



ΤΩ ΧΡΟΝΟΥ ΚΑΙΡΩ

“In the Nick of Time”



Occasional
Essays
and Other Stuff
for Christian
Students

Presented by the
President of

Central Baptist
Theological
Seminary of
Minneapolis

American Christianity needs leaders. American Christianity needs *Christian* leaders. Christian leaders explain the Scriptures, bringing them to bear upon life’s urgent questions. Christian leaders exemplify the life of faith, finding their ultimate satisfaction in God alone. They unite intellectual discipline with ordinate affection, turning their entire being toward the love of God. These essays are dedicated to the task of inviting today’s Christian students to become tomorrow’s Christian leaders.

—Kevin T. Bauder

“...Be instant in season,
out of season;
reprove, rebuke, exhort
with all longsuffering
and doctrine.”

X X X
September 9, 2005
X X X

Radical Monotheism

Part Six

The Hapless Henotheist

“Why have you stolen my gods?”

—Laban in Genesis 31:30

All gods are jealous. All gods insist that they alone be given ultimate loyalty. All gods make absolute demands. A thing becomes a god by being worshipped, and to be worshipped means to be valued as an end rather than as a means. Every god insists, not merely upon having first place, but upon having the only place.

Herein lies the frustration of the polytheist. Polytheists hope to serve many gods, but they cannot. Their gods come into conflict and seek to assassinate one another. Avarice bullies Lust. Ambition fights against Sloth. Woe to the human caught between two gods!

Because the ancients understood this warfare between the gods, they never asked too much of their deities. They knew that one god might be thwarted by another, or that all gods (being capricious) might suddenly turn against a worshipper. This was the very stuff of tragedy.

Moderns are less wise. They have been told that they have a right to demand fulfillment from all of their gods. When the gods do not deliver (and they do not), then moderns look for someone to blame. The culture of victimization, therapy, and resentment follows. People whose gods have disappointed them are bitter people indeed.

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This essay is by
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agrees with every
opinion that it
expresses.

Some people try to deal with this problem by narrowing their loyalty to a single god, who nevertheless is not the God of the Bible. They will choose between money and sensuality, between ambition and sloth, or select some other god. One person gives himself over to patriotism, another to alcoholism, and another to family, but each excludes other absolutes. Such people are rightly called *henotheists*. A henotheist is a person who worships one god among many.

The god of the henotheist is still an idol. That is the fundamental problem with henotheism. Henotheists solve the problem of conflict between the idols, but whatever god they choose still wars against the True and Living God.

No god but God is capable of bearing the weight of the human soul. Augustine well remarked, “Thou has made us for Thyself, and our souls have no rest until they rest in Thee.” We are made for a transcendent purpose. We are made to delight in Yahweh, to find our satisfaction in Him, to know Him as our God. No idol can satisfy us. The gods collapse when confronted with transcendence, leaving their worshippers hollow.

The idols are deceivers who always promise more than they can deliver. The drunkard cannot stay drunk: at some point he returns to reality and faces the devastation that his drunkenness has caused. The libertine who seeks satisfaction in sexual abandonment finds slavery instead, followed by the tortures of guilt and the fear of disease. The man of ambition strives to attain the pinnacle of recognition, only to discover that the mountaintop vanishes into mist.

A friend told me about a scholar—a man who after hard work became the noted expert in his field—who committed suicide. At the funeral one of his colleagues commented to another, “I just don’t understand it. We all admired him. He was at the top of his discipline.” The reply came, “Don’t you realize? There’s nothing at the top!” When he reached the very thing he had worshipped, this scholar’s god abandoned him.

All false gods will abandon their worshippers sooner or later. Laban is an excellent example. What could be more pathetically comic than an indignant idolater demanding, “Why have you stolen my gods?” A man who has lost his gods is indeed in a bad state of affairs.



Caravaggio. *The Sacrifice of Isaac*. c.1603.

All idolaters lose their gods sooner or later. Consider the man whose god is his career. He lives for his job. He wants to succeed, so he sacrifices all other goods and subordinates them to his occupation. His work is his satisfaction. He defines himself in relationship to what he does; his job becomes his identity. Then one day he is laid off or forced to retire. Forsaken by his god, he no longer knows who he is. He discovers that he has given his life to something that abandons him. He loses his god.

Consider also the woman who spends her life serving her husband (or the man who spends his life serving his wife). Such people delight in the wellbeing of their spouses. They find their satisfaction in the fulfillment of their marriage partners. For them, marriage is the ultimate good, the goal to which all other activities are the means. To these people, a husband or a wife becomes a god. No human partner, however, can bear that much weight. At some point the worshipped husband or wife will become unmindful or even unfaithful—or will die. In the moment of bereavement, those who have worshipped marriage will find themselves holding only to the ghosts of memory. They lose their gods.

The grave stands as the terminus of all idols. None of them can survive our deaths. None of them can sustain us, delight us, or satisfy us in the coffin. At the moment of our death, we die to all gods but the True and Living God. In that instant, we stand naked before Him.

I once read about a woman who spent her life amassing a collection of potato chips that resembled things. She had one that looked like Mickey Mouse and one that was a near-perfect silhouette of Bob Hope. She claimed to possess the only potato chip collection in the world.

One wonders what it feels like to die with the world's only potato chip collection. Does one face the grave with equanimity because one knows that one's life has been well spent? And what good would such a collection do five minutes after one's death?

Please don't misunderstand me: I am not suggesting that this woman made a god of her potato chips. I don't know that. What I do know is that potato chips would make a pretty pointless idol. What does it matter in eternity if you had the biggest (or the only) chip collection on earth?

But then, what does it matter if you had the biggest bank account? If you amassed the greatest number of degrees? If you attained the highest levels of recognition and honor? People *do* make gods of these things. Five minutes after death, however, they accomplish no more good than a collection of potato chips. At death, we lose all of our gods.

The only God who can bear the weight of the human soul is Yahweh. The only God who does not abandon us when we die is the Lord. Because He is the True and Living God, He can sustain, delight, and satisfy the soul forever.

No alternative exists. The polytheist is caught between jealous gods. The henotheist leans upon that which cannot support the weight of his soul. In the end, happiness comes only to radical monotheists as they serve and glorify the True and Living God. X



The Cross

Pedro Calderón de la Barca (1600-1681)

tr. R.C. Trench

Tree which heaven has willed to dower
With that true fruit whence we live,
As that other death did give;
Of new Eden loveliest flower;
Bow of light, that in worst hour
Of the worst flood signal true
O'er the world, of mercy threw;
Fair plant, yielding sweetest wine;
Of our David harp divine;
Or our Moses tables new;
Sinner am I, therefore I
Claim upon thy mercies make;
Since alone for sinners' sake
God on thee endure. X



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