

IDENTITY THEFT

Dr. Tony Evans is an African-American pastor and minister of a large Baptist church in Dallas, Texas. Recently he has been preaching on the relationship between Christianity and culture in America, and his sermons and blogs have drawn considerable attention. Dr. Evans recently preached a sermon about a new form of idolatry that is springing up in America and drawing Christians away from their faith. He calls it “identity theft” and his reasoning goes like this. Everyone knows that there are identity thieves out there who try to get their hands on personal information about you—like your birth date and social security number—so that they can steal your identity and then steal your money. What you may not know is that there is a far more dangerous identity thief out there who wants to steal something far more important than your money. He is called the devil and he wants to rob you of your identity as a child of God. Jesus calls him a liar and a murderer and a thief and a false shepherd who comes only to steal and kill and destroy. And the way he goes about stealing your Christian identity is by tempting you to worship what Dr. Evans calls “identity idols.” He wants to give you a fake I.D.--an identification marker which is not who you really are, so that you will come to believe that you are what your fake I.D. says and lose your identity as a child of God. Dr. Evans describes five identity idols.

The first identity idol mankind himself. When someone starts worshipping mankind—or “human potential”—rather than God, he is worshipping an identity idol. That kind of idolatry goes by a number of names: humanism, atheism, pantheism, narcissism. It replaces the authority of God with human authority and in our day and age it is rampant. In Dr. Evans' words, the worship of man is where you make yourself or mankind the standard by which all things should be judged. When God can say one thing and you respond, “but I think....And if you'd rather not waste your time thinking, you can “join up” with a group and let the group do your thinking for you. You can become a “gender-phile” or an “environment-phile” or a Marxist and let the group speak for you. At that point you are identifying your self in an idol.

The second identity idol—which follows closely on the heels of the first—is the human intellect. When someone thinks he's superior to other people because he is smarter than they are, he is making his intellect his idol. Intellectual idolatry is something I'm familiar with because I once worshipped the intellect. As a university teacher I was part of a crowd of self-styled intellectuals. We believed that intellectual progress had made God irrelevant. Faith was just a comforting illusion—an artifact of a bygone era.

We didn't need God: we could build utopia through the power of human reason. We forgot that it was human reason that enabled us build weapons of mass destruction with which we could annihilate all life on earth. Intellectual pride—the desire to know what God knows—was the original sin of man and intellectual pride is leading us down the road to Armageddon.

The third identity idol is economics—or to put it plainly, money. Economic idolatry is when people find their identity in an economic class. If you happen to be wealthy and trust your IRA to provide your security, money has become your idol. On the other hand, if you're poor and envy rich people just because they have more than you do, money has become your idol as well. Rich or poor, we are called to trust in the Lord—and not in our money—to meet our needs. The Psalmist writes, “the eye of the Lord is upon the one whose hope is in him to deliver his soul from death and to keep him alive in famine.” If poor economic circumstances lead you to question God's providence, you have made economics your idol. If you ignore the command of Jesus Christ to share your surplus wealth with the poor you have made economics your idol.

The fourth identity idol is race. If someone considers his primary identity to consist of his racial make-up, he has made his race his idol. If he believes that white people are superior to other races because he is white, he has made “whiteness” his idol. If he believes that it is ok to destroy whole neighborhoods in the name of social justice for blacks, he has made “blackness” his idol. Both ways of thinking are based on racial considerations alone and are contrary to the word and will of God, which is to honor the Lord through whatever racial identity you have. When racial identity has replaced one's true identity as a child of God, that person has found their identity in an idol.

The last category is politics. This idol has particular relevance to our situation in America today where political loyalties have become superheated. Political parties have become tribes where each party identifies itself as good and the opposite party as evil. And when political allegiance replaces allegiance to the word of God a person is no longer worshipping God, he is worshipping an idol. When you trust your party or its current leader rather than the word of God to dictate the way you think about moral and social issues, your political identity has replaced your Christian identity.

So there you have it: self-worship, intellectual status, economic class, race and politics—all idols that can steal your true identity. You can identify yourself primarily as a democrat or a republican or a black person or a white person or a rich person or a poor person or an intellectual or a narcissist, but if that's your primary identity, you're a pagan—not a Christian.

So what **is** your true identity as a child of God? **Galatians 2:20-21**: Paul writes, “I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.” We are sinners who believe that Jesus Christ died for our sins and was raised from the dead to give us eternal life. That is who we are. That is our identity. We’re believers and that should inform everything we do. Our faith in Jesus Christ should be like the hub of a wheel in which all the spokes of our thoughts and words and actions find their source. **We are born again of God; we are new creations!** A caterpillar which turns into a butterfly is more than a converted caterpillar. It is a brand new thing! Our problem is that we want to keep on being what **we** want to be, doing what **we** want to do, acting like **we** want to act and thinking what other people tell us what we should think—and not let Jesus have the final say. And that makes us suckers for the devil’s identity idols because they make us feel like we’re part of a larger group where everyone believes what we believe and says what we want to hear. We define ourselves as part of a group **and the appeal of this idol is incredibly powerful.** When Peter went to Antioch, he preached that salvation had been extended to gentiles as well as Jews, that both Christian Jews and Christian Gentiles were beloved of God, and that they could enjoy table fellowship with each other—even though Jewish law forbade it. So Peter began to eat and drink with both Jews and gentiles whom Christ had embraced. But when Peter’s “tribe” of Jewish apostles showed up, they objected to it and so Peter stopped eating and drinking with Christian Gentiles. When Paul saw what was going on, he wrote: “Peter was clearly in the wrong. Before certain men came from James, he used to eat with the Gentiles. But when they arrived, he began to draw back and separate himself from the Gentiles because he was afraid of those who belonged to the circumcision group.” Peer pressure is an idol that has silenced many a Christian conscience.

There was a woman by the name of Hannah Arendt, a German Jew, who wrote a book shortly after the Second World War called *The Origins Of Totalitarianism*. In it she sought to understand how a totalitarian regime like the Nazis had been able to inspire the enthusiasm and loyalty of so many people, when its stated goals were so discernibly evil. She concluded that it offered a powerful group identity that replaced individual identity. The Nazis had come up with what Dr. Evans would call an “identity idol.” Germans flocked to identify with the “party” and stopped thinking for themselves: they let the party think for them. Some ten years later, Ms. Arendt had the opportunity to apply her theory. A man by the name of Adolf Eichmann, who had been the principal administrator of Hitler’s plan to eradicate the Jews by building and operating concentration camps, had been captured by the Mossad in Argentina and transported to Jerusalem where he was put on trial. The *New Yorker* magazine contracted with Ms. Arendt to cover the trial.

She published her findings in a series of articles, entitled "Eichmann In Jerusalem: A Report On The Banality Of Evil." One might say, the ordinariness, the commonness of evil. She wrote that there was nothing in Eichmann's appearance or his behavior during the trial that seemed monstrous or malevolent or even evil. He seemed very ordinary—like a clerk you might see in a clothing store. He displayed neither guilt for his actions nor hatred for those trying him, claiming that he bore no responsibility for the deaths of millions of Jews because he was simply "doing his job" and "obeying the law." In his own words, he was not "master of his own deeds" and had been "unable to change anything." He testified that toward the end of the war he became depressed because it dawned on him that henceforward he would have to live without being a member of something or other. In his own words, "I sensed I would have to live a leaderless and difficult individual life. I would receive no directives from anybody, no orders or commands would any longer be issued to me." Arendt concluded that Eichmann had simply stopped thinking for himself and had let the thinking be done by others. He had lost his personal identity. As C. S. Lewis once wrote, "more evil has come into the world through polite conversation than through malicious design." "All that is necessary for evil to prevail is that good men do nothing." Evil is banal, ordinary, and the potential for it exists in every human being. When people let politics or economics or racial identity or gender loyalty or any other kind of identity idol determine their thinking and speaking and acting, they have become idolaters. And idolatry always unleashes evil.

The only cure for idolatry is to locate one's identity in Jesus Christ, the Incarnate Word of God who comes to us through the Words of God. You can conform your thoughts and words and actions to those of Jesus Christ or you can conform them to those of an idol. You can believe, for example, that what is conceived in a mother's womb is God's child or you can believe that it is expendable tissue. God said to Jeremiah: "before I formed you in the womb I knew you, before you were born I set you apart." Abortion rights supporters say that what is conceived in the womb is not a child and only becomes a child when he gains the ability to breathe. You can believe one or the other, but you can't believe them both.

You can believe that God created each human being male or female as the Bible says, or you can believe that we can "correct God's mistakes." You can believe either one, but you can't believe them both. You can find your identity in Jesus Christ or you can find your identity in an idol, but you can't find your identity in both. We can thank God that as believers who find our identity in Christ we will never have to live a "leaderless and difficult individual life" as did Eichmann. Jesus Christ is our leader and our identity. Amen.