

The Idolatry of Experience

I**N 1973**, one of the best-selling Christian books was J. I. Packer's *Knowing God*. Twenty years later, in 1993, Henry T. Blackaby's *Experiencing God* was published and itself became a bestseller. From knowing to experiencing: the difference in these two titles captures the growing shift in our culture from favoring intellectual knowledge to favoring authentic experience.

It is probably true that Western Christianity has had a history of idolizing the

intellect. However, have we now overcorrected to the other extreme? From ecstatic religious experiences to hands-on experiential learning, are we now in danger of turning experience into an idol?

Let's be clear—we should not overemphasize the role of human reason in our faith. Our intellect is an essential but limited part of our spiritual walk with God. And so are our experiences. Faith includes our experience and our intellect but is deeper than both of them.

Experiences come in various forms. We have emotional experiences, for example, when we have deep feelings of God's pres-

ence in our lives. Other experiences come by way of past results or best practices. All of these different kinds of experiences can become idols if we are not careful.

Idols are not simply made of stone or wood—they can be anything good in creation that we come to trust or love more than God. Any time we worship and serve created things rather than the Creator, we are practicing idolatry (see Rom. 1:25). Even the good things that God uses to help us can become idols: the bronze snake God told Moses to make saved the Israelites who were bitten by poisonous snakes (Num. 21:4-9). But

when the Israelites worshiped the snake, it became an idol that King Hezekiah had to destroy generations later (2 Kings 18:4).

Similarly, our experience is an essential and beneficial gift from God to help us in our Christian walk. Powerful emotional experiences can help seal our intellectually informed faith. Experiences can also help us make decisions with respect to what works and what does not. And precisely because our experiences are so good, so important and helpful, we are tempted to place more faith in them than we ought, making them into an idol that replaces God's centrality in our lives.

How can we recognize when experience has become an idol? I believe there are two telltale signs.

First, instead of being a means to an end such as a deeper faith in Christ, the experience becomes an end in itself. We may end up trusting our religious experiences—as good as they are—more than we trust God's truth, promises, and message. Like the apostle Thomas, we might start demanding an experience of God's truth before we can trust it. Thomas refused to believe that Jesus had risen from the dead until he could experience firsthand—see for himself—the risen Christ with his nail marks. Later, when he appeared to Thomas, Jesus said, "Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed" (John 20:29). Would we trust God even if we did not have any experience to back up our trust?

This is a very subtle difference, which is why we often fail to recognize it. In his book *My Utmost for His Highest*, well-known Christian writer Oswald Chambers warned, "Be ruthless with yourself if you are given to talking about the experiences you have had. Faith that is sure of itself is not faith; faith that is sure of God is the only faith there is." It's like loving the experience of marriage more than the person you actually married. You cannot have one without the other,

obviously, but where does your love ultimately reside?

The second warning sign that an experience might be turning into an idol is when we use it as an end to justify questionable means or actions. When we start rationalizing disobedience to God with our experience, then we have turned experience into an idol. When it becomes our final authority on what is right, or on our decision-making in general, our experience has become an idol. For instance, if we were to choose to join a

enclave by their addictions, we end up as slaves to our idols as we increasingly come to rely on them. Unlike God, who gives us life, idols drain the life from us.

Wonderful spiritual experiences—even best-practice experiences—are helpful, but we cannot idealize them. Are we turning uplifting emotional worship into a sacred cow? Is the need to maintain and create powerful worship experiences draining our congregations' energies and resources away from other important duties and callings that are less emotion-

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church simply because it has an uplifting worship service that makes us feel good even though it has unbiblical teachings and practices, then we have turned our experience into an idol.

Perhaps you're asking yourself *Is that really so bad?* Besides the obvious insult to God, let me mention a couple of other reasons to avoid such idolatry. First, idols shape us. Those who make and trust in idols, says the psalmist, will become like them (Ps. 115:8). We become like what we worship. If we worship Christ, we will become Christ-like. If we worship rationality or the intellect, we start imagining a logical, emotionless being like *Star Trek's* Mr. Spock as the ideal human. On the other hand, if we worship experience, we're likely to favor the empathic and telepathic Counselor Deanna Troi from *Star Trek: The Next Generation*. Either way, idealizing one-dimensional versions of humanity harms us, as it ends up suppressing essential parts of who we are.

Second, idols eventually enslave us. Think of addiction. Like drugs, idols of experience might initially do us a lot of good, which is why we start having faith in them. But over time, like junkies

ally rousing? Are we turning experiential results into the only measurement of ministry success?

When experience becomes an idol, we need to repent—that is, we need to turn away from the path we are traveling and turn toward God. This is not easy. Often it requires changing default modes that are deeply entrenched. In order to change, we need prophets from within the community or wise friends to point out our own or our community's idolatry. We may not welcome such wake-up calls, but we need to learn to heed them.

Repentance requires us to be ruthlessly honest with ourselves and humble enough to admit our faults. But it is Christ who forgives us and who gives us the power to change. So we also need the support and encouragement of a Christ-centered community. Together, as part of the whole Christian community, we can turn our idols of experience back into what they were intended to be: God's good gifts. ■



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