Professional in the Church, Amateur in Christ: The Dynamics and Outcomes of Ministry Idolatry and Pathways Towards Christocentric Ministry

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Abstract

Christian scholars traditionally frame idolatry as a sin but rarely explore it as a theological-pastoral phenomenon. This paper offers a theological reflection on the cause, chaos, and consequences of ministry idolatry, defined as sourcing one's ultimate good and security from Christian ministry rather than from God, which can result in despair, pride, and spiritual deformation.

By exploring this topic, the paper attributes the causes of idolatry to social, cultural, personal, and ecclesial power dynamics. Like other manifestations of sin, ministry idolatry adversely can affect the person through feelings of emptiness and disillusionment, the community through toxic and abusive leadership, and the spirit through a heart that drifts further away from God. It is argued that ministry idolatry often leads to despair because the idol fails to deliver on the hope that the Christian has placed within it.
In response, the paper proposes that embodying Christlike attributes, such as self-denial, lowliness, servanthood, and obedience, can pave the way from idolatry to Christocentric ministry and ultimately to human flourishing. Further, leaders can avoid modelling an unhealthy works-based soteriology by confronting and resisting the adverse societal and institutional power structures that sustain ministry idolatry.

Key words: ministry idolatry, self-idolatry, pastoral leadership, ministry failure

Introduction

Any suggestion that ministry can become idolatrous may cause readers to respond with anything from apathy to intrigue, to outright cognitive dissonance regarding their own

practice. Indeed, ministry idolatry seems an oxymoron. For those still with us, we both credit the reader and ask them to reflect on why this paper deserves attention – does it resonate with lived experience? Does it confirm a conviction of existing dissonance within church ministry? Does it scratch a purely academic itch? The authors have combined their personal and professional experiences to produce this paper, hoping it will vindicate suspicions of idolatry as a factor in the spiritual deformation of ministry leaders.

What is ministry idolatry?

While scant, contemporary online and printed ministry resources that address ministry idolatry usually draw on a pastoral or biblical perspectives to provide insight and instruction on this difficulty (Geiger, 2018; Know Jesus, 2023). However, exploring perspectives outside the pastoral or biblical context may reveal other factors at play. The paper argues that consideration of other factors may produce a clearer picture of what defines ministry idolatry and therefore, assist in exploring possible pathways forward. To reach this goal, the paper draws on the existing literature on this topic, supplemented by an exploration of idolatry from an anthropological, ontological, social, and personal perspective. Throughout this paper, *idolatry* is defined as an issue concerning one's interior life, and *ministry idolatry* refers to the point of convergence between one's heart (interior life) and one's vocation in Christian ministry.

The author's aims are twofold: first, to offer a robust understanding of ministry idolatry; and second, to invite ministry leaders to investigate where ministry idolatry may develop within themselves. Ultimately, the authors do not resolve to scathingly critique or call out "bad behaviour" from Christian ministers; instead, they resolve to promote preventative and restorative practices that reflect a Christocentric model for ministry. Therefore, our final recommendations are tentative and generalised, inviting readers to contextualise the findings towards application to their ongoing spiritual and vocational formation.

Idolatry as a misplacement of ultimacy

From the Torah onwards, significant literary attention is dedicated to idolatry. This topic secured top billing within the Ten Commandments (Exod. 20:3) and captured the attention of the early Church Fathers (Augustine, ca. 426/2003, City of God, XIX.24), the Reformers (Luther, 2010), and prominent pastoral voices (Keller, 2010). Approaching this topic from theological, anthropological, and psychological perspectives reveals many potential causes of the rise of ministry idolatry among Christian leaders. The following

insights are drawn from both classic and contemporary literature to identify the spiritual, relational, and emotional consequences of idolatry in general and ministry idolatry in particular. The paper culminates in a contextual model that may assist in a preventative and restorative pathway mentioned above.

Theological, anthropological, and ontological perspectives on idolatry from the Christian tradition

Idolatry has engendered a rich history of debate amongst pre-Christian thinkers, where, from the conception of religion, the term idolatry has referred to false religions and religious diversity. The conversation of idolatry has "emerged at the intersection of ancient Jewish and Greek debates on religion and images, before being appropriated and put to use by early Christian authors" (Barbu, 2022, p. 389). The Apostle Paul was perhaps the first *Christian* writer in this field as he addressed issues of idolatry in his letters to the churches in Corinth and Thessalonica. Within a generation or two after, the early Church Fathers and apologists (e.g Justin Martyr and Tertullian) contributed to the discussion as they attacked polytheism and sought to shape Christian theology in the early centuries of the Church. Today, different views on idolatry have emerged from diverse theological traditions, such as Catholic/Patristic (Cavanaugh, 2024), Protestant Reformation (Luther, 2010; Calvin, 1989) and Reformed (Keller, 2010).

Amongst these varied theological approaches J. K. A. Smith's philosophical anthropology provides a constructive lens for this research. Smith (2009) recognises that humans are "desiring creatures…whose love/desire is aimed at something ultimate" (p. 40). Although Smith draws no connection between his anthropology and idolatry, this paper will treat *ultimacy* as an essential component of the scholarly conversation around idolatry. Smith (2016) presents an Augustinian model of humans as lovers, rather than simply "brains-on-a-stick" (p. 3), by "shifting the centre of gravity of human identity" (Smith, 2009, p. 47) from the mind to the heart. Smith's (2009) understanding presents human identity as dynamic rather than static, unfolding and developing over time through a process of formation (p. 47). This research agrees with Smith in viewing human desire as aimed towards something ultimate, not as *what humans do*, but instead, *who humans are*. Therefore, idolatry should not be viewed exclusively in a behavioural sense but from within the realm of identity.

If human identity is a process of *formation*, idolatry could potentially cause *deformation*, or as Powlison (1995) says, "a…heart defection" (p. 36). However, Beale proposes an alternative conclusion suggesting that "God created humans to be imaging beings who

reflect his glory" (p. 16). He continues: "at the core of our beings, we are imaging creatures. It is impossible to be neutral on this issue: we either reflect the Creator or something in Creation" (Beale, 2008, p. 16). He then launches into a Scriptural exploration of idolatry where he traces the connection between identity and idolatry and suggests that worshippers of idols become as spiritually void and lifeless as the idols, they commit themselves to (Psalm 115:4-8; 2 Kings 17:15). While Beale's discussion on this point is modest compared to his extensive investigation of idolatry from the Old and New Testaments, his perspective on the imaging nature of man does not oppose Smith's view, as Smith (2016) argues "you are what you love" (p. 7). Beale emphasises the reflective nature of human desires. As desiring creatures, humans will reflect and *image* what they desire as ultimate, which in idolatry's case, results in formation away from God's design for humanity.

Conversely, feminist theologian Mary Daly (2017) suggests that being made in God's image "is the creative potential itself in human beings" (p. 76). However, she argues the implications of this image can "hardly be worked through under patriarchal conditions" (p. 76). Concerning idolatry, she suggests that the God's image bearer should exercise this creativity by breaking down the idol of male superiority (Daly, 2020, p. 76). Similarly, Boss (2016) notes, "feminist theology…accuses patriarchal theology of directing the worshipping gaze outwards towards the transcendent God who in his male manifestation is a false god" (p. 105). The perception of God as male may encourage idolatry by perpetuating idols of authority, ego, and power. While this concept certainly warrants further investigation, this paper will assert that the feminist perspective espoused by Daly, Boss, and others deepens an understanding of idolatry by highlighting the correlation between a misunderstanding of God and a misunderstanding of self, which limits a holistic reflection of God in the world, including within practices of Christian ministry.

Further, Christopher Wright suggests that idolatry can be understood as *ontological duality*. Like Beale, he draws upon Genesis 1 by suggesting that "the most fundamental distinction in all reality…is the distinction between the Creator God and everything else … [the] two orders of being" (Wright, 2020, para. 2). According to Wright, idolatry occurs when this distinction between God and creation is blurred, to the detriment of both. This view is similar to Reinhold Niebuhr, who suggests that humanity's unwillingness to acknowledge its "creatureliness" and thus accept its finiteness and dependence results in evil and idolatry (Niebuhr, 2021). As Niebuhr (2021) explains: "Man is constantly tempted

to the sin of idolatry and constantly succumbs to it because in contemplating the power and dignity of his freedom, he forgets the degree of his limitations" (Niebuhr, 2021, chap. 6, section 2, para. 18). This again suggests that the subject of idolatry reaches beyond the scope of human behaviour and should instead be situated in the realm of human identity and spirituality; idolatry as sin is "spiritual and not carnal" (Niebuhr, 2021, chap. 1, section 3, para. 8).

The Christian view of humanity understands the human person as a sinner, where "sin" is defined by various schools of Christian theology as pride, self-love, lust, or sensuality (Niebuhr, 2021). Therefore, the concept of sin is vital for understanding idolatry in anthropological terms because it reveals the deep distortion of human desire that lies beneath idolatrous behaviour. However, as Niebuhr (2021) argues, sin is man's refusal to admit his creatureliness by pretending to be more than he is and imagining himself as the whole, making himself the centre and source of his own life rather than recognising that he is a limited individual among the whole. Schwarz (2013) offers a slight alteration to this, suggesting that humanity *is* aware of its finitude but attempts to overcome it by abandoning "its position as God's administrators of the world" and seeking "to rule the world in autonomy" instead (p. 129). Sin, whether as misunderstanding at best or utter rebellion at worst, thus constitutes the essence of idolatry and is located within the "very centre of human personality – in the will" (Niebuhr, 2021, chap.1, section 3, para. 7). Thus, a Christian anthropological perspective of idolatry must take seriously the way sin steers a person away from God and orients their whole life around false centres.

Defining idolatry

Turning attention now to Luther, who in his larger catechism unpacks the first commandment, "You shall have no other gods before Me" (Exod. 20:3, ESV), by first defining the term "god". He explains, "god is that in which we are to look for all good and in which we are to find refuge in all need... it is the trust and faith of the heart alone that make both God and an idol" (Luther, 2016, p. 300). While like the other definitions, Luther suggests that idolatry ultimately involves expecting *more good* and *more help* from something or someone other than God. He goes on to emphasise that the essential aspect of what people seek from idols is the greatest amount of *good* and *help,* which provides the cause of idolatry.

Contra Luther, Calvin appears to relegate idolatry to the physical realm, thereby providing a limited perspective on this pervasive sin. For Calvin (1989), an idol is a physical image, statue, or icon made to represent God and is worshipped in place of God. While this understanding may have helped argue against the corruptions of certain church practices in his time, it falls short by treating idols merely as things made by human hands rather than as things conceived in human hearts. Perhaps we can summarise Calvin's perspective on idolatry as a misplacement of God *worship* rather than a misplacement of *God,* as other scholars describe (Keller, 2010; Niebuhr, 2021).

Powlison's (1995) perspective on idolatry goes beyond the search for security, suggesting that idolatry concerns lordship. He writes, "Has something or someone besides Jesus the Christ taken title to your heart's trust, preoccupation, loyalty, service, fear and delight?...the motivation question is the lordship question. Who or what 'rules' my behavior, the Lord or a substitute?" (Powlison, 1995, p. 35). According to Powlison (1995), one's desires determine their answers to these questions; "drifting from God into desires other than God is *the* problem" (p. 36). In summary, idolatry signifies that a substitute ruler other than Christ governs one's life.

While Luther, Calvin, Beale, and Powlison aid this research by highlighting different facets of the human problem, Tim Keller offers the most comprehensive treatment of idolatry. Keller suggests that idols are good things that humans make into ultimate things. He explains: "our hearts deify them as the center of our lives, because, we think, they can give us significance and security, safety and fulfilment, if we attain them" (Keller, 2010, p. xiv). His perspective reinforces ontological duality by suggesting that idolatry deifies a created thing over the Creator, or, as Wright (2020) so eloquently states idolatry "dethrones God and enthrones creation" (Chap. 3). In summary, idolatry is the misplacement of ultimacy, in which one seeks to find one's ultimate good, fulfilment, security, and significance in a created thing rather than in the Creator God.

Surface vs deep idols

This paper now examines how idolatry occurs in individuals, particularly ministry leaders. Firstly, Keller distinguishes between surface idols and deep idols. Like other scholars, Keller affirms that money, sex, family, and food are among humanity's most-loved idols. However, he believes that "deep idols" such as power, comfort, approval, and control seek fulfilment through the more concrete and visible "surface idols" (Keller, 2010, pp. 64–65).

Keller's "deep idol" distinction proposes the depths of what is sought in idolatry, albeit from the wrong source.

While anything can be an idol according to Keller (2010), humans can make an idol of themselves. However, Beale addresses an aspect missing in Keller's discussion: idolatry of the self, an inversion of the Creator-creature relationship. Beale (2008) proposes that "much of the Church today, especially that part of it which is evangelical, is in captivity to this idolatry of the self" (p. 294). He believes the Church often perpetuates the idol of "self", which Brownback (1982) believes is "the antithesis of the legitimate blessedness that comes from being poor in spirit" (p. 130).

To pair his thesis with self-idolatry, Beale (2008) writes, "what we revere we resemble, and if we revere ourselves, we will attempt to expand our image egotistically, which will eventually lead to destruction—if the process is not halted" (p. 297). Self-idolatry centres the desire to appear ever more significant or to "artificially inflate" oneself (Beale, 2008, p. 297), which has also been labelled by Wright (2020, para. 7) as the "worship of the self", as "the God who should be worshipped becomes an object to be used" in order to serve individual interests.

Tragically, leaders within the Church are not exempt from this idol, as ministerial work can provide the means for ego inflation and self-worship. In this vein, Walton (2023) interprets the Tower of Babel account in Genesis 11 as a warning against using God to make a name for oneself, focusing on our glory and success rather than God's, rather than simply viewing it as a moral lesson about pride. An example of this would be using platforms, social media influence or church membership numbers.

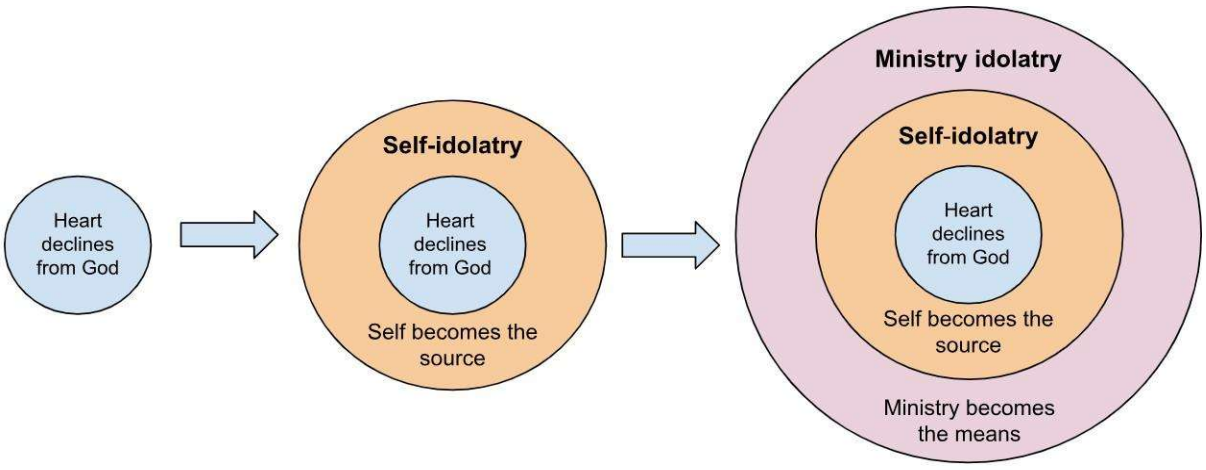
Further, Walton (2023) asserts that the people of Babel were attempting to forge their own path to flourishing instead of trusting the God-given way of covenant relationship with their Creator as the source and centre of order. God's way of covenant relationship is the true path to human flourishing, enacted as people trust him, live under his rule, and find identity and security in him, in stark contrast to self-glory or success, as in the case of Babel, where self-made structures are erected. Making a name for oneself is not the product of idolatry, but the process of idolatry, where the product or object is the *self*. By defining idolatry in this way, Walton suggests that the desire and attempt to *make a name*

for oneself arise from the individual's quest to gain ultimate good, fulfilment, and significance from the source of *self*.

While not directly discussing idolatry, Wilson devotes an entire chapter of his book to the pastor's management of *glory*. Self-glory is akin to self-idolatry as it attempts to rob the glory that is due Christ through the means of ministry success. Wilson (2013) posits that ministers can be tempted to steal the glory that arises from ministry successes because “we can be so lustful for adulation, craven consumers of personal praise” (chap.11, Your Praise is Not the Boss of Me). Pope Francis (2013) refers to this as *careerism*, writing, "we are caught up in ourselves, in careerism which thirsts for recognition, applause, rewards and status" (p. 207). As Walton suggests, this thirst is simply a longing to find the ultimate good in one's name: fame. Further, Wilson (2013) posits that the self-glorifying minister seeks justification and immediate satisfaction for their flesh. However, his assertions fail to connect the lust for glory with the sin of idolatry and the search for ultimate good.

In search of this connection, we return to Luther (2010), who connects self-glory and idolatry by highlighting King Saul as someone who “let his heart decline from God” (para. 22) and trusted his crown and power instead. Perhaps then, self-glory is trusting the *self* as the source of what only God can give, which happens when the heart drifts or declines from God (Powlison, 1995, p. 36). Therefore, we posit that ministry idolatry is a development (or manifestation) of self-idolatry. When one's heart drifts from God, the self can become the source, and ministry can become the means to seek one's ultimate good, security, significance, and fulfilment. This proposed phenomenon is illustrated in the diagram below:

Figure 1. Depths of ministry idolatry



Pastoral care and counselling

If ministry idolatry develops out of deeper patterns of self-idolatry, we must ask how these patterns take shape within particular persons and contexts. For instance, to inform effective practice in Christian counselling, Powlison (1995, pp. 38–47) addresses the heart and the social milieu as two strands of human motivations contributing to idolatry. He lists family of origin, genetics, temperament, consumer culture, Western society, life experiences, and somatic influences among the contributing factors that lead not only towards idolatry but towards a particular cluster of idols - that is, a characteristic constellation of ruling desires in a person's life (e.g. power, pleasure, religiosity, avoidance, etc).

Further, Powlison (1995) suggests that idolatry can arise from others who "model and purvey false laws or false standards, things which mis-define value and stigma, blessedness and accursedness, the way of life, and the way of death", and by doing so, he believes "they sin against us" (p. 39). Kraj (2020) also connects idolatrous misconduct with the world's influence, suggesting that sin "might be a result of false or misplaced openness to the world" (p. 144). Noting the extreme pessimism, Powlison (1995) believes that "membership in the society" ensures that individuals are bombarded with advertisements, shaped by typical forms and values, and conditioned towards defection from God, all of which result in "the confluence of disoriented heart motives and disoriented socio-cultural systems" (p. 47).

Membership in society catalyses idolatry in more ways than Powlison suggests. Drawing from Charles Taylor's work, Trueman (2020) affirms "the triumph of expressive individualism and of poiesis over mimesis" (chap. 1, para. 17). In a poietic society, the individual creates the true self for themselves by manipulating the world's raw material to serve their own purposes (Trueman, 2020). The climate of expressive individualism in the West could function as a greenhouse, fostering the flourishing of self-idolatry. Christian ministry could be viewed as a raw material that the individual uses to serve their idolatrous purposes. According to Levin, institutions serve as platforms for expressing one's individualism. Writing specifically about American culture and politics, Levin (2020) observes: "we find professors and scientists and ministers and CEOs and artists and athletes all using the legitimacy built up within professional institutions to raise their profiles in a broader public arena" (p. 35). In this way, institutions have become performative instead of formative as they are not "moulds that ought to shape their

behaviour and character but as platforms that allow them greater individual exposure and enable them to hone their brands" (Levin, 2020, p. 6). The rise of expressive individualism and poiesis, and the fall of institutions into platforms rather than moulds, invite the Christian leader to unwittingly *become* their brand, using ministry to serve their purposes and treating the Church as their platform. Hence, culture can contribute to idolatry by fuelling, sustaining, and celebrating the idol of *self*. The Christian leader should resist being conformed to this world's pattern, as it starkly contrasts with God's ultimate purpose and design for humanity as God-imagers and discerners (Rom. 12:2).

Regarding personal factors, Powlison (1995) posits that an idol can be ingrained in an individual from childhood, depending on what "drug of choice" was modelled in the family (p. 39). Life experiences can also influence the idol's shape because "our idols both covet what we do not have and hold on for dear life to what we do have" (p. 46). Powlison (1995) even suggests that an individual's personality typologies may reflect common root idols such as pride, control, power, or pleasure (p. 45). These assertions are significant for this research, as Powlison identified many causes outside the human heart responsible for idolatry, thereby supporting the research. This way, idolatry arises from within and is insinuated from without (p. 36). While idolatry arises from within an individual's heart, many factors from one's society, culture, family, and personality can catalyse it. Idolatry is more than a theological issue. It should be viewed holistically. However, as Powlison (1995) recognises, a complete treatment of the topic would require a "psycho-social-spiritual-somatic-volitional-experiential analysis" (p. 47).

Ruination – the consequences of idolatry

Scholars agree that consequences for idolatrous action and conception are ruinous. Beale (2008) includes the element of consequence in his thesis: "what people revere, they resemble, either for *ruin or restoration*" (p. 16, emphasis added). He suggests that idolaters will become as spiritually lifeless and insensitive to God as the idols of wood, rock, or stone that they worship (Beale, 2008). However, this imagery is ineffective in addressing flesh-and-blood idols. For the ministry idolater whose deep idol is *self*, Beale's thesis would suggest that the consequence of their sin resembles them more. Perhaps Beale's thesis does not apply to self-idolatry or any other idolatry involving another living being.

According to Keller (2010), idolatrous hopes are "illusory" because the idolator does not find the ultimate good, fulfilment, security, and significance sought from an idol, resulting in despair (p. xi). He continues, "despair, however, is inconsolable because it comes from losing an ultimate thing. When you lose the ultimate source of your meaning or hope, there are no alternative sources to turn to. It breaks your spirit" (Keller, 2010, p. xi).

Powlison (1995) calls this state "a hangover of misery and accursedness" (p. 37) and makes a point that is not clear in Keller's discussion. Despair may not manifest immediately, as idolaters can continue in their folly for an entire lifetime. Perhaps this “hangover” is felt over time or is so subtle the idolator can ignore it. Hence, they may not feel despair. Wright (2020) agrees with Keller that idolatry is “doomed to disappointment”, but he provides more specificity by suggesting that “worship of the self eventually implodes in narcissism, nihilism, or sheer amoral selfishness” (ch. 3, para. 8). Despite not justifying or expanding on this point, Wright’s contribution aids the research by suggesting that the consequences of idolatry are not limited to one’s relationship with God but can also bleed into the areas of relationships and personality. For some, this may manifest in the prime of success. However, for others, it lies under the surface unnoticed throughout their lives without the intervention of a psycho-volitional-experiential analysis.

Regarding idolatry’s consequences, Luther draws upon Deuteronomy 5:9, where God warns his people that they:

> shall not bow down to them or serve them [idols]; for I the LORD your God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me.

Luther (2010) comments, "he is a God who will not leave it unavenged if men turn from Him and will not cease to be angry" (para. 16). He does not elaborate on what these consequences might entail, given Christ's sacrifice and the current dispensation of grace. However, he does state that idolaters "shall not succeed…they shall be wrecked, with all in which they trusted" (Luther, 2010, para. 16). This assertion echoes Beale's (2008) warning that idolaters resemble their idols, which leads to ruin. Beale and Luther's discussion of the consequences of idolatry lacks specificity, therefore limiting its application. Yes, ruin and wreckage are potential ends for idolaters, but Beale and Luther rely on others to explain what this ruin and wreckage practically result in; these other scholars suggest despair, besetting anxiety, restlessness, narcissism, nihilism, and amoral selfishness (Keller, 2010; Smith, 2016; Wright, 2020). However, Paul David Tripp's (2012) final

charge in his picture of self-glory is most haunting: “You’ll constantly confuse being an ambassador with being a king” (ch. 12, para. 1).

In summary, several scholars suggest that the consequences of idolatry – particularly idolatry of the self – include pride towards God, spiritual lifelessness, despair, besetting anxiety, restlessness, narcissism, nihilism, selfishness, unapproachability, and self-deception. These are all summed up in two words: *ruin* and *wreckage*, which sounds absolute and catastrophic. In balance, the authors of this article do not necessarily hold that damage of this gravity will automatically occur, as matters of context are not taken into consideration. However, the authors do issue a clarion call to resist ministry idolatry, due to the potential personal and moral ruination it may bring to leaders and communities.

The cure for idolatry and pathways toward Christocentric ministry

Rather than remaining with negative assertions about Christian living, we turn now to what the literature says positively about how Christians, especially those in ministry leadership, ought to live. If the heart is, as Calvin (1989) claimed, a "perpetual idol factory" (p. 97), then surely God, through His Holy Spirit, will provide a way of escape for Christians so they can flee the factory, close its doors, and dismantle its operations. This paper will briefly review the literature on the cure for idolatry and offer contemporary Christian leaders a Christocentric model for ministry as a potential way forward.

When addressing idolatry, most authors suggest the solution is to return to God through Christ, which ultimately involves a return to ontological duality: deifying God as Creator and recognising the self as a dependent creature (Beale, 2008; Keller, 2010; Kraj, 2020; Luther, 2010; Tripp, 2012). This solution is not specific to idolatry but applies to all sin, for the Christian is liberated from sin through the “Christ event” (Schwarz, 2013, p. 131) and now walks not according to their fleshly desires, but according to the Spirit (Gal. 5:16). As idolatry is drifting from God into desires other than God, by submitting to the desires of the Spirit, the Christian receives grace from God to overcome the sin of idolatry. Writing about the dangers of self-glory, Tripp (2012) suggests that pastors need to be “rescued by the very same grace we have come to proclaim and live before others" (ch. 12, para. 20). However, what this looks like in practice is left to the individual pastor to discover.

The solution to return to Christ through repentance and confession reinforces what Figure 1 illustrates: the idolatry of self and ministry are the results of a heart that has drifted, declined, or defected from God. Kraj (2020) and Walton (2023) both suggest that an essential part of returning to Christ is to give up personal desires to follow Him and thus accept Jesus' invitation to self-denial and daily cross-bearing (Luke 9:23). This self-denial would be necessary to combat the heart's perpetual idolatrous tendencies. Luther (2010) suggests the solution is to place one's entire confidence and trust in God alone, for whatever one hopes to receive from an idol, Christ would say, "Expect it all of Me, and regard Me as the one who will help you and pour out upon you richly all good things" (para. 10). Therefore, according to the literature, the solution for idolatry is to deny oneself and return to Christ by placing one's trust and confidence in Him, believing Him to be the source of ultimate good, fulfilment, security, and significance.

So, what does it look like to return to Christ to overcome idolatry? Most authors lose momentum here as they suggest purely theoretical or abstract solutions such as humbling yourself, knowing your place and God's, reconsidering what it means to be a follower of God, and seeking God's glory, not your own (Beale, 2008; Tripp, 2012; Walton, 2023; Wilson, 2013). While Keller affirms the importance of such truths, he also offers some more practical advice for the idolater seeking to turn back to Christ. He believes that idolatry cannot be remedied solely by repenting or by using willpower to live differently; instead, the Christian must learn to become secure in Christ's love. He explains:

> Jesus must become more beautiful to your imagination and more attractive to your heart than your idol. That is what will replace your counterfeit gods. If you uproot the idol and fail to "plant" the love of Christ in its place, the idol will grow back. (Keller, 2010, p. 172)

Keller (2010) suggests that planting the love of Christ in the heart and replacing the love of idols requires cultivating spiritual disciplines that shape and direct the Christian's loves, desires, and actions (p. 172). Despite not directly addressing idolatry, James K. A. Smith offers the most comprehensive understanding of the power of habit to shape the heart's loves and desires. He writes, "We have seen that love is a habit. This means that our love is like second nature: it directs and propels us, often under the radar of conscious awareness, like breathing and blinking" (Smith, 2016, p. 32). However, the Christian should not think of love as an unpredictable force that moves unprovoked. As Smith (2016) explains, "our love is shaped, primed, and aimed by liturgical practices that take hold of our gut and aim our heart to certain ends" (p. 40). Therefore, Smith's theory supports Keller's (2010) practical suggestion that the spiritual disciplines will free the Christian from idolatry by

making the gospel “a life-shaping reality in our hearts and imaginations” (p. 175). However, participation in ministry itself could also be seen by ministers as a discipline of service that helps them escape from idolatry, yet unknowingly do the very thing that is idolatry. While this does not appear to be in Keller's thinking, it is also worth reflecting on.

Christian leaders may practically address the issue of ministry-idolatry by embracing the way of descent into humble and lowly service to God and people. Keller draws upon the Christ-hymn in Philippians 2 as a model for ministers today. According to Keller (2010), "our hearts say, 'I will ascend, I will be as the Most High for my own sake,' but Jesus said, 'I will descend, I will go low, for their sakes'" (p. 124). This approach ensures that the ministry aspires to God's glory and not the leader's self-glory. Similar to Keller, Tripp (2012) advises:

> Jesus says... If you are my ambassadors, called to represent my will and way, called to be tools of my redeeming grace, then you must not think that any ministry task is beneath you. You must be willing to do the lowest, most debased thing so that my work and my will be done. You must not refuse. You must not think of yourself as too good. You must be willing to be the lowest of slaves in order that my kingdom may come, and my will may be done. (ch. 12, para. 18)

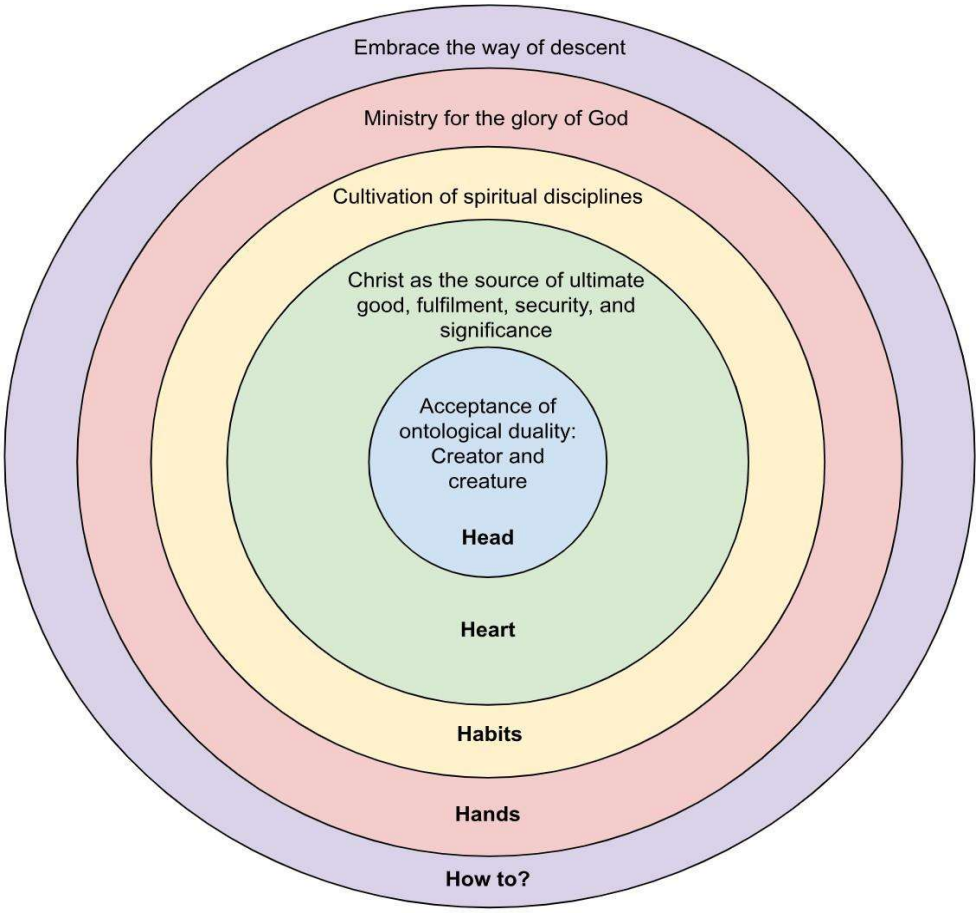
To encourage application, the findings of this paper are synthesised and illustrated in Figure 2: *A Christocentric model for ministry as an alternative to ministry idolatry*. This model begins with the leader’s acceptance of ontological duality; progresses into the heart, where the power of habits shapes one's loves; is aimed at God’s glory; and culminates in one’s willingness to “go low” (Keller, 2010, p. 124). When the leader recognises that they have drifted (or are tempted to drift) from God, thus entering idol territory, they can begin the journey back to Christocentric ministry by first renewing their mind with the reality of their utter dependence on God as Creator (Rom. 12:2). Then, the leader would do well to recover a Christocentric approach to ministry by cultivating the spiritual disciplines of their tradition; thereby planting the love of Christ more deeply in their heart. Once the leader’s head, heart, and habits align with God, the leader can model the ministry of Christ by aiming their ministry at the glory of God and embracing the way of humble descent in service to God and man.

The authors recognise that this model has limitations in its scope and application. It is intentionally simple and individual-focused, thereby not explicitly capturing the full complexity of ministerial contexts. Yet, it does provide a practical invitation for the

Christian leader to search their heart and turn "to God from idols to serve the living and true God" (1 Thess. 1:9). Turning from idols is perhaps the most critical task of any Christian leader, as John Bunyan (1678) exhorts:

> ...above all, look well to your own hearts, and to the lusts thereof, for they are deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked. Set your faces like a flint; you have all power in heaven and earth on your side. (p. 142)

Figure 2. A Christocentric model for ministry as an alternative to ministry idolatry



Conclusion

This reflection highlights potential causes and consequences of ministry idolatry. In a universal sense, idolatry occurs when a person places ultimacy on something created. The person then looks to this created thing to provide ultimate good, fulfilment, security, and significance to the seeker. Ministry idolatry occurs when the self becomes the idol, and the idolater uses God and/or ministry as a means of self-glory. While the human heart is an "idol-making factory" (Calvin, 1989, p. 97) and is therefore prone to sin in this way, other external factors contribute to the rise of idolatry within the heart and one's particular idol of choice. These external factors arise from culture, society, family of origin, personality,

and life experiences. The paper argues that the cause of idolatry arises from the heart's drift, decline, or defection from God, driven by sin, as well as from societal, cultural, and personal factors that powerfully impinge on the individual. The sin of idolatry – especially the idolatry of self – can bring ruinous consequences that affect one's relationship with God, others, and themselves, ultimately leading to despair and destruction (Beale, 2008, p. 297). Thankfully, the process can be halted by receiving aid from the Holy Spirit and forgiveness from the Father and by embracing the Christocentric model for ministry, as shown in Figure 2.

Finally, whilst this paper maintains a sober, analytical tone throughout, it is offered in a spirit of humility. The author's hope is for ministry leaders to use the paper for ongoing reflection on their own propensity for idolatry that so easily ensnares and to run the ministry race with endurance, following the pattern of Jesus (Heb. 12:1). Whilst many scholars surveyed in the paper present their views as unqualified and definitive, the authors remain cognizant of the complex and contextual nature of ministry idolatry. Hence, readers should exercise their own discernment in selecting the insights most relevant to their contexts.

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