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Idols Unmasked: Over-Concentration and Over-Involvement on Christian Campuses

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Idolatry, as described by Donald Opitz and Derek Melleby in their book *Learning for the Love of God*, occurs when humans apply energy and glory due God to creation rather than the creator. Opitz and Melleby characterize idolatry as a hungry beast that cannot be satisfied, for nothing less than the infinite creator can fill the void in the human heart. Humans who neither recognize nor care to fight such a monstrosity will be devoured by the very thing that they hoped would save them. Whereas the wooden and golden idols of the Old Testament were perhaps easier to identify, idols continue to take on various forms today. Opitz and Melleby exhort their readers to assume the responsibility of unmasking and tearing down any idol that proves a hindrance to the truth and glory of God. (59-62) I agree with Opitz and Melleby that idolatry is deadly as well as pervasive, requiring action from students. However, Opitz and Melleby write specifically to an audience of Christian students attending secular universities where idols are generally more conspicuous. (Consider alcohol, perfect grades, sex, partying, athletic titles, etc.) Challenged by Opitz and Melleby, I propose that students should consider two areas of masked idolatry that permeate Christian institutions such as Cedarville University. These idols of “over-concentration” and “over-involvement” are as deft at camouflaging themselves from Christians as they are at undermining the relationship between God and man. Thus, students must first unmask idols in order to conquer them.

Idols don many masks, alternating disguises to suit the context and

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replace God in a person's affection, attention, or devotion. At a Christian institution, blatant idolatries such as gambling, drinking, or drugs may be more quickly identified and terminated. Therefore, idols often function under the guise of false service or obedience. As I consider such deception in the lives of Christian collegiate students, two specific idols arise: "over-concentration" and "over-involvement."

The first idolatry of "over-concentration" directs a disproportionate focus on one topic or passion. This is exhibited by an obsessive attention to sports, politics, grades, or even a field of study. When a student places an excessive focus on his own discipline, it may motivate a contempt for other disciplines containing the truth and beauty of God. Supported by Paul's analogy of the church body in 1 Corinthians 12, no person or specialty is solitarily adequate but interdependently displays and promotes all aspects of God's character. Furthermore, such a singular disciplinary focus pulls the student into an identity found outside of Christ, which is a dangerous place to be. I should note that, yes, God does grant particular interests and talents to students for serving God and receiving joy. However, students must concede that their identity is not designated by earthly interests but by Christ alone. Students must also consider that God, who designed the diversity of the universe, imbues all aspects and disciplines with evidence of His truth. Therefore, students can excel in their own specialties as well as appreciate truth without being confined to their own major.

I witness this "over-concentration" on my own Christian campus. Some of my peers burrow into the library, determined to get A's regardless the expense of sleep or friendship. Other peers throw themselves into collegiate sports, the purpose of domination their constant companion. Excuses are not lacking. Athletes claim, "I compete for Christ!" Research assistants state, "I toil in my work to honor God and display his handiwork." Students enveloped in unwarranted study sessions entreat, "All for the glory of God." But motives easily slip from the pure devotion to Christ as students grow infatuated with promotion and accolades. Ultimately, all idolatry ends in pain. I should know, for there were many days of my first college semester characterized by "over-concentration"

on grades. I allotted unnecessary amounts of time and energy to studies, exhausting myself in the pursuit of that “100%” at the top of my test scans. Yes, I learned valuable material from my classes and professors. I made lifelong study partners and friends. My efforts paid off in the fact that I received a 4.0 on a transcript and a mug. But when my concentration was misapplied in idolatry, I lacked a secure identity and peaceful mind in Christ. The weeks in which I sacrificed substantial time with my God for supplemental time in textbooks were saturated with pride, anxiety, discontent, and exhausting comparison with peers. The worst part was that I would not have termed my activity or desires as idolatrous in the moment. The idol was well masked.

“Over-involvement” is an equally slippery slope of idolatry, convincing students that they must be constantly busy and widely involved. Students may acknowledge the display of God’s truth in every dimension of creation; therefore, “I must experience it all.” But again, like the “over-concentrated” student, the “over-involved” turns God’s goodness (in this case, the gifts of variety and activity) into an idol. Fear also factors into this idolatry. The over-involved student fears missing out on experiences or interactions, and therefore admires busyness over godliness. Such students may be seen around Cedarville’s campus as they endeavor to complete class assignments, serve with multiple ministries, compete in intramurals, and attend various events and presentations offered weekly only to collapse into bed without once having sufficient time with their Creator.

I have also agonized under the idol of involvement. Launching into sophomore year, I knew so many more people and ways to get involved compared to freshman year. I love learning about various subjects and keeping occupied with activities and conversations. But my interests have the capacity to take on a competitive edge when I desire to keep pace with all my friends and their own commitments. I justify my striving to participate in numerous arenas by claiming that as a Christian I need to be “knowledgeably well rounded” and “available for opportunities to serve others.” Such commitment, however, is misdirected and unsustainable apart from the wisdom and power of Christ. Rushing to reach events and meetings and

responsibilities, I am tempted to neglect precious time with my Savior and am left tired and directionless. Without praying to my Heavenly Father and reading scripture, my identity is lost in the midst of trying to match that of everyone else. If I am not careful, I can let idolatry slip on another mask.

Such distracted thoughts reflect the account of Martha and Mary in Luke 10:38-42. “But Martha was distracted with much serving. And she went up to [Jesus] and said, “Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to serve alone? Tell her then to help me.” But the Lord answered her, “Martha, Martha, you are anxious and troubled about many things, but one thing is necessary. Mary has chosen the good portion, which will not be taken away from her” (*The Bible, English Standard Version*). Jesus calls Martha to put aside her busywork, because, in the end, proper identity and fulfilling joy are found with time spent in Christ’s presence. If students become distracted by “much serving” and do not attend to Christ, then they are not truly serving Christ but serving ugly idols.

Lurking beneath claims of disciplinary duty and widespread service, idolatry afflicts both the aware and the oblivious on the Christian campus. No matter the veneer, anything replacing the Lord in student’s thoughts and motives is idolatry. Exposing idols whenever and wherever they show face is the first step in disarming them. Active beneath facades of ministry, the poisonous idols of over-concentration and over-involvement need to be recognized, for the flourishing of the Christian student and the Christian campus demands it.

Works Cited

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Opitz, D & Melleby, D. *Learning for the Love of God*. Brazos Press, 2014.