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WHO WE ARE AND WHO WE THINK WE ARE

We are made to image what we worship

O come, let us worship and bow down; let us kneel before the LORD, our maker!
For he is our God, and we are the people of his pasture, and the sheep of his hand (Ps. 95:6-7).

'Great is Artemis of the Ephesians!' (Acts 19:34).

THE Psalms are full of many kinds of anguish, but angst over identity is not one of them. Psalm 95 expresses clearly what all the psalms assume: these are the songs of the people of Yahweh, the one true God, who had called them to Himself. They are His people, and He is their God. It is not for nothing that psalm-singing has been a key feature of the people of God for three thousand years.

No-one (as far as I know) has ever argued that the psalms are primarily about human identity. Of course they are not; they are about God, and specifically about the worship of God by the covenant people of God. But that is my point, and the point of this book. Who we are, and who we understand ourselves to be, are grounded more than anything else in whom we are made to worship, and whom (or what) we do in fact worship. The Bible is from start to finish a call to worship the Triune God, and in so doing to return to what we really are.

So while an obsession with our 'identity' is very far from a Christian instinct, who we are is nevertheless at the heart of the gospel. Not that the Bible at any point uses the twenty-first century psychological concept of 'identity' in any recognisable form. That would have been impossible for an author writing even fifty years ago, let alone two thousand. But the question of what man *is* is deeply embedded in the structure of the Christian gospel and the entire Christian worldview.

A crisis of identity

The belief in an internal, psychologically-defined 'identity' has been growing in the West for many years.[1] The wave, it seems, has grown so tall that it is perhaps beginning to break. The claims of different identities are coming ever more sharply into conflict, and it is becoming clear that it is impossible to ensure absolute equality for them all, or even to know what that might mean. 'As a culture we have now entered an area which is now mined with impossibility problems', writes the journalist Douglas Murray, in a book which sets out some of these problems forcefully but offers few solutions.[2] The argument of this present book is that Christianity provides an answer which secularism cannot; indeed, the fundamental tenets of secularism are the problem. Since who we are is defined by our duty to worship God, our crisis of identity is at root a crisis of worship. The Christian gospel, being God's call to worship Him alone, uniquely has the resources to remedy this.

You are what you are made to worship

All things are created to worship God. That is, they are created to bring glory to Him, and to do so in the way in which they were designed to do. This presupposes the most basic thing about a Christian worldview: that for all things other than God Himself,

1. Carl Trueman, *The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self* (Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway, 2020), gives one account of the development of this belief.
2. Murray, *Madness of Crowds*, p. 239.

to exist is to be a creature, in the literal sense of 'created thing'. Nothing in this universe 'just exists'. Everything exists because God called it into existence. Neither stars nor trees nor rocks nor human beings are independent, self-supporting entities. That can only be said of God alone – known as His *aseity*, from the Latin '*a se*', from Himself. We creatures do not take our being from ourselves. We were designed, made, and placed in our particular locations and settings by another: by God our creator.

What we are is therefore entirely non-negotiable. Humans did not choose to exist any more than a brick chose to be a brick or a pencil chose to be a pencil. Those things are what they are because they were formed that way by their Creator, and so are we. This is of course a simple fact of existence, which is affirmed in Acts 17, Genesis 1, and Psalm 8 among other places of Scripture, and which is assumed throughout the Bible. And it is undeniable to all men, whether they know the Scriptures or not. Our existence is something we became aware of, not something we caused. Indeed, how could it be otherwise? If I caused my own existence, there was some 'I' already in existence to do the causing – which must already have had some existence. Unless we believe ourselves to have existed eternally – in other words, believe that we are God – then we did not make ourselves. I did not choose my date of birth; I did not choose my species; I did not choose my race or nationality. I did not choose even the thing most closely associated with my identity – my name.

Saying we are creatures is saying more than this, however. Not only does it mean we did not create ourselves. It means we were created by another. A belief in creation cannot be avoided: to be human is to know that someone or something else brought about your creation. Now this is, of course, denied by atheists who want to assert that we are simply the product of blind forces. Very well, but this is not really saying something different; it is simply saying that our creator is a set of blind, mute, mindless forces. A very poor sort of creator, and one wonders how such an unimpressive creator could be responsible for such a marvellous creation – but a creator nonetheless. But God in Christ has revealed that the

truth is far better. We were created by Him, the God of infinite goodness, majesty, glory and power. We are here by His decision, His design, His construction, His gift of life.

Why did God create all things? He did so for His glory. All things are created to worship Him, as Psalm 148 asserts. In that sense, cows and eggs and icebergs worship Him. Not consciously, for God did not give them that ability; but their true identity is to give glory to God in the manner in which they were designed to do.

Notice the imperative here: created things are *supposed* to act in this way. They are commanded and required by God to do these things, because as His creatures they are obliged to do His bidding, to be what He created them for. Creatures did not come into existence as neutral 'stuff' whose role or purpose in life was undefined or yet to be discovered. Rather, their purpose was predefined for them by their Creator.

Images of God

Now we humans, being creatures, are to do that too. But in a far greater way than the rest of God's creation. For the manner in which each creature brings glory to God is determined by the nature which God gave it, and what we humans are is something qualitatively different from the rest of creation. For we are God's *images*:

> So God created man in his own image,
> in the image of God he created him;
> male and female he created them (Gen. 1:27).

We will come to the significance of God's image being created as male and female in chapter 4. For now, we note the central role of 'dominion' and 'multiplication' in the image in the verses immediately before and after this: man is to rule over creation, in a godlike way. We are to act like God as we govern the rest of the world, filling the earth and subduing it. We are to image God as ruler over the creation, and we are to image Him in our multiplication and family. Not that in either of these are we the same as God, for an image is never the same thing as the thing it images. Our rule with ploughs (and swords for that matter) is

a faint reflection of His mysterious governing of all things; our family relationships are a faint reflection of His mysterious being as one God who is Father, Son and Holy Spirit. But in both, we are His images, and we are to act like it.

So being God's 'image' means we display the glory of God in a rather different way to the rest of creation. All things glorify God by being evidence of His creative power and wisdom. We certainly do that, but we also glorify Him by being *like* Him: reflecting His power and wisdom in our own being. Theologians have attempted to try to capture the key aspects of this image; some have limited it to one or more faculties of the human soul. But as Herman Bavinck says, 'The whole being, therefore and not *something in man* but *man himself*, is the image of God.'[3] The incarnation of the second person of the Trinity means it must be so: for Jesus of Nazareth could only be the perfect image of God in His human nature if human nature were already fitted by design to be a sufficient image of the glory of God. Everything we are, body and soul, is designed to reflect and display the glory of God.

This is why John Calvin begins his *Institutes* with the famous chapter about how the knowledge of God and the knowledge of ourselves cannot be separated:

> '… it is certain that man never achieves a clear knowledge of himself unless he has first looked upon God's face, and then descends from contemplating him to scrutinize himself.'[4]

We do not know ourselves by focussing on ourselves; we know ourselves by focussing on God, for we are created to display Him. In this sense, all of Christian theology has been about 'identity', but it is deeply Christian that Christians have not thought of it that way. Christianity has the answers to identity-obsession, but we will not find them by indulging in it ourselves. It is of our very essence to direct our minds and hearts towards God. The more our being

3. Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics* Vol 2 (Grand Rapids: Michigan, 2004), p. 554. Roman and Lutheran views of the image of God differ from Bavinck's Reformed view in important ways, but not ones which are significant here.

4. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 1.1.2.

is filled with the knowledge of God, the more God is imaged in us, and the more we truly are and know what we are supposed to be.[5]

The image is not limited to knowledge, however. It is also in our moral nature and actions, as prescribed by the law of God. Jesus' perfect obedience of the law is an essential part of how He is the perfect image of the invisible God (Col. 1:15). For the law is a description of what it means to reflect God's glory; how His images must live if they are truly to display His holy nature in His creation.[6]

So the duties of man and what it means to be man – who we are – are inextricably linked. Our duties flow from who we are, and who we are is expressed in and defined by our duties. The Ten Commandments are a blueprint for true humanity. But they are not only duties. They are also intended to be our calling and our joy and delight. For the God whom we are made to reflect is a God who has eternal delight in Himself and eternal love and joy between the persons of the Trinity. And so those who image Him as He intends find that they share in His eternal delight, love and joy. Indeed, bringing us to share this is the central thing for which Jesus prayed for His disciples (John 17:26). Which brings us to consider the central place of worship in the image of God.

Image and Worship

To whom do we display God's nature as His images? It is clear from the text of Genesis 2 that we do so to the rest of creation (through our dominion over it) and to one another (through our family relationships). Yet once we have understood that the law of God is an exposition of what it means to be God's image, we realise that neither is primary. The first four of the ten commandments are about our relationship to God.

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5. Thus, Bavinck sees the discipline of theology as an essential part of the recovery and completion of the image of God in restored humanity, the church. Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 1:588.

6. I am speaking here of the moral law, which has always been written in our consciences, to which God has called us to obedience in Christ, not the contingent laws which God gave Israel for the period before Christ came.

So to be God's image is first and foremost about our worship. We do not worship Him in the inanimate way in which stars and rocks worship Him; nor in the mindless way in which animals and birds worship Him. We are to worship Him with all the godlike faculties He has given us: with minds, hearts, lips and hands in devotion to Him. The purpose of an image is to bring glory to the thing of which it is an image: our purpose, built into our very nature, woven into our fabric, is to love, serve and glorify the God whose image we are. We are made to reflect the glory of God back to God. That is who we are.[7]

This connection between image and worship is emphasised in the creation account. The goal of creation is the Sabbath: the day God rests to take delight in His creation. Therefore, the highest part of His creation, His images, are to see that day as 'holy' (Exod. 20:8): a day for communion with Him, for us to image God to God. When the man is placed in the Garden of Eden, he is to 'work it and keep it', the words used in Numbers to describe the duties of the Levites in the Tabernacle.[8] Add to this that the garden is described in temple language and functions as the archetypal temple throughout the Bible; in fact, the Tabernacle/Temple is presented in numerous ways as a re-established Eden, down to the guardian cherubim protecting the entrance on the east side. Therefore man, the image of God, is established as a priest, designed and appointed for the worship of God. In

7. This is the major theme of Augustine's *Confessions*, followed particularly by the Reformed tradition: e.g. '… he commands us to worship and adore him with true and zealous godliness', Calvin *Institutes* 2.8.16; 'Praise and outward homage and adoration are the very expression by a dependent creature of the relation in which as a creature he stands to God – the very end for which he was created and exists,' James Bannerman, *The Church of Christ* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 2015), p. 341; 'We worship God because God created us to worship him. Worship is at the center of our existence, at the heart of our reason for being,' Hughes Oliphant Old, *Worship: Reformed According to Scripture* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002), p. 1.

8. Michael Morales, *Who shall ascend the Mountain of the Lord?: A Biblical Theology of the Book of Leviticus* (Nottingham, England: Apollos, 2015), p. 53 suggests the most accurate translation here would be 'to worship and obey'. The word translated 'work' in most English translations is the same as the word for 'serve', in the sense of worship, in Exodus 3:12 and throughout the Pentateuch.

Genesis 2, this precedes his dominion-work of imaging God to the animals by naming them. Man images God back to Himself first, and then to the lower creatures.

This order is reflected in the Ten Commandments, which can be seen as a blueprint for what it means for man to be God's image. Commandments 1-4, traditionally called the First Table of the law, are primarily about imaging God to God; Commandments 5-10, the Second Table, focus on imaging God to the rest of creation, including one another. Since we are God's images, mankind is most human when we are on our knees before God, or sitting listening to His word, or singing His praise to Him, or eating and drinking at His table. And also we are being truly human when we leave our imaging-God-back-to-Him worship to start our imaging-God-to-creation worship. So a man is being truly human when loving his wife, bringing up his children in the fear of the Lord, honouring his parents, ploughing a field, building a house, programming a computer, and dealing with people in justice and righteousness, all out of service to the God whose image he is. Indeed, we can only keep the second table of the law if we keep the first, for it is for God's sake, out of desire to glorify Him, that we are to do all these things.

Worship and love

Inseparable from worship, and central to it, is love.

> And one of the scribes came up and … asked him, 'Which commandment is the most important of all?' Jesus answered, 'The most important is, "Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one, And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength." The second is this: "You shall love your neighbour as yourself". There is no other commandment greater than these.' (Mark 12:28-31)

Jesus is not replacing the Ten Commandments here but summarising them (in Moses' own words), and going to the core of what they are all about. At the heart of worshipping God as His images is love. Since God is love – the eternal Trinitarian love between Father, Son and Spirit – it must be this way. Worship

is therefore, first, the expression of our love for God to God. Augustine of Hippo famously expressed it like this:

> Nevertheless, to praise you is the desire of man, a little piece of your creation. You stir man to take pleasure in praising you, because you have made us for yourself, and our heart is restless until it rests in you.[9]

Godlike love does not stop here, however. Secondly, we are to love others for His sake; in the way He commands, because we love Him.

This then fills out what the image of God is and how it works. God is love, so we love Him with a Godlike love. And so we also love one another, and the creation under our dominion, with a Godlike love as well. Thus we are to reflect God to God, and to resemble God to everyone else.

We are now in a position to connect this to the question of identity. It is a universal of human nature that we identify ourselves by what we love. Ask a man to describe a bit about himself, and he will tell you about what he loves: his wife, his children, his home town, his football team, but only if he is a fan; his job, if he likes it, but probably not, if he doesn't. Conversely, if you don't know what someone loves, you really can't say that you know that person at all.

Now we can see why. Love goes to the core of our being. Not the experience of love, or love as an involuntary feeling, which is far from the Biblical understanding of love. Love is a *duty*; and it is the duty to love which defines us. The duty to love God comes first; it is, if you like, our primary identity. And since God commands us to love others, according to His law, there are a host of what we might call lawful sub-identities, all of which rightly interlock and build up our sense of who we are. Taking the Second Table of the Ten Commandments as a framework, we can say that our true identity rightly includes our parentage, for we are to honour our father and mother; our spouse, if we have one,

9. Augustine, *Confessions*, 1.i, tr. Henry Chadwick (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992).

and our maleness and femaleness, whether we are married or not, from the seventh commandment; our friends and neighbours, whose welfare we are to seek, from commandments 6, 7, 8, and 9; and the society of which they and we are a part; honest work, which is necessary if we are not to break commandment 8. Putting those together we can see that it is quite right that such things as family, sex (maleness or femaleness), race and culture (which are inseparable from family), nationality, work, ways in which we involve ourselves in community – and many more – are good and legitimate parts of our understanding of who we are. For they are necessary outworkings of our primary duty to love God, and primary identity as His images.

To be God's image is to be His worshipper. There is no higher calling or greater privilege, and nor could one be conceived of. This is what we are made for. It is in worshipping Him that we fulfil the purpose for which we exist. This is what we are.

You think you are what you do worship

Needless to say, this is a very long way from a 21st Century secular view of humanity. We live in an age which believes that it doesn't do worship. Modernity is all about the belief that we have outgrown religion.

One of the troubling things about this from a Christian perspective is that this is not a scenario which the Bible seems to envisage. 'Non-religion', agnosticism and atheism are not strongholds upon which the writers of Scripture feel the need to train their guns.[10] This contributes to the sense among some Christians that modernity is a problem which the Bible has left us under-equipped to deal with.

This, however, is a case of being too willing to accept unbelief's account of itself. There is nothing really new about today's

10. Psalms 14 and 53 might appear to be an exception, but it is doubtful if anything resembling secular atheism is in view. The 'fool' the psalmist speaks of is wickedly denying God's existence to himself, even though he is well aware of Him, for he wants to sin with impunity. 'The fool is neither ignorant nor an atheist.' Willem A. VanGemeren, *Psalms* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2008), *in. loc.*

situation; and the obsession with identity is a good window into what is really going on. The place to start is with the consistent biblical connection between sin and idolatry.

Sin is false worship

Basic to the Bible's story is that the image of God in humanity, while not lost, has been corrupted dreadfully. Jesus' mission is to restore humanity to the full realisation of that image as God's worshipping people. So how has the image been spoiled?

Consider Paul's description of the fall of man in Romans 1:

> For although they knew God, they did not honour him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened. Claiming to be wise, they became fools, and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and creeping things (Rom. 1:21-23).

'Claiming to be wise' alludes unmistakably to Genesis 3:6, where the woman saw 'that the tree was to be desired to make one wise'. What is interesting is how Paul immediately connects the first sin of Genesis 3 to idolatry: exchanging the glory of the immortal God for images. At the heart of what has gone wrong in man is a transfer of worship.

That link is not explicitly made in Genesis 3. But Paul is drawing out a very deep connection. Physical idols probably first appear in the Bible in the form of Laban's Teraphim in Genesis 31, although the casual way they are mentioned leaves us in no doubt that they were widespread long before this.[11] As we progress through the Old Testament we find idols occupying a more and more central place in the characterisation of sin; indeed, idolatry is presented as sin's basic structural form. The Ten Commandments make this clear, with commandments 1, 2 and 10 addressing it, thus making the worship of non-gods both the most significant sin and the principle which underlies all sins.

11. Calvin, *Institutes* 1.11.8.

Paul is indicating that idolatry is present in the first sin of Genesis 3. We can see this from at least three converging considerations.

First, there is the centrality of desire to the account of the fall. The tree was good for food, was a delight to the eyes, and was to be desired to make one wise (Gen. 3:8). God intended and provided an abundance of goodness, delight and legitimate desire and its satisfaction to the first human couple, and all three pointed to the goodness, delight and desire they should rightly have for God. There is a note of worship about these words. The point is that here – directed towards the fruit – they are illegitimate. Goodness, delight and desire are to be focused on God, not the things God has made. Worship has been transferred.

Second, there is an attempt at cosmological inversion going on. The serpent presented the fruit as desirable because, he said, it would make them 'like God, knowing good and evil'. Eating the fruit involves setting up a false cosmology in their minds: abandoning the knowledge that God defines good and evil (and therefore His commands are to be obeyed), and substituting a belief in which we define good and evil for ourselves. And this means abandoning the knowledge that God is God at all, and substituting the belief that we are. Not creature, but creator; not image, but original. In eating the fruit, Adam and Eve embraced a recalibration of the whole universe; with God dethroned and themselves exalted above Him.

Which leads to the third consideration, which is that this sin is one which takes place in the context of worship. The Garden of Eden, as we have seen, is a temple in which Adam's first duty is worship.[12] So when, instead of 'guarding' the garden-sanctuary against the intrusion of the snake, he instead listens to its voice and 'serves' it, not God, he is effectively bowing down to this creature (a reptile – which is perhaps in Paul's mind in Romans 1:23) in the very throne-room of God. More importantly, he is bowing down to his mental image of what

12. Richard Lints, *Identity and Idolatry: The Image of God and its inversion* (Nottingham, England: Apollos, 2015), chapter 3.

this reptile represents – a better god, more serviceable to his desires. He has, in his mind, instituted the worship of a new, self-made deity.

Thus idols do not need to be physical images. When they are, they demonstrate particularly clearly how idolatry is an inversion of what we are supposed to be: rather than the image of God worshipping his Creator, man becomes an image-maker who worships the image of himself he has created.[13] This remains true whether idols are physical or mental. It is the fashioning of a deity whose worship requirements match rather better his preferred moral choices.

Sin has to do this, because it is of the nature of sin to want to define what is good and what is evil, as God does. But to declare something good on our own authority would be mere opinion. To elevate our preferences to the level of moral absolutes – which is what good and evil mean – we need a peg higher than ourselves to hang them on. And for that we need a deity. Has God called evil something that we wish to call good? No problem: let us make a new god, a more amenable god, a god like us, who will conveniently declare it good for us. Idols redefine evil as good and good as evil. That is the purpose for which we make them.

The relevance of this is enormous. One of the things which has most alarmed Christians in the last decade or so is the sudden realisation that the secular society around us is not characterised by its moral apathy. It is not the case, as perhaps it once was, that people don't care about doing evil things. 60s-style permissiveness has been left behind; rather, things that the Bible calls evil are seen as positively *good*, and doing and celebrating them a form of moral heroism. Even more stunning to many Christians is that that which the Bible calls good is not seen as merely unnecessary but as positively evil. To believe in marriage is wicked. To flaunt sexual perversion is virtuous. To encourage children to sexual restraint is abusive; to urge them to sexual experimentation is decent and right and good. To kill unborn children is right; to suggest that their lives should be protected is morally appalling.

13. See Ibid., p. 80ff.

My generation of Christians grew up with the expectation that some people would find our views on such things dated, irrelevant or amusing. Now we dare not mention them in public for fear of losing our jobs.

But this moral inversion is precisely the function of idolatry. And so, this suggests that what has happened in the secular West has not been a matter of abandoning religion, but of adopting an idolatrous new one. What this religion and what its idols are, we will come to shortly.

Idols redefine us

Idols redefine reality and morality. But in so doing, they also redefine us. Partly, this is what we wanted: idols create a rewritten reality designed for us. But partly this is in a way we perhaps did not expect. The convenient thing about idols is that we are their masters. Or so we think. But written into the first few chapters of Genesis, and the wider biblical account of idolatry, is that sin and idolatry, though they promise freedom, in fact enslave.

Why? Because though we may not want to be images, images is what we are. We are worshippers, so we will worship, no matter what. The foolishness of idolatry, brought out repeatedly by Isaiah, is that we know that we made these gods, but we worship them anyway: we carved the wood ourselves (having made the rest into firewood), and yet we fall down and declare it our god.[14] Calvin puts it like this: 'As soon as a visible form has been fashioned for God, his power is bound to it … they fasten God wherever they fashion him, and hence they cannot but adore."[15]

And being images, we become like the thing we worship. When we worship images made by us, we become images of them. They come to control us; and they come to define us.

Greg Beale shows how this happens repeatedly in the Bible in his monograph on idolatry in the Bible, *We become what we*

14. Isaiah 44:12-20.
15. Calvin, *Institutes* 1.11.9.

worship.[16] When the Israelites made a golden calf they became stiff-necked like it was. Isaiah said the people were blind and deaf like their idols were. Psalm 115 sums up perhaps most clearly:

> Their idols are silver and gold,
> the work of human hands.
> They have mouths, but do not speak;
> eyes, but do not see.
> They have ears, but do not hear;
> noses, but do not smell.
> They have hands, but do not feel;
> feet, but do not walk;
> and they do not make a sound in their throat.
> Those who make them become like them;
> so do all who trust in them. (Ps. 115:4-8)

Idolaters shrink to resemble their voiceless, powerless idols. Richard Lints puts this well:

> Worship fashioned the worshipper into an imprint of the object worshipped. Worship of the one true and living God brought life in all its purpose, dignity and security as a consequence. Worship of the false gods refashioned worshippers in the image of the inanimate creation.[17]

This is a broad and rich insight of great pastoral significance. Individuals and peoples come to reflect the character of the (fictional) gods they worship. And integral to this is that individuals and peoples come to *identify themselves* by the gods they worship.

Being images, our true identity is found in the God whose image we are, and whom we are made to love with all our heart and soul and strength. And so those who worship false gods, giving them the love due to the true God, cannot help but define themselves by those gods instead. This pattern is seen repeatedly in Scripture. The Philistines' national self-understanding was

16. G. K. Beale, *We Become what we Worship: A Biblical Theology of Idolatry* (Nottingham, England: Inter-Varsity Press 2008), p. 76ff.
17. Lints, *Identity and Idolatry*, p. 94.

focused on 'our God', Dagon (Judg. 16:23-24). Micah felt he had lost everything when the Danites stole 'the gods that I made' (Judg. 18:24). For Ruth, to change her people meant changing her God (Ruth 1:16). Most striking of all perhaps is the riot in Ephesus in Acts 19: faced with the preaching of the gospel the outraged people shouted for two hours nonstop, 'Great is Artemis of the Ephesians'! They knew perfectly well that her statues were made by silversmiths like Demetrius. But nevertheless their civic identity was bound up with her; they defined themselves by her. To question her deity was an outrageous insult to themselves and their city; her honour must be defended, by violence if necessary. Human beings take their identity from whom they worship.

And it must be so, for so we have been designed. We will worship, no matter what, and draw our sense of who we are from what we worship. And if we worship something created – indeed, something *we* created – then we will both believe ourselves to have, and in time start to resemble, a new and vastly inferior deity.

This is what the peoples of the world do. Muslims, Buddhists, Hindus and all other people define themselves chiefly by their gods. We identify ourselves by our idols; we label ourselves by what we love.

True and false identities in conflict

An idol, of course, has no real existence (1 Cor. 8:4; though demons will happily accept the worship offered to them, 1 Cor. 10:19). The physical image, if there is one, is just wood or stone. And the idea behind it just that: a human idea, created by a human mind. The identities conferred by idols are therefore no more real than the idols themselves. Meanwhile, the Triune God, Creator of heaven and earth, revealed in the incarnate Son and active in the world by the Holy Spirit, remains the one who eternally is, and we remain His creatures and images.

And so, for all fallen human beings, there is a basic identity-conflict in play. We are one thing; we believe ourselves to be something else. We have a true identity, though we deny it and seek to suppress it; and we have a false identity, centred around

our idols, which we cling to fiercely even though it diminishes our humanity.

This is expressed most clearly in Paul's address to the Areopagus in Acts 17:22-30. The Athenians, not knowing or worshipping the true God, have misunderstood who they are. Their idolatry has constructed a false cosmology which they falsely believe themselves to inhabit. They believe that they built the gods' dwelling-places; in reality, the true God allotted theirs. They believe they provide for the gods' needs; in reality, the true God provides for theirs. Their true identity as His creatures and offspring is intact, though suppressed to the level of a faded cultural memory in the writing of a few poets. And so Paul's message to them is a summons from God to repent of their foolish idolatry. To reappraise radically their understanding of the universe and their own place in it, by shifting their worship to Him and Him alone, in view of the resurrection of Christ and His coming return to judge.

Barnabas and Paul's earlier address at Lystra had much the same message: '… we bring you good news, that you should turn from these vain things to a living God, who made the heaven and the earth and the sea and all that is in them' (Acts 14:15). And this is what the converts in Thessalonica had indeed done: '… how you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God, and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead, Jesus who saves us from the coming wrath' (1 Thess. 1:9-10).

There is a sense in which the final judgment will be, for the unrepentant, a reassertion of their true identity. The God whose image they are will be vindicated as the true God, and the utter falsehood of their idols and their false identities will be exposed. Their true identity will be revealed and used as damning evidence against them. But for those found in Christ on that day, their glorification will be resurrection to the eternal worship of God in the new creation. They will enter into the life promised to Adam via the Tree of Life, and achieved only in Christ, of the consummation of human nature as Christ's bride, imaging God as He does.

This worship-centred understanding helpfully clarifies our understanding of the condition of fallen man. Even for those outside of Christ and lost in their sins, God's common grace still preserves them from wholly abandoning His moral law, written as it is on the consciences of all of mankind.[18] Thus even though the first table of the law is wholly ignored, in no society is this true of the second table: there is still some degree of respect for parents, restraint from murder, honouring of the law of marriage, disapproval of theft, and recognition of the value of truth. God is still imaged, though in a twisted and atrophied sense, among all mankind. And thus there are still valid identities held by unbelievers: ancestry, family relationships, work, nationality, standing in society. Yet this imaging of God is subsumed under a basic idolatry, and thus a false identity. A Muslim father remains an image of the triune God, and because of this his understanding of himself as being a father, of a certain ethnic/cultural background, and of (say) being a British citizen, are all true and valid; in God's common grace he may image God well in these roles, as a good father, community leader and citizen. Yet his primary self-conception of being a Muslim first and foremost is false. A submitter to Allah is what he thinks he is, but not what he actually is, for Allah is an idol with no real existence. The false identity and the good vestiges of the true one coexist.

For the Christian, the reverse is true. In Christ, he has put off his old self and put on the new, renewed after the image of God in true righteousness and holiness (Eph. 4:24). Thus his primary identity, as marked emphatically in his baptism, is restored: in Christ he is a redeemed, worshipping image of God. This is true definitively in our justification, for Christ has kept the law for us, and therefore we are counted as true images, true worshippers, with all our sins atoned for and the curse of the law taken away by Christ. And it is true progressively in our sanctification, for the Spirit works in the Christian to write the law on our hearts.

18. According to the common Reformed understanding of Romans 2:14-15, for example, as it is used in Westminster Confession of Faith 4.2.

Christians have become truly human, restored to the knowledge and increasingly to the reality of who we are.

Yet in this life our hearts remain, in Calvin's words, a factory of idols.[19] Christians may have transferred their worship and allegiance to God in Christ by the power of the Spirit, but still we tend to drift into the worship of other things, and cling to or pick up false identities from the things we worship. These may be things which are in themselves good when done out of worship for God – such as good family relationships, the fifth and seventh commandment – but which we elevate above God Himself and make into an idol. A Christian can be so proud of his family life that he tends to worship it rather than God who commands it. Or they may be things which are in themselves sinful, ideas or concepts or images which we use to justify disobeying God Himself. Such things lead to Christians holding false understandings of themselves, deriving false identities from these idols even while they know their primary identity is in the Triune God. Christians may have true faith in Christ and yet cling to an array of false identities: for example, a particular career, an exorbitant pride in family or nation, even the recognition that goes with a church ministry. Battling against such double-mindedness (as James calls it) remains a feature of the Christian's life until death or the Lord's return.

We are defined by whom we worship. Primarily, by whom we should worship, and thus only those saved by Christ know who they truly are. And in our sin, we redefine ourselves by what we do in fact worship, even though such things are no gods at all. If we want to know who we are, we must worship the God who made us and, if we worship idols instead, we will believe ourselves to be what in fact we are not.

19. Calvin, *Institutes* 1.11.8. Calvin's focus in this section is on unregenerate man, but he clearly believes that the tendency to idolatry still lingers in the converted.