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Omnibus IV Secondary Section B

In an age of pragmatism, where distraction fragments thinking and spreads concentration thin over the metaphorical bread of cranial input, there is much to occupy the mind of the average American. Each thought or topic battles to be the lord of a person’s thoughts, and pagan and Christian alike have a wide array of idols to choose from. This and a sex-crazed culture make idolatry and adultery common and important for the evangelical to be aware of. These vices need firstly to be defined, then compared and contrasted.

Idolatry and adultery are both prohibited in the Ten Commandments, though the former is prohibited in the first table, and the latter in the second. Idolatry is condemned as a sin against God, adultery as a sin against man.

Idolatry, as used by Old Testament writers, is simply the use of household gods in worship. Simply put, it is the worship of anything other than Yahweh, the LORD, God of the Israelites. New Testament writers use a more descriptive word meaning “formal sacrificial feats held in honor of false gods.”[[1]](#footnote-1) Essentially, idolatry is the giving of something that belongs to God to someone or something else.

Adultery is “to have unlawful intercourse with another’s wife.”[[2]](#footnote-2) Often adultery is also a form of unfaithfulness in marriage. Adultery is prohibited in the seventh commandment in the Old Testament (Exodus 20:14) and condemned under sexual immorality in the New Testament. Galatians 5:16-20 condemns “the works of the flesh” (among which is sexual immorality) and says they are “against the Spirit.” Just because adultery is in the second table of the commandments does not mean it is not a sin against God – all sins are sins against God. Adultery then is a sin against God.

But how is adultery related to idolatry? It could be argued that it, along with the other sins prohibited in the second table, falls under idolatry: after all, these sins put man’s personal desire for something above his desire for God, and above God’s commands. Committing adultery puts sex before God, making sex an idol. In this way, adultery is a sort of subset of idolatry: along with greed, covetousness, or a desire for fame – it makes an idol.

Technically speaking, idolatry gives to something else what God deserves; adultery gives to somebody else what somebody else deserves. In this way, idolatry is almost a subset of this broader definition of adultery.

God calls Israel an “Adulterous wife, who receives strangers instead of her husband!” (Ezekiel 16:32) James speaks of this spiritual adultery, calling out the spiritual unfaithfulness of God’s people by calling them “you adulterous people!” (James 4:4) God through Hosea calls out the infidelity of Israel: “a spirit of whoredom has led them astray, and they have left their God to play the whore (Hosea 4:12).” Here idolatry – having other gods, like Baal, is a form of general adultery. Earlier on in Hosea, however, adultery is shown to be a form of idolatry – and also a form of general adultery: “There is no faithfulness or steadfast love…there is swearing, lying, murder, stealing, and commiting adultery (Hos. 4:1-2).” Here, along with the rest of the second table, human adultery is both unfaithfulness to the human spouse - making it a form of general unfaithfulness and adultery – and a putting of personal gratification above the desires of God - making it idolatry.

Though this technical classification may not be entirely accurate, God certainly uses marriage as analogy to his relationship with his people. Ezekiel 16:8 says “I made my vow to you and entered into a covenant with you, declares the Lord GOD, and you became mine.” In Hosea 2:16, talking to his people Israel, God says “in that day…you will call me ‘My Husband.’” In Ephesians 5:22-23-32 Paul says “Wives, submit to your own husbands, as to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife even as Christ is the head of the church, his body ,and is himself its Savior…This mystery [marriage] is profound, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church.” Clearly there is a strong analogy here between God and his people. To turn from God and fashion idols, is, to continue the analogy, to commit spiritual adultery. Just as God’s covenant relationship with his people is analogous to marriage, so unfaithfulness on the part of the church is analogous to spiritual adultery.

Both human marriage and this spiritual analogy are monergistic relationships. The Israelites and the Church are only to have one God (Ex. 20:3), and a man is to have only one wife. The sex-driven culture, however, encourages drive-by sex and multiple, stringent relationships – much like the syncretistic polytheism that Canaanites impressed upon the Israelites. Both idolatry and adultery encourage changing the monergistic to the synergistic; changing a single relationship into fragments spread far and wide. Sex is not inherently evil, and neither is love and faith. Both are good. But both are corrupted when shared with the wrong person. Love and faith are to be given first and foremost to God and alone. Love and sexual intercourse is likewise reserved by a man for his wife alone. But when given to another, they become a sin.

Additionally, the lure and temptation of sinful relationships is similar in both cases. The attractive call of the idol is analogous to the sexual attraction of the adulteress. Both appeal to man’s sense of instant gratification – the same sense that triggers procrastination. Here it is a procrastination of God, where man pushes aside God, promising to “do that later.” What really matters, he thinks, is the here and now. Adultery and idolatry urge the man to forget about what God says for the moment and gratify personal desire. At the root of it all is pride; trust in oneself rather than in God. The adulterous Israel, the bride of God, in Ezekiel 16 plays the whore because “[she] trusted in [her] beauty.” (Eze. 16:15) That same beauty, ironically, was given her by God “and your renown went forth among the nations because of your beauty, for it was perfect through the splendor that I had bestowed on you.” (vs. 14)

Ezekiel 16 captures the image well, painting perfectly the analogy of a sinful adulteress and an idolatrous people. The similarities are many. Adultery is an analogy for idolatry; adultery is a form of idolatry. Both are disgusting, horrendous, and wicked acts. Both are acts of unfaithfulness and love of another. In a spiritual sense, it seems safe to say that adultery and idolatry are one and the same. The only real difference is that adultery is also a sin of man, and placed in the second table for that reason. Faithfulness to a spouse, however, is dependent on faithfulness shown to God. And just as God is a jealous God to his spiritual wife, his people, so men should be jealous for their wives. The Christian, then, ought to “put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires.” (Romans 13:14)

1. <http://www.blueletterbible.org/lang/lexicon/lexicon.cfm?Strongs=G1495&t=KJV> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. <http://www.blueletterbible.org/lang/lexicon/lexicon.cfm?Strongs=G3429&t=KJV> [↑](#footnote-ref-2)