

“GUARD YOURSELVES FROM IDOLS”

First John 5:13-15, 18-21

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Abstract: *The following sermon was the final in a series on 1 John, an epistle concerned with the relational and personal nature of God and God’s people. While we may not worship gold statues anymore, contemporary theology’s bend toward non-traditional Trinitarian language dangerously heads down the path of idolatry by ignoring the personal and relational nature of the Trinitarian God. Such a pathway leads to the frightening possibility of being unable to know God at all. The Gospel proclaimed by the Apostle John, and echoed by the late T. F. Torrance, points toward a radically personal and relational God who has revealed himself to humankind as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.*

Over two thousand people had gathered together in Minneapolis, MN to worship and reflect on the nature of God. Those gathered represented twenty-seven different nations, and most of the major denominations — Roman Catholics, Lutherans, Episcopalians, Methodists, Presbyterians, and even Baptists.¹ Some saw the event as a beautiful representation of God’s people coming together in the name of God. Others saw it differently. And they saw it differently precisely because they could not agree with the name of God being used.

This event of which I speak was the 1993 conference “Re-Imagining God, Community and the Church.” The event’s organizers sought to make an explicit

1 James Torrance, *Worship, Community & the Triune God of Grace* (InterVarsity, Downers Grove: 1996), 96.



SERMON: GUARD YOURSELVES FROM IDOLS

call for new images of God to express the concerns of women. When they looked out on society and even the church they saw a male dominated world.

On the surface, their intentions were not terribly problematic — God is neither male nor female. Yet, even in the twenty-first century some in the church and society continue to treat women condescendingly, treating them as inferior to men. This conference, however, did not involve this kind of soft feminism. This was not some attempt to simply remind Christians of the equal status of women and men in the eyes of God. It was, literally, an attempt to re-imagine God.

The new language proposed for God not only stripped the traditional Father/Son language, but infused such names as to barely make the triune God recognizable to anyone. For instance, rather than Father, Son, and Spirit, they might encourage Mother, Child, and Womb. More common was simply to refer to the feminine name *Sophia* — the Greek word for “wisdom.” In many circles today, it has even become the norm to refer to the Triune God as the “Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer.” The newly proposed “names” for God at the conference created widespread concern throughout churches in 1993, and it ought to concern us today, as well.

The only true and living God is the triune God revealed in Jesus Christ. And God is not simply *Father*, but always “Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.” The relationship between the Father and Son always takes primacy over the relationship between the Creator and the created.² We call God our *Father* because the Holy Spirit has united us to Jesus Christ, who gives us the privilege of claiming God as our Father. We do not call God *Father* because God is male or because we are projecting our dreams of what a father should be like onto God. We call God *Father* because God the Father is the Father of Jesus Christ. Where the Son is, we always find the Father — the names of *Father* and *Son* refer to who God actually *is* in the relationships within the triune God’s self.³

2 T. F. Torrance, *The Trinitarian Faith* (T&T Clark, London: 1995), 49.

3 “Thus Christian theology makes proper use of the terms ‘Father’ and ‘Son’ to speak of God as he is in himself, when it allows them to refer imagelessly to relations eternally inherent in God which are in their uncreated transcendent form the creative ground of what on our creaturely level of existence we are meant to understand by ‘father’/‘son’ relations in human being” (ibid., 71).

Now, we do need to be fair to those who wish to re-name God *Sophia* or some other feminine name. Scripture does use some feminine metaphors for God, but these are only metaphors and not proper names. We also need to remember that feminine images are not the only ways we attempt to “re-imagine” God. Sometimes in the church’s history it has emphasized a fatherhood of God and the forceful power of God so much, that it has neglected the Son and the Spirit. When this happens, it does result in a “re-imagined” masculine God just as problematic as a “re-imagined” feminine God.⁴

This kind of masculine God has its own problems. Upon this God are often projected ideals of power and authority. This results in a God similar to the gods of the ancient Greeks. Gods like Zeus and Apollo rule with forceful and arbitrary wills, manipulating the lives of humans. Humans, then, are left to groveling at the feet of these impersonal, distant, and masculine gods. Neither this masculine God nor the feminine God is the true God.

The living God has revealed himself to us as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. To call God anything else is to replace God’s revealed name for our own name for God. In other words, to “re-imagine” God is to “re-create God” in our image. We become the creators, and God becomes the created. God becomes an idol crafted in our own image — our own ideals of who we would like God to be.

The assumption of the conference goers and others who want to rename God is that ultimately we cannot know God — that God is completely unknown and that it really doesn’t matter how we talk about God, as long as we believe in this thing we call God. To know him (or her!), you simply need to look deep within yourself and your life experiences to find language and images with which to describe the divine and your religious experiences.⁵

This is convenient if you want to run your life the way you want and not deal with the living God. When you can claim an unknown God, you can fill in the blanks of who you want or think God should be like. Even if you do not intend to project your dreams and ideals onto God, this often happens anyway when you believe God cannot be known.

4 Torrance, *Worship, Community*, 102-103.

5 *Ibid.*, 101.

SERMON: GUARD YOURSELVES FROM IDOLS

You can rename this God *Sophia* or whatever you like — it does not matter as long as it feels right to *you* — as long as the new name reflects your own perceived experiences of the divine in *your* life and *your* world. But such a God is, in fact, *not* God.⁶ Not only that, but if you are not sure *who* God is, how can you ever be sure you can talk or pray with God? How can you be sure that this God hears you when you pray? How can you be sure that this thing we call the Christian life is even a right and true way to live? How can you be sure that this Christian faith is anything more than a coping mechanism?

So it was that Pastor John ends his letter with the advice to “guard yourselves from idols.” It is an odd way to end a letter. Yet, Pastor John knew the danger of idols — the danger of false gods. This went to the heart of his letter: life is all about relationships.

An idol, as any good Sunday school teacher will tell you, does not have to be a statue made of gold or silver. Pastor John teaches us that an idol is a god with whom we cannot have a relationship — a god without personality, a god without the ability to hold a conversation.⁷ It is just a force, an abstract being beyond our senses. You can never really know an idol. You cannot have a relationship with an idol anymore than you can have a relationship with the wind or the stars or the concept of justice. You can pray to it, but it will get you nowhere.

The living God, on the other hand, is just that — a *living* God — a God constantly on the move, breathing new life into old bones, resurrecting the dead, drawing all things into a joyful relationship with himself. The living triune God is one with whom you *can* have a conversation. For Pastor John this Trinity of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit centered his theology and his understanding of the Christian life.⁸ Without it, our faith loses its substance and reason for existence.

6 “If you cannot say anything positive about what God is, we really cannot say anything accurate about what he is not” (Torrance, *The Trinitarian Faith*, 50).

7 Eugene Peterson, *Christ Plays in Ten Thousand Places: A Conversation in Spiritual Theology* (Eerdmans, Grand Rapids: 2005), 325.

8 I realize that it is anachronistic to suggest that the writer of 1 John centered his theology in the Trinity, as the official doctrine did not arise until later in church history. However, as with many New Testament writers, the reality of the Trinity seeps through their pages as they wrestled with and clarified their understanding of the nature of God in light of the Incarnation event of Jesus Christ.

This is why Pastor John goes to such great lengths in his little letter to emphasize the humanity of Jesus. Remember how Pastor John began? “We declare to you what was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands, concerning the word of life.”⁹

The Son of God — very God of very God, the one through whom God created the world — this Son of God became human flesh, someone whose skin we could touch, whose voice we could hear, and whose body we could see.

That the Son of God became human, and that God is a Trinity, means that we can *really* deal with God.¹⁰ When we deal with Jesus through the Holy Spirit, we relate really, truly, and fully with the living God — not some facsimile or hologram or imitation. That God is a Trinity and not an idol means that we can have a conversation with God.

When we pray to the Father in Jesus’ name, we can be confident that God *really* hears our prayers. And God hears our prayers because it is Jesus himself who carries them before the Father. Through Jesus and the Holy Spirit God speaks to us, and through Jesus and the Holy Spirit we can speak with the living God.

The problem with idols is that you cannot have a relationship with them. When you worship a god in your image, you are really worshipping yourself. When you project your highest ideals onto God — be they nurture and tolerance or unlimited power and absolute justice — you are really worshipping yourself.

It is no surprise that so many of the modern “re-imaginings” of God ultimately result in the modern quest of self-fulfillment and achieving a high self-esteem. This kind of religion simply degenerates into self-realization where the goal is to “know thyself.” At the “Re-imagining God” conference, one of the more radical leaders declared, “I found God in myself and I loved her.”¹¹ That is the perfect example of where the road leads when one tries to re-imagine God, using new

9 1 John 1:1 (English Standard Version).

10 “Thus, if we are to have any true and precise scientific knowledge of God, we must allow his own nature, as he becomes revealed to us, to determine how we are to know him, how we are to think of him, and what we are to say of him” (Torrance, *The Trinitarian Faith*, 52).

11 Torrance, *Worship, Community*, 107.

SERMON: GUARD YOURSELVES FROM IDOLS

names for God. All you will ever find is yourself — your prayers simply echo off the walls as you express your deepest desires to, well, yourself.

Only through Jesus Christ can we properly know and understand anything about the living and true God. To turn anywhere else is to worship a false god, a facsimile, a hologram, an idol. Dear children, Pastor John writes, guard yourselves from idols.

And *guard ourselves* we do by constantly turning our attention to Jesus Christ. He has done everything necessary so that we can have confidence that through him and by the Holy Spirit, we truly deal with the living God.

Pastor John, against a large portion of our culture and even in the contemporary church, teaches that true worship begins with Jesus Christ and not ourselves. God created us for communion with him — for relationship with him — he did not create us to grope about in the dark re-imagining God's identity. Nor did he create us to grope about trying to find our assurance, confidence, and peace in ourselves or our highest ideals.

Instead, this triune, living God has given us himself so that we might know and love him as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. To gather in the name of Jesus is to gather in the presence of the true God. The Holy Spirit unites us to Jesus, through whom we see God himself as we find ourselves in the communion between Father and Son in the power of the Holy Spirit.

That God is triune means that we can stop running after idols. We can stop trying to find meaning in ourselves. We can stop trying to imagine what God might be like. We can stop trying to search for God. We can stop an endless search for truth and meaning that leads to nowhere. Instead, we can look to Jesus, through whom God seeks us and finds us.

What a joy, then, that the Holy Spirit invites us to this communion table, for it is at this table that we taste and see who this God is. Through the Spirit, God calls each of us by name, that he might reveal himself to us through the bread and cup. By the Spirit, God joins us with the Son, through whom he will converse with us and share with us his everlasting love. The search for God, the search for meaning, the search for full and abundant life ends right here at this table before us.

Brothers and Sisters, may *you* taste and see that the Lord is good — this living and triune God — and may you *know* and *converse* with the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, the only God who will give you the acceptance, the joy, and the peace for which you long.