

The American Idols Must Die

How to change the course of our nation's decline

Few Christians in America are confident in the spiritual direction our country is headed. We are a troubled nation, growing progressively worse in a time when people "call evil good, and good evil" (Is. 5:20).

As I was musing on the state of the nation during a walk the other day, I asked the Lord some pointed yet disturbing questions: "Lord, if You judge America, if You harshly judge this nation, what will happen to Your people? And I mean true believers—will they be spared? What about my four precious daughters? What will come of them?"

I came to a standstill, in utter shock and horror, at the thought of what the answer to that question could be. Because the truth is, if God does to His people today what He did with His people in the Old Testament when the nation of Israel was judged, then the answer is clear—and it's not a good one.

A story in 1 Samuel gives a fascinating account of a situation that many believe parallels the American church today.

Long story short, after Israel loses a battle and the Ark of the Covenant to the Philistines, the Philistines encounter every kind of problem you can imagine. After many an affliction, they realize they have to rid themselves of this curse (the Ark of the Covenant), and they send it back to Israel.

Upon seeing the cart carrying the Ark, the Israelites "rejoiced at the sight" (1 Sam. 6:13, NIV). But what followed wasn't exactly what they expected. The Ark did not bring them good fortune or great blessing, as they had thought it would. Instead, for more than 20 years, all the presence of the Lord brought the Israelites was judgment, so much so that it says

in chapter 7 that “all the people turned back to the Lord” (v. 2)—even though they were already in His presence!

What we quickly find out in the next two verses is that while they had the presence of the Lord in the Ark of the Covenant for those 20 years, they also had idols, including Ashtoreth poles, Baals and other foreign gods, in their midst, in their tents and in their cities—again, *while in the presence of the Lord*.

We can easily hear words like *idols*, *Ashtoreth poles* and *Baals* and think such idolatry is a million miles away or, more specifically, thousands of years removed from our tech-driven, progressive-thinking modern world. After all, who in America today carves out images of deities such as Ashtoreth and Baal and worships them?

Well, the idols may have changed shape and form, but our compulsion to worship other gods is just as prominent.

Defining Idols

What is an idol? tells us it’s “any person or thing regarded with blind admiration, adoration or devotion.”

If there’s any ambiguity on what constitutes an idol, let me make it so simple that you’ll know in an instant what yours is.

For some, it is an object, such as a car, a boat or even a video game. For others, it is a person or a set of persons—perhaps someone famous, such as a television, movie, reality show or music personality. For others, it may be something like an itch; you try so hard not to scratch it, but sometimes you do, and it is never more than an instant away from your fingertips.

An idol is your apple in the garden—your one thing you tell yourself over and over you could stop any time you really

wanted to, but you don't. And even though you walk into churches and feel God's presence, you just can't seem to move to that next step—that next level—and joy eludes you again and again because you are trying to live a life where both coexist: the presence of God and that something you know is standing between you and your God.

Consumed by Media

I have been alarmed at the boldness of the American media the past few years, but within the past year it seems things on this front are accelerating like never before. I've never seen network and cable TV filled with so much brazen, out-and-out immorality, violence and sexuality—all of which are our version of Ashtoreth poles and Baals.

This fall's new TV season will undoubtedly usher in another wave of shows pushing the boundaries of moral decency on screen. Try counting the number of shows with the word *lie*, *liars*, *deceit* or some other reference to untruth in their titles. And as everyone knows by now, homosexuality is presented as just a normal part of society on the small screen. One show even calls it the "new normal."

This is to be expected from a godless culture. But studies show our TV viewing habits in the church are no different than those in the world. We come home from church, plop down and let the TV run for hours in our homes. We're just as likely to tune in to every episode of the latest reality TV hit celebrating immorality, decadence and a no-holds-barred approach to life. Some of us claim to watch these programs merely to stay relevant and culturally up-to-date, yet we succumb to the same diluted standards and begin to refer to what we see on screen as normal.

If you don't think this shift in media has an effect on real-life people, just wait for the next tragic rampage to hit our nation and see what's *really* behind the carnage.

Children are dying in their classrooms and people are walking into movie theaters and shopping malls and schools, killing people at a clip I have never seen in my 40-something years. Teens are taking their lives and entering rehab centers at alarming rates while one camp of the church wrestles with being culturally relevant and the other camp wrestles with being 100 percent theologically correct and outing any who are not.

Were it not for the promise in God's Word, one would think victory was slipping through our hands like water through a broken dam.

The Cycle Repeats

When will we learn this isn't anything new? The views of morality the U.S. media embraces right now aren't new. They aren't depicting evolving thought processes or progressive breakthroughs. This is as old as the Bible itself. It is the same cycle that has repeated itself over and over. It is our history. It is our Christian heritage, and it isn't a good one.

Throughout history, God's people have gone from seeing amazing victories to drifting away from their center through generational decline to conforming more to the culture of the surrounding peoples to chasing after other gods and then bowing to the other gods and then, inevitably, to God's judgment—His strong hand of correction. More times than not, this meant captivity, slaughter and loss of life as they knew it.

How modern they must have felt in Sodom! How forward-thinking they must have thought they were as Babylon was marching! How righteous and well-educated they must have thought themselves when the Savior of the world stood in their very midst, as they dismissed Him as a threat to their power and position!

In 2013, it's a different day, same dilemma.

Is there hope? Absolutely! But a sifting must come first, and that is where I believe Christianity in the U.S. is today and what I believe God is doing in the church as we know it right now: sifting.

Rick Warren recently told a viewing audience a very simple truth: that every civilization has a starting point and an ending point. All great civilizations, at some point, die. And ours has outlived most.

We must never think God needs His people to live well and live free in a Christian nation for the kingdom to be advanced. In fact, many of the greatest moves of God came when His people were in the minority or under the oppression of a foreign government, burning at the stake or even in slavery or prison, as was the case with Daniel, Esther, Shadrach, Meshach, Abednego, Moses, Joseph, Paul, Barnabas—and the list goes on and on.

This life we live today could be gone tomorrow, as has been the case with every major civilization in the history of the planet—and for most, their end was swift and painful.

The Church's Response

I will tell you this, and I say this with the sincerest prophetic utterance and persuasion that I have been called to say it: God loves His church and stands ready to bless her even in these evil days. But God will not be mocked, and He is a jealous God.

The highest form of idolatry is when God's people begin to break free from the life with God they surrendered to live and begin to live according to the limits of their minds, their reason, their surrounding culture, their media and their vices—in other words, their version of Ashtoreth poles and Baals.

I have watched too many once-mainline denominations and well-

known pastors yield to the wisdom of the day and stray from their founding principles and the Scriptures with which they were formed. In their pursuit to be relevant, they find themselves being, in all things once absolute, relative. The same goes for the colleges founded in their names.

Let me be clear: Any movement, church or individual that would relegate the Bible to metaphors, good stories and anything less than the inerrant, living, breathing Word of God is committing the highest form of idolatry, as it's the equivalent of declaring yourself the god of your own life, weighing all things through the finite reasoning of your own mind and conscience, church committee or denominational vote. We do this to our own great peril.

When views on abortion, suicide, adultery, divorce, homosexuality, alcoholism, drug use, sex outside of marriage, gambling, foul language and other leading issues are no different in the church than they are in the unsaved world, there is idolatry. It means refusing to surrender our own desires and beliefs to the will of the God of the universe and His Word and refusing to bow the knee.

When you say, "I know the Bible says this, but I am going to do this, or I think differently," then you have declared yourself to be your own god, and that is the highest form of idolatry. In the words of Calvary Chapel founding pastor Chuck Smith, "If the Bible is not completely true or inerrant, then, pray tell, who decides which parts are true and which parts are not?"

When a church or a church leader strays in this way, they can sing all the songs they want and pray all the prayers they want to pray, but they are singing and praying to dead air, no matter how good the music makes them feel or how inspiring the words of the leader may be. They have taken their anointing and covering from their God and placed them in the hands of man or an ideology. In doing so, they have become no more than

a club or a group—and the nation incurs the loss, as does the church.

What Is Our Hope?

Our hope is as old as our faith itself, and it can be summed up in one word: *surrender*. So many churches are struggling, and many have closed. They say it's the economy, but one look at Europe—once the seat of so many great missionary and evangelistic movements in church history—and we can see great parallels to the decline of Christianity in the U.S. over the last 20 years.

I do not wish to pour salt in the wounds of precious pastors in the trenches, but I do want to say that even in these difficult financial times, I know of many churches that are flourishing and seeing amazing moves of God. What do these churches have in common? They possess a passionate commitment to prayer, private fasting, God's Word and seeing the lost come to Christ. And they speak the truth in love about idols.

We hold the answer, friends. We always have. Bend the knee. Come under the authority of God's Word. Guard your children against the "new normal."

Churches, be willing to break from your weekly and yearly calendar, and schedule regular times of prayer and fasting. Give as you have never given before. Do not turn a blind eye to the orphan, the widow, the single mother, the alien or the hungry. See beyond your own shores, and set foot on lands you have not known. Extend a hand weekly to the lost, and make evangelism and discipleship the pillars of everything you do. Pray for your leaders. Pray for your president, whether you agree with him or not. Pray for his children. And pray for the peace of Jerusalem.

Pastors, engage as you have never engaged before. We do not need words from the stage only. We need shepherds who smell like sheep and prophets who are not afraid to proclaim what

God whispers in their ears. We desperately need leaders who are strong and courageous.

The passage in 1 Samuel 7 shows that everything changed with three simple acts. The people destroyed their idols; they assembled to fast; and they confessed.

We are not so different than our ancient church ancestors. I know I'm not. I have my something, just like you have your something. And I have tried in vain to serve and worship One while entertaining the other in those off hours—those hours when no one is looking. But I have a name for it now—idolatry—and it must die if I am to go on with Him.

I am not ready to throw in the towel, and by God's grace, Satan will not have my children. My Bible says no weapon formed against me will prosper. My Bible says God will build His church and the very gates of hell will not prevail against it. My Bible says *if* God's people will humble themselves and pray and turn from their wicked ways, then He will hear from heaven and heal their land. The promises are there, and they are real.

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Watch as Rich Rogers explains how to recognize wolves in sheeps' clothing at