

# ARTICLES

## ON GUARDING AGAINST IDOLS

Dr. Paul S. Rees\*

You have probably noted in the program that we are to think in these moments about something I have called "On Guarding Against Idols." The matters to which we shall address ourselves may be thought of as having a minimum of four echoes in the Bible, two in the Old Testament and two in the New. First of all, from the Ten Commandments, "Thou shalt have no other gods before me." From Isaiah 26:13, "Oh Lord our God, other lords beside thee have ruled over us." Then from I Thess. 1:9, "You turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God." Finally, from I John 5:21, "Little children, keep yourselves from idols," or as Phillips has it, "Be on your guard. . . against every false god!"

Observe what Paul wrote to the Thessalonians in the first chapter. He has already reminded the Thessalonian Christians that, as he puts it, "Our gospel came to you not only in word, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction." Result? "You turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God."

Or note what John wrote to the Christians, roughly a whole generation after the time of Paul's writing to the Thessalonians. This grand old father of the Church says to these Christians, "Keep yourselves from idols." To preserve the gospel, as well as to proclaim the gospel, means that you challenge the idols. And that is the thrust of what I want to say in these moments.

Now obviously one wants to say immediately, after that sort of observation, that the idols of the first century—the idols, for instance,

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of the Roman and the Greek Pantheon, which were many—are by no means the same as the idols in American society in the year of our Lord 1972. Already, in Paul's own time, he had recognized that an idol can be something very different from a carved image in stone, or wood, or gold, or silver. When he wrote his letter to the Philippians, he spoke about some people then alive "Whose god" was "their belly. . . who mind earthly things." I will have occasion to return to that, but I speak of it now in passing so that all of us will be aware that when we are talking about idols we are not necessarily talking about the images that might appear in a Hindu temple. The idols of today are not the same as the idols of yesterday, even as the idols of tomorrow will not necessarily be the same as the idols of today.

Now, I should like to remind all of us of something that I thought was a validly made point in a chapel talk given by a friend of mine, the late Professor James Morgan, Professor of Theology and Social Ethics at Fuller Seminary in Pasadena, whose untimely death occurred so recently.

In his address Professor Morgan drew attention to the fact that the New Testament again, and again, and again talks about the presentation, the proclamation, of the gospel, over against some hostile background. This "overagainstness" is almost always there. Sometimes it is the gospel over against Pharisaism. Or, it may be the gospel over against Sadduceeism. Or, it may be the gospel over against legalism. Or, it may be the gospel over against paganism. But almost never, if indeed ever, do you find in the New Testament the gospel presented in total isolation from the particularity of some hostile context.

As I say, I think the point is well made and, if it is, then I think you and I as Christian leaders, as ministers, have got to ask ourselves and our fellow Christians, "Are the idols in American society today identifiable? And if so, what are they?"

Now before I become specific, I just want to level with you as my dear brothers and sisters in Christ and tell you in advance that I am going to be tackling and wrestling with some hard points. I shall be doing it, be assured, not as one who poses as an authority. I shall be doing it rather as one who is expressing a concern, one who has at least some degree of appreciation of how complex, how open to diverse views and diverse opinions, perhaps one should say, even diverse convictions on the part of equally committed and loyal Christian ministers; these are the points I am going to raise. But I do not believe this complexity, and the confusion that often arises from it, should prevent us from facing up to these things.

## I.

First of all, what about the idol of *form*? Last week in California I was in a small consultation consisting of those who make up *The International Advisory Council of World Vision*, a Christian service organization with which, as some of you know, I am currently identified. In this little group there was present an Anglican bishop from southern Asia. At one point in our conversation he told us something I now recall and offer to you as an illustration of what I am talking about, namely, the evil of making an idol out of forms.

Numbers of you will know that every ten years the Anglicans of the world, known in our country as *Episcopalians*, hold something that is called the Lambeth Conference. It is a conference of bishops. All the bishops of world-wide Anglicanism come together for two or three weeks at Lambeth Palace, which is a residential palace used by the Archbishop of Canterbury. We were told that at the last meeting of the Lambeth Conference, with about five hundred bishops present, our bishop from Asia was grieved and indignant. Why? Because one whole hour of the time of those bishops was given over to a briefing on the latest in the proprieties that are associated with the use of candles in Anglican worship. A world in flames and half a thousand bishops spending a whole hour in preoccupation with the placement of candles!

May I say in passing that this is one reason why the churches have lost the young people of our generation, who are "fed up" on this kind of unreality which attempts to coexist with the overriding, overpowering realities of our time. One is reminded of Paul's words about the danger of having "a form of godliness" or, as one of our later versions has it, "Holding the form of religion but denying the power of it."

I think we ought to ask ourselves, "Are we challenging the idol of form?" Are we saying, "What are your priorities?" Are we concerned about ecclesiastical and liturgical niceties, or are we concerned about people, people where they are in their situations, whether they be members of our churches or outside of the churches, members of our human communities.

Elton Trueblood, who is rarely caustic, permits himself to say sharply, "There are pastors whose chief concern centers in the colors to be used in the chancel at different seasons of the year." And he adds, "One congregation has invested \$30,000 in liturgical lighting effects." If I may, I will alter a verse of Scripture, "And they said, 'Let there be light ' and there was darkness."

## II.

Let me suggest a second thing. What about the idol of *words*? Words have about them a wonder, a magic, a potential of good or ill, at which I never cease to marvel. I do not forget, and you do not, that when Paul wrote to his dear young preacher-friend, Timothy, he said to him among other things, "Hold fast the form of sound words." But the same Paul, please note, writing to the same Timothy one chapter later, says, "Timothy, avoid disputing about words, which does no good." Avoid making an idol simply out of words.

Let me return for a moment to that first quotation: "Hold fast the form of sound words." If you take literally and precisely what Paul says about clinging to the form of sound words, such as Timothy had heard from Paul, then not a man in this assembly this morning is obeying Paul's instruction. Not a man! Now, why do I say such a drastic thing as that? I say it for the simple reason, which I trust will be obvious to you, that the *form* in which Paul spoke and wrote was Greek. And the *form* in which you and I normally write and speak is English.

In a television interview in Scotland last summer I was asked, "Do you take the Bible *literally*?" I said, "No, it is impossible to take the Bible literally. What I do is take the Bible *seriously*." This conviction has grown on me with the years. A man who says, "I take the Bible literally". . . just doesn't quite know what he is talking about. The Bible doesn't ask to be taken literally. It asks to be taken seriously.

A pastor told me that when our astronauts, out there in space sometime ago, did that very extraordinary thing of reading the Genesis account of creation, one of the ladies in his congregation said to him, a day or so later, "Wasn't that thrilling?" He replied, "Yes, it was." Then she said, "You know, what thrilled me most was that they read from the *King James Version*!" Sentimentally understandable, but linguistically appalling! Why? Because the whole world was listening. And four-fifths or more of the three billion human beings in the world can not understand English in any version of the Bible.

Let us begin to do some hard thinking about this matter. Even within the framework of the English language our attitudes toward varying translations and versions sometimes assume what certainly approaches idolatry, the idolatry of words. The American Bible Society, just the other day, got a furious letter from a man who denounced the Society for having produced what is known as *Good News for Modern Man*. It is a responsibly produced translation, designed to be as nearly in

the current vernacular as *koiné* Greek was in New Testament times. The translation has been tremendously appreciated by masses of people. But not the writer of this letter! Outraged, he denounced this Bible as fit only for burning.

Mind you, from some points of view I can sympathize with anyone who is reluctant to let any translation replace the *King James*. One misses the stately cadences and the beautifully obsolescent phrases of the *King James*. But here was a man who went furiously beyond this. He contended that the words of the *King James* were the *only* forms in which the Bible can be read and heard.

While I am on this point I shall permit myself a further remark if you will promise not to assign me to the cynic's corner. I am alternately saddened and amused when I discover that right now the *Living Bible* is being bought like mad by lovely evangelicals all over the nation, who would not even allow the *Revised Standard Version* in their homes, when every Greek and Hebrew scholar worth his breakfast food knows that the *Revised Standard Version* is incomparably closer to the original than the *Living Bible* is. Do I wish to speak ill of the *Living Bible*? Not at all. I rejoice when the Bible is read in any of our versions. The point is that the *Living Bible* is believed to have come from a safely evangelical source and the *Revised Standard* is thought to have come from an unsafe source. Therefore, the *words* we read in the *Living Bible* are received as God's Word and the *words* we read in the *Revised Standard* are suspected of not being so.

If the Bible is to go to all the nations and all the languages of mankind, it deserves the most careful, enlightened translation possible. That is, careful in the sense that it is dynamically communicative but that which lies in the message of the Book is the thing that will save men. "You study the Scriptures diligently," said Jesus to the Pharisees, "supposing that in having them you have eternal life; yet, although their testimony points to me, you refuse to come to me for that life" (John 5:39, 40, NEB).

Eternal life is not in *words*. Eternal life is in a Person. That person is the person of our Lord Jesus Christ.

To be faithful to the gospel is to challenge the idols. To preserve the gospel is to be on guard against idols.

### III.

Let us try a third tack. What about the *dollar* idol? Now when I use the word dollar, it is shorthand for materialism. I said

I would turn to that passage in Paul's letter to the Philippians. May I do so now? Paul speaks of those in his own day "whose God is their belly. . . who mind earthly things." They were obsessed by perishables. Incidentally, Phillips' handling of this passage, which is Phil. 3:19, is slightly gentler than the King James but still picturesque. Phillips has Paul saying "their god is their own appetite. . . and this world is the limit of their horizon." Now if that is not a description of millions of people in America then, ladies and gentlemen, I don't know what is. And these people are not all outside of our churches either.

That leads me to ask you, as I have to ask myself, "Are we challenging the idols?" Paul did. And he did it so specifically and so penetratingly that, when people made their decision for Christ, that decision had something to do with idols.

A gentleman from an economically underprivileged Asian country had spent some time as a visitor in the United States. Near the end of his stay in this country, he was asked, "What is the single, strongest impression that has been made on you while you have been visiting the United States?" Can you guess what his answer was? He said, "The enormous size of your garbage pails!" Millions of people in the third world could be fed better than they are being fed now on what America wastes. *Life* magazine ran a special feature on the youth culture of America — in reference to the economics of our youth culture. One of the really startling things that *Life's* editors stated was that, if you add up what America's teen-agers receive in earnings and allowances, their per capita annual income is greater than the total per capita income in 85 percent of the nations of the world.

This has all sorts of implications. One of them is this: don't take it too seriously when your people tell you they have no money for missions. Don't take it too seriously if they think they can not afford to give funds for inner city Christian projects in addition to what they are doing for themselves in church structures and facilities. I ask again, putting it to myself just as strongly, just as urgently, as I put it to you: Are we challenging the idols? Or are we accepting them? Are we accommodating ourselves to them?

#### IV.

Let us examine another one. What about the *white color* idol? Let's all be reminded of the recency and tragedy of our history, when whole sections of our American cities were being shot up and burned down. President Lyndon Johnson appointed a blue-ribbon commission

to examine the causes and cure of civil disorders. It would be interesting to know how many of you in this assembly ever took time to read the report of that commission. There were masses of politicians who got started in it, then dropped it like a hot potato. Millions of Americans simply could not take it. Why?

Well, for one thing, the commission, which was nonpartisan and nonsectional, stated categorically that we are living in a racist society. One reason, the commission argues, why we make such slow progress in dealing with our race problem is that the majority community of the country, namely the whites, will not even admit their racist traits and traditions. Racism, in our American context, is seen in the assumption that whites have the right and the ability to define the humanity of the blacks. They presume to define the extent to which blacks have an authentic humanity. They define the extent to which, in terms of civil rights and social mores, the dubious humanity of the blacks shall be allowed to express itself and develop. That is white racism. You can have all kinds of it in all degrees of it, and never use the word "nigger."

Some months ago I sat for two days in a small circle of whites and blacks, all of whom were committed evangelicals. We heard these black brothers say that blacks in America can no more trust the whites to define the humanity of blacks than Jews in Germany could trust the Nazis to define the humanity of Jews. They told us that it would be no surprise to masses of black Americans if white backlash racism would even yet unleash emotions in the fury of which blacks would be liquidated after the manner in which six million Jews were rubbed out in Nazi Germany. Nevertheless, as one of the most brilliant of the blacks present in that circle of evangelical brethren put it, looking around at us whites, "You can no longer define my humanity for me. That day is past."

Here is the question which cannot be stifled: Where has the Church been during the three hundred years of American history when we have allowed our culture to be encrusted with white superiority and white racism? Where has it been? For every John Woolman, for every Wendell Phillips, for every William Lloyd Garrison, there have been millions of church members who have shown no anguish over the situation, who have exhibited no willingness to step out in one single initiative to reform and reshape the situation.

I ask again, in this racial context, are we challenging the idols?

I am quite aware, that in this hurried way of treating the matter there are all kinds of questions and there are many different aspects of the problem I can not even touch upon. Still the question persists: Are

we challenging the idols? Respectfully, may I say that it is not enough for you to reply, "Well, after all, the early Christians did not launch a direct, a frontal, attack on slavery in the Roman Empire." That's right. They did not. But may I remind you of something? Slavery in the Roman Empire was not strictly on a race basis, which is one reason why John Wesley called the slavery of the British Empire and American slavery (notably American slavery) the vilest form that had ever been known to man.

Are we challenging the idols?

## V.

Let us inspect another one. What about the idol of the flag? Again, this is shorthand for rabid nationalism which, by the way, is a very different thing from patriotism. If I know my heart, and if I know my American history, if I know what it means to feel profoundly attached to the soil from which you came at birth, I stand before you as an American patriot. I do love the flag. I do love my country. That is not what I am talking about.

When I talk about nationalism now, I am talking about the excesses of patriotism. It is sick patriotism, running a fever. We have too much of it. This jingoistic nationalism elevates the state to the level of an ultimate and unassailable control. We should remind ourselves that Christians, when they have understood the implications of Christ's lordship, have never consented to this concept of the state. Never, not even under the Roman Empire! Why did thousands of Christians go to the lions in the arena? Because they refused to bow down and worship the figure of the emperor. Why did they say, when the crunch was on, "We must obey God, rather than men?" Because they believed, as I hope you believe, that there is a reality known as the Kingdom of God which sits in judgment upon all the kingdoms of this world, whether they are called kingdoms, or democracies, or republics, or what you will.

We should not forget that from time to time in Christian history there have been those gallant remnants of the total Christian community—communities like the Mennonites and the Quakers—who have witnessed to this high allegiance in which the King of kings stands as Lord over their consciences, above what kings may decree or parliaments and congresses may declare.

For thirty-five years I have lived in the state of Minnesota, to which thousands of Scandinavians came as immigrants. My mother was born in Sweden. She never saw this country until she was sixteen years old.



Multitudes of those Swedish and other Scandinavian peoples renounced their citizenship and came to America to get away from universal military conscription. Not to get into it but to get away from it! Make of it what you will, this is just a bit of history.

I wonder if there is a reminder in this, that in the first generations of Christians those who entered the fellowship of the Christian Church renounced military service. Nor should we forget that part of the glory belonging to the original American dream is to be seen in the recognition that there is no power possessed by the state that can compel the conscience of its citizens. There is a rather famous Supreme Court decision that was handed down, if I remember correctly, when William Howard Taft was the Chief Justice of that court, in which, as part of the decision this tremendous sentence appears: "In the forum of conscience, there is a higher power than that of the state."

Do you believe that? If you do not, I must tell you that I do.

May I refer here to a best-selling book that has left me with extremely mixed emotions. I'm thinking of Charles Reich's *The Greening of America*. If I am to be candid in a personal judgment, the book is at one and the same time meteoric in its brilliance and idiotic in its stupidity. If that paradox sounds strange, I offer it to you as a footnote on the orthodox doctrine of original sin.

Charles Reich is a law professor at Yale University. I should like to commend to anybody's thoughtful attention his chapter called "Anatomy of the Corporate State." Those of you who have read the book remember that Reich built it around a threefold pattern: something he calls Consciousness One, Consciousness Two, and Consciousness Three. Consciousness One: early American history, rugged individualism; Consciousness Two: this thing he calls the corporate state, where you have, in varying degrees and forms, the development of immense power structures —big business, big labor, big government. Consciousness Three: something that Reich says we are just entering, into which we are being led by the drop-outs and the hippies, by the flower people and the acid heads. This is going to be the salvation of America. And that is the idiotic part. Tremendous on diagnosis and absolutely frightful when it comes to therapy and cure!

Really, it is ludicrous. Reich has an absolute "thing" about marijuana. Over, and over, and over again he comes back to it, with the suggestion that if we would only legalize marijuana, we would be well on our way to solving our problems in American life. This is the stupid part of the book.

But this nonsense does not prevent Reich from spinning off some sensible observations on the American scene today. Take cognizance of this insight for example:

What we have is technology, organization, and administration out of control, running for their own sake, but at the same time subject to manipulation, and profiteering by the power interests of our society for their own non-human ends.

That statement should not be thrown out too quickly. It may be a little exaggerated. However, we should not forget Ralph Nader. Bless him! If he has not done anything else, he has shot to ribbons what someone said some years ago—"What's good for General Motors is good for the country."

Here is another quotation:

The corporate state is an immensely powerful machine, ordered, legalistic, rational, yet utterly out of human control, wholly and perfectly indifferent to human values.

This reminds me of the delightful story that Billy Graham told me about riding on the presidential plane one day soon after Lyndon Johnson had gone out of office and Richard Nixon had come in. Both men were aboard, with Graham present as Richard Nixon's guest. In telling me about it Billy said, "To listen to these two men, one an ex-president and the other newly in office, talking about the presidency was a most fascinating experience." At one point Lyndon Johnson said, "You know, when the presidency was thrust upon me, I had an idea that with the power of this office in my hands there was a great deal that I could do." He went on to speak of his frustrations over what he could **not** do. Turning loose one of his typical Johnsonian Texas expressions, he said "There were times when I found myself standing like a mule in a hailstorm —just taking it!"

We laugh at that, but it has a terribly tragic implication: the juggernaut of the present American state! And one asks, "Has the Church any lead to give? Has the Church any word to speak? Are we challenging idols?"

You say, "It isn't the business of the Church to restructure the American government." I couldn't agree with you more. I'm with you. But I wonder if I can carry you with me when I say the next thing. "If it isn't the business of the Church to restructure the government, it is the business of the Church to produce the kind of citizens who can do

something about it, as they relate themselves increasingly and collectively to the problems that are crying out for reform and renewal. Are we challenging the idols?

## VI.

Let me close with this: What about the idol of *status*? Remember Vance Packard's book, *The Status Seekers*? Well, the status seekers are not simply the society ladies who live in suburbia. They are not simply the higher-ups of General Motors, and General Mills, and General Electric. The status seekers are sometimes right in the Church.

Robert Raines, whom I do not know, but whose father, Bishop Richard Raines, I have known for years and love dearly, wrote a book called *New Life in the Church*. I quote from it.

That the average church member and the typical church have lost their sense of mission, is ultimately a judgment upon us who are the leaders of the Church. How tragically we succumb to the secular pressures upon us! How rapidly we lose our zeal, our sense of urgency! How easily we accept the pattern imposed upon us by our culture, so that we accept our ministry as a job. Pathetically, the Church apes the world in assigning authority and financial reward to its most "successful" men. The power, prestige, and prerequisites the Church can bestow upon her leaders too often result in our defensive support of the institution that houses the Church's life, and our blindness to the mission which is the true Church.

A few years ago a minister in the State Church of Sweden, whose name I could give you if it were necessary, developed an overweening ambition to become a bishop in the church. He knew there were three men under consideration for a vacancy, and he was one of them. He got the appointment. But what happened? Less than a year after he took office, charges were preferred against him. A church trial was held. It was proven by the evidence that in his anxiety, in his overriding ambition, to be a bishop he had caused letters to be circulated that reflected slanderously upon the names and characters of the other two candidates. And one year after being consecrated bishop, he was unfrocked. As one church editor put it, "A gifted man destroyed by his hunger for high church office!"

The editor added, "There is no conceivable kind of church organization"—get this, dear brothers, you who are Nazarenes and Wesleyans

and Baptists, who do not have bishops—"There is no conceivable kind of church organization, ranging all the way from the tight discipline of monastic orders and the Salvation Army to the loose associations of the Full Gospel Tabernacles, where the corrosion of ambition is not a threat."

Are we challenging the idols? The idol of status among us? One of the fondest recollections of my life is that of association with Commissioner Samuel Logan Brengle of the Salvation Army. Brengle started out as a Methodist, and loved Methodism to the day of his death. But when he was a young man, having graduated from DePauw University, and then from Boston University, the School of Theology, he heard General William Booth preach. And the vision of the underprivileged, the disadvantaged, the downtrodden, came to him so burningly that he turned his back on what could have been a brilliantly useful career in Methodism and offered his services to the Salvation Army.

He told me that when he first approached General Booth, Booth asked him about his background. Then in his rather raspy voice the General said, "Brengle, I'm afraid we can't use you." Young Brengle said, "Why can't you, General? He said, "With your educational degrees and your training, you would not be willing to get down where our people are." What softened the grand old man was that Brengle said, "Well General, couldn't I try?"

That did it! Brengle was signed on. The first time he preached in the General's presence, he told me he used a rather gory illustration, in which a man got killed. He said, "I made the statement that the man was 'decapitated.' " The General, sitting behind him on the platform, instantly spoke up: "Brengle, tell them he got his head cut off." That taught him. He came down to where people were.

The first assignment they gave him was in the London training school. Here he was, a B.A. from DePauw and a B.D. from Boston. He had won several prizes in oratorical contests. His first job in practical training was to go down at night and clean and polish the shoes, or, as they say over there, the boots of the other cadets, some of whom could barely read and write.

He told me that the first night he went down to perform this service there was an ugly voice that spoke in his ear and said, "You're making a fool of yourself!" But then there was a very gracious voice which said, "If I was willing to wash their feet, shouldn't you be willing to polish their shoes?"

He passed the humility test, and went on to become one of the best known and best loved Salvation Army officers in the world. His book

*Helps to Holiness* is such a gem that it has been translated into many languages. At his funeral a telegram of condolence was read from the President of the United States.

“Seekest thou great things for thyself? Seek them not.”

“He that would be greatest among you, let him be the servant of all.”

The dearest idol I have known,  
Whate'er that idol be,  
Help me to tear it from Thy throne,  
And worship only Thee!