

Chapter 1

An Introduction: Ode To The Unknown God

“You are My witnesses,” says the LORD, “and My servant whom I have chosen, that you may know and believe Me, and understand that I am He. Before Me there was no God formed, nor shall there be after Me. I, even I, am the LORD, and besides Me there is no savior. I have declared and saved, I have proclaimed, and there was no foreign god among you; therefore you are My witnesses,” says the LORD, “that I am God. Indeed before the day was, I am He; and there is no one who can deliver out of My hand; I work, and who will reverse it?” (Isaiah 43:10-13)

Some years ago I had a written discussion with a very capable brother on the subject of God’s foreknowledge. It was during this discussion that I started to understand that, as incredible as it sounds, “THE UNKNOWN GOD” the apostle Paul spoke of to the Athenians in Acts 17 could be a God almost as unknown to Christians as He is to most pagans. If you think this a bit rash, I ask you to consider the following.

During the discussion, my esteemed brother used several human analogies in an effort to prove God could not know the future, contingent, free will choices of His creatures. These were the “master of chess” God and “God as novelist or playwright.” In his master-of-chess analogy, his point was: “God does not need foreknowlwdge of the contingent free will choices and actions of men in order to bring His purpose to pass.” He argued that “a master of chess would not need foreknowledge of a novice’s moves in

order to decisively defeat him.” He then applied this analogy to God by arguing, “So it is with God and men.” When using the God as novelist or playwright analogy, his point was that if God already knew the future, then it would have to be because He had already written it.

I pointed out to him that the problem with all such analogies is the inherent assumption, even when one is unconscious of it, that God is just a man of larger proportions—something the Bible categorically denies.¹ My objection to such reasoning was twofold: (1) the obvious effort to make God in the image of man, something Romans 1:23 clearly identifies as idolatry; and (2) God’s foreknowledge cannot be legitimately compared with man’s writing of a novel or play because God’s foreknowledge, contrary to that of the the novelist/playwright, need not be any more manipulative than omnipotence, an attribute my opponent readily admitted God could use to carry out His will without stomping all over the free moral agency of His creatures.

However, and this was a point that greatly offended my opponent, there is, in reality, little difference between the theologian’s constructs (viz., God as a novelist or playwright analogies) and the pagan’s idols—they are all substitutes of God. Further, when one insists on playing around on the slippery slopes of higher anthropomorphism he ought not to be so surprised when he falls victim of his own dubious assumptions. To this line of reasoning, my opponent said: “I am accused of an ‘obvious effort to make God in the image of man,’ and, therefore, of idolatry. This is a mighty serious charge to bring against a brother.” I think I can understand how he must have felt, but I was obligated to show that ideas do, in fact,

¹ See Numbers 23:19 and Romans 11:33.

have consequences.² At issue was not whether I had made a serious charge against a brother, but whether the charge was true. Now, like then, I do not believe this brother knowingly involved himself in idolatry. However, he engaged in it when he superimposed man's imperfections and inabilities onto God. This, after all, is what idolatry is.

I refer to this incident not because I wish to embarrass or be unkind to my opponent in that debate, but because I think it serves to illustrate a weakness we Christians have when it comes to the subject of idolatry. It seems we have a tendency to think idolatry is something that only affects heathens. However, the tendency to idolatry is as prevalent today as it ever was. The Bible makes it clear that idols are not just concrete images found on pagan altars, but they can exist as false concepts in the hearts and minds of well-educated moderns, as well.

In the New Testament, the apostle John warned Christians to keep themselves from idols.³ The apostle Paul wrote that Christians are to flee idolatry.⁴ Are these warnings to all Christians throughout all time, or are they, as some claim, just warnings to Gentile Christians who were surrounded by pagan idolatry? Doesn't the Bible teach that all Christians are susceptible to covetousness? And doesn't this same Bible clearly teach that covetousness is, in fact, idolatry?⁵ If so, then the Bible teaches that idolatry can affect modern "civilized" Christians, just as it did the ancients, and that we moderns must continue to be careful not to become entangled in its snare.

² See Proverbs 23:7.

³ See 1 John 5:21.

⁴ See 1 Corinthians 10:14.

⁵ See Ephesians 5:5 and Colossians 3:5.

The Almighty Is A Jealous God

The true and living God, the One who has revealed Himself in the Scriptures, is a jealous God. As such, He demands that we have no other gods before Him.⁶ Therefore, when we study Jehovah's revelation of Himself in the Bible, we must work very hard not to misunderstand what He says. If we do misunderstand—or worse yet, misrepresent—Him in any way, we could easily be entangled in idolatry. For example, I have heard people say, “The God I worship could never send anyone to Hell for an eternity.” They go on to say that their God is a God of love, not wrath; mercy, not vengeance, *et cetera*. I believe most Christians will recognize the idolatrous nature of such thinking, for it is clear that people who talk like this have created a god (i.e., a theological construct or idol) who is much different from the God who has revealed Himself in the Bible. Consequently, all Christians, especially gospel preachers, must be very careful to understand correctly, and teach accurately, the magnificent attributes and characteristics of the Almighty God, Jehovah Elohim. When a preacher says that it is impossible for God to foreknow the future—unless He has acted to cause it to happen—simply because it hasn't happened yet, he is portraying, even though unintentionally, a god quite different from the One who has identified Himself in the Bible. And as I pointed out in the aforementioned debate, this is nothing less than idolatry.

The fact that the brother in that debate thought my mentioning of idolatry to be too harsh in a discussion between Christians is, I am convinced, indicative of a general misunderstanding of the far-reaching significance of idolatry. Idolatry is not just something

⁶ See Exodus 20:1-2.

that pagans engage in; it is something Christians can, and do, participate in, as well. Therefore, an examination of idolatry—*what* it is and *how* it affects us—is a study that can be extremely helpful.

Our plan for doing so is as follows:

- *First*, we'll take a little closer look at the one true God who has revealed Himself in the Bible.
- *Then*, we'll examine idolatry itself, particularly its psychological nature.
- *Finally*, we'll consider some of the idols we moderns have constructed for ourselves.

The study will be challenging, maybe even taxing, but when we're through, I hope you will agree with me that it was worth the effort.