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# Idols of the Heart and “Vanity Fair”

by David Powlison

One of the great questions facing Christians in the social sciences and helping professions is this one: How do we legitimately and meaningfully connect the conceptual stock of the Bible and Christian tradition with the technical terminologies and observational riches of the behavioral sciences? Within this perennial question, two particular sub-questions have long intrigued and perplexed me.

One sort of question is a Bible relevancy question. Why is idolatry so important in the Bible? Idolatry is by far the most frequently discussed problem in the Scriptures.<sup>1</sup> So what? Is the problem of idolatry even relevant today, except on certain mission fields where worshipers still bow to images?

The second kind of question is a counseling question, a “psychology” question. How do we make sense of the myriad significant factors that shape and determine human behavior? In particular, can we ever make satisfying sense of the fact that people are simultaneously inner-directed and socially-shaped?

These questions—and their answers—eventually intertwined. That intertwining has been fruitful both in my personal life and in my counseling of troubled people.

## THE RELATIONSHIP OF INDIVIDUAL MOTIVATION TO SOCIOLOGICAL CONDITIONING

The relevance of massive chunks of Scripture hangs on our understanding of idolatry. But let me focus the question through a particular verse in the New Testament which long troubled me. The last line of 1 John woos, then commands us: “Beloved children, keep yourselves from idols” (1 John 5:21). In a 105-verse treatise on living in vital fellowship with Jesus, the Son of God, how on earth does that unexpected command merit being the final word? Is it perhaps a scribal emendation? Is it an

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<sup>1</sup>The “First Great Commandment,” like the first two or three commandments from the decalogue, contrasts fidelity to the Lord with infidelities. The open battle with idolatry appears vividly with the golden calf and reappears throughout Judges, Samuel, Kings, the prophets, and Psalms.

awkward *faux pas* by a writer who typically weaves dense and orderly tapestries of meaning with simple, repetitive language? Is it a culture-bound, practical application tacked onto the end of one of the most timeless and heaven-dwelling epistles? Each of these alternatives misses the integrity and power of John’s final words.

Instead, John’s last line properly leaves us with that most basic question which God continually poses to each human heart. Has something or someone besides Jesus the Christ taken title to your heart’s trust, preoccupation, loyalty, service, fear and delight? It is a question bearing on the immediate motivation for one’s behavior, thoughts, and feelings. In the Bible’s conceptualization, the motivation question is the lordship question. Who or what “rules” my behavior, the Lord or a substitute? The undesirable answers to this question—answers which inform our understanding of the “idolatry” we are to avoid—are most graphically presented in 1 John 2:15-17, 3:7-10, 4:1-6, and 5:19. It is striking how these verses portray a confluence of the “sociological,” the “psychological,” and the “demonological” perspectives on idolatrous motivation.<sup>2</sup>

The inwardness of motivation is captured by the inordinate and proud “desires of the flesh” (1 John 2:16), our inertial self-centeredness, the wants, hopes, fears, expectations, “needs” that crowd our hearts. The externality of motivation is captured by “the world” (1 John 2:15-17, 4:1-6), all that invites, models, reinforces, and conditions us into such inertia, teaching us lies. The “demonological” dimension of motivation is the Devil’s behavior-determining lordship (1 John 3:7-10, 5:19), standing as a ruler over his kingdom of flesh and world. In contrast, to “keep yourself from idols” is to live with a whole heart of faith in Jesus. It is to be controlled by all that lies behind the address “Beloved children” (see especially 1 John 3:1-3, 4:7-5:12). The alternative to Jesus, the swarm of alternatives, whether approached through the lens of flesh, world, or the Evil One, is idolatry.

## An Internal Problem

The notion of idolatry most often emerges in discussions of the worship of actual physical images, the creation of false gods. But the Scriptures develop the

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<sup>2</sup>This confluence of the world, the flesh, and the devil is unsurprising, as it recurs throughout the Scriptures: see Ephesians 2:1-3 and James 4:1-7 for particularly condensed examples.

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idolatry theme in at least two major directions pertinent to my discussion here. First, the Bible internalizes the problem. "Idols of the heart" are graphically portrayed in Ezekiel 14:1-8. The worship of tangible idols is, ominously, an expression of a prior heart defection from YHWH your God.<sup>3</sup> "Idols of the heart" is only one of many metaphors which move the locus of God's concerns into the human heart, establishing an unbreakable

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bond between specifics of heart and specifics of behavior: hands, tongue, and all the other members. The First Great Commandment, to "love God heart, soul, mind, and might," also demonstrates the essential "inwardness" of the law regarding idolatry. The language of love, trust, fear, hope, seeking, serving—terms describing a relationship to the true God—is continually utilized in the Bible to describe our false loves, false trusts, false fears, false hopes, false pursuits, false masters.

If "idolatry" is the characteristic and summary Old Testament word for our drift from God, then "desires" (*epithumiai*) is the characteristic and summary New Testament word for the same drift.<sup>4</sup> Both are shorthand for the problem of human beings. The New Testament language of problematic "desires" is a dramatic expansion of the tenth commandment, which forbids coveting (*epithumia*). The tenth commandment is also a command that internalizes the problem of sin, making sin "psychodynamic." It lays bare the grasping and demanding nature of the human heart, as Paul powerfully describes it in Romans 7. Interestingly (and unsurprisingly) the New Testament merges the concept of idolatry and the concept of inordinate, life-ruling desires.

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<sup>3</sup> "Heart" is the most comprehensive biblical term for what determines our life direction, behavior, thoughts, etc. See Proverbs 4:23, Mark 7:21-23, Hebrews 4:12f, etc. The metaphor of "circumcision or uncircumcision of heart" is similar to "idols of the heart," in that an external religious activity is employed to portray the inward motivational dynamics which the outward act reflects.

<sup>4</sup> See such summary statements by Paul, Peter, John, and James as Galatians 5:16ff; Ephesians 2:3 & 4:22; 1 Peter 2:11 & 4:2; 1 John 2:16; James 1:14f, where *epithumiai* is the catch-all for what is wrong with us.

Idolatry becomes a problem of the heart, a metaphor for human lust, craving, yearning, and greedy demand.<sup>5</sup>

### A Social Problem

Second, the Bible treats idolatry as a central feature of the social context, "the world," which shapes and molds us. The world is a "Vanity Fair," as John Bunyan strikingly phrased it in *Pilgrim's Progress*.<sup>6</sup> Bunyan's entire book, and the Vanity Fair section in particular, can be seen as portraying the interaction of powerful, enticing, and intimidating social shapers of behavior with the self-determining tendencies of Christian's own heart. Will Christian serve the Living God or any of a fluid multitude of idols crafted by his wife, neighbors, acquaintances, enemies, fellow members of idolatrous human society...and, ultimately, his own heart?<sup>7</sup>

That idolatries are both generated from within and insinuated from without has provocative implications for contemporary counseling questions. Of course, the Bible does not tackle our contemporary issues in psychological jargon or using our observational data.<sup>8</sup> Yet, for example, the Bible lacks the rich particulars of what psychologists today might describe as a "dysfunctional family or marital system" only because it does not put those particular pieces of human behavior and mutual

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<sup>5</sup> Ephesians 5:5 and Colossians 3:5.

<sup>6</sup> John Bunyan, *The Pilgrim's Progress* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1967), pages 84-93.

<sup>7</sup> I'm commenting here only on the impact of "negative" social influences, which both communicate their idols to us and provoke our hearts to produce idols. If you rage at me, I tend to learn from you something about the supreme importance of getting my own way, as well as a few tricks and techniques for accomplishing that. I also instinctively tend to generate compensatory idols in order to retaliate, to defend, or to escape. We tend to return evil for evil.

I could equally comment on the impact of "positive" social influences—both in Bunyan and in life—which communicate faith to us and tend to encourage faith in our hearts and repentance from idolatry. The biblical way to deal with "enemies," returning good for evil, is both learned from others and a product of the heart.

<sup>8</sup> Sociologists, anthropologists, and historians of psychiatry have described how most symptoms and all diagnostic labels are culture-bound. This is especially true with regard to functional problems (as opposed to the distinctly organic problems) which comprise the vast bulk of human misery and bad behavior. This relativizing observation means that diagnostic labels are not "scientific" and "objectively true." Labels are occasionally useful heuristically if we recognize them for what they are: crude taxonomic orderings of observations. But labels are elements within schemas of value and interpretation. Because diagnostic categories are philosophically and theologically "loaded," a Christian who seeks to be true to the Bible's system of value and interpretation must generate biblical categories and must approach secular categories with extreme skepticism.

influence under the microscope. The “lack” is only in specific application. The biblical categories do comprehend how individuals in a family system—or any other size or kind of social grouping—work and influence one another for good or ill. For example, the life patterns often labeled “codependency” are more precisely and penetratingly understood as instances of “co-idolatry.” In the case of a “co-idolatrous relationship,” then, two people’s typical idol patterns reinforce and compete with each other. They fit together in an uncanny way, creating massively destructive feedback loops.

The classic alcoholic husband and rescuing wife are enslaved within an idol system whose components complement each other all too well. There are many possible configurations to this common pattern of false gods. In one typical configuration, the idol constellation in the husband’s use of alcohol might combine a ruling and enslaving love of pleasure, the escapist pursuit of a false savior from the pains and frustrations in his life, playing the angry and self-righteous judge of his wife’s clinging and dependent ways, the self-crucifying of his periodic remorse, a trust in man which seeks personal validation through acceptance by his bar companions, and so forth.

The idol pattern in the wife’s rescuing behavior might combine playing the martyred savior of her husband and family, playing the proud and self-righteous judge of her husband’s iniquity, a trust in man which overvalues the opinions of her friends, a fear of man which generates an inordinate desire for a male’s love and affection as crucial to her survival, and so forth. Each of their idols (and consequent behavior, thoughts, and emotions) is “logical” within the idol system, the miniature Vanity Fair of allurements and threats within which both live. Their idols sometimes are modeled, taught, and encouraged by the other person(s) involved: her nagging and his anger mirror and magnify each other; his bar buddies and her girl friends reinforce their respective self-righteousness and self-pity. The idols sometimes are reactive and compensatory to the other person: he reacts to her nagging with drinking, and she reacts to his drinking by trying to rescue and to change him. Vanity Fair is an ever so tempting...hell on earth.

### Spiritual Counterfeits

Idols counterfeit aspects of God’s identity and character, as can be seen in the vignette above: Judge, savior, source of blessing, sin-bearer, object of trust, author of a will which must be obeyed, and so forth. Each idol that clusters in the system makes false promises and gives false warnings: “if only...then....” For example, the wife’s “enabling” behavior expresses an idolatrous playing of the savior. This idol promises and warns her, “If only

you can give the right thing and can make it all better, then your husband will change. But if you don’t cover for him, then disaster will occur.” Because both the promises and warnings are lies, service to each idol results in a hangover of misery and accursedness. Idols lie, enslave, and murder. They are continually insinuated by the one who was a liar, slave master and murderer from the beginning. They are under the immediate wrath of God who frequently does not allow such things to work well in His world.<sup>9</sup>

The simple picture of idolatry—a worshiper prostrated before a figure of wood, metal or stone—is powerfully extended by the Bible. Idolatry becomes a concept with which to comprehend the intricacies of both individual motivation and social conditioning. The idols of the heart lead us to defect from God in many ways. They manifest and express themselves everywhere, down to the minute details of both inner and outer life. Such idols of the heart fit hand in glove with the wares offered in the Vanity Fair of social life. The invitations and the threats of our social existence beguile us towards defection into idolatries. These themes provide a foundational perspective on the “bad news” that per-

<sup>9</sup>It is obvious that if idolatry is *the* problem of the “co-dependent,” then repentant faith in Christ is the solution. This stands in marked contrast to the solutions proffered in the co-dependency literature, whether secular or glossed with Christian phrases. That literature often perceptively describes the patterns of dysfunctional idols—addictions and dependencies—which curse and enslave people. The idols which enslave the rescuer or the compulsive drinker do not work very well for them.

The literature may even use “idolatry” as a metaphor, without meaning “idolatry against God, therefore repentance.” The solution, without exception, is to offer different and presumably more workable idols, rather than repentance unto the Bible’s Christ! Secularistic therapies teach people eufunctional idols, idols which do “work” for people and “bless” them with temporarily happy lives (Psalm 73).

So, for example, self-esteem is nurtured as the replacement for trying to please unpleasable others, rather than esteem for the Lamb who was slain for me, a sinner. Acceptance and love from new significant others, starting with the therapist, create successful versions of the fear of man and trust in man rather than teaching essential trust in God. Self-trust and self-confidence are boosted as I am taught to set expectations for myself to which I can attain. The fruit looks good but is fundamentally counterfeit. Believers in false gospels are sometimes allowed to flourish temporarily.

Therapy systems without repentance at their core leave the idol system intact. They simply rehabilitate and rebuild fundamental godlessness to function more successfully.

The Bible’s idolatry motif diagnoses the ultimately self-destructive basis on which happy, healthy, and confident people build their lives (eufunctional idols), just as perceptively as it diagnoses unhappy people, who are more obviously and immediately self-destructive (dysfunctional idols).

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vades the Bible.

In sum, behavioral sins are always portrayed in the Bible as “motivated” or ruled by a “god” or “gods.” The problem in human motivation—the question of practical covenantal allegiance, God or any of the substitutes—is frequently and usefully portrayed as the problem of idolatry. Idolatry is a problem both rooted deeply in the human heart and powerfully impinging on us from our social environment.

This brings us squarely to the second kind of question mentioned at the outset. This second question is a counseling question. How on earth do we put together the following three things? First, people are responsible for their behavioral sins. Whether called sin, personal problems, or dysfunctional living, people are responsible for the destructive things which they think, feel and do.<sup>10</sup> If I am violent or fearful, that is *my problem*.

Second, people with problems come from families or marriages or sub-cultures where the other people involved also have problems. People suffer and are victimized and misguided by the destructive things other people think, want, fear, value, feel, and do. These may be subtle environmental influences: social shaping via modeling of attitudes and the like. These may be acutely traumatic influences: loss or victimization. My problems are often embedded in a tight feedback loop with your problems. If you attack me, I tend to strike back or withdraw in fear. *Your problem* shapes my problems.

Third, behavior is motivated from the inside by complex, life-driving patterns of thoughts, desires, fears, views of the world, and the like, of which a person may be almost wholly unaware. We may be quite profoundly self-deceived about what pilots and propels us. My behavioral violence or avoidance manifests patterns of expectation that own me. “You might hurt me...so I’d better keep my distance or attack first.” My behavior is a strategy which expresses *my motives*: my trusts, my wants, my fears, my “felt needs.” Such motives range along a spectrum from the consciously calculating to the blindly compulsive.

How are we—and those we counsel—simultaneously socially conditioned, self-deceived, and responsible for our behavior without any factor cancelling out the others?! That is *the* question of the social and behavioral sciences (and it is the place they all fail when they excise God). It is also *the* question that any Christian counselor must attempt to answer both in theory and practice in a

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<sup>10</sup> Terminology is, of course, not indifferent. “Personal problems” and “dysfunctional living” imply a primary responsibility only to oneself, family, and society. “Sin” implies a primary responsibility to God the Judge, with personal and social responsibilities entailed as secondary consequences.

way that reflects Christ’s mind. The Bible’s view of man—both individual and social life—alone holds these things together.

### A Three-Way Tension

Motives are simply what move us, the causes of or inducements to action, both the causal “springs” of life and the telic “goals” of life.<sup>11</sup> The notion of motivation captures the inward-drivenness and goal-oriented nature of human life in its most important and troublesome features. All psychologies grapple with these issues. But no psychology has conceptual resources adequate to make sense of the interface between responsible behavior, a shaping social milieu, and a heart which is both self-deceived and life-determining.

Here are some examples. Moralism—the working psychology of the proverbial man on the street—sticks with responsible behavior. Complex causalities are muted *in toto*. Behavioral psychologies see both drives and rewards but cast their lot with the milieu, taking drives as untransformable givens. Both responsible behavior and a semi-conscious but renewable heart are muted. Humanistic psychologies see the interplay of inner desire/need with external fulfillment or frustration but cast their final vote for human self-determination. Both responsible behavior and the power of extrinsic forces are muted. Ego psychologies see the twisted conflict between heart’s desire and well-internalized social contingencies. But the present milieu and responsible behavior are muted. It is *hard* to keep three seemingly simple elements together.

### Unity ‘with Respect to God’

The Bible—the voice of the Maker of humankind, in other words!—speaks to the same set of issues with a uniquely unified vision. There is no question that we are morally responsible: our works or fruit count. There is no question that fruit comes from an inner root to which we are often blind. “Idols of the heart,” “desires of the flesh,” “fear of man,” “love of money,” “chasing after...,” “earthly-minded,” “pride,” and a host of other word pictures capture well the biblical view of inner drives experienced as deceptively self-evident needs or goals. There is also no question that we are powerfully constrained by social forces around us. The “world,” “Vanity Fair,” “the counsel of the wicked,” “false proph-

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<sup>11</sup> The Bible’s mode of everyday observation is comfortable describing both the push and the pull of human motivation as complementary perspectives. Psychologies tend to throw their weight either towards drives or towards goals. Idolatry is a fertile and flexible conceptual category which stays close to the data of life, unlike the speculative abstractions of alternative and unbiblical explanations.

ets," "temptation and trial," and the like capture something of the influences upon us. Other people model and purvey false laws or false standards, things which misdefine value and stigma, blessedness and accursedness, the way of life, and the way of death. They sin against us. God quite comfortably juxtaposes these three simple things which tend to fly apart in human formulations. I am responsible for my sins: "Johnny is a bad boy." My will is in bondage: "Johnny can't help it." I am deceived and led about by others: "Johnny got in

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with a bad crowd." How can these be simultaneously true?

The answer, which all the psychologies and sociologies miss, is actually quite simple. Human motivation is always "with respect to God." The social and behavioral sciences miss this "intentionality," because they themselves are idolatrously motivated. In a massive irony, they build into their charter and methodology a blindness to the essential nature of their subject matter.

Human motivation is intrinsic neither to the individual nor to human society. Human motivation is never strictly psychological or psycho-social or psycho-social-somatic. It is not strictly either psychodynamic or sociological or biological or any combination of these. These terms are at best metaphors for components in a unitary phenomenon which is essentially religious or covenantal. Motivation is always God-relational. Thus human motivation is not essentially the sort of unitary species-wide phenomenon that the human sciences pursue. It is encountered and observed in actual life as an intrinsically binary phenomenon: faith *or* idolatry. The only unitary point in human motives is the old theological construct: human beings are worshiping creatures, willy-nilly. Seeing this, the Bible's view alone can unify the seemingly contradictory elements in the explanation of behavior.

The deep question of motivation is not "What is motivating me?" The final question is, "Who is the master of this pattern of thought, feeling, or behavior?" In the biblical view, we are religious, inevitably bound to one god or another. People do not have needs. We have masters, lords, gods, be they oneself, other people, valued objects, Satan. The metaphor of an *idolatrous*

heart and society capture the fact that human motivation bears an automatic relationship to God: Who, other than the true God, is my god? Let me give two examples, one dear to the heart of behaviorists and the other dear to the heart of humanistic psychologists.

### **Hunger as Idolatry**

When a "hunger drive" propels my life or a segment of my life, I am actually engaging in religious behavior. I—"the flesh"—have become my own god, and food has become the object of my will, desires, and fears. The Bible observes the same mass of motives which the behavioral sciences see as a "primary drive." Something biological is certainly going on. Something psychological, and even sociological, is going on. But the Bible's conceptualization differs radically. I am not "hunger-driven." I am "hunger-driven-rather-than-God-driven."

We are meant to relate to food by thankfully eating what we know we have received and by sharing generously. I am an active idolater when normal hunger pangs are the wellspring of problem behavior and attitudes. Normal desires tend to become inordinate and enslaving. The various visible sins which can attend such an idolatry—gluttony, anxiety, thanklessness, food obsessions and "eating disorders," irritability when dinner is delayed, angling to get the bigger piece of pie, miserliness, eating to feel good, and the like—make perfect sense as outworkings of the idol that constrains my heart.<sup>12</sup> Problem behavior roots in the heart and has to do with God.

The idolatries inhabiting our relations with food, however, are as social as they are biological or psychological. Perhaps my father modeled identical attitudes. Perhaps my mother used food to get love and to quell anxiety. Perhaps they went through the Great Depression and experienced severe privation, which has left its mark on them and made food a particular object of anxiety. Perhaps food has always been my family's drug of choice. Perhaps food is the medium through which love, happiness, anger and power are expressed. Perhaps I am bombarded with provocative food advertisements. The variations and permutations are endless.

Membership in the society of the fallen sons and daughters of Adam ensures that we will each be a food idolater in one way or another.<sup>13</sup> Membership in American consumer society shapes that idolatry into typical forms. A complex system of idolatrous values can be

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<sup>12</sup>Matthew 4:1-4, 6:25-34, John 6, and Deuteronomy 8 are four passages, among many, which work out these themes in greater practical detail. Notice how the language of relating to God—love, trust, fear, hope, seek, serve, take refuge, etc.—can be applied to relating to food.

<sup>13</sup>Matthew 6:32: "The nations run after these things."

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attached to food. For example, we characteristically lust for a great variety of foodstuffs. Food plays a role in the images of beauty and strength which we serve, in desires for health and fears of death. Food—the quantities and types prepared, the modes of preparation and consumption—is a register of social status. Membership in a famished Ethiopian society would have shaped the generic idolatry into different typical forms. Member-

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ship in the micro-society of my family further particularizes the style of food idolatry: for example, perhaps in our family system hunger legitimized irritability, and eating was salvific, delivering us from destroying our family with anger. Yet in all these levels of social participation, my individuality is not lost. I put my own idiosyncratic stamp on food idolatry. For example, perhaps I am peculiarly enslaved to Fritos when tense and peculiarly nervous about whether red food dyes are carcinogenic!

#### **Security as Idolatry**

Behaviorists speak of “drives” and tend to “lower” the focus to the ways we are most similar to animals. Humanists and existentialists, on the other hand, speak of “needs” and tend to “raise” the focus to uniquely human social and existential goals. But the same critique applies. When a “need for security” propels my life or a segment of my life, I am again engaging in religious behavior. Rather than serving the true God, the god I serve is the approval and respect of people, either myself or others. I am an idolater. I am not “motivated by a need for security.” I am “motivated by a lust for security *rather than* ruled by God.” Or, since desire and fear are complementary perspectives on human motivation, “I fear man” instead of “I fear and trust God.” Need theories, like drive theories, can never comprehend the “rather than God,” which is always built into the issue of human motivation. They can never comprehend the fundamental idolatry issue, which sees that the things which typically drive us really exist as inordinate desires of the flesh that are direct alternatives to submitting to the desires of the Spirit.

Our lusts for security, of course, are tutored as well as spontaneous. “Vanity Fair” operates as effectively here as it does with our hunger. Powerful and persuasive people woo and intimidate us that we might trust or fear them. In convicting us of our false trusts and ac-

knowledging the potency of the pressures on us, the Scriptures again offer us the liberating alternative of knowing the Lord.<sup>14</sup>

#### **Idols: A Secondary Development?**

When the conceptual structures of humanistic psychology are “baptized” by Christians, the fundamental “rather than God” at the bottom of human motivation continues to be missed. For example, many Christian counselors absolutize a need or yearning for love. As observant human beings, they accurately see that fallen and cursed people are driven to seek stability, love, acceptance, and affirmation, and that we look for such blessings in empty idols. As committed Christians they often want to lead people to trust Jesus Christ rather than their idols. But they improperly insert an *a priori* and unitary relational need, an in-built yearning or empty love tank as underpinning the heart’s subsequent divide between faith and idolatry.

They baptize this “need,” describing it as God-created. Idolatry becomes an improper way to meet a legitimate need, and our failure to love others becomes a product of unmet needs. The Gospel of Christ is redefined as the proper way to meet this need. In this theory then, idolatry is only a secondary development: our idols are wrong ways to meet legitimate needs. Repentance from idolatry is thus also secondary, being instrumental to the satisfaction of needs. Such satisfaction is construed to be the primary content of God’s good news in Christ. Biblically, however, idolatry is the primary motivational factor. We fail to love people because we are idolaters who love neither God nor neighbor. We become objectively insecure because we abide under God’s curse and because other people are just as self-centered as we are. We create and experience estrangement from both God and other people. The love of God teaches us to repent of our “need for love,” seeing it as a lust, receiving merciful real love, and beginning to learn how to love rather than being consumed with getting love.

Humans lust after all sorts of good things and false gods—including love—in attempting to escape the rule of God. The love-need psychologies do not dethrone the inner sanctum of our heart’s idolatry. Structurally, the logic of love-need systems is analogous to the “health and wealth” false gospels. Jesus gives you what you deeply yearn for without challenging those yearnings.

It is no surprise that, for good or ill, love-need psychology only rings the bells of certain kinds of counselees, who are particularly attuned to the wavelength of what we might call the intimacy idols. Such theories

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<sup>14</sup> Proverbs 29:25; Jeremiah 17:5-8.

lack appeal and effectiveness “cross-culturally” to people and places where the reigning idols are not intimacy idols but, for example, power, status, sensual pleasure, success, or money. A love-need system must interpret such idols reductionistically, as displacements or compensatory versions of the “real need” which motivates people.

The Bible is simpler. Any one of the idols may have an independent hold on the human heart. Idols *may* reduce to one another in part: for example, a man with an intractable pornography and lust problem may be significantly helped by repentantly realizing that his lust expresses a tantrum over a frustrated desire to be married, a desire which he has never recognized as idolatrous. Idols can be compounded on top of idols. But sexual lust has its own valid primary existence as an idol as well. A biblical understanding of the idolatry motif explains why need models seem plausible and also thoroughly remakes the model. In biblical reality—in reality, in other words!—there is no such thing as that neutral, normal and *a priori* love need at the root of human motivation.

The biblical theme of idolatry provides a penetrating tool for understanding both the springs of and the inducements to sinful behavior. The causes of particular sins, whether “biological drives,” “psychodynamic forces from within,” “socio-cultural conditioning from without,” or “demonic temptation and attack” can be truly comprehended through the lens of idolatry. Such comprehension plows the field for Christian counseling to become Christian in deed as well as name, to become ministry of the many-faceted good news of Jesus Christ.

### CASE STUDY AND ANALYSIS

Using a case study of a hurt-angry-fearful person, this article will now explore in greater detail the relationship between “world” and “heart” in the production of complex and dysfunctional behaviors, emotional responses, cognitive processes, and attitudes.

Wally is a 33-year-old man.<sup>15</sup> He has been married to Ellen for eight years. They have two children. He is a highly committed Christian. He works for his church half time as an administrator and building overseer and

<sup>15</sup> Resemblances between “Wally” and any actual human being are purely coincidental products of the essential similarities among all of us. The external details of this case study are fabricated of snippets and patterns from many different lives, altered in all the particulars of behavior, gender, age, background, etc.

Similarly, the analysis of idolatries derives from a biblical analysis of the generic human heart—my own heart included—rather than from any particular individuals. Wally is Everyman, idiosyncratically manifesting idolatrous human nature.

half time in a diaconal ministry of mercy among inner city poor. He and his wife sought counseling after an explosion in their often-simmering marriage. He became enraged and beat her up. Then he ran away, threatening never to come back. He reappeared three days later, full of guilt, remorse, and a global sense of failure.

The current marital problems are exacerbated versions of long-standing problems: anger, inability to deeply reconcile, threats of violence alternating with threats of suicide, depression, workaholicism alternating with escapism, a pattern of moderate drinking when under stress, generally poor communication, use of pornography, and loneliness. Wally has no close friends.

Several years ago Wally became involved sexually with a woman he was working with diaconally: “I know it was wrong, but I just felt so bad for her and how rough she’d had it that I found myself trying to comfort her physically.” He broke it off, and Ellen forgave him; but both acknowledge there has been a residue of guilt and mistrust.

He oscillates between “the flame-thrower and the deep freeze.” On the one hand he can be abrasive, manipulative, angry, and unforgiving. On the other hand he withdraws, feels hurt, anxious, guilty, and afraid of people. He oscillates between anger at Ellen’s “bossiness, nagging, controlling me, not supporting me or listening to me” and depression at his own sins. Her patterns and his create a feedback system in which each tends to bring out and reinforce the worst in the other.

Wally grew up in a secular, Jewish, working class family. He was born when his father was 52 years old and his mother, 42. By dint of hard work, long hours, and scraping by, they bought a house in a relatively affluent WASP suburb shortly after Wally was born. Wally’s father was a critical man, impossible to please. “If I got all A’s with one B, it was ‘What’s this?’ If I mowed and raked the lawn, it was ‘You missed a spot behind the garage.’”

After his retirement at age 70, Wally’s father became “much more mellow; and, with my having become a Christian and trying to forgive him, our relationship wasn’t half bad the last five years of his life.” His mother was “well-meaning, nice, but ineffective, totally intimidated by my Dad.” Wally had been a bit of a “weirdo” in high school: “I never matched up to the bourgeois values. I was too smart, too uncoordinated, too ugly, too shy, too awkward, and too poor to cut it in school.”

Wally became a Christian during his first year in college and immediately gravitated towards work with the poor and downcast. “I have little sympathy for rich, suburban Christians; but I love the poor, the single parents, the ex-addicts, the psychiatric patients, the ex-

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cons, the orphans and widows, the handicapped, the losers." His Christian commitment is intense and life-dominating. He loves Jesus Christ. He believes the Gospel. He desires to share Christ with others. He knows what his behavioral sins are, but he feels trapped. "I just react instinctively. Then I feel guilty. You know the pattern!"

Financially, Wally and Ellen are not well off. They are not extravagant spenders, but they face continual financial decisions: Dental work for the children? Should we buy a house? Should we take a vacation or work side jobs to earn a little extra money? How many hours a week should Ellen try to work outside the home? Can we really afford to tithe? Should we accede to the kids' desire for a VCR? They live month to month, and the bill cycle periodically creates quite a bit of stress.

How are Christian counselors to understand Wally in order to help him?

#### **"Vanity Fair": The Sociology of Idolatry**

Idols define good and evil in ways contrary to God's definitions. They establish a locus of control that is earth-bound: either in objects (e.g., lust for money), other people ("I need to please my critical father"), or myself (e.g., self-trusting pursuit of my personal agenda). Such false gods create false laws, false definitions of success and failure, of value and stigma. Idols promise blessing and warn of curses for those who succeed or fail against the law: "If you get a large enough IRA, you will be secure. If I can get certain people to like and respect me, then my life is valid." There are numerous idolatrous values which influenced Wally and continue to pressure him: beguiling him, frightening him, controlling him, constraining him, enslaving him.

His father's perfectionistic demands were one of the prominent idols impressed into Wally's personal history: "You must please *me* in whatever way I determine." Wally believed his father's sinful, lying demand. "Fear of man" describes the phenomenon from the psychological side of the equation, a particular "idol of the heart." "Oppression" and "injustice" describe his father's powerful demands on the sociological side. We see the dominion of a father whose leadership style was that of a tyrant-king, not that of a servant-king promoting the well-being of his son.<sup>16</sup> In essence, he lied, bullied, enslaved, and condemned. "I can remember lying on my bed while my Dad went on and on lecturing me, ranting and raving." Wally was conditioned to be very concerned with what significant people thought of him. At the same time Wally bought the idol. He is simultaneously a victim and guilty. He was abused by

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<sup>16</sup> Mark 10:42-45.

powerful idols operative within his family system. He also instinctively both bought into those idols and produced his own competitive idols.

Relationships are rarely static. There were various sides and various phases to Wally's relationship with his father's critical opinion. At times Wally temporarily

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### *Idols define good and evil in ways contrary to God's definitions.*

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succeeded in pleasing his father and felt good about himself. At other times he failed in his father's eyes, earning only scorn for being "a spaz, girlishly emotional." At other times he obsessively, almost maniacally, strived to please his father. He once spent a summer, with dismal results, trying to learn to dribble a basketball in a way that did not "look like a six-year-old girl." Some of the classic "low self-esteem" symptom patterns were established in this crucible.

At other times Wally rebelled against his father and his father's implacable demands. He pitted his will against his father. Being highly intelligent, he was formidable and creative as a rebel. In his teens he succeeded in driving his father half crazy by setting up contrary value systems (serving contrary idols): rock music, bizarre dress and hairstyle, left-wing politics, marijuana use. One idol—"I need to please my father"—led into another—"I'll do what I want and set myself in opposition to my father."<sup>17</sup>

There are even elements in Wally's conversion to Christianity which might be construed as part of this tendency to define himself in opposition to his father's secular, ethnic Jewish, upwardly mobile culture. His Christianity could be used at times to torment his father. Idols are fluid. The rebellious stance ultimately became Wally's predominant long-term commitment and undergirds a certain low-grade resentment he still feels at the memory of his father, now five years dead. But rebellion is not unmixed. It can be tintured with regrets, a sense of failure, or even with merciful and gentle tendencies. "Sometimes I think I have really come to peace with my father—an honest, merciful peace that Christ has painstakingly wrought in me. At other times

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<sup>17</sup> John Calvin, in his remarkable discussion of the nature of man in the opening section of his *Institutes*, comments on the way that idols "boil up from within us." It could equally be said that they boil up around us. There is always some object at hand for us to put our faith in.



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I know I lose it and react like the wounded and proud animal I once was.”

Wally’s father was not static either. In his later years he mellowed considerably. Wally’s Christian faith and his father’s evolution into a gentler man combined to bring a fair measure of kindness and forgiveness into the relationship. It became peaceable but never warm. Idols have a history, a “shelf life.”<sup>18</sup> Vanity Fair evolves. A demanding father became a less demanding father who eventually promulgated a friendlier idol: he wanted to bask in the warmth of “family” and retirement. Our hearts also evolve. A youth with a compulsion to please became a young man who half wanted to please and half rebelled. The young man became a middle-aged man driven and haunted by some of the same patterns of contradictory compulsions, even after his earthly father’s death. Wally both lusts after the approval and respect of people and yet rebels and isolates himself in his pride.

### Multiple Idols

We become infested with idols. The idolatrous patterns in Wally’s relationship with his father manifest in other relationships. Wally has had ongoing problems with authority figures in school, the military, work, and the church. He has had the same sorts of problems with his wife, friends, and even his children. Naturally, he brings this same pattern into the counseling relationship, with all the challenges that creates for building trust and a working relationship. He continues to manifest a typical stew of associated problems: a slavish desire to be approved, a deep suspicion that he won’t be approved, a stubborn independency.

We have attended in some detail to the way in which his father’s demandingness constituted an idol system which staked out a claim in Wally’s affections. We will give less detail to other influences, though each might be explored in equal detail. His mother’s passivity in the face of conflict set a model for him which still frequently colors his relationship to Ellen. The “bourgeois values” of his high school peer culture—dating, athletics, scoring sexually, looks, clothes, money, “cool”—also marked him out as a failure and fueled both his rebellion and his sense of shameful inadequacy. He bought the bourgeois values and failed against them. He rebelled against those values and bought the alternative values of the drug culture, in which he succeeded. He rebelled against both straights and druggies and isolated himself as a world of one, which sometimes worked and sometimes failed. All these things happened, sometimes simultaneously, sometimes successively.

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<sup>18</sup> I am indebted to Dick Keyes of L’Abri Fellowship for this felicitous phrase.

Even the counterculture values of his “radical Christian” subculture can be understood in part as an idolatrous narrowing of the Christian life in reaction to the opposite idolatrous equation of Christianity with the American Dream. Certain biblical goods are magnified to the exclusion of other biblical goods. In various ways Wally continues to play out a three-fold theme. First, he typically rebels against certain dominant “successful people” cultures. Second, he finds his validity in the affirmation of a “down-and-out” subculture. Third, all the while he acts in idiosyncratic pride to create his own culture-of-one in which he plays king, and his opinions on anything from the dinner to eschatology are self-evident truth.

“Who can understand the heart of man?!” And who can understand the world that negotiates with that heart?! Wally and the myriad forces which impinge on him elude exhaustive, rational analysis. Yet we can describe enough of what goes on in his complex heart and complex world to minister helpfully to him. And the Wally we meet today is only today’s Wally, not the Wally of some prior point in his personal history. Biblical counsel, the mind of Christ about Wally’s life, can be given. Wisdom, the nourishing and honeyed tongue, can make satisfying and convicting sense of things, and Wally can learn to live, think, and act with such wisdom.

Many other idol systems and sub-systems impinge on Wally. Some are the same players Bunyan described in his *Vanity Fair*: cultural attitudes, values, fears, and opportunities which circle around money, sex, food, power, success, or comfort. Certain gentle-faced idols—the mass media, professional sports, and the alcohol industry—woo him with temporary compensations and false, escapist saviors from the pressures generated by his slavery to the harsh, terrifying idols which enslave and whip him along at other times: “I must perform. I must prove myself. Everyone I respect must like me. What if I fail?”

Some of the other idol systems which daily impact on Wally are found within the marital system and the family system. Ellen’s and the children’s values and desires provoke and persuade Wally in various ways. If Ellen worries about money, if the children get swept up with complaining when they do not get what they want, if Ellen nags Wally with expectations of moralistic behavioral change, Wally is variously worried, angry, compliant, depressed, defensive, full of denial, or whatever else, depending on how he interfaces with the particular micro-society that is constraining him.<sup>19</sup>

This way of exploring “What rules me?” is “socio-

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<sup>19</sup> Where do we begin in counseling? Are there hierarchies of influence or “key” influential relationships to tackle? There

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logical." False gods are highly catching! With good reason both Old and New Testaments abound with warnings against participating in pagan cultures and associating with idolaters, fools, false teachers, angry people, and the like. Our enemies not only hurt us, they also tempt us to be like them. False voices are not figments which the individual soul hallucinates. "World" complements "flesh" to constitute monolithic evil: the manufacture of idols instead of worship of the true God.

If we would help people have eyes and ears for God, we must know well which alternative gods clamor for their attention. These forces and shaping influences neither determine nor excuse our sins. But they do nurture, channel, and exacerbate our sinfulness in particular directions. They are often atmospheric, invisible, unconscious influences. Conscious repentance begins to thrive where I see both my own distortions and the distortions impinging upon me from others. Both tempt me, and I must battle both.

Scripture is sensitive to sociological forces without compromising human responsibility. But, of course, idols are also "in here" in our hearts, determining the course of our lives. In the discussion above, Wally's heart response to his environment—idols of the heart—continually intruded. The two are impossible to disentangle absolutely. But in the next section I will look in greater detail at the more psychological dimension of idolatry.

### **Idols of the Heart: the Psychology of Idolatry**

At the simplest level Wally both imbibed the idols to which he was exposed and creatively fabricated his own. He has variously succeeded, failed, or rebelled against various value systems. But in each case he nurtures and serves numerous unbiblical values. His life implicitly validates many lies. His heart is deeply

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may well be. In particular, is Wally's relationship with his parents the key to effective counseling? Not necessarily, although psychodynamic psychology is strongly biased towards parent-child relationships. The Bible is not similarly biased (either for or against looking at relationships with parents).

I do not believe that in this case, as presented, Wally's relationships with his father and mother are the most important ones to tackle now in counseling. Theoretically, we could tackle any troubled relationship in Wally's life, and we would end up grappling with generically similar issues, the same idols and sins. My instincts in counseling would be to tackle vignettes involving Wally and Ellen or his children. That is where most of the hot patterns are being played out. His relationship with his father could come up as could other significant relationships where there are live issues. But for Wally to grow and be renewed, to repent intelligently, to be transformed both in heart and behavior, he does not necessarily need to look at the parental relationship.

divided between the true God and idols. Is he a Christian? Yes. But the ongoing work of renewal must engage him genuinely over the particular patterns of idolatry that functionally substitute for faith in Christ. There has been a measure of genuine fruit in his life. But there has been a measure of bending the true God to the agenda of the flesh.

Idols are rarely solitary. Our lives become infested with them. Wally is psychologically controlled by a lush variety of false gods. For example, he typically oscillates between "pride" and the "fear of man."<sup>20</sup> Pride or "playing god" generates one set of sins: anger, manipulation, compulsions to control people and circumstances, a "Type A personality," rebellion against parents and the bourgeois. The fear of man or "making others into god" generates another set: self-consciousness, fears, depression, failure, anxiety, withdrawal, a gnawing sense of inferiority, chameleon behavior. They work hand in hand to produce his "perfectionism," both in its anxious and its demanding aspects: "My performance in your eyes. Your performance in my eyes."

Many other gods wait in the wings, playing occasional bit parts in the drama of Wally's life. At times Wally's god is a lust for escapist comfort from the pressure cooker he creates. Alcohol abuse, TV watching, video games and pornography provide fleeting escape. At times he is owned by a desire to "help" people. He becomes obsessed with his ministry, angry at any who hinder it, prone to become messianic (and even adulterous), justifying any doubtful actions on his part by reference to the supreme value of "my ministry." Of course, this is only a sampler. Any of scores of particular lesser gods can appear in the temple of his heart depending on traffic conditions, the weather, how his wife treats him, how his children do in school, etc.

The real Wally is irreducibly complex! Even as I portray Wally in broad strokes, it is clear that his life emerges from an ever-shifting mosaic of false loyalties. This noted, are there hierarchies of idols or prepotent idols of unusual significance in Wally's case? Yes, there are. Wally's life may well play out typical, oft-repeated themes. He is a "type" in a loose sense, though he can never be reduced to a rigid diagnostic type because of the myriads of fluid idols which constrain him. Certain idols strike me as predominant in Wally. "Pride" (I play god) and "fear of man" (I install you as god) are crucial. One finds variations on the themes of "I want my way" and "How do I perform in your eyes?" endlessly re-

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<sup>20</sup> And "there is no temptation which is not common to all men" (1 Corinthians 10:13). This pride/fear of man oscillation is run-of-the-mill human nature. It plays itself out in an endless variety of forms.

peated in Wally's life. Demand and fear take turns in the spotlight. Other typically dominant idols—sexual pleasure, money, etc.—certainly have their say in Wally's life but have a more low-grade, nagging quality, which in a different counselee might be greatly intensified.

It is striking how biblical categories—the idol motif, in this case—stay close to the concrete details of life and do not speculate abstract typologies. The bedrock similarities between people tend to be brought into view. In our psychologized culture we are used to definitive analyses of Wally and others according to a typology. He is a type-A person. He is a Pleaser. He is a Controller. He is a combination of melancholic and choleric temperaments. He is a typical ACOA or member of a dysfunctional family. His root sin is anger. His problem is low self-esteem. In DSM-III categories he is a..., and so forth. Such statements tend to pass for significant knowledge. In fact, they are not explanations for anything but are simply ways of describing common clusters of symptoms.

### Root Idols?

Given the prevalence of this mode of typing people, it might be expected that we could say something like, "His *root* idol is..." But the data on idolatry does not generally support such reductionistic understandings of the human heart.<sup>21</sup> At best we can make the softer claim, "His most characteristic idol is...usually...but at other times...!" For purely heuristic purposes it may be useful to notice that one person is particularly attuned to the intimacy idols, another to avoidance idols, another to power idols, another to comfort idols, another to pleasure idols, another to religiosity idols, and so forth. A person's style of sin—"characteristic flesh" in Richard Lovelace's graphic term<sup>22</sup>—may tend to cluster habitually around particular predominant idols.

But sin is creative as well as habitual! We should not forget that the reductionism the Bible consistently offers is not a typology that distinguishes people from each other but is a summary comment that highlights our commonalities: all have turned aside from God, "each to his own way," "doing what was right in his own eyes."<sup>23</sup>

<sup>21</sup> Of course, at specific points in time *specific* idols will need to be named and faced. Wise biblical counseling grapples with specifics. Jesus faces the rich, young ruler with his mammon worship. The parable of the sower faces people with their unbelief, their social conformity, their preoccupying riches, pleasure, and cares (all of which can be rephrased as expressions of the idol motif). In the Old Testament Elijah directly confronts Baal worship. For example, Wally will need to deal with his drive to perform in people's eyes as the issue unfolds in counseling.

<sup>22</sup> Richard Lovelace, *Dynamics of the Spiritual Life* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1979), page 110.

Under this master categorization the temple teems with potential shapes for idols and false gods. The rampant and proliferating desires (plural) of the flesh contend with the Spirit and clamor for our faith and obedience. Typologies are pseudo-explanations. They are descriptive, not analytical, though as conceptual tools for various psychologies and psychotherapies they pretend to explanatory power. At best, typologies describe "syndromes," patterns of fruit and life experience that commonly occur together.<sup>24</sup> Current typologies are not helpful for exposing the real issues in the lives of real people. At best they are redundant of good description and intimate knowledge of a particular individual. At worst, they are bearers of misleading conceptual freight, for they duck the idolatry issues.

How do we explain the fact that all of us are not exactly like Wally though we share the same generic set of idolatrous tendencies?: the numerous forms of pride and the fear of man; obsession with sensual pleasures; preoccupation with money; tendencies towards self-trust regarding our opinions, agendas, abilities; the creation of false views of God based on our life experience and desires; desire to be intrinsically righteous, worthy, and esteemable; and the like. Jay Adams has perceptively commented on the commonality inhering within individual styles of sin:

Sin, then, in all of its dimensions, clearly is the problem with which the Christian counselor must grapple. It is the secondary dimensions—the variations on the common themes—that make counseling so difficult. While all men are born sinners and engage in the same sinful practices and dodges, each develops his own styles of sinning. The styles (combinations of sins and dodges) are peculiar to each individual; but beneath them are the common themes. It is the counselor's work to discover these commonalities beneath the individualities.<sup>25</sup>

### 'Neighborhoods' in Vanity Fair

How do individual styles develop? Certainly particular "neighborhoods" in Vanity Fair can empower different idols. It doesn't surprise us that Wally's demanding and unpleasable father can be correlated with a particular form of the "fear of man" as a significant idol in Wally's heart. Yet because of the continual interplay

<sup>23</sup> Isaiah 53:6 and Judges 21:25.

<sup>24</sup> The word "syndrome" ought to be stripped of its clinical pretensions to significant explanatory power. It is purely descriptive. It literally means, "things that tend to all run along together."

<sup>25</sup> Jay Adams, *Christian Counselor's Manual* (U.S.A.: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., 1973), Page 124f.

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of idol-making heart with idol-offering milieu, another child might grow up with very accepting parents, and the “fear of man” would be similarly empowered as a lust never to be rejected or fail. Our idols both covet what we do not have and hold on for dear life to what we do have.

Many of the nuances of our idolatries are socially shaped by the opportunities and values that surround us. For example, it is unsurprising that more people will become homosexuals (or adulterers, or pornographers, or whatever) in a culture that makes certain forms of sexual sin available, legitimate, or normal. For example,

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*For all our differences,  
the Bible speaks to every one of us.*

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Wally grew up in a family moderately obsessed with academic and professional achievement. His next door neighbor might have grown up in a family obsessed with escapist pleasure, and he might have been nurtured to live for “Miller Time” and televised sports. The generic idols in every heart may bear different fruit in different people. For example, Baal is no threat to produce “religious” forms of idolatry today, but Mormonism is such a threat.

Much of the variation among us is simply empowered by the “accidents” of life experience: tragedies or smooth sailing, handicaps or health, riches or poverty, New York City or Iowa or Uganda, a high school or a graduate school education, first-born or eighth-born, male or female, born in 1500 B.C. or 1720 or 1920 or 1960, and the like. Much individual variation is due to hereditary and temperamental differences: kinds of intelligence, physical coordination and capabilities, variation in talents and abilities, metabolic and hormonal differences, and so forth. In the last analysis, idiosyncratic choice from among the opportunities and options one encounters accounts for the nearly infinite range for individuality within the “commonalities” that biblical categories discern in us.

The diagnostic categories which pierce to the commonalities are categories such as “idolatry versus faith,” which we are using here. These alone can embrace *both* the fluidities and relative stabilities of Wally’s world, flesh, and devil—and can embrace the true God who has saved Wally. They apply to *every* person in a way which is simple, but never simplistic, accounting for all the complexities. For all our differences, the Bible speaks to every one of us.

## OTHER DIAGNOSTIC PERSPECTIVES AND THE GOSPEL: MULTIPERSPECTIVAL INTERPRETATION

As we have indicated, Wally’s mass of behaviors, attitudes, cognitions, value judgments, emotions, influences, *et al.* can be understood right down to the details utilizing the biblical notion of idolatry. The disorder in Wally’s life is produced by the interplay between particular idols of his heart and particular idols of his social environment. Sins occur at the confluence of disoriented heart motives and disoriented socio-cultural systems of all sizes. The intention of this essay has been to explore some of the dense connections between flesh and world. But there are other ways of approaching these things which are important to recognize.

Notably absent has been attention to the equally dense connecting links between the Devil and both world and flesh in the production of Wally’s dysfunctional and sinful living. “Who rules me?” invites awareness of spiritual powers. Idols and demons go hand in hand in literal worship of false gods. Not surprisingly, the functional lordship of Satan is equally evident in the more subtle idolatries that enslave Wally. Does this mean that Wally is “demon-possessed” and the treatment of choice is exorcism? Decidedly not. But whenever we are problematically afraid or angry—to isolate two particular bad fruits—we are being formed into Satan’s image rather than Christ’s. The same modalities that fight world and flesh also fight the Devil. Intelligent faith in the Gospel of Jesus Christ is ultimately the answer. But awareness of the spiritual warfare occurring emphasizes the fact that Christian counseling is a ministry of prayer.<sup>26</sup> Awareness of spiritual warfare also helps shake us out of the behavioral science mindset which tempts us to think about people psycho-socially, rather than with respect to God.

The Dark Lord’s stratagems are all intended to establish his lordship over people. Satan methodically disintegrates Wally’s relationships, leads him into gross sins, deceives his mind into highly distorted and selective perceptions, accuses him into despair, discourages him, ties his life into knots in every imaginable way, fans normal desires into inordinate and addictive desires and “needs,” and the like. This article has primarily attended to “world and flesh.” “Devil” completes the monolithic triad of biblical perspectives on the motivation of problem behavior.

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<sup>26</sup> Acts 6:4 is a classic text defining ministry in terms of both truth and prayer. Ephesians 6:10-20 is a classic text on the mode of warfare: faith in all its elements and ways of expression defeats demonic powers. James 3:13-4:12 adds the note that repentance is crucial to the defeat of Satan.

Also notably absent has been detailed attention to the somatic influences on Wally. His problems are exacerbated by allergies, overtiredness, a diet with too much “junk food,” sexual frustration and a sedentary lifestyle. Close attention to patterns of irritability, marital tension, sexual lust, and depression would consistently reveal a plausible somatic component. The fact that monitoring caffeine and sugar intake, and getting more regular rest, sexual intercourse, and exercise moderates Wally’s symptoms also points to somatic influences. Somatic factors, at minimum, influence the “quantity” of Wally’s problems, though they do not create the “quality” of his problems. A tense irritability can flare into rage and cursing. A case of “the blues” can spiral into bleak despair. A tendency to ogle women can break out into purchasing *Penthouse*. Wally’s body variously exacerbates or moderates the intensity of his sins. It does not create new kinds of sins.

### The Role of the Will

Also notably absent has been a discussion of the degree to which Wally’s behavior is willed and, hence, immediately controllable. As was stressed earlier, paying biblical attention to motives of heart and world is no ploy for cutting the force out of the Bible’s view of human responsibility. Wally chooses, even when he plunges down well-worn ruts where a fork in the road seems experientially nonexistent. Wally has made headway in self-discipline at various times in his life. He knows what is wrong and what is right. He is able to describe many times when he “bull-headedly chose wrong.” He can also tell of many times when he acted out of conscious faith in Christ to choose right.

Recognizing choice does not negate the power of world, flesh, and Devil. The more Wally grows to know himself and his environment, the more he consciously knows and experiences that he has *always* been making choices. One of the purposes of working with the idol motif (or with its more culturally accessible equivalents: the idolatrous desires, hopes, fears, expectations and goals which own people) is to expand the arena in which Wally is aware of the choices he has been making implicitly. Sanctification expands the arena of conscious choice and biblical self-control.

Also notably absent has been a discussion of the providence of God in bringing intense, transforming experiences. Wally’s conversion “dropped out of the sky” and gave him months of freedom from sins, joy in Christ, and growing love for people. He has had other “high times” as a Christian: times of greater vision, love, and liberty produced by a good sermon, at a retreat, or by some inexplicable opening of his heart to God in a moment of daily life.

But changes in Wally’s life—whether the product of victories in conscious spiritual warfare, of physiological alterations, of volitional commitment or of mountaintop experiences—seemingly “happen” at random. These four paradigms often provide the stuff with which Wally thinks about problems and change in his life. Wally has little sense of confidence that his life is moving in the direction of consistent, intelligent, desirable, whole-souled change. His life in general seems to be an unhappy chaos, with occasional and temporary moments of symptomatic relief. One of the goals of this essay is to describe several elements which can make change more consistent, internalized, self-conscious and genuinely transformative. In my experience the Wallys, both inside and outside the church, tend to be very blind to the things that move them. It is a curious but not uncommon phenomenon that a biblically literate person like Wally has no effective grasp on the idols of his own heart and the temptations of the particular Vanity Fair which surrounds him.<sup>27</sup> Wally is all action, impulse, and emotion. He knows relatively little about what God sees going on in his heart and his world. The question, “What is God’s agenda in my life?” can often be answered with some confidence when I start to grasp the themes which play out in my life.

My analysis has been predominantly “psycho-social” (covenantally psycho-social!). A full biblical analysis of Wally’s problems would be a “psycho-social-spiritual-somatic-volitional-experiential” analysis.<sup>28</sup> To understand the exact weight of each variable is, obviously, to quest after something which is—from a human point of view, the intentions of social scientists notwithstanding!—ultimately elusive. But the Bible’s answer is always powerfully applicable: turning from idols to the living God, renewal of mind and heart in the truth, activities captured in shorthand by the phrase “repentance and faith.”

### The Lordship Question

There is some utility to teasing out these two strands of human motivation, while never forgetting that we are focusing only on several perspectives within a unified

<sup>27</sup>The Bible indicates the reason for this by frequently describing our inordinate desires as “deceptive.” Satan is the arch-deceiver. We tend to conform to the atmospheric deceptions of our socio-cultural milieu. Our idols are so plausible and instinctive that a person can even describe them, without really seeing them as the crucial problem in his or her life.

<sup>28</sup>There are doubtless any number of other ways of slicing the pie of human motivation. See Tim Keller’s “Puritan Resources for Biblical Counseling” (*The Journal of Pastoral Practice*, 9:3 (1988), pages 11-44) for a stimulating portrayal of the multi-perspectival subtlety of a previous generation of Christian counselors.

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whole. The two I have concentrated on in this article—the heart and the social milieu—without question receive the bulk of the Bible’s attention. But the question of human motivation is ultimately the multiperspectival question of lordship, of faith in idols and false gods in tension with vital faith in the true God. This can be looked at through numerous lenses:

- Lordship through the lens of our hearts: The grace-filled, “strait and narrow” will of the Spirit *versus* the rampant, idolatrous desires of my flesh.
- Lordship through the lens of social influences: Social shaping by the Kingdom of God and the body of Christ *versus* imbibing the models and values of the

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*The Gospel is better  
than unconditional love.*

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kingdoms of our world (various micro-kingdoms of marital and family systems; on up through progressively larger kingdoms of peer relations; of neighborhood, school, and work place cultures; of ethnic group, socio-economic class, nationality, etc.).

- Lordship through the lens of spiritual masters: The good King Jesus *versus* the tyrant Satan.
- Lordship through the lens of somatic influences: living through bodily pains and frustrations in the hope of the resurrection *versus* immediate service to and preoccupation with my belly’s and body’s pains, pleasures, deprivations, and wants.
- Lordship through the lens of volitional choices: Conscious faith in God’s promises and obedience to God’s will *versus* believing and choosing according to my spontaneous will, desires, and opinions, “the way that seems right to a man.”
- Lordship through the lens of experiential providence: Learning to rejoice in God amid blessings and to repent and trust God amid sufferings *versus* growing presumptuous, proud, or self-satisfied when things go our way and depressed, angry, or afraid when life is painful, frustrating, or unsure. Though this article has commented particularly on the interplay between the first two lenses, my intent throughout has been to expand our view of Wally, not to constrict it. Within the biblical conceptual framework we can bring into view all of Wally and his world. The notion of behavior as *ruled* lets us hold together seeming paradoxes. Wally is fully responsible for what he does. Wally’s inner life is full of kinks, distortions, and blind compulsions. Wally is continually being conditioned from without, tempted, tried, and deceived. Wally is also a Christian. The Spirit

and the Word can work powerfully both to reorient him from the inside and to set him free from the control of what impinges on him.

### **Idolatry and the Ministry of the Gospel of Jesus Christ**

In this article my attention has been heavily weighted towards the issue of diagnosis: How do we biblically understand people? But biblical diagnosis bridges immediately into biblical treatment. The understanding of people presented here enables the message of the Gospel to apply relevantly to the problems of troubled people.

One of the major challenges facing Christian counselors is how to apply the Gospel of the love of God incisively. There are many faulty, distorted, or inadequate ways to go about this. The Gospel is easily truncated and weakened when idols of the heart and Vanity Fair are unperceived or misperceived. But if we accurately comprehend the interweaving of responsible behavior, deceptive inner motives, and powerful external forces, then the riches of Christ become immediately relevant to people. What was once “head knowledge” and “dry doctrine” becomes filled with wisdom, relevancy, appeal, hope, delight, and life. People see that the Gospel is far richer than a ticket to heaven and rote forgiveness for oft-repeated behavioral sins.

How many Wallys—and Ellens—are stuck with a vague guilt over seemingly unshakable, destructive patterns? But when Wally sees his heart’s true need and his need for deliverance from enslaving powers-that-be, he then sees how exactly he really needs Christ. Christ powerfully meets people who are aware of their real need for help.<sup>29</sup> We Christian counselors, both in our own lives and in our counseling, frequently do not get the Gospel straight, pointed, and applicable. I will consider two broad tendencies among Christians who seek to help their fellows: psychologizing and moralizing.

Christian counselors with a psychologizing drift typically have a genuine interest in the motivation that underlies problem behavior. Psychologically-oriented Christians attempt to deal with both the internal and external forces that prompt and structure behavior. The heart issues are typically misread, however. “Need” categories tend to replace biblical categories—idolatry, desires of the flesh, fear of man, etc.—which relate the heart immediately to God. Also, environmental issues such as a history of abuse, poor role models, and dys-

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<sup>29</sup> Hebrews 4:12-16; Matthew 5:3-6; Luke 11:1-13; Matthew 11:28-30; 2 Corinthians 12:9-10; indeed, the entire Bible! Christ’s forte is our acknowledged need in the face of compulsions from within and pressures from without.

functional family patterns tend to be given more deterministic status than they have in the biblical view.

These views of inner and outer motivation fit hand-in-glove as an explanation for behavioral and emotional problems. "You feel horrible and act badly because your needs aren't met because your family didn't meet them." The logic of therapy coheres with the logic of the diagnosis: "I accept you, and God really accepts you. Your needs can be met, and you can start to change how you feel and act." Behavioral responsibility is muted, and the process of change becomes more a matter of need-meeting than conscious repentance/*metanoia* and renewal of mind unto Christ.

### What is the Gospel?

What happens to the Gospel when idolatry themes are not grasped? "God loves you" typically becomes a tool to meet a need for self-esteem in people who feel like failures. The particular content of the Gospel of Jesus Christ—"grace for sinners and deliverance for the sinned-against"—is down-played or even twisted into "unconditional acceptance for the victims of others' lack of acceptance." Where "the Gospel" is shared, it comes across something like this: "God accepts *you* just as *you* are. God has unconditional love for you." That is not the biblical Gospel, however. God's love is not Rogerian unconditional positive regard writ large. A need theory of motivation—rather than an idolatry theory—bends the Gospel solution into "another gospel" which is essentially false.

The Gospel is better than unconditional love. The Gospel says, "God accepts *you* just as *Christ* is. God has 'contraconditional' love for you." Christ bears the curse you deserve. Christ is fully pleasing to the Father and gives you His own perfect goodness. Christ reigns in power, making you the Father's child and coming close to you to begin to change what is unacceptable to God about you. God never accepts me "as I am." He accepts me "as I am in Jesus Christ." The center of gravity is different. The true Gospel does not allow God's love to be sucked into the vortex of the soul's lust for acceptability and worth in and of itself. Rather, it radically decenters people—what the Bible calls "fear of the Lord" and "faith"—to look outside themselves.

Christian counselors with a psychologizing drift typically are very concerned with ministering God's love to people who view God as the latest and greatest critic whom they can never please. But their failure to conceptualize people's problems in the terms this article has been exploring inevitably creates a tendency towards teaching a Liberal Gospel. The cross becomes simply a demonstration that God loves me. It loses its force as the substitutionary atonement by the perfect

Lamb in my place, who invites my repentance for heart-pervading sin. "The wound of my people is healed lightly."<sup>30</sup>

Christian counselors with moralistic tendencies face a different sort of problem. Where there is a moralizing drift to Christian counseling, Christ's forgiveness is typically applied simply to behavioral sins. The content of the Gospel is usually more orthodox than the content of the psychologized Gospel, but the scope of applica-

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*Christian counseling is counseling  
which exposes our motives—our hearts  
and our world—in such a way  
that the authentic Gospel is the only  
possible answer.*

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tion may be truncated. Those with psychologizing tendencies at least notice our inner complexities and outer sufferings, though they distort both systematically. In some ways the moralizing tendency represents an inadequate grip on the kinds of "bad news" this article has been exploring.

Moralistic Christianity does not usually evidence much interest in the pressures and sufferings of our social milieu. Counselors fear that such interest would necessarily feed those varieties of blame-shifting and accusation which spring up so readily in our hearts. Human responsibility would be compromised. But they do not see that understanding the evil that happens to me—the Vanity Fair that is swirling around my life—is a crucial part of my widening and deepening appreciation of Christ. Attendance to the forces that have pressured and shaped me—and are shaping me—for ill allows me to respond intelligently, responsibly, and mercifully. As psalm after psalm demonstrates, our sufferings are the context in which we experience the love of God, both to comfort us and to change us. We are comforted in our afflictions as we learn of God's promises and power. We are changed in our afflictions as we learn to take refuge in God rather than in vain idols.

Moralizers are also weak on the inward side of motivation. Heart motives may be attended to in part via an awareness of "self" or "flesh." But the solution is typically construed in all-or-nothing terms. Conversion, "Let go and let God," and "total yieldedness" attempt to deal with motive problems through a single

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<sup>30</sup>Jeremiah 8:11(cf.23:16f).

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act of first-blessing or second-blessing housecleaning. The Gospel is for the beginning of the Christian life or a dramatic act of consecration. There is little sense of the patient *process* of inner renewal which someone like Wally—and each of us!—needs. Jesus says to take up our cross *daily*, dying to the false gods we fabricate, and learning to walk in fellowship with Him who is full of grace to help us. Receptivity to God's love—"The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not want"—is the absolutely necessary prerequisite for any sort of active obedience to God.<sup>31</sup>

I have looked at two common truncations of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Both evidence an inadequate grasp of the deviance of our hearts and our corresponding vulnerability to external influences. People are idol-makers, idol-buyers and idol-sellers.<sup>32</sup> We wander through a busy town filled with other idol-makers, idol-

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<sup>31</sup> Active love is the fruit of receptive faith. Psalm 23—like many portions of Scripture—is a pure promise to be drunk in. Other passages detail the transition from gift to gratitude, from root to fruit, from abiding to fruit-bearing, from faith to works (Galatians 5 and 1 John 4:7-5:12 are two of the most sustained expositions). Performance-oriented people like Wally, idol-driven people, rarely drink and eat of the life-giving bread of heaven.

<sup>32</sup> We have not mentioned how Wally's distorted system of interpretation and valuation affects—is "sold" to—his children, wife, friends, and parents. There is obviously a feedback loop of mutual effects, a vicious circle.

Conversely, as Wally is able to change both heart and behavior, he will create a gracious circle of positive effects in his family and church. We have emphasized the negative side of social shaping, but faith is just as catching as idolatry.

buyers, and idol-sellers. We variously buy and sell, woo, agree, intimidate, manipulate, borrow, impose, attack, or flee. But there is a bigger Gospel. At the gates of Vanity Fair, Christian met a man who entreated him and his companion:

Let the Kingdom be always before you; and believe steadfastly concerning things that are invisible. Let nothing that is on this side of the other world get within you; and, above all, look well to your own hearts, and to the lusts thereof, for they are deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked. Set your faces like a flint; you have all power in heaven and earth on your side.<sup>33</sup>

Christian passed through Vanity Fair bloodied but purer in heart. He remembered, amid hard combat with world, flesh, and Devil, the Celestial City which was his destination, and the Lord Jesus who beckoned him to life.

The biblical Gospel delivers from both personal sin and situational tyrannies. The biblical notion of inner idolatries allows people to see their need for Christ as a merciful savior from large sins of both heart and behavior. The notion of socio-cultural-familial-ethnic idolatries allows people to see Christ as a powerful deliverer from false masters and false value systems which we tend to absorb automatically. *Christ-ian* counseling is counseling which exposes our motives—our hearts and our world—in such a way that the authentic Gospel is the only possible answer.

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<sup>33</sup> Bunyan, *ibid.*, page 83.