



Australian Idols

MAKING GOD
IN OUR OWN
IMAGE

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AUSTRALIAN
IDOLS

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SINGLENESSE
AND
IDOLATRY

Bei-En Zou

WEBSITE REVIEW:
MARS HILL
WOMENS' THEOLOGY

Amy Isham



ishah

Woman (Hebrew *ishah*). Woman, with man, was made in the image of God. 'Male and female he created them' (Genesis 1:27).

welcome...

When it comes to the subject of idolatry, it may be tempting to nurse a feeling of superiority because we do not bow down to immense golden images, or worship man-made or inanimate objects, or entrust our circumstances to the dubious care of fickle gods who must be appeased or bribed. But, as our articles in this edition point out, there are many ways – some obvious and some insidious – that modern-day idolatry entices and entraps us, leading us away from worship of the one true God in whom “we live and move and have our being...” (Acts 17:28).

The idolatry we are prone to may be material, appealing because possessions and worldly achievements bolster our self-image and offer us the status of success and prosperity. Perhaps what we idolise is a relationship, or the dream of having a relationship we do not yet enjoy. Or maybe our idols are less tangible, and possibly more powerful because of that. Security or freedom or independence are good things in themselves; but elevated to the position that belongs rightfully only to our Creator God, they can become sources of enslavement and frustration instead.

As you read through this edition of ishah, it is our prayer that you will be challenged as we have been, to consider where the subtle traps of idolatry may be lurking in our lives – and then to find the grace and courage to seek God’s help in ousting them, so that we are free to worship the one true God, and serve Him alone.

Here at ishah we continue to seek your prayer and support as we contemplate future directions for the magazine. We are facing an ongoing struggle to make each edition happen, needing both finances and human resources. Thank you to those who have offered assistance and made donations over the last couple of months – your help is much appreciated! But there is still a significant need, so if you would like to offer support in any form to this ministry, please take a moment to consider the Friends of ishah information on page 8 and to let us know of the ways in which you are willing to lend your support.

Alison Flynn, on behalf of ishah editorial committee

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1. To value the Bible as God’s inspired Word to us and the ultimate authority on matters of faith and practice, through thinking hard about how the Bible applies to our everyday lives.
2. To encourage women to grow in godliness and maturity in Christ.
3. To equip Christian women to be creative, confident and effective in communicating the gospel.
4. To give women in a variety of roles and situations the forum to think about contemporary issues from a framework of Biblical theology and to articulate their thinking in a manner that stimulates themselves and others to live lives that are more faithful to God’s Word.

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Making God in our Own Image

BY HEATHER PATACCA

I love the irony of Guy Sebastian, a committed Christian, being the first winner of 'Australian Idol'. Idols are everywhere in our society. Yet as Christians, we are called to shun idolatry, and worship God alone, loving Him with our heart, soul, mind and strength.

How are we to approach the issue of idolatry? Let's begin with a brief overview from the Bible.

Idolatry in the Old Testament

In the Old Testament we read in the Ten Commandments of the jealous God who demands His people's love (Exodus 20:5-6). The Israelites are commanded to love God exclusively, and they are forbidden from making idols and worshipping them. The great irony of the Israelites worshipping the golden calf while awaiting Moses' return to them from Mount Sinai with the Ten Commandments should not be lost on us. Interestingly, the Hebrew word for idols means 'nothingness or worthlessness'.¹ God's expectation is His people will bow down in worship before Him. This sovereign right of God to alone be worshipped is emphasised in Scripture and is the key to the Ten Commandments. He made all things and as the source of all that is created, all creation is His. He has absolute authority over all things, He upholds all things, and all things are dependent on Him, owing Him service.²

We are made in God's likeness. We are not to make God in our own or anything else's likeness. Being in God's likeness entails acting as God's ambassadors in

God's world. In the Old Testament, one way the people showed they were God's ambassadors was to show His judgement on the 'high places' for worship of other gods. They pulled them down acting as God's agents, in His likeness. Significantly, the place to worship God was in the middle of where His people were, not on the outskirts of towns, or removed places up on high mountains where the world imagined you might be closer to deity. Rather, God is with His people.

Idolatry in the New Testament

By the first century AD there did not seem to be the same problems within the Jewish people with idolatry as were demonstrated in the Old Testament. Among neighbouring nations, though, idolatry was rife. Jesus Himself never spoke about idolatry as such, the exception being by implication in His words that we are not able to worship both God and Mammon – you can't serve two masters (Matthew 6:24).

Paul's letters demonstrate that outside Israel, general society had much in common with our society in its pluralistic approach to life. Its idolatry was expressed quite literally in people's dependence on idol worship to ensure the gods' good favour. The aim was to manipulate a god, or the gods, to do what you wanted them to, so that you could have some power over your circumstances. For example, ensuring a bumper crop if you were a farmer, or successful business dealings for a merchant. Worship of idols illustrated

the link between idolatry and the outcomes of everyday life situations.

Two ways the apostle Paul deals with this are found in 1 Corinthians 10 and Colossians 3. In 1 Corinthians, Paul exhorts his readers to gauge the situational effect of what they do before acting. So he says, do not eat meat if its use in idol worship is drawn to your attention by a present brother or sister in Christ. However, if served meat by a non-believer, he says not to refrain from eating meat out of good manners, so as not to cause offence to your host. Idols are nothing, so meat offered them can be eaten by a Christian, but if eating it in front of a weaker brother or sister will cause harm to them, don't do it. In Colossians 3:1-5 Paul tells his readers to live as people transformed by their faith, warning, amongst other things, against greed, which is idolatry. They are to live as people renewed in their knowledge of their Creator (Colossians 3:10).

So some principles we can draw from this are:

- We are to give God first place in everything.
- We need to clearly witness to our devotion to God. If your actions risk interfering with someone else's faith, act to help them. Don't do things that unnecessarily offend or mislead others.
- Take care to guard against greed.
- The irony of idolatry is that we can fall for it just as we are in the process of a significant moment with God, like the impatient Israelites waiting for Moses to come back down the mountain.

Idolatry today

In our society we see idolatry around us in other religions that do not acknowledge the one true and living God. Idolatry as Paul would have known it on his missionary journeys exists in many cultures around the world. In Western society greed is rife, driving much of our economy. Consumerism is viewed as the solution to the economic woes we, and the rest of the world, currently face. The German theologian Niebuhr wrote, 'Greed is in short the expression of man's inordinate ambition to hide

value and a boost to their self-esteem. Having wealth and expensive goodies can make people feel successful in life, and good about themselves. The pursuit of material possessions can bring power and independence. Wealth brings with it power, both in freedom to do what we want, and over others who are not as well off. We can look after ourselves and not have to rely on others if we have wealth. Finally, many chase after the material in pursuit of pleasure. Whatever it is we want, we can have it with wealth.⁴

with the idea of God's wrath'. They had developed a theology that avoided the parts of the Bible where God's wrath is mentioned. If we undermine the sovereignty of God and avoid bits of the Bible that we don't like, we make ourselves the ultimate measure for His character and attributes, and make God smaller and other than He is.

When mature Christians clearly live out their reliance on God, it serves both as a witness to those who do not know Christ, and also an encouragement for younger Christians. Although Paul's advice in

"Materialism is an idol in Australian society"

his insecurity in nature.³ In essence he argues that as a way of protecting ourselves from what may befall us, we want a more and more secure position. We chase after 'protective layers' in the same way those in Paul's day tried to find favour with idols in an attempt to protect themselves or better themselves.

Materialism is an idol in Australian society. A flick through a glossy magazine shows us, both through the articles and the advertising, what we idolise. Accumulating an overload of luxury goods is presented as the aim and purpose of life. Here's what I found when I surveyed the idols presented in our magazines today: money, career, houses, fashion, family achievements, cars, handbags, thinness, fitness, pursuit of own personal rights, autonomy and personal freedom, and celebrities who have all of these things.

There are many reasons why people may chase material things. Some are pursuing security. Material security makes us feel that we are taken care of. Others may be seeking personal

These pursuits distract us from letting God be God in our lives. Why do people chase material 'padding' instead of God? From the Bible's perspective this is the antithesis of putting to death things like greed as part of our transformation in Christ. It is from our relationship with God that we receive the grace He bestows on us, security and self-esteem as His children, the strength of gospel freedom, intimacy with our heavenly Father, and heavenly joy. If we get sucked into this untruth, what is its impact? We damage our witness when Christians try to serve both God and Mammon. We confuse the central gospel message – that is, what God has given us in Christ, not what we can get materially or from other faiths.

Idolatry impacts our theology. One problem we face in the Church is that of making God in our own image. We can be tempted to only accept that which we find palatable about God, rather than the whole witness of God's self-revelation in the Bible. Recently while reading the Bible in a group setting, one person said, 'I have a bit of a problem

1 Corinthians 10 was written because of the issue of meat offered to idols, his message can be applied in our current context. Australian Christians need to carefully consider their possessions and the way they live. If we are living the high life, indulging our greed, this may give the wrong signal to those who are weaker than us in Christ, that they too should seek out these things.

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³ Garland, David E. (1998), *The NIV Application Commentary: Colossians and Philemon*, Grand Rapids: Zondervan, p 232.

⁴ Wilkins, Michael J. (2004), *The NIV Application Commentary: Matthew*, Grand Rapids: Zondervan, p 302-307.

■ Heather Patacca is Priest-in-Charge at St David's Anglican Church East, Doncaster, is married to Phillipe and has two sons. She likes reading, movies, and being on holidays.

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Australian Idol

BY JEN BEECHEY

Recently I was reading Matthew 13, the parable of the sower, when I saw myself, my peers, my culture, and my society. You may recall this parable, in which a farmer randomly scatters seed, and only a quarter of it lands in a place where it is able to grow and bear fruit. What I read there appears to be a description of a middle class western Christian: 'The one who receives the seed that fell among the thorns is the man who hears the word, but the worries of this life and the deceitfulness of wealth choke it, making it unfruitful...' (Matthew 13:22 NIV).

The person Jesus describes hears, knows about, maybe even believes, what God has to say but life becomes too hard. It becomes important to make sure they are OK, their kids are OK, their parents are OK, they have enough, the house is painted, the mortgage is paid, they have time to play, enough money to go on holidays, they go to the gym, they see the doctor, they go on a diet, they save for the future. They become obsessed with their comfort and security, allowing these things to take the place God should have. Maybe it is not deliberate, but lots of little things add up until they are so 'choked with thorns' that they have no time, energy, or resources to bear the kind of fruit that the parable is alluding to.

I travel a lot in India, and the gods there are easy to see everywhere you go. There is no mistaking them as objects of worship, and so I can easily choose to worship them or not. I suspect that our Australian idols are just as numerous but they are more insidious, harder to spot, and often seen as virtues rather than evil distractions: possessions,

sport, beauty, celebrity, youth, money, happiness, relationships and security. Like the 'thorns' from the parable above, many of these things are not evil of themselves. We might think a Hindu is silly for worshipping a tree which is a worthwhile but ordinary object, and yet we worship things, giving our devotion, our time, our money, our attention, and our love to things that are as ordinary and have as few godlike qualities as a tree.

What I fear the most at the moment is the god of security. I hear many people say that being responsible for your family, saving for the future, being a good steward are not wrong things to do. I can't argue with that. But security becomes my god when I make choices to devote myself to it rather than to the God of the universe. While Jesus promised He would be with us to the end of the age, He did not promise we would have enough to retire on comfortably, that our children would be well educated, that our bellies would be full. He told us merely to take up our cross and follow Him. In Matthew 6, Jesus says that God knows what we need, but He does not promise that He knows we need to eat meat every day, chocolate from time to time, or have a new dress for a friend's wedding, or a holiday. In my own experience He has provided all that, but I also know people for whom life is a daily grind until they die.

Following Jesus is a risk. He says we should follow Him and let Him worry about tomorrow. Today we are to be obedient only. When our choices are for the safe option tomorrow, instead of for the risk of obeying Jesus today, then the

god of security has taken Jesus' place as first in our life.

In practice, I'm still working out what this means. I have some friends and others I respect greatly who have actively chosen to leave behind the security god and go to places where life is hard and people are broken, in order to bring Jesus' life and light to those places. I fear to move to a poor suburb in Melbourne or a slum in Delhi. I don't think I am called to that life, though by reading Jesus' words I cannot see any reason why I would not be. The stories of His life give the impression that following Him is not the safe option, and is not the life for the risk-averse. I think perhaps my safe middle class existence is an aberration in the Christian life, and while I may enjoy it, I should share the opportunities I have and the resources I have to build God's Kingdom. If I am to avoid the situation where the worries of the world overtake me, I need to make lots of small and unsafe decisions to follow Jesus. Anyone who has been seriously ill, lost a loved one, lost their job, been in a war, or had their home broken into, will know how really fragile safety and security are. The safe option is an illusion, and safety a false god that I must not attempt to hold on to in place of the one true God.

■ *Jen Beechey is part of New Community Ringwood, is married to Mike, and works for TEAR. She recommends Dave Andrews' stories about People of Faith? or his book Plan Be as a good read to help think more about what life could look like if we follow Jesus instead of our Australian idols. Dave Andrews' website: www.daveandrews.com.au*

Singleness and Idolatry

BY BEI-EN ZOU

Idolatry. The word conjures up images of pagan rites, debauchery, the Golden Calf that the Israelites worshipped at the foot of Mt Sinai. It's an incongruous word that doesn't seem to fit into the world I live in. I don't usually bow down at an altar; the only pagan rite I can think of is Halloween, which isn't celebrated in my neck of the woods, and I had to look up 'debauchery' in the dictionary.

So what is at the core of idolatry in our modern society? It's replacing God with something or someone else to worship, a subtle shifting of priorities: placing our hope elsewhere, pitching our security on something more tangible, and giving the entirety of our love and devotion to another. Perhaps, for a lot of us, it's also striving after things that make us feel worthy, so that we make an idol of ourselves, becoming lovers of self rather than lovers of God (2 Timothy 3:4). I think these are temptations that beset us all, regardless of our marital status, but being single perhaps means some challenges come into the foreground, while others recede for the time being.

Here's one that I thought of.

Relationships: the need for them, and the lack of them, are dimensions of life that singleness brings out. Human beings are socially minded creatures, and we enjoy a rich diversity of human relations and interactions. We are friends, sisters, daughters, workmates, and classmates. But, as a single, there's one kind of relationship we aren't part of. Yep. You guessed it. We're not married.

In this age of speed and transience, cursory enquiries and superficial relating via the likes of Facebook seem the norm. And so we long for deep and fulfilling relationships. At the centre of all attempts at relating, is the desire to be understood. We hope to know fully, and be fully known. We long for the fulfilment that comes from loving lavishly, and being loved extravagantly in return. Deep relationships bring a sense of purpose and security to our lives. The obvious place to look for all this is in the full nakedness of a marriage relationship, and many of us singles look towards the marital state, or being with a 'special friend' as the ideal hope.

Failing that, we may look towards a mentor, an older Christian woman, or perhaps a close friend, to fill the gap. When I was a child I was a big fan of *Anne of Green Gables*. Apart from the fact that she wrote poetry, cracked slates over stupid boys' heads, and spent a night up a cherry tree, she was also a keen propagator of 'bosom friends'. Diana was Anne's bosom friend. She was the one to whom Anne 'bared her soul'. Many of us rely on wise Christian women for counsel, or turn to close friends and family for comfort and direction.

So is this bad? Of course not! We're made for relating, and relationships enrich us. Please don't hear me say that relationships are bad. Relationships are neither to be shunned, nor condemned, nor viewed with suspicion. They are to be enjoyed, deepened and celebrated, when and if God grants them to us.

But these natural desires, inherent parts of our humanity, should not take the place of God in our lives. To seek to fulfil our longings *exclusively* in human relationships is to shipwreck ourselves on disappointment. When we elevate the created things to the place of the Creator, we run the risk of placing our security and identity on something other than God.

The test probably comes when we ask ourselves, 'What do we live for?' Living for God and having deep relationships are, of course, not exclusive. But, given the two options, which do we pursue? Our answers to certain questions may illuminate. Have I shaped my identity and expectations in such a way that I may become bitter or resentful if my life does not turn out to include marriage? Can I, during what seems to be the millionth wedding of the summer, rejoice with the bride and groom, and praise God for Christ's union with the Church? Do I worry when my mentor moves away, fearful that I'll lose that feeling of connectedness to God through her? Do I enjoy my friendships in the light of the Giver, not clutching at them, not fearing for change, but holding these gifts lightly in my hands?

The expectation of a perfectly fulfilling relationship with another human being will invariably turn out to be a broken idol. We're all sinful, and relationships will never quite satisfy. We were in fact never designed to find our entire fulfilment in them. The fourth century Christian Augustine once said of humans and God that, 'Thou madest us for Thyself and our heart is restless until it repose in Thee.'¹ Similarly, John puts it like this, 'This is eternal life: that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent' (John 17:3 NIV). God alone is the source of our worship, joy, glory, our very life. For us to boast, is to boast in knowing God (Jeremiah 9:23-24). The things in Creation - relationships, gifts of marriage and the freedom of singleness - are indicators, pointers to our God, as the wonderful and creative Inventor of them all. These are sign posts that should encourage us to know and revel in the wonderful God who imagined all these into being!

Relationships are great! But we need them in their appropriate place, beneath the great God who is in Himself the ultimate Relationship - the eternal love of Father, Son and Holy Spirit in the Trinity. Through Christ we enter into this relationship, and learn to revel in God, and to relate to each other in light of this primary relationship with Him.

References

¹ *The Confessions of Saint Augustine*, Book 1, First Collier Books Edition (1961), p 11.

■ *Bei-En Zou is learning the ins and outs of student ministry at the University of Melbourne. She staunchly maintains that one can be both a coffee and tea person, and enjoys flat whites and Lady Grey teas in equal measure. She loves reading, learning languages and watching The West Wing. She prays to be a better friend, and actually quite likes Facebook. She would love to hear from you, and can be contacted at: twisserige.taal@gmail.com*

Mars Hill Womens' Theology

Website Review:
Mars Hill Church, Seattle
Womens' Theology Section
<http://www.marshillchurch.org/media/womens-theology>

BY AMY ISHAM

I have been a fan of the teaching of Mars Hill Church in Seattle for some time, even as their theological bent differs from mine slightly. I am very attracted to their pastoral focus, their desire to discard sin from their lives and the contemporary language and stories. Being a bit of a sermon junkie, I have listened to as many as I could find on the website by Mark Driscoll to get me through hours of data-entry at work.

One day, I stumbled across the 'teaching' section of the website, within which is a section called 'women's theology,' taught by wives of the elders of Mars Hill. I listened to some talks which were under a broader title of 'Christian womanhood in a feminist culture', which delve deeply into several topics in both biblical and intensely personal ways.

The topics are all teaching from the Bible about sins that women of Mars Hill, and indeed many women, struggle with. The centerpiece of the teaching was 'Moving from sin to joy', by Grace Driscoll, whose husband, Mark, is the founding pastor of Mars Hill Church.

I was struck by the natural, humble and feminine way in which these women taught the Bible. Almost

every talk began with, 'I'm really frightened of talking about this as I have struggled with this particular sin for many years', and had a point at which the speaker was moved to genuine tears of sorrow, shame or guilt and ended with heartfelt prayer and repentance. Almost every woman had prepared for their talks on their knees before God and were facing sins they would much rather avoid.

The talks on 'Gluttony' and 'Adultery' were particularly helpful as their focus was not just on the act of eating excessively or cheating on one's husband, but based on the condition of the heart - which by its very nature is concealed and secret. It can be easy to have an outwardly self-controlled life, but be greedy and discontent, or be weighing up the shortcomings of our husbands. I felt deeply challenged to face the sin in my own heart, which, while it has never manifested in actions that tear apart my marriage or cause me to be overweight, are ever present and if full grown, could give birth to sin (James 1:15).

In keeping with the initial call to move from sin to joy, every woman reminded her hearers to fall on God's grace for mercy and help, and

not to despair when their efforts to change were thwarted repeatedly by their own sin.

Overall I found the talks very helpful and thought that the subjective 'story sharing' was well balanced with a good study of the topic from the Bible. The very emotional response to obedience to Scripture was a very different approach for me, presented in the sermon form - as I am more accustomed to listening to 'harder' theology as opposed to more practical theology. I will definitely try and check new additions to this section of the website regularly and recommend it when appropriate.

■ *Amy is a regular presence in the Christian online world in the way of sermons, blogs and forums, although she tends to lurk more than post. Amy is married to Luke, a Ridley College student and tries to obey Christ with her whole heart while working full-time as a Digital Systems Specialist at a small library supplier.*



write of reply

ishah welcomes reader responses to topics dealt with in previous issues. These should be no more than 200 words long and can be emailed to ishahmag@ishah.org or posted to *ishah*, c/- 5 Laughlin Ave, Nunawading, VIC, 3131.



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Starting Point is a regular column that aims to encourage readers to engage with a contemporary issue in the media.

Abortion Reform

As one opposed to the recently passed Abortion Law Reform Bill, it was with great sadness and frustration that I read Jenny Mikakos’ parliamentary response. Jenny is the local member for the Northern Metropolitan Region. She is ‘a practising Christian’ who personally ‘could not choose abortion’, yet she was one of 48 in the lower house who voted in favour of the reform. Amongst her reasons was the idea that legislating morality doesn’t ‘work’. But the passing of the Abortion Reform Bill has indeed legislated morality – a morality where the value of a human foetus is secondary to a woman’s autonomy; a deeply pluralistic morality where moral relativism (under the guise of tolerance) is valued above moral ideals.

Because Christians have at times been guilty of oppression, I can understand fearing that legislating God’s values may be viewed as legalism, or resented, which in turn undermines God’s cause. Though Jenny’s desire to respect other people’s opinions has prevented her from taking an important moral stand, Jenny must be applauded for her desire for Christian values to be put into practice throughout society. Our moral views may have more

impact or appeal if they are clearly supported by the way we live; too often they appear merely legalistic rhetoric.

Providing supporting and nurturing communities for struggling mothers and families of children with disabilities is just one example of truth in action. Signing petitions, writing to Members of Parliament and voicing concerns about political and/or social issues is a great place to start, but our moral argument will be far more persuasive if backed up by social action that demonstrates God’s love and concern.

In our busy lives I am first to acknowledge that action takes more time and effort than words. Yet I am challenged to consider the question, ‘How do my actions and the way I live reflect and encourage God’s moral code?’

■ Trisha Prentice is a training paediatrician and has a Masters in Bioethics. She attends St. Jude’s Anglican Church, Carlton with her husband and daughter. One day she hopes to learn the art of rest.

