

## IS MESSI GOD?

Recently, Pope Francis reminded Roman Catholics (especially) that world-renowned Argentinian soccer player, Lionel Messi, is not God. The Pope is rightly vexed

by the degree to which entertainers are adulated. He names Messi because he is the biggest in the biggest of sports. (Image: <https://wallpapersite.com/sports/lionel-messi-hd-17173.html>).

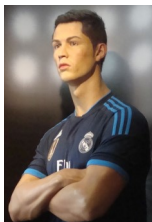
### SECULAR IDOLATRY

We don't decri those rising to the top of their professions. That is inevitable and to be lauded. Rather, we speak of a great irrationality of our age, namely, the desertion of the organized worship of God for the worship of someone or something very limited. We have in effect flung off humility so as to take pride in the creation of our own deities.

Think of the pronouncement placarded at Manchester United's Old Trafford ground: "Manchester United: The Religion." In this self-proclaimed "Theatre of Dreams" the longing for transcendence is as evident as is the idolatry. Each weekend, crowds which once attended worship services, flock in their masses to the grounds, their club scarfs and flags identifying them as worshipers, their stadia as church premises, their match programs as church bulletins, their chants as hymns, their goals as moments of ecstasy, and their heroes as Christ.

Watch how, when Messi greets the crowds following his latest goal or win, they, with raised hands, bend toward him as if to bow. He returns the favor, bowing toward them. It looks harmless fun but is in fact the consummation of worship. They need him for meaning in life, he needs them for his place in history. What would their lives be without the thrill of his skill, but who would Messi be if it was all played out before empty stadia?

What's the problem? Not sport or entertainment in itself. Messi seems a humble enough fellow and a team player to boot. He may be deified in the eyes of many, but he does not come off like his arch-rival Cristiano Ronaldo as believing he is divine. Messi's star will wane shortly after Ronaldo's, his personal life is as flawed as anyone



else's, his skill in time will become a distant memory, and the crowds will create new gods. (Photo: wax model, Cristiano Ronaldo, Hong Kong).

### RELIGIOUS IDOLATRY

Here's the irony. The religious can be as idolatrous as the masses choosing stadia rather than churches as their place of worship. False religion is, it must be said, no better in the eyes of God than no religion. The Pope rightly warns us against making gods of our heroes, and yet his ecclesiastical office claims, without biblical warrant, no less than the offices of the Godhead.

The Pope is, in Roman Catholic theology, "Holy Father," but there is only one Holy Father, namely, God the Father. The Pope we are told is Head of the Church, but that role belongs to one, namely, God the Son. The Pope is said to be Vicar (or representative) of Christ on earth, but Jesus promised us before returning to heaven that God the Spirit would fulfill that role (John 15:26; 16:5-14). Consistent with all this is the Pope's claim to be infallible when speaking *ex cathedra* (from his papal throne).



In the New Testament, by contrast, we read of Peter, supposedly the first pope, having a mother-in-law (Matthew 8:14), thereby destroying the argument for a compulsory celibacy in the hierarchy of the church. Untold numbers of lives have been scarred by this false piety. Moreover, the Acts of the Apostles narrates how the church was led by Christians in Jerusalem and in Antioch in Syria long before the church in Rome came into its own. Thus, while there is truth in Roman Catholicism—the inspiration of the Holy Scriptures, the Trinity, the incarnation of the Son of God, the sanctity of life, etc.—the accumulation of one tradition upon another has created in Roman Catholicism its fair share of idols, the distortion of Christian doctrine, and the obscuring of the good news of Jesus Christ.

*The Way* argues neither for a drifting from the worship and service of God, nor for a retreat from secular into religious idolatry. Rather, God invites us into a personal relationship with him which requires no idolatry and, indeed, is the antithesis of it. Trust in the Lord Jesus Christ is, God has pronounced, sufficient for both forgiveness and for genuine fellowship with him. If, then, you are trusting in anyone or anything for meaning in life other than Christ, do read on.

## OUR HEARTS ARE FACTORIES OF IDOLS

So observed John Calvin (1509–1564), the Protestant Reformer of Geneva. He was merely summarizing what the Bible teaches, and thus the point is as relevant now as it ever was.

“Supposing,” you ask, “my heart does produce idols, why does it matter? It’s my life and I’ll worship whoever or whatever I choose!” Certainly you can, for God does not take away your divinely given free agency to decide the details of life. But we may not create idols and it is folly to transform our interests into worship by hanging our entire lives upon them. Here is why.

### IDOLATRY IS IRRATIONAL

The making of idols, whether ancient (statues for worship and the like) or contemporary (money; film, rock, or sport stars, etc.), may all seem very reasonable, yet it is against reason.

*First, because idolatry testifies to the existence of the one true God.* If there were no God, there would be no higher being to replicate or to substitute. Idols require a higher or transcendent being to make any sense.

*Second, idolatry testifies to our knowledge that the one true God has placed eternity in our hearts (Ecclesiastes 3:11.)* To reject the eternal God means inevitably that we seek to fill the God-shaped cavity, for we were created for worship and service.

*Third, idolatry, with its many gods, testifies to our awareness that idols are no substitute for the one true God.* Nothing finite can make up for the worship of the infinite God, and, therefore, no amount of gods can satisfy the God-shaped hole our Creator has placed within our hearts. The emptiness, temporariness, and multiplicity of idols are a monument to their failure to offer ultimate satisfaction.

### IDOLATRY IS SIN



*First, idolatry is a willful rejection of what God has revealed to us of himself.* His revelation is twofold. It is written on our hearts as also in Holy Scripture. Idolatry, for instance, is forbidden by the first and second commandments. In

this abiding law of God we read: **“You shall have no other gods before me. You shall not make for yourself a carved image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. You shall not bow down to them or serve them . . .”** (Exodus 20:3-4). ([factoday.com/curiosity/5-facts-about-the-human-heart-you-probably-didnt-know/](http://factoday.com/curiosity/5-facts-about-the-human-heart-you-probably-didnt-know/)).

*Second, it follows that idolatry is an attempt to establish ourselves as God.* God is the Creator, but in idolatry we claim to be the gods who create. In the apostle Paul’s day, the Athenians felt God could be contained in such an edifice as the Acropolis, and spent their days making one idol after another, even building an altar to the unknown God. Paul counters their idolatry,

teaching them that God, as Lord of heaven and earth, cannot be replicated by anything human nor need we complete him by our creations. Idols are, then, a profound hindrance to the knowledge of God.

*Third, idolatry is the reaping of the desire to exchange God for a lie.* When we reject what God has plainly revealed of himself to us, refusing to honor him or give thanks to him, and worshiping and serving the creature rather than the Creator, we begin to experience God’s disapproval of our rejection of him as our Creator and Lord (Romans 1:19, 21, 25).

### IDOLATRY IS FUTILE

Symptomatic of God’s judgment of idolatry is man’s blindness to his own folly. All the while he claims to be wise, there creeps a darkness over his heart and a futility over his mind (Romans 1:21-22). Look at the evidence of this.

*First, we create idols we know to be powerless, for our idols are subject to our own considerable limitations.* Many animate idols discern less than we do. Take Hinduism’s sacred cow. Lying in



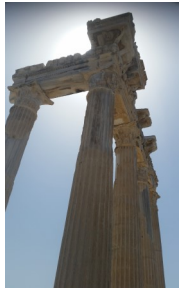
the temple precincts set apart for worship by the apron he wears, he knows not why he is there nor why he is dressed up. The Hindu worshiper knows more about the “god” than the deified cow knows about himself! At their best, animate idols—and now the reference is to human idols—may know as much, perhaps more than we do in certain areas of knowledge, but the allowance of others to worship them is but the beginning of their ignorance. Then there are the inanimate idols. They cannot see, nor hear, nor stop themselves from falling down. They are, says the Old Testament prophet Isaiah, “profitable for nothing” (Isaiah 44:9-20, esp. v. 10). (Photo: <https://www.nation.co.ke/oped/opinion/440808-4648182-13o3rqj/index.html>).

*Second, we attach unwarranted confidence to such idols.* Since such idols have no divine existence behind them (since they cannot replicate the true God nor reveal a substitute god or gods [cf., I Corinthians 8:4-6]), they are clearly undependable. Their multiplicity—India claims as many as 330 million!—implicitly indicates the insufficiency of idolatry to meet the needs of man (cf., Acts 17:16, 21-23).

*Third, an idolater has “no inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and God” (Ephesians 5:5; cf., I Corinthians 6:9).* We cannot worship God Almighty and at the same time an idol pathetically reflective of him or substituting for him. We may have many legitimate interests, but to none of them can we attach the meaning of life or offer affections belonging to our Creator alone. If you need to add to God you detract from him, and if you detract from him you say in effect that he cannot meet your deepest needs. If he cannot meet those, then he cannot save you from your sins nor obtain for you a place in heaven. And if he cannot do that, then, I must warn you in love that you have no inheritance awaiting you from God.

## JESUS CHRIST: THE ONLY TRUSTWORTHY IMAGE OF GOD

If secular idolatry can only sustain its hype for so long and religious idolatry (whether in professing Christianity or in the world religions)—owning unashamedly the need for God—is unable to meet our deepest needs, how may we worship and serve God aright?



The apostle Paul, having seen throughout the Roman empire both the secular idolatries of the nations (you could worship any god so long as you also worshiped the cult of the emperor) and the religious idolatries of his own people (muffling God's voice by their traditions), gave curt direction to his readers: **"flee from idolatry"** (1 Corinthians 10:14). He was not saying that salvation from the bondage and sin of idolatry is found in the fleeing (for that would amount to self-righteousness—the greatest idolatry known to man), but that freedom and forgiveness are found in the One to whom we flee.

Paul had in mind the Lord Jesus Christ, the one he had once hated with seething rage because of the challenge Christ presented to his own idolatries, but who came to be his "all in all" (Colossians 3:1). What, then, is it about Christ which sets him apart and above all idols, who both indicts and nullifies all idolatry? Here are a few stand-out observations.

### JESUS ALONE CAME FROM GOD

All other religious leaders without exception have sought to get to God. Jesus uniquely came from God, for he was God, and accomplished God's work on earth. Equal in eternity and deity to God the Father and God the Spirit, God the Son, as agreed by the Godhead, had added through the incarnation a human nature to his divine nature, by which means he could reveal God to man and save men and women from their sins.

Christ appeared in human flesh as **"the brightness of [God's] glory, and the express image of his person"** (Hebrews 1:3 [KJV]). Wrote John, **"we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth"** (John 1:14). Yet, the apostles and disciples could only see God through the glory of the Lord Jesus because that glory, so great as to overpower them, was adapted to their limited powers of observation and absorption. We understand this, for our sunglasses which cover our eyes are designed not to hide the sun but to help us to enjoy it without being blinded by it. Thus, those who experienced Christ came to see more of God than they could do so from nature, for he appeared as **"the only Son from the Father."** This they discerned through Christ's unique fullness of both grace and truth (John 1:14).

What is the significance of all this to us? John explains: **"No one has ever seen God [—hence the futility of idolatry—], the only**

**God, who is at the Father's side, he has made him known"** (John 1:18). In other words, he who was God became also man so that we who are men (human) may come to know God. For, says one theologian, "in God there is no unchristlikeness at all." It is, then, by looking to Christ that we meet the God we cannot see.

### JESUS ALONE OPENS THE WAY TO GOD

Since God created us for fellowship with him, our creatureliness is not of itself a hindrance. After all, our first parents, Adam and Eve, knew fellowship with God before they fell into sin (Genesis 2:4–3:24). It is sin, then, which is the insurmountable obstacle to our meeting with God. Here, however, is the great news: God has taken the initiative to unblock the way to him.

*First, Christ has lived the perfect life we cannot live.* This is critical, for without perfection there is no relationship with God nor heavenly home. God, who is spotlessly holy, cannot look on sin nor allow his home to be marred by it. Thus, Christ images God and obtains for us perfect righteousness by keeping God's law perfectly, in thought, word, and deed; by what he did (acts of commission) and did not do (acts of omission); and throughout the whole course of his earthly life.

*Second, Christ has endured on the cross the condemnation due us for breaking God's law.* Making idols that seek to distort or substitute God is but one evidence that sin exudes our natures, that God's law is disregarded, his love spurned, his holiness offended, and that our lives are disfigured. Nevertheless, God responds in great love, offering us Christ to bear our sin and thus its just consequences (2 Corinthians 5:21). Christ fully accords, going through hell, atoning for sin as only God can and suffering for sin as only man must. He exited the darkness crying out, **"It is finished!"** (John 19:30).

### JESUS ALONE CAN INTRODUCE YOU TO GOD

God's unsullied image bearer has, as sin-bearer, taught us from the cross, that if we trust in his sin-bearing we bear our guilt no more. In true faith, however, there is interwoven a repentance toward God. We are not to underestimate how much our idolatry ought to figure in our turning to God, for it offends his holiness and wastes by futility and emptiness the lives he has given us.



Whereas the nations live, says the apostle Peter, in **"lawless idolatry"** (1 Peter 3:5), those who have come to know the true and living God have, writes the apostle Paul, **"turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God"** (1 Thessalonians 1:9). This begs the question as to whether we can say that we have done this. If we have, then, says the apostle John, we are to **"keep [ourselves] from idols"** (1 John 5:21). They are offences to God and betrayers of man in this life, and are irrelevant to man and the objects of God's eternal displeasure in the next.



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## FLEEING IDOLATRY

### AN EXPLANATION

Know that God's call to renounce our idols does not entail giving up all interest in the world. Far from it! As the hymn goes, "This is my Father's world, and to my list'ning ears, all nature sings and round me rings the music of the spheres." Or, as Dutch theologian and one-time prime minister, Abraham Kuyper, put it, "There is not a square inch of earth in which Christ does not say, 'This is mine!'" We have, then, as



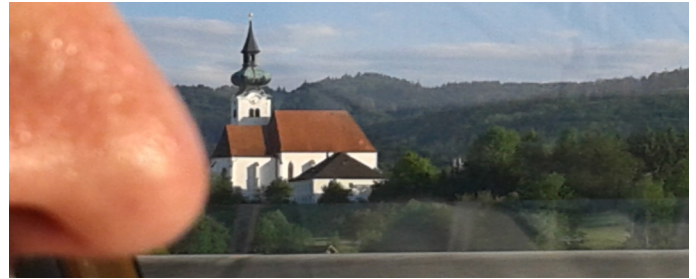
Christians, great joy and quite the track record in exploring God's jaw-dropping universe, but we refrain from confusing the creature or created thing and God. Nor do

we attach ultimate meaning to anything or anyone other than to God. Once we say, "My life only has meaning if my girlfriend loves me [my job is secure, my wealth is accumulating, my children are a success, my spouse is alive, my team is on top, my cathedral remains standing, or my political party is in power]," then we have blurred the vast distinction between the creature and the Creator and journey through life on a tightrope of rotting cloth.

### AN INVITATION

Some of you perceive already the sin and folly of idolatry. You are ready to take in the Bible and to hear how, centuries before Christ, God declared two evils: the forsaking of him as the fountain of living water (as treasure in an arid climate), and the hewing out of our own cisterns—broken cisterns which are unable to hold water (Jeremiah 2:13). You now concur with God and want to be rid of idolatry, but ponder how to be.

Consider Akitela. This Kenyan lady of the Turkana tribe had been under the sway of the witch doctor. Finding him to have failed her, she made her way to church. There she heard from God's Word how Joshua, the leader of the Hebrews, challenged them before entering the Promised Land to choose whom they would serve—the gods their fathers had earlier served or the LORD, the true God of heaven and earth (Joshua 24:15).



Unversed in Scripture, Akitela nevertheless got the message. She immediately forsook the witch doctor, clinging instead to Christ. So may you! Don't wait for your idols to let you down!

### A QUALIFICATION

A nose for church is helpful, so long as the church focuses on preaching the Bible in its fullness, and on communicating the good news that it is by the grace of God alone, in Christ alone, through faith alone, that a person enters a relationship with God. But give God no rest until you have not only entered into church but into fellowship with him.

Church, you see, can also become an idol where it is an end in itself—hence our term "Churchianity." This does not justify us using Sunday, the Lord's Day, in ways other than those God directs (Hebrews 10:24-25). Indeed, our use of Sundays is a good gauge of how deep-seated idolatry can become. If it is taken up with everything and everyone but the worship of God, it is certain our lives are run by idols. Church reminds us, however, that the ultimate purpose of the Lord's Day is to glorify God by heeding his call to come to Christ.

Only when we do, are we—to end where we began and to cite the banner at the recently televised European match between Messi's Barcelona and Manchester United—"Walking to glory."



(Photo: <https://www.galleryofsocial.com/content/2023544339145471187/BwVEt-ryBLTT>).

**Next Issue Due Out: September 1**