

Three Forms Of Self-Redemption

Human beings never grow weary of trying to “save” themselves, though our concepts of “salvation” and “sin” vary widely depending on our underlying worldview. For a secularist, for example, self-redemption means freedom from religious bias and autonomy to express oneself. For a Marxist self-redemption is ideological purity and communist party loyalty. For a New Age spiritualist self-redemption means flourishing as a semi-divine being, using all the religious resources available regardless of the original worldview.

In the paragraphs that follow I summarize three basic self-salvation techniques that humans usually pursue.

First and on the practical level, humans try to secure their existence against the siege of sin and divine curse (Gen 3:8-19) through money and hedonism. In this “present evil age” (Gal 1:4)



money is power and a toxic form of self-anesthesia, because it is the “answer to everything” (Eccl 10:19) and a “strong city” (Pr 10:15a). Money is sacred and with it we control our environment, buy our security, enjoy the fruits of our labor, and fashion our identity. We “lay up for [our]selves treasures on earth” (Matt 6:19) in an attempt to re-establish Eden, personally and socially. Like the Rich Fool (if we are lucky enough to achieve financial independence), we boast to ourselves: “Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry” (Luke 12:19). This is why we cannot love both God and Mammon (Matt 6:24) and why “the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil” (1Tim 6:10).

Second and intellectually, human beings suppress the truth about God and exchange that truth for idols (Rom 1:19-23). As John Calvin explained everyone is a “factory of idols.” As a result, there is an endless variety of God-substitutes we embrace for meaning and security. A former student proclaimed: “I am a living example that people can live, survive, and be happy without God...We have different things that can be substituted for him. Friends, music, and sport are totally necessary in my life, and to me they serve as that kind of substitution.” Idolatry is an affirmative response to the question: “Do I enjoy myself and the creation more than I enjoy God, the creator?” Sadly, because of sin, we are by nature idol worshippers and we prefer to organize our lives – our thinking, doing, desiring, spending -- around substitute gods of our preference. Tim Keller explained that a “counterfeit god is anything so central and essential to your life that, should you lose it, your life would hardly be worthy living.” The problem with idols, however, is that they are “broken cisterns” (Jer 2:13). They cannot hold the contents we pour into them. They need constant repair and development. And so, idols are futile and frustrating.



Third and existentially, humans try to manipulate and appease the divine judge with good deeds. It is hoped that either the quantity or quality of one’s works merit the favorable response of God. Some, like the self-righteous Pharisee cry out: “God, I thank you that I am not like other men, extortionists, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector” (Luke 18:11). Others delude themselves through a highly elevated sense of entitlement, such as the sinner described in Romans 2 who hoped to escape judgment and “presumed on the riches of his kindness and forbearance and patience” (v. 4). In a similar fashion Keller describes two paradigmatic methods of self-justification. One he calls the “way of moral conformity” and the other the “way of self-discovery.” In conformity with accepted social norms the former declares: “I’m not going to do



what I want, but what tradition and the community wants me to do.” The latter acts in rebellion to social convention and affirms: “I’m the only one who can decide what is right or wrong for me. I’m going to live as I want to live and find my true self and happiness that way.” The second method is prevalent today in societies deeply influenced by postmodernism and consumerism. What both paths have in common is an idolatrous, self-directed, and self-justifying norm for redemption.

Finally, the problem with every man-made plan of redemption is that they do not adequately deal with the root of our alienation from God due to idolatry.

Only the gospel of Jesus Christ addresses the complexity of the human condition and our fruitless forms of self-redemption and idol worship. Only the gospel addresses the threefold problem of evil at its root – self-deification (sin), self-redemption (self-justification), and enslavement (Satan).