

What is Biblical Worship and Idolatry?

Elijah approached all the people and said, “How long will you straddle the issue? If the LORD is God, follow him; if Baal, follow him.” But the people did not answer him. So Elijah said to the people, “I am the only remaining prophet of the LORD, and there are four hundred and fifty prophets of Baal. Give us two young bulls. Let them choose one, cut it into pieces, and place it on the wood, but start no fire. I shall prepare the other and place it on the wood, but shall start no fire. You shall call upon the name of your gods, and I will call upon the name of the LORD. The God who answers with fire is God.” All the people answered, “We agree!”

Elijah then said to the prophets of Baal, “Choose one young bull and prepare it first, for there are more of you. Call upon your gods, but do not start the fire.” Taking the young bull that was turned over to them, they prepared it and called upon Baal from morning to noon, saying, “Baal, answer us!” But there was no sound, and no one answering. And they hopped around the altar they had prepared. When it was noon, Elijah taunted them: “Call louder, for he is a god; he may be busy doing his business, or may be on a journey. Perhaps he is asleep and must be awakened.” They called out louder and slashed themselves with swords and spears according to their ritual until blood gushed over them. Noon passed and they remained in a prophetic state until the time for offering sacrifice. But there was no sound, no one answering, no one listening.

Then Elijah said to all the people, “Come here to me.” When they drew near to him, he repaired the altar of the LORD which had been destroyed. He took twelve stones, for the number of tribes of the sons of Jacob, to whom the LORD had said: Israel shall be your name. He built the stones into an altar to the name of the LORD, and made a trench around the altar large enough for two measures of grain. When he had arranged the wood, he cut up the young bull and laid it on the wood. He said, “Fill four jars with water and pour it over the burnt offering and over the wood.” “Do it again,” he said, and they did it again. “Do it a third time,” he said, and they did it a third time. The water flowed around the altar; even the trench was filled with the water.

At the time for offering sacrifice, Elijah the prophet came forward and said, “LORD, God of Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, let it be known this day that you are God in Israel and that I am your servant and have done all these things at your command. Answer me, LORD! Answer me, that this people may know that you, LORD, are God and that you have turned their hearts back to you.” The LORD’s fire came down and devoured the burnt offering, wood, stones, and dust, and lapped up the water in the trench. Seeing this, all the people fell prostrate and said, “The LORD is God! The LORD is God!”

-1 Kings 18: 21-39

While this may seem strange, there are those who really don't know what it means to worship in the Biblical sense. Of course, the word "worship" (like too many other religious terms) is routinely misused in secular matters. The word "idol," which is closely connected to worship, is likewise greatly abused. But what did the authors of the Bible mean when they spoke of these terms and, more importantly, what did the audience take these words to mean when they were presented?

A) Contemporary Worship versus Religious Worship:

1) Secular Worship: A teenager may be said to worship the ground a person he has affection for walks upon, or that he idolizes a sport player or singer. The misuse of these words is not accidental; the intent is certainly to convey the idea that the feelings or devotion felt are extreme, even daring to elevate the target of their feelings to God. This common form of idol worship is not exclusively a sin of teenagers, but it is at least emotion-based and therefore usually temporary. As time goes by and the intense emotion drops to more appropriate levels, a more realistic perspective tends to grow out of the initial euphoria. Even at its peak, if one challenged this person and asks if they were really saying this other person is as good as God, in many cases a reply like "No, but it's probably the closest I'll find on Earth," will be given. Only in rare cases will such feelings actually turn into a long-term lifestyle, and such instances generally will be by people who could be (or actually have been) diagnosed with some kind of mental disorder. In short, while this practice does improperly (and sinfully) elevate a human to God status, it is at the same time acknowledged as a deliberate exaggeration in an effort to convey intense feelings and the actions that result from the feelings.

2) Religious Worship: Worship and idolizing in the religious sense, however, are *not* emotional states of mind. They are deliberate and rational acts to honor the supernatural. In the religious sense, one does not have to be emotionally attracted to the object of worship, nor does one usually desire to imitate the object of worship as an idol. Many destructive pagan gods were not worshiped in an effort to get them to do something, but rather to encourage them to leave the worshipers alone! Religious worship and idolizing of this type will take place regardless of how one feels (awestruck, thankful, fearful, disappointed, disgusted, etc.) of the god in question.

B) Definitions:

1) Veneration: The online Merriam-Webster Dictionary (www.merriam-webster.com) defines Veneration as "respect or awe inspired by the dignity, wisdom, dedication, or talent *of a person.*" (italics mine) While the whole definition is useful for my lesson, I want to especially touch on what it means to respect.

How to show respect is highly dependent on the circumstances. In some countries, one shows respect by shaking hands with those one meets; in others one bows. But respect is also shown to those of different stations. My friends that visit me call me by my first name, while my children call me "Dad" even if at the same event. I also want to point out that, if one looks at this definition closely, Veneration is actually based on characteristics of a person (which are called Accidentals in philosophy), not the innate nature (or Essence) of the person himself. If the person were to lose these Accidentals, then the Veneration the person had would change to the past tense or even be lost altogether.

2) Worship: Using the same dictionary, we find this word has two meanings. The second is essentially the secularized version that I talked earlier (**Topic A.1**). I am not interested in this definition. The first one, the one we need, is "to honor or show reverence for as a *divine being* or

supernatural power." (italics mine)

Now we need to look a little deeper at both definitions to see how they are different. I hope that the gentle reader will not get excited over one definition using "respect" while the other uses "honor or show reverence for." In Romans 13:7, Saint Paul uses the word "honor" interchangeably with "respect" when telling us how to treat those in authority: Pay to all their dues, taxes to whom taxes are due, toll to whom toll is due, respect to whom respect is due, honor to whom honor is due. For this paper, I am not worried about whatever hair-splitting definition can be found between these words. If we can ignore this distraction, we will realize that Worship is not about what the object has done or can do, but about what the object *is*. In philosophy, what something "is" is called its Essence.

So, now we have a much clearer understanding between Veneration and Worship. In Veneration, we are praising the gifts the subject *has*. In Worship, we are praising what the subject actually *is*.

3) Idol: The online dictionary gives us several definitions, but I am interested in the first two: 1) an object of extreme devotion and 2) a representation or symbol of an object of worship. Notice the key words "*extreme* devotion" in the first definition and the word "Worship" in the second. Both these definitions, therefore, allow for many everyday uses of images without them becoming idols.

4) Ten Commandments: The Catholic division of the Ten Commandments is slightly different than most Protestants. What the Catholics consider as the 1st Commandment is typically split in two by Protestants. To make up for this difference, the Catholics have made two Commandments out of what the Protestants consider the 10th. I will be using the Catholic organization, so every mention of a Commandment in this paper will be off by one for Protestants (for example, the Catholic 5th Commandment corresponds to the Protestant 4th). Arguing over which arrangement is "right" or "wrong" is meaningless as the content and even the verse numbering of both are the same. While theories explaining the merits of one system over the other make for a fine parlor game, to seriously use it to "attack" the legitimacy of the other system is sinful as it causes division within Christ's Holy Church.

C) Preliminary Discussion: Based on the definitions given, it should be clear that the difference between Veneration and Worship depends on the appropriateness of the respect or honor. The appropriateness is largely determined if it is focused on the Essence of a being or its Accidentals (the Accidentals, of course, being gifts of Jehovah). Giving honor does not become Worship *until* and *unless* it becomes inappropriately excessive for a human's status and more appropriate for a deity or other spiritual power. This invariably involves shifting attention from the Accidentals to the Essence.

In a similar way, a simple image is not an idol. One can use images to both respect and remember others without violating the 2nd Commandment. One can look at pictures, stand over grave stones and even name buildings after people as a form of honor. It is only when an object takes on a significance greater than what it actually represents, or is used in lieu of a supreme power that it becomes idolatry. In this respect, the object does not need to even be an image. I dare to say that a solid bar of gold is a much likelier candidate to become an idol than any picture or statue placed in a Church. And just because something is made in the name of Jehovah does not mean it can't be twisted into an idol. The Temple of Jerusalem is identified several times in the New Testament as being treated as an idol, and in Acts of the Apostles 7:44-53, this accusation is rather explicit.

D) The Value of Dignity: So, what is and isn't appropriate Veneration, especially as it pertains to

Idolatry and Worship? I think the key to this lies in understanding the difference between Human Dignity and God's omnipotence. Human Dignity is unique to each individual, yet all are equal before God. Our Human Dignity can only exist through God, as it is a gift of God. To give just recognition to another's dignity is therefore a form of praise to God. A person's dignity can change over time as God bestows additional blessings. This does not make one's dignity superior to others in God eyes, but it does warrant them additional honors.

For example, God codified the 5th Commandment to honor our parents (Exodus 20:12 and Deuteronomy 5:16) because they have been given a special blessing when they become parents. In a similar manner, we honor those in authority because the blessing God gave them in becoming an official demands such an honor (such as the Romans quote mentioned in **Topic B.2**). We are told that the saints are greater than those still on Earth by Jesus Himself (Matthew 11:11 and Luke 7:28), but this does not mean they are deities. It means they are now purified and can fully share the beatific vision with God.

I will not go into any amount of detail here as to what is and isn't appropriate. The Bible gives us some indicators and cultural norms provide the rest. And if we define a sin as the *willful* refusal of God's will, we usually need not fear when acting out of ignorance. Of course, ignorance is not an excuse for not taking due diligence either (intellectual laziness, the sin of Acedia)! It is only when we deliberately exaggerate the honor due to another to the point where it is not their Accidentals but their very Essence that we revere, that we run into Idolatry.

E) Intercessory Prayer: Perhaps the biggest misunderstanding about praying to the saints for help is the mistaken belief that it is the saint who will answer the prayer. Many whose faiths allow for intercessory prayer through the saints are just as guilty of this error as those who come from faiths that don't. To believe the saints answer the prayer in the form of granting it through their own power and authority is indeed a form of Worship and Idolatry. This is a matter that can only be remedied by proper education.

But before I go into the theology, let me start with reality. Personally, I have yet to meet one person who claims praying to saints is Idolatry yet who does not belong to a Church that has a prayer line or similar support network established. Informal requests for intercessory prayer are made by nearly all Christians on behalf of themselves, friends, family and co-workers in need on a regular basis. I am not aware of any Christian Church who claims that asking one to pray for another is a sin. We actually find several examples in the Bible directing us to do just that. Indeed, the Biblical demand to pray for others goes so far as to include our enemies! Interesting enough, I am not normally "corrected" for pointing out all these examples of intercessory prayer. Instead, I am "reminded" that these are all examples of the living praying for the living, not asking the dead for help.

I can appreciate the concern on the grounds that the saints are now part of the Supernatural, and that Worship is partially defined by honoring the Supernatural. We might even be tempted to suggest that at least some of them are "Supernatural Powers," as Jesus promised kingship and authority to his closest disciples (Luke 22:29-30). Do these observations suggest that the saints are now worthy of Worship? I say no, because this power is still an Accidental bestowed upon them by God, not part of their Essence. But it doesn't really matter what I think, what does the Bible say?

1) God of the Living:

Some Sadducees, who say there is no resurrection, came to him and put

this question to him, saying, "Teacher, Moses wrote for us, 'If someone's brother dies, leaving a wife but no child, his brother must take the wife and raise up descendants for his brother.' Now there were seven brothers. The first married a woman and died, leaving no descendants. So the second married her and died, leaving no descendants, and the third likewise. And the seven left no descendants. Last of all the woman also died. At the resurrection [when they arise] whose wife will she be? For all seven had been married to her." Jesus said to them, "Are you not misled because you do not know the scriptures or the power of God? When they rise from the dead, they neither marry nor are given in marriage, but they are like the angels in heaven. As for the dead being raised, have you not read in the Book of Moses, in the passage about the bush, how God told him, 'I am the God of Abraham, [the] God of Isaac, and [the] God of Jacob'? He is not God of the dead but of the living. You are greatly misled."

-Mark 12:18-27

To start with, let me address the claim that saints are "dead." We see, in the only Biblical example of the Sadducees challenging Jesus (shown above and retold in Luke 20:27-40), that saints are not dead, but living! We also see that *all* faithful are members of the church, even those who went on ahead of us (Saint Paul in his letters makes frequent mention of saints with no apparent distinction between those still on Earth or in Heaven, indeed it is only by assuming that he meant the term interchangeably that we see any consistency in his writing). All well and good one might say, but what if those in Heaven may no longer care for those of us on Earth? I can only suppose that the same argument Jesus made about Jehovah being the God of the living has fathered this belief (as marriage is dissolved in Heaven). It is likely supported by various references to the world going away to make way for the new (such as the Second Letter of Saint Peter, 3:11). We also see Isaiah 65:16-17 and Revelations 21:4 which suggests that we will forget about the damned. But a closer look at these examples does not, by necessity, suggest saints no longer care for the Earthbound Church. These passages tell us all human institutions (including marriage) will go away, and that we will not be bothered by those who refused God's gift of Grace. Looking to the rest of the Bible, we see examples of those beyond this world still caring for it. Rachel cried for the exiles perhaps 1400 years after her death (Jeremiah 31:15), and her tears are given as the reason God promised to one day bring back the exiles. And then, about 600 years after *that*, we find her crying again during the Murder of the Innocents (Matthew 2:16-18, and it quotes Jeremiah to cement the connection between the two). By the testimony of Jesus Himself, the one [unnamed] human soul we know to be in Hell asks that his brothers be spared the same fate (Luke 16:19-31), while in his Parables of the Lost Sheep and Lost Coin (Luke 15:4-10, with emphasis on verses 7 and 10) we see those in Heaven rejoicing over the repentant. Moses and Elijah appeared with Jesus during the Transfiguration of Jesus in all three Synoptic Gospels. And of course, Jesus Himself not only came back to Earth, but promised to send the Holy Spirit to guide us after He had to leave. The argument that those in Heaven having no further interest of Earth is simply un-Biblical.

For final thoughts on this matter, I did have at least one person use the example of Saul going to the Witch of Endor, a necromancer, and summoning Samuel's soul (1 Samuel 28:8-25) for information, claiming this was proof we are not to engage with the departed. By what perverted logic they came to this conclusion, I do not know. Necromancy is the raping of a spirit, not its Veneration. Compelling a spirit to behave in one fashion or another is certainly among the worst of sins, as it is a direct and personal challenge to the sovereignty of God. How this can ever be confused with a respectful prayer asked humbly for help is beyond me.

2) The Beatific Vision: Now that we have addressed why asking the saints for help is Biblically approved, I want to address some reasons why it's actually a good idea. Except for the four named angels found in the Bible, all canonized saints were once humans here on Earth. Every aspect of human life has a canonized saint associated with it. No group of family and friends can possibly understand everything we went through, especially those of us whose lives have taken us far from where we grew up. But no matter what experiences we have gone through, there is at least one canonized saint (and often many) who has gone through it themselves. God, through the Church, offers these canonized saints as a gift of understanding for us. Furthermore, by being a Heavenly saint, they have the beatific vision. They can not only talk directly to God of things we are going through, but, because of their perfected state, they know things about us we can't put into words. Put another way, they know to ask God for things we can't think to ask for. Finally, by having a canonized saint who has been through what we have been through (and probably even worse), we find a true hero to comfort and inspire us in our darkest times. Unlike Earthly heroes, their inspiration is pure and we can count on them not to lead us astray through Earthly weaknesses.

In the end, one can certainly have a full and meaningful Christian journey without calling on a canonized saint, but the journey will be that much harder for it. God gave us these saints to help and inspire us as a gift; how we use it (or don't use it) is up to us.

F) Worship: I hope that I have clarified that seeking intercession with a saint is not a form of Worship, but really an acknowledgment that they are in a better position to commune with God than any Earthly person. As long as we do not expect the saint himself to do the answering, we are not honoring them in the sense that they have divine power, but rather Venerating their beneficial position they occupy to help us. Let us now look at what Worship is in the context of the Bible.

1) Intellectual Worship: To start off with, there is an intellectual form of Worship to be sure. The entire book of Psalms stands as evidence to that. We see another example in Mark 7:6-7. Acts of the Apostles 10:25 also talks about this lesser type of worship. Many more examples can be found throughout the Bible. But any intellectual Worship, even if accompanied by some habitual practice such as singing or discussing the Bible, is a weaker form of Worship than the one I will soon be discussing at length. This intellectual Worship differs from Veneration only by degree. To call one a king is Veneration, to call Jesus King of Kings is Worship. One may identify someone as their "savior" out of Veneration to a particular rescue, but it is Worship to address Jesus as our "Eternal Savior." But there *is* a form of Worship that is the exclusive domain of the gods: the Sacrifice. One cannot offer a Sacrifice out of Veneration; to offer a Sacrifice is to testify to the divinity of the subject.

2) Sacrificial Worship: We see Sacrifice as early as the story of Cain and Able (Genesis 4:3-4). We see Noah beginning the tradition of marking the beginning of a Covenant with a Sacrifice (Genesis 8:20), and ending with Jesus offering Himself as the Sacrifice for the final Covenant. Abram offered Sacrifices constantly, with God aborting the most famous Sacrifice Abram was about to make (his son). The Cherubim on the Arc of the Covenant (Exodus 25:18-22), the Bronze Serpent (Numbers 21:4-9) and the treasures of Solomon (2 Chronicles 2:6 and 12-13 both specifically state that engraving was going to be done in the temple, while 3:7 and 10-13 and 4:3-4 speak at length of the images) were not considered Idols because no Sacrifices were made to them. The Golden Calf (Exodus 32:1-29) *was* an Idol because Sacrifice was made to it. Indeed, the specific priestly and Sacrificial duties that are so famous in Judaism (Exodus 24:3-8 and Ezekiel 20:7-8) were prescribed because this incident proved Israel's inability to otherwise break away from Egyptian paganism. The history of Israel is peppered with the people falling astray due to building altars and Sacrificing to pagan gods, with Kings Solomon

and Ahab arguably being the most infamous. Every trip Jesus took to Jerusalem found in the Gospels corresponded to special days of Sacrifice to Jehovah.

With all this being said, it may come as a shock to many readers that merely *believing* in other gods was not considered Worship or Idolatry. Indeed, such a belief in other gods was part of Mosaic law (Deuteronomy 32:8-9) and it is upheld frequently in Psalms (most notably, Psalms 58 and 82). Jesus uses this fact in defense of His claims to divinity in John 10:34 (a reference specifically to Psalm 82:6). It was not actually wrong to acknowledge that pagan gods existed, it only became a sin when the chosen people began to Worship them (particularly with Sacrifice). We actually see this in the middle part of the 1st Commandment (Exodus 20:4-6 and Deuteronomy 5:8-10): you shall not bow down before them or serve them. ... (Exodus 20:5, Deuteronomy 5:9)

3) The Sacrifice: So what is a Biblical Sacrifice? Besides the animal (or whatever was appropriate to the sacrifice), an altar, a priest, a liturgy (not necessarily a formalized or standardized one) and an offering prayer were needed. We shouldn't expect to find this spelled out in the Bible any more than one should expect a modern day storyteller to go into great detail on how to turn on the ignition and put a car into gear every time one of their characters needs to drive. Just like most readers of a modern novel will know the basics of driving a car because it is such an important part of the modern lifestyle, ancient Jews knew the basics of sacrifice because it was such an important part of their lifestyle.

The Catholic Church has declared that sacrificing to anyone but Jehovah is heretical from the earliest days of Christianity, and the Jews shared this belief at least since the time of Moses. We see two examples of the crowd attempting to offer sacrifice to the apostles in the Acts of the Apostles (3:12 and 14:11-18). In both cases, the apostles acted quickly and decisively to put an end to it. While excess honor to a human or misunderstanding on how saints intercede for us can lead to unintended idolatry, we at least have good will on our part when asking God for forgiveness. One might even be justifiably able to claim to be "guiltless" on the matter if we were taught wrong. But to offer Sacrifice to any but Jehovah is unquestionably a mortal sin. It's not that God won't forgive it if asked with a humble and contrite heart, but the gravity of such a sin cannot be underestimated.

Conclusion:

To ask the intercession of a Heavenly saint may not be explicitly be stated in the Bible, but one can see its justification if one only looks. We are told to pray for each other, as living helping the living. We know the saints are alive because we have a God of the Living (Mark 12:27 and Luke 20:38). We know they are aware of our plight and that they may intercede for us even if unbidden (as did Rachel). While many of us, through ignorance, may have committed apostasy by mistakenly thinking it was the saint who answered the prayers, this does not discredit intercession as a practice. There is no reason not to call on them properly and, because of their special position, there is much advantage to this. One can certainly live a good Christian life without calling on a saint, but to do so is to ignore a wonderful gift God has given us for our journey to Salvation.

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