect.” (Strobel 2004, 109) Yet some scientists dream of imaginary universes or play loose with language as a means of claiming that the overwhelming appearance of design in the universe is only apparent.

The very first *enthusiasts* became convinced that they could gain true knowledge without having to rely upon help from their Transcendent Creator. Modern *enthusiasts* use the tools of the poets to hide gods and goddesses in metaphors, similes, and personified forces. In the words of Luther, “they do not remain silent but fill the world with their chattering and scribbling.” It’s not that the use of poetic devices is wrong or deceitful in itself. Poetic language can be a vehicle for either truth or falsehood. What is important is

to learn to use poetic tools wisely and honestly. We will turn next to examine the powerful communication tool of metaphor.

UNMASKING METAPHORS

Recent investigations point to the likelihood that much of our thinking and behavior is shaped by metaphor. Metaphors are woven into our entire “conceptual system,” where they influence our behavior for good or ill. Lakoff and Johnson are two theorists who co-authored a book entitled *Metaphors We Live By*. Lakoff is a linguist at the University of California Berkeley; Johnson is a professor of Philosophy at the University of Oregon.

In the preface of their book, they deny “the possibility of any objective or absolute truth...” (Lakoff and Johnson 1980, x) Such an assertion in no way appears to be a necessary conclusion flowing from their research. Metaphors can convey either truth or falsehood. Their philosophical biases aside, their book has a considerable number of useful insights and strategies for unmasking the metaphors we live by.

The Role of Metaphor in Our Thinking and Acting

Metaphor is a significant component in our larger conceptual system. It is a powerful language tool—a technology—capable of advancing the growth of either greater learning or greater ignorance. Lakoff and Johnson put it this way:

Metaphor is for most people a device of the poetic imagination and the rhetorical flourish—a matter of extraordinary rather than ordinary language. Moreover, metaphor is typically viewed as characteristic of language alone, a matter of words rather than thought or action. For this reason, most people think they can get along perfectly well without metaphor. We have found on the contrary, that metaphor is pervasive in everyday life, not just in language but in thought and action. Our ordinary conceptual system, in terms of which we both think and act, is fundamentally metaphorical in nature....Our concepts structure what we perceive, how we get around in the world, and how we relate to other people. (Lakoff and Johnson 1980, 3)

The problem is that our conceptual system is so much a part of how we think and act, that we are seldom aware of its presence and influence. Lakoff and Johnson continue:

But our conceptual system is not something we are normally aware of. In most of the little things we do every day, we simply think and act more or less automatically along certain lines. Just what these lines are is by no means obvious. One way to find out is by looking at language. Since communication is based on the same conceptual system we use in thinking and acting, language is an important source of evidence for what that system is like. (Lakoff and Johnson 1980, 3)

The authors have devised a technique whereby they expose sets of metaphors that populate our everyday conceptual systems. They claim:

...we have found a way to begin to identify in detail just what the metaphors are that structure how we perceive, how we think, and what we do. To give some idea of what it could mean for a concept to be metaphorical and for such a concept to structure an every day activity, let us start with the concept ARGUMENT and the conceptual metaphor ARGUMENT IS WAR. This metaphor is reflected in our everyday language by a wide variety of expressions:

ARGUMENT IS WAR

Your claims are *indefensible*.

He *attacked every weak point* in my argument.

His criticisms were *right on target*.

I *demolished* his argument.

I've never *won* an argument with him.

You disagree? Okay, *shoot!*

If you use that *strategy*, he'll *wipe you out*.

He *shot down* all of my arguments. (Lakoff and Johnson 1980, 4)

Lakoff and Johnson stress that:

It is important to see that we don't just *talk* about arguments in terms of war. We can actually win or lose arguments. We see the person we are arguing with as an opponent. We attack his positions and defend our own....Many of the things we *do* in arguing are partially structured by the concept of war....The language of argument is not poetic, fanciful, or rhetorical; it is literal. We talk about arguments that way because we conceive of them that way—and we act according to the way we conceive of things. (Lakoff and Johnson 1980, 4, 5)

How Metaphor Works

This brings us to the question of how metaphor actually works. This question is of vital importance to us if metaphor is truly something more than poetic decoration. If indeed metaphor does play a significant role in our conceptual systems, then in turn it influences how we think, feel and ultimately how we act. Therefore, we need to consider how metaphor produces its effect. Lakoff and Johnson are helpful at this point:

The essence of metaphor is understanding and experiencing one kind of thing in terms of another. It is not that arguments are a subspecies of war. Arguments and wars are different kinds of things—verbal discourse and armed conflict—and the actions performed are different kinds of actions. But ARGUMENT is partially structured, understood, performed, and talked about in terms of WAR. (Lakoff and Johnson 1980, 5)

Their key point is that with a well-structured metaphor, one thing only partially stands for another. If a metaphor is executed well, the focus will remain between those aspects of

the two otherwise disparate things in such a way that the hearer will make only the desired connections intended by the speaker. For example, when the psalmist says that “God is my Rock,” he is not saying that God is composed of minerals, nor is he focusing on the weightiness or physical dimensionality of a rocky surface. Rather, he is trying to help the hearer to note the strength and the firmness of God as a refuge for his children. Lakoff and Johnson note:

The very systematicity that allows us to comprehend one aspect of a concept in terms of another (e.g. comprehending an aspect of arguing in terms of battle) will necessarily hide other aspects of the concept. In allowing us to focus on one aspect of a concept (e.g. the battling aspects of arguing), a metaphorical concept can keep us from focusing on other aspects of the concept that are inconsistent with that metaphor. For example, in the midst of a heated argument... we may lose sight of the cooperative aspects of arguing. Someone who is arguing with you can be viewed as giving you his time, a valuable commodity, in an effort at mutual understanding. (Lakoff and Johnson 1980, 10)

Now we are in a better position to demonstrate the presence of a deeply rooted conceptual system that quietly governs a good deal of what people think, believe, and do. We have been considering the roles of chance and fate in modern thinking. Let’s examine the metaphorical concept that “LIFE IS A CRAPSHOOT.” What does human life have in common with words about chance and gambling? How deeply embedded in our everyday living is the connection between our experience and luck or chance? We came up with numerous common phrases pertaining to luck and chance—phrases that we use all of the time without thinking about them. Here are just a few of them:

CHANCE: “LIFE IS A CRAPSHOOT.”

As *luck* would have it I do have a tool kit in my trunk.

Fortunately, I remembered to bring my umbrella.

By *chance* would you happen to have a match?

Her *odds* are not all that great of making it into Harvard.

You have to make the best of *the hand that is dealt* you.

Boy, you really *drew the short end of the stick*.

It’s really a *coin toss* as to what he should do.

That’s not really my *strong suit*.

The shooter began to fire at victims *randomly*.

I’m waiting to see how it all *plays out*.

We found it relatively easy in a matter of five minutes to come up with twenty-five similarly common statements about fate, using the statement, “FATE: OUR FUTURE IS IN THE STARS.” Here are a few of them:

FATE: “OUR FUTURE IS WRITTEN IN THE STARS”

You can’t change the past.

It was *meant to be* or *not meant to be*.

It was *destiny*.

As fate would have it.
His life was hanging by a thread.
It's my lot in life...
Don't tempt fate.
That was predictable.
It was inevitable.
It was a foregone conclusion.
There was a fatal accident with one fatality.

How to Make the Best Use of These Tools

The following are a few strategies we can employ to become more aware of the metaphors we live by and the conceptual systems that feed into how we perceive a given aspect of our lives. The most direct way to access a metaphorical system is to think of a strong metaphorical phrase, and begin to free-associate related words and commonplace phrases. If this approach does not yield results, there is always the thesaurus.

Once a list of phrases and key words begins to emerge, the task of the preacher is to mine deeply for motivations, influences, consequences, needs, word pictures, symbols, related imagery, and the like that will shed light on the subject. Next, think deeply about the nature of the connection between the two key words in the metaphorical statement—how one kind of thing can be understood in terms of another. It's also important to ponder the ways in which the two words do not align with one another. This may uncover some of our hidden assumptions.

Next, the preacher should examine how the metaphor squares with biblical truth. Does the metaphor directly or indirectly express, or contradict the biblical witness on a related theme? It is important to perform a careful analysis here. Metaphor is neither good nor bad in and of itself. It's necessary to examine the use of metaphors in our everyday interactions and in our sermons because they are so pervasive in our lives that they often govern how we think, feel, and act. Because of the power and subtlety of metaphor, as well as of other poetic tools, we need to take care that we use it to convey God's truth rather than a hidden cultural bias.

The final step will be to imagine how the metaphor functions in the context of daily life. How it functions in a sermon will depend upon whether we are seeking to expose the metaphors we live by in the analytical portion of a sermon, or whether we would like to apply biblical truth to life using metaphorical language in the sermon's application. If it is the latter, then the preacher may want to draw a vivid picture or pictures of what that truth might look like when it is lived out in our daily lives.

Our role as preachers is to become aware of the metaphors by which people live their lives and develop their worldview, and then to analyze them, evaluate them, surface their meaning and influence for listeners, and propose new pathways of thought, belief, and action that lead our listeners toward God.

UNMASKING THE AUDIENCE

The Role of the Prophets in Their Day

Before considering how to follow the prophets' and apostles' examples in order to confront the problem of idolatry, we need to do some careful reflection on differences between the role of preachers in the church and society today and the role of the prophets in their day. This is important as we consider the tone of our sermons, especially when our message is based on prophetic texts. The language and imagery that characterize much of the prophetic literature on the issue of idolatry can be very colorful and caustic. Both the situation being confronted and the composition of their audience helped to determine the flavor of the prophet's message.

As is well known, when Isaiah and Jeremiah were preaching, they were addressing audiences that were supposed to be living in covenant faithfulness with a God who had done wondrous things for them. The Kingdom of Judah in particular was, at least formally speaking, a theocratic monarchy. Their true king was God. Each generation of the Davidic dynasty was intended to be God's earthly representative. The king himself was expected to live under God's law and covenant, and in turn he was to enforce the covenant among God's people. This meant that the king himself was not the law, as neighboring despots considered themselves to be. In turn, the prophets were charged with the duty of calling the people to covenant obedience. And the priests functioned as mediators between God and his people within the sacrificial system.

Of course, frequently the people—prophet, priest, and king included—broke their covenant with God. Then God would confront his people through those prophets who remained true to him. That is the context in which the harshest preaching against idolatry occurred. In contrast, our cultural context differs greatly. We do not live in a theocratic monarchy, but rather in a pluralistic society that has much more in common with the cultures of Greece and Rome in the first three centuries of the Common Era than with the land of Judah eight centuries before the Common Era. Christians living in the Greco-Roman civilization were aliens and strangers in lands where they had little or no political power.

A Changing Role for the Church in Western Civilization

Western civilization, particularly in North America, has granted unprecedented freedom to followers of Christ. Along with this freedom has come a limited, but real, measure of influence with respect to the wider culture. However, over the past few decades that influence has waned. Some estimates place the drop in the percentage of Bible-based believers in America from a high of sixty-five percent among the "Builder generation" (born 1927-1945), to a low of four percent in the "Millennial generation" (born 1984 or later). (Luce 2005, 30)

As the Western culture moves further and further away from a Christian worldview, our situation more and more resembles that of the Christians living in the first few centuries of the Common Era. Christians living in the present day who seek to transform society for the better through primarily political means are likely to face ever-deepening

resistance and animosity. Key tenets of our faith and practice are increasingly being misunderstood, misrepresented, and ridiculed in the surrounding culture.

The good news is that we have a message that really is *Good News*. As Paganism continues to flower and go to seed, our message and our witness will stand out in ever sharpening contrast to the changing cultural environment. If we want to make a difference in people's lives, we should take a cue from William Wilberforce, who worked not only to change unjust laws, but to change the hearts and customs of the British people. He began his attempt at reform with the ruling class. (Belmonte 2002, 155-157)

The excesses of the changing cultural environment may open doors into the hearts of men and women who have grown weary from their exacting service to the idols they have bound themselves to. Therefore, it is essential that preachers seek to remain faithful to the message of the Gospel. Attempts to win people to Christ by accommodation to cultural icons and idols will ultimately fail. Christ must be preached faithfully. Through preaching the Holy Spirit continues to offer to sinners Christ crucified and Christ raised from the dead.

Our Approach to People of Faith

At least two different approaches will be necessary as we continue to proclaim the Good News to the present generation. To those who are already in Christ, we need to call upon them to remain true to God in Christ as his covenant people. Faithfulness means remaining free from beliefs, attitudes and behaviors that are fundamentally idolatrous in character. Yet separation from sin does not mean physical separation from the world. Jesus called upon his disciples to be salt and light in the world—to be a blessing and a preserving influence upon the people around them—always prepared to give a reason for the hope within.

The prophets called God's people to covenant obedience, and so must we. Idolatry should be confronted directly and firmly, but with genuine compassion, seeking always to restore those who become imprisoned by the allurements of idols. Our attitude and tone should be similar to that of Christ Jesus, of Paul, and of the other apostles.

The role of pastors is not equivalent to the role of the prophets. The pastoral office has evolved since the days of the early church into a generalist role. That includes not only the original shepherding and caring role, but also the added responsibilities of evangelizing, teaching, and on occasion delivering a prophetic word as the Spirit moves. The combining of gifts and roles within the pastoral role produces an occasional conflict between the prophetic ministry on the one hand and the caring and counseling ministry on the other. To use a boxing analogy, pastors cannot afford to take the gloves off as the prophets of old did, yet they cannot pull punches either.

Our Approach to People Living Outside of the Faith

Perhaps the best strategy for addressing people outside the faith about the issue of idolatry is the one Paul used when he addressed the Areopagus. When he saw the numerous idols in Athens, he was "deeply distressed." (Acts 17:16) He went first to the

synagogue to reason with the Jews and God-fearing gentiles, and then daily into the marketplace to reason with whomever was there. The dialogue would have been helpful in preparing him for his forthcoming extemporaneous speech in the Areopagus. Through the dialogue, he would have listened to their ideas and questions, which would have better prepared him to address the Epicureans and the Stoics.

It is evident from the way Paul began his speech, that he was adopting a more respectful tone, even though the idolatry of their culture was deeply offensive to him. He remarked in non-judgmental tones on their high degree of religiosity. He found an opening illustration from *their* customs and belief system (the altar to an “unknown God”). He incorporated a line from one of *their* poets.

After beginning in this respectful way he confidently asserted the truth about the one true God. His message briefly outlined the view of God presented in the Hebrew Scriptures touching on God’s creative and providential handiwork, and his transcendent and spiritual nature. He directly, firmly, but gently laid out the case against idolatry, including the consequences of continuing to offend God by worshipping such things. He spoke of God’s righteous character and his future judgment, and he offered them Christ, crucified and resurrected, knowing how foolish this would sound particularly to the Epicureans. In a word, Paul’s message was tailored to be as winsome as possible without in any way showing embarrassment about the Gospel. Although he offended many in the audience with the ideas in his message, a few responded and became followers of Christ. It was the message itself that seems to have offended his listeners, not the messenger. Paul’s approach is a worthy model for our methods of evangelism and preaching.

UNMASKING THE RHETORICAL AND THEOLOGICAL CUES

In this final section we will propose a pattern of sermon development that follows a fairly common pattern in the messages delivered by the prophets and apostles in their time. In general it will be helpful to deal in specifics when a preacher wishes to preach from a text on the topic of idolatry. In other words, it may add more meaning and power to a sermon if the preacher avoids both grouping all idolatries together and condemning idolatry in general. People get trapped by particular idols. What traps one person may have no appeal at all to another. The wreckage unleashed upon people’s lives through idolatry comes in very specific forms.

The question remains as to which idol or idols to identify when preaching an expository sermon on a particular biblical text. The short answer is to choose the contemporary idol or idols that most closely resemble what the biblical author appears to have in mind. This may not always be possible, but we believe that it is sometimes possible to climb the ladder of abstraction to identify a modern version of an ancient lie.

Six Essential Tools to Keep in Your De-Idolization Tool Box

The six tasks listed below will be done in very different ways depending on the particular themes the biblical author emphasizes, as well as the support material, poetic devices, and imagery he employs. Of the six tasks below, number one should be done first. Number six should be done last, though the pictures of grace might be sprinkled throughout the sermon. The four tasks listed in the middle may be arranged in different orders, and may be given more or less emphasis in the sermon depending on the preaching text and the needs of the audience. The six tools are:

1. Expose the idols hiding in plain view. Explore language and cultural fashions.
2. Compare the counterfeit god with the true God. What legitimate needs are listeners trying to meet in illegitimate ways?
3. State God's case. Analyze and evaluate specific idolatrous worship and behaviors. What is wrong with this idolatry?
4. Ridicule (if the preaching text does so) the foolishness and the sense of betrayal of the specific idol or idolatry. Be extremely careful about who, when, how, and how often.
5. Warn about the consequences of exchanging the true God for a lie, and state the benefits of repentance and turning back to God.
6. Invite the listeners to repent and receive God's grace through Christ, and apply the benefits by drawing a few pictures of what a grace-filled life may look like.

Applying What We've Learned

In this final section we will look at Isaiah 44 as a representative text of a prophetic message on the topic of idolatry. We believe that the six homiletical tasks mentioned above are highly applicable to our sample text, as well as to other prophetic texts that address the issue of idolatry. What the texts on idolatry generally seem to share in common is the way in which the prophet or apostle directly confronts the futility and sinfulness of his hearers' affection for idols. What seems to differ from text to text on idolatry is the location of the emphasis within the prophet's message. The various biblical authors employ different approaches and emphasize different aspects of idol-making, idol worship, and its consequences. Some of these tools might also be applied to non prophetic preaching texts as well.

Sermons following the six-step pattern would differ greatly in development and the selection of support material in accordance with the tack taken by the biblical author in addressing the broad issue of idolatry with their audiences.

A word of caution may be in order at this point. Exposing and confronting an individual's or a community's idols is often a thankless job. People steeped in idolatry often develop

powerful attachments to the things they worship. Hebrews 11:32-40 lists the ways in which many of the prophets “enjoyed” their “retirement” from preaching.

We chose Isaiah 44 for our example because it emphasizes the process of fabricating idols—the particular aspect of idolatry that this paper seeks to expose. For the reader’s convenience, we have included the full text of Isaiah 44. Certain words or phrases are highlighted in italics within the text in order to draw attention to one or more key features we wish to examine. Brief bracketed comments are inserted into the block of the biblical text for the same purpose.

For those who plan to attend the presentation of this paper, we would like to propose that you attempt a similar analysis on the text of Jeremiah 2. We would like to spend some of the time in the session examining how a sermon on Jeremiah 2 would differ from one on Isaiah 44.

Things to Take Note of When You Read Isaiah 44

As you read through the text, note the themes that Isaiah emphasizes, as well as the location of the climactic sentence and the anticlimax that follows. Note also the tone of Isaiah’s passionate attitude toward those who make the idols, the idols themselves, as well as those who “would speak up for them.” Then you may want to list the vision of God that Isaiah presents—which divine attributes and actions does Isaiah focus upon? Note the extraordinary level of detail Isaiah includes in highly visual word-pictures referring to the huge amount of effort and collaboration that goes into making something that is false and absolutely worthless. Note also who Isaiah ridicules, and how he goes about it. Finally, note the picture frame in which this message sits—what does it add, and which one of the six tasks does it accomplish?

Isaiah 44 NIV

Reminder of God’s Covenant Faithfulness and Future Promise

“But now listen, O Jacob, My ^aservant; And Israel, whom I have chosen: ² Thus says the LORD who made you And ^aformed you from the womb, who ^bwill help you, ^cDo not fear, O Jacob My servant; And you ^dJeshurun whom I have chosen. ³ For ^aI will pour out water on ¹the thirsty land And streams on the dry ground; I will ^bpour out My Spirit on your ^coffspring, And My blessing on your descendants; ⁴ And they will spring up ¹among the grass Like ^apoplars by streams of water.’ ⁵ “This one will say, “I am the LORD’s”, And that one ¹will call on the name of Jacob; And another will ^awrite ²on his hand, “Belonging to the LORD,” And will name Israel’s name with honor

Challenge to False Gods to Do What Only the True God Can Do

⁶ “Thus says the LORD, the ^aKing of Israel And his ^bRedeemer, the LORD of hosts: “I am the ^cfirst and I am the last, And there is no God ^dbesides Me. ⁷ Who then is like me? Let him proclaim it. Let him declare and lay out before me what has happened since I established my ancient people, and what is yet to come—yes, let him foretell what will come. [*In verse 7 God is taunting the “dumb” idols to speak or prophesy.*] ⁸ Do not

tremble, do not be afraid. Did I not proclaim this and foretell it long ago? You are my witnesses. Is there any God besides me? No, there is no other Rock; I know not one.”

Evaluation of Idols and Those Who Make Them and a Prediction

⁹ All who make idols are nothing, and the things they treasure are worthless. *Those who would speak up for them are blind; they are ignorant, to their own shame.* [Emphasis added] ¹⁰ Who shapes a god and casts an idol, which can profit him nothing? ¹¹ He and his kind will be put to shame; craftsmen are nothing but men. Let them all come together and take their stand; they will be brought down to terror and infamy.

Description of the Absurdity of the Idol-making Process

¹² The blacksmith takes a tool and works with it in the coals; he shapes an idol with hammers, he forges it with the might of his arm. He gets hungry and loses his strength; he drinks no water and grows faint. ¹³ The carpenter measures with a line and makes an outline with a marker; he roughs it out with chisels and marks it with compasses. [Extreme irony characterizes this following portion of the text.] He shapes it in the form of man, of *man in all his glory* [Emphasis added], that it may dwell in a shrine. ¹⁴ He cut down cedars, or perhaps took a cypress or oak. He let it grow among the trees of the forest, or planted a pine, and the rain made it grow. [A tremendous amount of time and cooperative effort must be expended to fashion a worthless idol] ¹⁵ It is man’s fuel for burning; some of it he takes and warms himself, he kindles a fire and bakes bread. But he also fashions a god and worships it; he makes an idol and bows down to it. ¹⁶ Half of the wood he burns in the fire; over it he prepares his meal, he roasts his meat and eats his fill. He also warms himself and says, ‘Ah! I am warm; I see the fire.’ ¹⁷ From the rest he makes a god, his idol; he bows down to it and worships. He prays to it and says, “Save me; you are my god.” ¹⁸ They know nothing, they understand nothing; their eyes are plastered over so they cannot see, and their minds closed so they cannot understand. [The idol’s makers and worshippers are as blind and unthinking as the block of wood they have crafted.] ¹⁹ *No one stops to think, no one has the knowledge or understanding to say, “Half of it I used for fuel; I even baked bread over its coals, I roasted meat and I ate. Shall I make a detestable thing from what is left? Shall I bow down to a block of wood?”* [Emphasis added, Verse 19 appears to be the climax to which the whole passage has been building. Everything that follows is anticlimax and conclusion.]

Diagnosis and Remedy

²⁰ He feeds on ashes, a deluded heart misleads him; he cannot save himself, or say, “Is not this thing in my right hand a lie?” ²¹ “Remember these things, O Jacob, for you are my servant, O Israel. I have made you, you are my servant; O Israel, I will not forget you. ²² I have swept away your offenses like a cloud, your sins like the morning mist. Return to me, for I have redeemed you.”

The Glory of God Revealed in the Covenant Renewal

²³ Sing for joy, O heavens, for the LORD has done this; shout aloud, O earth beneath. Burst into song, you mountains, you forests and all your trees, for the LORD has redeemed Jacob, he displays his glory in Israel. [The heaven and earth are called to witness the return of God’s people to him and his return to them.] ²⁴ “This is what the

LORD says—your Redeemer, who formed you in the womb: I am the LORD, who has made all things, who alone stretched out the heavens, who spread out the earth by myself, ²⁵ *who foils the signs of false prophets and makes fools of diviners, who overthrows the learning of the wise and turns it into nonsense*, [Emphasis added] ²⁶ who carries out the words of his servants and fulfills the predictions of his messengers, who says of Jerusalem, “It shall be inhabited,” of the towns of Judah, “They shall be built,” and of their ruins, “I will restore them,” ²⁷ who says to the watery deep, “Be dry, and I will dry up your streams,” ²⁸ who says of Cyrus, “He is my shepherd and will accomplish all that I please; he will say of Jerusalem, “Let it be rebuilt,” and of the temple, “Let its foundations be laid.” ‘ (^{NIV} Isaiah 44:1-28)

APPROACHES TO PREACHING ISAIAH 44 USING THE SIX TOOLS

Isaiah’s Approach

Exposing the Idols

Isaiah emphasizes one aspect of idolatry above all others in this text—the foolishness of worshipping something made by human hands. When someone prays for help, they pray to someone who is supposed to be above their own highest abilities, otherwise the person praying could help him- or herself. The absurdity of praying to the work of one’s own hands in the form of an idol is that it would not even exist without the person’s help. An idol’s origin is well known—it is the product of the craftsman’s abilities—a finely crafted object over which he or she has exercised absolute control and mastery—their masterpiece. Why then would someone expect help from something that needs their help to exist? Isaiah emphasizes the totality of the carpenter’s control in the creation of the idol from start to finish. He planted the sapling, cut it down, measured its dimensions precisely, drew an outline with the marker to determine its shape, chiseled it out, and marked the final dimensions of the idol with a compass. The only thing the carpenter doesn’t do is send the rain to water the tree while it grows.

Isaiah then shifts the focus to two more absurdities. First, he emphasizes the absurdity of worshipping a log. Logs are used as fire wood for keeping warm and cooking. The log is a dumb, senseless, inanimate object that can’t think, see, feel, speak, or act in any way. It’s an object, not a subject. An idol is the ultimate absurd metaphor. A lifeless inanimate log can never stand for even a part of the living, powerful God who is spirit. A log has no spirit. It is an object—not a subject with personal characteristics.

Second, there is the amount of effort and high cost in terms of time, energy, money, and talent required to produce something that is absolutely worthless. The log’s twin is now lying in a pile of ashes on the hearth. As Isaiah describes the blacksmith’s effort, he brings out all of the picturesque power of the familiar scene of the smith standing by an extremely hot fire. He cannot eat or even take a drink because of the amount of energy it

takes to keep a fire in a forge hot enough to melt metal—so the smith grows weary and faint. Idolatry of both the material and immaterial types is always extremely costly, with nothing of any true value given in return. A log is just a log. It doesn't answer prayers. It is only fit for burning or building. Isaiah states that those who make idols, worship idols, or promote idols in any way are “nothing” and the block of wood that they worship is “worthless” and can “profit them nothing.”

Comparing Counterfeit Gods with the True God

The most poignant irony of Isaiah's comparison of the log-God with the true God is a matter of who made whom. The idol maker reverses meaning and value here. The idolater worships *something* he has made literally from the “ground up,” when the idolater ought to be worshipping *someone*—God—who made him or her from the ground up. The first five verses point powerfully to the intimate care with which God forms his children in the womb. Isaiah's portrayal of the true God underscores the absurdity of his people worshipping something they formed in the “womb” of the forge, or the carpentry shop.

The true God is eternal, “the first and the last.” The idols have a definite beginning—it's difficult to choose one. Their birthday could be marked as the day they were planted, the day they were harvested, the day the chisel first touched the wood, or when they were carried to the shrine. The true God is the only real God. The true God also sustains his creation, communicates with his creatures, redeems them, and the like. God speaking through Isaiah taunts the log-God—“let him foretell what will come.”

Stating God's Case

Stating God's case is the step in the process where the preacher begins drawing together the pieces of evidence in God's case against his people. All of the evidence is drawn to a point where the charges are read in a sentence or two. First, the listener is shown the logic of the case against them. For the first time, they are made to see their behavior for what it is from God's point of view. In Isaiah 44 they are confronted with the foolishness of their hours of careful labor and their waste of time and treasure to produce something that is utterly worthless. Then an evaluation of the specific nature of their offense is given in words that sound a lot like a formal indictment. In Isaiah 44 this language comes to the point in verse 20: “...Is not this thing in my right hand a lie?” Isaiah leads them to the “gripping” realization that what they hold in their hand is a lie. Instead of a God that can carry them, they are serving a god that they have to carry around in their hand. The rest of Isaiah 44 is anti-climactic by comparison.

Ridicule

Isaiah, speaking the words of God as his ambassador, and as though with his voice, taunts the idol first, “Let him declare...let him proclaim...let him foretell...” But of course the log-god cannot speak. It's just a log. Then Isaiah ridicules and condemns the idol-makers, the idol promoters, and the idol worshippers, each in turn, calling them “nothing,” and highlighting the absurdity of their actions.

Because of the strong negative connotations that almost always attach to the word “ridicule” we are reluctant to use this word here. However, as we searched the thesaurus for an alternative, nothing seemed more accurate to describe what the prophets were actually doing by their use of language. The only other word that seemed as fitting was the word “taunt,” which did not seem any softer.

Considering Consequences

Isaiah does not belabor the point when he declares the negative consequences of idolatry in this particular passage. In verse 11, he mentions only that those who make idols and those who speak up for them will be brought down in shame, terror, and infamy. He does not get much more specific than that, although the implications throughout the entire passage are that the idol maker should feel shame and humiliation for such absurd behavior. Isaiah underscores the stupidity of crafting and serving idols.

The prophet places most of the stress upon the positive results that will occur when God’s people repent. The generous forgiveness and grace of God form a frame around the harsh criticisms in the middle of the chapter. He begins and ends with words promising that God’s people will receive his help. He will pour out his Spirit upon “Israel’s offspring” as he pours out water upon their dry and thirsty land. There will be streams again in the dry land, and life will re-sprout. The houses of Judah will be rebuilt. Jerusalem will also be rebuilt, and the foundation of the temple will be laid. All of these promises are preceded by a promise of forgiveness and an invitation for God’s people to return to him.

Inviting Listeners to Repent and Receive Forgiveness

Following right on the heels of the most condemning language in the passage are words of affection and the assurance that forgiveness is available. These words are followed in turn by an invitation to repent, and the declaration of restored standing before God.

He feeds on ashes, a deluded heart misleads him; he cannot save himself, or say, “Is not this thing in my right hand a lie?” [Italics added to demonstrate the shift in theme and tone.] “Remember these things, O Jacob, for you are my servant, O Israel. I have made you, you are my servant; O Israel, I will not forget you. I have swept away your offenses like a cloud, your sins like the morning mist. Return to me, for I have redeemed you.” (Isaiah 44:20-22)

Two Different Homiletical Approaches

Isaiah 44 is rich in homiletical possibilities. The first approach would be to take the overarching theme of worshipping the product of one’s hands or imagination, and confront the pantheon of overarching gods and goddesses that we have sought to expose throughout this paper. The advantage to selecting these idols, rather than the more obvious ones like money, power, material things, etc., is that listeners are challenged to truly examine their deeper unconscious assumptions about life and decision-making. A theological worldview corrupted by fate or chance interferes with a deeper faith in Christ. Even sincere and seasoned followers of Christ sometimes operate out of a dual set of

assumptions, informed on the one hand by the Bible and on the other hand by a secular culture quietly dominated by the popular notions of fate and luck.

The second option would be to take on smaller idols in the sermon—the idols commonly associated with consumerism, materialism, and mammon. The advantage of the second approach is that it is easier to execute. The idolatries of a materialistic and celebrity-oriented culture are more obvious and concrete. Many people are already dissatisfied with the number of hours and the drudgery of their daily work. On a theoretical level they can connect the tyranny of possessions directly to the cost in terms of time and effort required just to keep what they already have.

Approach A

Exposing the Idols

Isaiah went to great lengths to describe the making of an actual idol. In this first approach the preacher's goal would be to expose the presence of the larger secular gods and goddesses. The challenge is to re-embody the ancient goddesses of fortune and fate. They have been hidden behind abstractions for centuries, yet they occasionally peek from behind the curtain in the form of personification. The preacher needs to expose them with all of their original character defects. This may be done in part by shining the light of the true God on them. The character traits of the ancient goddesses are a poor counterfeit for the divine attributes of the true God. Fortune ridicules God's Providence. Fate ridicules his Sovereign power and Divine decrees.

Listeners need to be convinced that they are more influenced by the fraudulent gods than they realize. Perhaps a few commonplace phrases from the CHANCE metaphor stated early in the sermon could begin to show how Chance hides in figures of speech and lofty sounding abstractions. The preacher could either list some of these, or he or she could create an interactive exercise, priming the pump with a couple of examples, and then asking people in the congregation to call out a few expressions about fortune or luck.

Once the prevalence of chance is in view, the preacher would begin moving back and forth between the powerful imagery of the idol makers in the Isaiah text and the idol makers of the modern pantheon and their contemporary promoters. Chance and Fortune appear to be different kinds of idols because they have been disembodied for such a long time, but they once had real temples and were depicted in pictures and statues. Fortune's modern temples are found in Las Vegas and Atlantic City, and on Wall Street. Their Scriptures are science text books and popular books on the topic of life's origins. Their mythology is described as though it were the gospel truth on radio talk shows and the Discovery Channel.

At the same time we are re-embodying Fortune and Fate, we need to remember that while Isaiah focused most of his attention on the physical craftsmanship of idols, even these statues were originally conceived in the imaginations of idol makers. All idolatry begins in the mind and heart of the individual who turns away from the true God.

Ultimately, the stress within the sermon needs to be placed on the silliness of worshipping something whose fabrication is traceable either to the forge, or the imaginations of men. Generations of thinkers and scientists since the Enlightenment have deliberately sought ways to free themselves from the constraints of a covenanting God who wants to relate to the creatures he has made. Contemporary idol makers have left the forge in favor of the academy and the laboratory

Brief stories from the ancient myths that reveal the goddesses' real character, or quotes like the one from Pliny earlier in this paper, might help to bring abstract chance out from hiding. True contemporary examples of people relying on chance should then be tied to the fickle goddesses, thus showing how absurd some ideas are that otherwise competent and intelligent people really do live by. Seizing on the ironic tone of Isaiah's phrase "man in all his glory," the preacher could demonstrate the irony of it all. When God is jettisoned from our lives and we attempt to take his place, we end up dehumanizing rather than exalting ourselves.

Comparing Counterfeit Gods with the True God

The preacher should take care as Isaiah does to highlight God's eternal and transcendent nature, as well as his creative character and providential care. These stand in sharp contrast to the counterfeit gods and goddesses who play whimsical tricks on their human victims. The covenanting God rules with true justice, mercy, and compassion. When they still had bodies the pagan gods of the ancient pantheon ruled by fiat. Ironically, they still do, albeit quietly in their abstract form. The ancient gods will continue to exert influence on people as long as they believe the gods exist in the form of real forces and laws in the universe—it's a deification of nature and history. (See: Schlossberg 1990 for extensive treatment of this topic.)

The verses in Isaiah 44:25- 26 highlight the sharp differences between the God of truth and the counterfeit gods and goddesses. If God is truly the only God, and there is none other beside him as verse 6 claims, then fortune and fate are really nothing more than figments of the imagination—idols hiding in plain view. The task of the preacher is to help people understand that neither these goddesses nor the principles that now stand for them are anything but false.

Stating God's Case

In order to state God's case it is necessary to unearth the motives behind idolatry. We must ask, what desire is someone seeking to fulfill when he or she expends extensive resources and effort to worship a product of their hands or their imagination? There is a negative return on their investment. Such misguided energy and effort defies logic and reason and defies chance and fate. The Isaiah passage expresses God's bewilderment and annoyance at the twisted logic that leads a person to worship a block of wood—especially when there is a real God who loves them and wants to be in relationship with them.

An idol is a squatter—a freeloader—a means of avoiding the transcendent God. What does an idol maker seek to gain by avoiding the *transcendent* God? Why, for instance, do philosophical naturalists prefer to talk about imaginary universes and *apparent biological*

design, rather than to at least admit the possibility of an *intelligent designer* who enabled “nature to go digital?” What are these scientists really saying when they talk about nature or selection as though either was a person with consciousness, though they vigorously deny that there is such a consciousness? These scientists are unwittingly striving for transcendence. As spiritual beings, they need to satisfy life’s deep questions of meaning and purpose, but they want it for free. Many scientists substitute the pursuit of a theory of everything for God. Intuitively they know that if there is a God, he would have a right to their love, gratitude, and obedience, and deep down they just don’t want to give these things.

The desire for autonomy goes back a long way. It is a desire fed by an ancient lie. The irony is that total autonomy is impossible. Either we are indebted to God, or we are slaves to sin, fear, and ultimately to death. Sadly, the words of Isaiah seem to fit these men and women who dream up make-believe universes, and monkeys typing lines from Shakespeare in order to keep God out of their minds and hearts: “He feeds on ashes, a deluded heart misleads him; he cannot save himself, or say, “Is not this thing in my right hand [or my imagination] a lie?” Declaring such a verdict is what we mean by *stating God’s case*.

Ridicule

The question we need to pose is whom or what, if anything, should we in our cultural context be willing to ridicule? One candidate that seems uncontroversial is the idol itself. Idols cannot see, hear, or feel anything, and yet by their very existence, they do such harm. Idols deserve all the ridicule we can give them.

What about idol makers or worshippers, is it permissible to ridicule them? One of the scientists quoted earlier in this paper described an imaginary monkey typing out a line from Hamlet on an imaginary typewriter. The author was attempting to explain how nature (which by the way does not even have the intelligence of a monkey brain) could provide the necessary genetic code from which life emerged, without any help from an intelligent being. Can we ridicule this author? Perhaps, but it would probably be better to take the high road, and stick to ridiculing the monkey.

In general, it is better to avoid personal attacks, even if the prophets took such liberties. However, in our view, preposterous ideas advanced to conceal weak arguments are fair game. The final word of caution is to always proceed with caution when using such a potent weapon. Pastors especially have to be careful not to scare away people who may need to come to them for comfort. Pastors sometimes must deliver a prophetic word, but they also must be willing and able to help bind up wounds.

Considering Consequences

Isaiah points out the shame that goes along with bowing to a block of wood and saying, “Save me; you are my god.” The most immediate consequence is that no help is on the way—after all, it’s really just a block of wood. If it can’t carry itself around, or pick itself up off the ground, then it certainly can’t pick up and carry anyone else.

Life is difficult for the person who chooses to carry their gods around with them. There is a no-value-added tax for an idolater. You still have to pay the tax, but nothing of value is coming in return. Idols are the ultimate consumers. They let their admirers do all the work, and they pay nothing in return. The poor blacksmith in Isaiah's account is dehydrated, overheated, and hungry, but he has to keep the fire in the forge going. How many modern workers feel the same way? Once the idols have you in their grip, it's virtually impossible to get them to let you go.

The worst consequence is that the idol blocks the way to God's help. God will not usually answer the phone for one of his false competitors. He warned the first enthusiasts that if they looked for their own way, they would be on their own. Spiritual death is separation from God. It is the ultimate price that the unrepentant idol maker and worshipper must pay if they never turn around and start heading back to the only true God. In the end repentance is turning in the right direction.

Inviting Listeners to Repent and Receive God's Gift

The Good News is that following right on the heels of the words of indictment concerning the idolater in verse 20 are the words in verse 21 and following—words of invitation and redemption. The idolater may turn his or her life into nothing, but God is willing and able to make something out of nothing. He did it at the time of the Creation, and he still makes new creatures out of the spiritually dead.

“Remember these things, O Jacob, for you are my servant, O Israel. I have made you, you are my servant; O Israel, I will not forget you. I have swept away your offenses like a cloud, your sins like the morning mist. Return to me, for I have redeemed you.” Sing for joy, O heavens, for the LORD has done this; shout aloud, O earth beneath. Burst into song, you mountains, you forests and all your trees, for the LORD has redeemed Jacob, he displays his glory in Israel.

Approach B

Exposing the Idols

An alternative approach would be to choose more concrete idols such as money and material possessions. The preacher would portray the idol makers—the manufacturers and idol worshippers—the consumers in complementary roles. “Those who would speak up for them” are the advertisers. The irony in this line of development is that the ultimate consumer is the idol itself. The worshipful consumer and the industrious manufacturer are both consumed by the product they wish to consume. The absurdity of the situation is that inanimate objects of the idolaters' own making can demand so much without having a mind to do so, or a heart to appreciate the worshipper's and the manufacturer's sacrifice. No one ends up satisfied in the end. The harder one works—either in the making of idols, or in the effort required to buy the idol maker's finished product—the more the desire grows for more. The objects of the modern idolater's desire have no value, because they can never satisfy the type of hunger the idolater suffers, which is really a hunger for a transcendent God.

Comparing Counterfeit Gods with the True God

This line of sermon development would make use of the imagery in the Isaiah passage concerning the forge, and the extraordinary effort of the carpenter to produce something at great cost that has no real value in the end. The futility of the eighty-hour work week should be stressed. Idols, without a mind of their own, are slave-drivers. The idolater works and works, always hoping to get a return on the investment in the form of a favor from the false god, but the favor never comes—only greater cost. This aspect of idolatry is a form of bribery. Ironically, just when the idolater gets their hands on the thing they believe will bring them joy, they feel only more emptiness. The end result is a desire for the next thing, so there never truly is an end result. Isaiah draws a sharp contrast between the hard labor of the idolater sweating and dehydrating at the forge, and the children of God’s covenant on whom God pours his spirit like fresh water. New life grows up and flourishes under the loving grace of God. The preacher would want to stress the emphasis God places on rest and renewal for his servants.

Ridicule

Ridicule could be directed toward the advertisements that attempt to create false needs from wants. Describing a particular commercial or two—preferably an amusing one—and exposing the means by which the advertiser sneaks in subliminal messages would be a good way to illustrate the idea that “the thing in my right hand is a lie.”

Considering Consequences

Illustrations on the consequences of rampant consumerism and materialism would be drawn from statistics and stories about the problem of overworking. The cost would be measured in terms of health—physically, mentally, spiritually, and relationally. Drawing parallels between the parched and hungry blacksmith sweating at the forge, afraid to leave for fear of losing his income, and the overworked American chained to his or her computer would be apropos. The desk at work becomes the forge of Isaiah’s imagery—and the worker is afraid to leave on time lest he or she lose their job, and with it the trappings of success expected by an idolatrous society. And the irony is that the overworked American works longer hours for less real income—to support higher payments on a bigger house for a smaller family which he or she barely has time to see. The preacher would stress how little things have changed.

The paramount relationship that is forfeited is the one with God, who alone can meet the cravings of a person’s spiritual hunger. With God too, the more of him you have in your life, the more of him you want, but the difference is that he is like an unending stream of living water, and he is always prepared to refill. Isaiah uses this very imagery in the text. If Isaiah’s emphases are followed by the preacher, then the focus will be more on the grace that comes as a consequence of turning away from idols and toward God.

Stating God’s Case

In this second approach, the emphasis would be more on the foolishness of the amount of effort and exhausting labor that goes into making a worthless lie in material form. The attempted bribery inherent in such wasted effort might also be considered. The point of this indictment is more focused on the issue of works versus grace.

Inviting Listeners to Repent and Receive God's Gift in Christ

As with plan A the stress would be placed on verses 21-22. The preacher might want to cite the words of Jesus in Matthew 11:28, "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest."

CONCLUDING REMARKS

People living in the twenty-first have access to more information than any generation in history. In fact, this generation has access to the cumulative knowledge and wisdom of every preceding generation that managed to leave a record of their thoughts and experiences. The present generation may believe itself to be far too sophisticated to bow before idols, or seek the favor of a blindfolded goddess running around half naked and dispensing favors randomly. The ancients knew her fickle ways well. Chance is more likely to favor the ne'er-do-well and the fool than she is the diligent and wise. But believe in her and her sisters, the present generation does, though in a more dignified abstract form. The ancient lying cheating gods never really went away. They went into hiding right out in the open, invisibly capturing the dreams and aspirations of anyone willing to place blind trust in them. Ironically, they have no real minds of their own. They cannot appreciate all that their followers do for them, because they don't really exist. They are slave-drivers and harsh taskmasters that their worshippers place over themselves.

Effective preaching in the secular West will demand that we expose the myths people live by. This generation's personified taskmasters will have to be brought into plain view. In their place we have something of real value to offer—more accurately we have someone to offer. We can offer them an invitation to know Christ—not a version of Christ that this generation gets to design or alter with their imagination. No, the only Christ we have to offer is the one who was crucified as a sacrifice for sin—even the sin of idolatry, and raised from the dead. This is the only Christ there is. When the message of the cross was preached to the ancient intellectuals gathered in the Aeropagus to listen to one little Christian rabbi, many scoffed. They called the rabbi a babbler and condemned his message as foolishness. However, then as now it was a message of great power and great love—the power of God unto salvation for the few that would listen. Perhaps it will only be a few that listen to us. Perhaps the others will call us mere babblers, but then again who really cares what the scoffers think? They are too busy chasing after a half-naked, blindfolded goddess who doesn't really exist, to know the difference between an idol they can carry around in their right hand, and a real God—the only God—who would and could carry them if only they were willing!

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