

OF IDOLATRY

CLXXI.

Idolatry is all manner of seeming holiness and worshipping, let these counterfeit spiritualities shine outwardly as glorious and fair as they may; in a word, all manner of devotion in those that we would serve God without Christ the Mediator, his Word and command. In popedom it was held a work of the greatest sanctity for the monks to sit in their cells and meditate of God, and of his wonderful works; to be kindled with zeal, kneeling on their knees, praying, and having their imaginary contemplations of celestial objects, with such supposed devotion, that they wept for joy. In these their conceits, they banished all desires and thoughts of women, and what else is temporal and evanescent. They seemed to meditate only of God, and of his wonderful works. Yet all these seeming holy actions of devotion, which the wit and wisdom of man holds to be angelical sanctity, are nothing else but works of the flesh. All manner of religion, where people serve God without his Word and command, is simply idolatry and the more holy and spiritual such a religion seems, the more hurtful and venomous it is; for it leads people away from the faith of Christ, and makes them rely and depend upon their own strength, works, and righteousness. In like manner, all kinds of orders of monks, fasts, prayers, hairy shirts, the austerities of the Capuchins, who in popedome are held to be the most holy of all, are mere works of the flesh; for the monks hold they are holy, and shall be saved, not through Christ, whom they view as a severe and angry judge, but through the rules of their order.

No man can make the papists believe that the private mass is the greatest blaspheming of God, and the highest idolatry upon earth, an abomination the like to which has never been in Christendom since the time of the apostles; for they are blinded and hardened therein, so that their understanding and knowledge of God, and of all divine matters, is perverted and erroneous. They hold that to be the most upright and greatest service of God, which, in truth, is the greatest and most abominable idolatry. And again, they hold that for idolatry which, in truth, is the upright and most acceptable service of God, the acknowledging Christ, and believing in him. But we that truly believe in Christ, and are of his mind, we, God be praised, know and judge all things; but are judged of no human creature.

CLXXII.

Dr. Carlstad asked me: Should a man, out of good intention, erect a pious work without God's Word or command, does he herein serve a true or a strange God? Luther answered: A man honours God and calls upon Him, to the end he may expect comfort, help, and all good from Him. Now, if this same honour and calling upon God be done according to God's Word - that is, when a man expects from him all graces for the sake of his promises made unto us in Christ, and then he honours the true, living, and everlasting God. But if a man take in hand a work or a service, out of his own devotion, as he thinks good, thereby to appease God's anger, or to obtain forgiveness of sins, everlasting life, and salvation, as is the manner of all hypocrites and seeming holy workers, then, I say flatly, he honours and worships an idol in heart; and it helps him nothing at all, that he thinks he does it to the honour of the true God; for that which is not faith in sin.

CLXXIII.

Hypocrites and idolaters are of the same quality with singers, who will scarce sing when asked to do so, but, when not desired, begin, and never leave off. Even so with the false workers of holiness; when God orders them to obey his commands, which are to love one's neighbour, to help him with advice, with lending, giving, admonishing, comforting, etc., no man can bring them to this; but, on the contrary, they stick to that which they themselves make choice of, pretending that this is the best way to honour and serve God - a great delusion of theirs. They plague and torment their bodies with fasting, praying, singing, reading, hard lying, etc.; they affect great humility and holiness, and do all things with vast zeal, fervency, and incessant devotion. But such as the service and work is, such will also, the reward be, as Christ himself says: "In vain do they worship me, teaching for doctrine the commandments of men."

CLXXIV.

The idolatry of Moloch had, I apprehend, a great show, as though it were a worship more acceptable and pleasing to God than the common service commanded by Moses; hence many people who, in outward show, were of devout holiness, when they intended to perform an acceptable service and honour to God, as they imagined, offered up and sacrificed their sons and daughters, thinking, no doubt, that herein they were following the example of Abraham, and doing an act very acceptable and pleasing to God.

Against this idolatry God's prophets preached with burning zeal, calling it, not offerings to God, but to idols and devils, as the 106th Psalm shows, and Jeremiah, chap. vii. and xxii. But they held the prophets to be impostors and accursed heretics.

This worshipping of idols was very frequent in popedom, in my time and still, though in another manner; the papists in popedom being esteemed holy people that give one or more of their children to the monasteries, to become either monks or nuns, that so they may serve God, as they say, day and night. Hence the proverb: Bless the mother of the child that is made a spiritual person! True, these sons and daughters in popedom are not burned and offered to idols corporally, as were the Jewish children, yet, which is far worse, they are thrust into the throat of the devil spiritually, who, through his disciples, the pope and the shaven crew, lamentably murders their souls with false doctrines.

The Holy Scripture often mentions Moloch, as does Lyra; and the commentaries of the Jews say, it was an idol made of copper and brass, like a man holding his hands before him, wherein they put fiery coals. When the image was made very hot, a father approached, and offering to the idol, took his child, and thrust it into the glittering hands of the idol, whereby the child was consumed and burned to death. Meantime, they made a loud noise with timbrels, and cymbals, and horns, to the end the parents should not hear the pitiful crying of the child. The prophets write, that Ahab offered his son in this manner.

CLXXV.

The calves of Jeroboam still remain in the world, and will remain to the last day; not that any man now makes calves like Jeroboam's, but upon whatsoever a man depends or trusts - God set aside - this is the calves of Jeroboam, that is, other and strange gods, honoured and worshipped instead of the only, true, living, and eternal God, who only can and will help and comfort in all need. In like manner also, all such as rely and depend upon their art, wisdom, strength, sanctity, riches, honour, power, or anything else, under what title or name so ever, on which the world builds, make and worship the calves of Jeroboam. For they trust in and depend on vanishing creatures, which is worshipping of idols and idolatry. We easily fall into idolatry, for we are inclined thereunto by nature, and coming to us by inheritance, it seems pleasant.

CLXXVI.

St Paul shows in these words: "When ye knew not God, ye did service," etc., that is, when as yet ye knew not God or what God's will was towards you, ye served those who by nature were no gods; ye served the dreams and thoughts of our hearts, wherewith, against God's Word, ye feigned to yourselves a God that suffered himself to be conciliated with such works and worshipping as your devotion and good intention made choice of. For all idolatry in the world arises from this, that people by nature have had the common knowledge, that there is a God, without which idolatry would remain unpractised. With this knowledge engrafted in mankind, they have, without God's Word, fancied all manner of ungodly opinions of God, and held and esteemed these for divine truths, imagining a God otherwise than, by nature, he is.

CLXXVII.

He that goes from the gospel to the law, thinking to be saved by good works, falls as uneasily, as he who falls from the true service of God to idolatry; for, without Christ, all is idolatry and fictitious imaginings of God, whether of the Turkish Koran, of the pope's decrees, or Moses law; if a man think thereby to be justified and saved before God, he is undone.

When a man will serve God, he must not look upon that which he does; not upon the work, but how it ought to be done, and whether God has commanded it or no; seeing, as Samuel says, that "God has more pleasure in obedience, than in burnt sacrifices."

Whoso hearkens not to God's voice, is an idolater, though he performs the highest and most heavy service of God. 'Tis the very nature of idolatry not to make choice of that which is

esteemed easy and light, but of that which is great and heavy, as we see in the friars and monks, who have been constantly devising new worshipping of God; but, forasmuch that God in his Word has not commanded these, they are idolatry, and blasphemy. All these sins, they who are in the function of preaching ought undauntedly and freely to reprove, not regarding men's high dignities and powers. For the prophets, as we see in Hosea, reprov'd and threatened not only the house of Israel in general, but also, in particular, the priests, ay, the king himself, and the whole court. They cared not for the great danger that might follow from the magistrate being so openly assailed, or that themselves thereby should fall into displeasure or contempt, and their preaching be esteemed rebellious. They were impelled by the far greater danger, lest by such examples of the higher powers, the subjects also should be seduced into sin.

CLXXVIII.

The papists took the invocation of saints from the heathen, who divided God into numberless images and idols, and ordained to each its particular office and work.

These the papists, void of all shame and Christianity, imitated, thereby denying God's almighty power; every man, out of God's Word, spinning to himself a particular opinion, according to his own fancy; as one of their priests, celebrating mass, when about to consecrate many oblations at the altar at once, thought it would not be congruously spoken, or according to grammar rules, to say, "This is my body," so said, "These are my bodies;" and afterwards highly extolled his device, saying: "If I had not been so good a grammarian, I had brought in a heresy, and consecrated but one oblation."

Such like fellows does the world produce; grammarians, logicians, rhetoricians, and philosophers, all falsifying the Holy Writ, and sophisticating it with their arts, whereas God ordered and appointed it. Divinity should be empress, and philosophy and other arts merely her servants, not to govern and master her, as Servetus, Campanus, and other seducers would do. God preserves his church, which by him is carried as a child in the mother's womb, and defends her from such philosophical divinity.

The invocation of saints is a most abominable blindness and heresy; yet the papists will not give it up. The pope's greatest profit arises from the dead; for the calling on dead saints brings him infinite sums of money and riches, far more than he gets from the living. But thus goes the world; superstition, unbelief, false doctrine, idolatry, obtain more credit and profit than the upright, true, and pure religion.

CLXXIX.

God and God's worship are relatives; the one cannot be without the other; for God must always be the God of some people or nation, and is always *inpredicamento relationis*. God will have some to call upon him and honour him; for, to have a God and to honour him, go together. Therefore, whoso brings in a divine worship of his own selection, without God's command, is an adulterer, like a married woman who consents to another man, seeking

another and not the upright true God, and it avails him nothing that he thinks he does God service herein.

CLXXX.

In all creatures are a declaration and a signification of the Holy Trinity. First the substance signifies the almighty power of God the Father. Secondly, the form and shape declare the wisdom of God the Son; and, thirdly, the power and strength is a sign of the Holy Ghost. So that God is present in all creatures.

CLXXXI.

In the gospel of St John, chap. iii., is plainly and directly shown the difference of the persons, in the highest and greatest work that God accomplished for us poor human creatures, in justifying and saving us; for there it is plainly written of the Father, that he loved the world, and gave to the world his only begotten Son. These are two several persons - Father, and Son. The Father loves the world; and gives unto it his Son. The Son suffers himself to be given to the world, and "to be lifted up on the cross, as the serpent was lifted up in the wilderness, that whosoever believed in him shall not perish, but have everlasting life." To this work comes afterwards the third person, the Holy Ghost, who kindles faith in the heart through the Word, and so regenerates us, and makes us the children of God.

This article, though it be taught most clearly in the New Testament, yet has been always assaulted and opposed in the highest measure, so that the holy evangelist, St John, for the confirmation of this article, was constrained to write his gospel. Then came presently that heretic, Cerinthus, teaching out of Moses, that there was but one God, and concluding thence that Christ could not be God, or God man.

But let me stick to God's Word in the Holy Scripture, namely, that Christ is true God with God the Father, and that the Holy Ghost is true God, and yet there are not three Gods, nor three substances as three men, three angels, three sons, three windows, etc. No: God is not separated or divided in such manner in his substance, but there is only and alone one divine essence, and no more.

Therefore, although there be three persons, God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Ghost, yet notwithstanding, we must not divide nor separate the substance, for there is but only one God in one only undivided substance, as St Paul clearly speaks of Christ, Coloss.i., that he is the express image of the invisible God, the first born of all creatures; for through him all things are created that are in heaven and on earth, visible, etc., and all is through and in him created, and he is before all, and all things consist in him.

Now what the third person is, the holy evangelist, St John, teaches, chap. xv., where he says: "But when the Comforter is come, which I will send unto you from the Father, the Spirit of truth which proceeds from the Father, he shall testify of me." Here Christ speaks not only of the office and work of the Holy Ghost, but also of his substance and faith; he goes out or proceeds from the Father, that is, his going out, or his proceeding, is without all beginning,

and everlasting. Therefore the holy prophet Joel gives him the name, and calls him, "the Spirit of the Lord."

Now, although this article seem strange or foolish, what matters it? its not the question whether it be so or no, but whether it be grounded on God's Word or no. If it be God's Word, as most surely it is, then let us make no doubt thereof; He will not lie; therefore, let us keep close to God's Word, and not dispute how Father, Son, and Holy Ghost can be one God; for we, as poor wretches, cannot know how it is that we laugh; or how with our eyes, we can see a high mountain ten miles off; or how it is, that when we sleep, in body we are dead, and yet live. This small knowledge we cannot attain unto; no, though we took to our help the advice and art of all the wise in the world, we are not able to know the least things which concern ourselves; and yet we would climb up with our human wit and wisdom, and presume to comprehend what God is in his incomprehensible majesty.

[HOME](#)

[TABLE TALK INDEX](#)