

Flee Idolatry!

The apostle Paul's guidance, in two lengthy letters, to the fledging church of God in Corinth was set against a city given over to idolatry. He had spent two years in the city and after his departure the culture of Corinth threatened to engulf the church. So he instructs them '*...flee idolatry*' (I Corinthians 10:14). Does this have any relevance for the church today?

In the context of the Christian Scriptures 'idolatry' is the worship of any god other than that of the Bible. He is the Creator of all things material and spiritual, and his 'worship' is more, much more, than turning up to sing hymns and spiritual songs in church. For God has described for us *how* He is to be worshipped.

Every so-called 'god' is worshipped by a set pattern of practices. A modern example is *Allah*, the Islamic god with its distinct 'five pillars of Islam'. It includes regular worship on Friday, pilgrimage to Mecca, prayer five times daily, the annual Ramadan fast, *Shahadah* (the basic statement of faith) *etc.* Christendom is marked by worship on Sunday and various festivals (Christmas, Easter *etc.*). Hinduism, too, has its set festivals unique to it. The God of both Judaism and Biblical Christianity has a distinct worship pattern. It includes worship on the seventh day of the week and on the seven festivals outlined in Leviticus 23.

Anciently, various faiths had their special festival observances. Mithraism, for example, venerated the Sun (on Sunday, of course), and also the Saturnalia during the last week of December—celebrated as the 're-birth of the sun' following the dark days of winter. Indeed, this festival with its orgies and overeating may have been in the apostle's thoughts when he wrote to the Corinthian brethren about the excesses of the people of Corinth. Peter the apostle wrote: '*...You have spent enough time in the past doing what the heathen like to do. Your lives were spent in idleness, lust, drunkenness, orgies, drinking parties, and the disgusting worship of idols*' (I Peter 4:3). It's almost as if he were transported forward in time to our day—around Christmas time!

A Transformed Life

The culture that envelops us ('*this age*') in this twenty-first century increasingly reflects the worst traits from the ancient pagan faiths. Yet embarking on the Christian way requires radical change. '*...be not conformed to this age, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, in order to prove by you what is the good and pleasing and perfect will of God*', says the apostle Paul to the Roman Christians [the very heart of Mithraism!] (*ch* 12:2). Peter adds: '*...And now the heathen are surprised when you do not join them in the same wild and reckless living, and so they insult you. But they will have to give an account of themselves to God, who is ready to judge the living and the dead*' (*vv.*4-5). Christians, in other words, had left behind all that sinful practice—idolatry with all its unholy lifestyle and ungodly festivals—when they became joined to Christ. It took courage to resist the hedonist culture—yet many were willing to suffer the jibes of family and colleagues and neighbours, give up jobs and even give their lives for '*...the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus*' (Philippians 3:14). That 'high calling' is to be transformed through a resurrection to become a Spirit-born child of the great God of the universe, and to work with Him eternally.

God is consistent. '*I don't change*', He said. Addressing His nation of Israel He says: '*...take heed to yourself that you not be snared to follow [the heathen]...and that you not inquire after their gods, saying, How did these nations serve their gods? And I shall do so, even I. You shall not do so to Jehovah your God; for everything hateful to Jehovah, which He detests, they have done to their gods. For they have even burned their sons and their daughters in the fire to their gods. All the things that I command you, take heed to do them and you shall not add to it, nor take away from it*' (Deuteronomy 12:30-32). Ω

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