

## CHAPTER 1

# Introduction to Idolatry

### God's commonwealth on earth

"Now after John was arrested, Jesus came into Galilee, preaching the gospel of God, and saying, 'The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent, and believe in the gospel.'" (Mk. 1:14-15)

Nearly two thousand years ago Jesus came preaching that the kingdom of God is at hand. Do we still believe this? In our modern technological age - who can believe that the kingdom of God is at hand? How many Christians even have a vision of the kingdom of God so that the announcement that it is at hand is stirring and motivating? And isn't the announcement a bit of a contradiction in terms? If we believe that God's kingdom is far away in time and space - as a kingdom in heaven for a future life - then how can it be immediately present? The questions are serious - for if we have lost our vision of God's kingdom then we are no longer able to proclaim the same gospel that Jesus proclaimed. And if we have lost our vision then, perhaps, we have lost our way.

To reclaim the gospel we must regain a vision of God's kingdom that is "at hand": we must seek a vision of God's kingdom here and now - a vision of "God's commonwealth on earth." To speak of the need for a new vision is to acknowledge the inadequacy, the sinfulness, of present-day religion. If the Christian churches are not proclaiming a true and compelling vision - if the churches are not living out the gospel of God - then what are they doing?

### Christian organization & fruitfulness

"I am the true vine....Abide in me as I abide in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine,

neither can you unless you abide in me. I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing." (Jn. 15:1,4-5 NRSV)

The above passage from John 15 states an essential truth: Jesus is the vine, Christians are the branches, and how well the branches are connected to the vine is all-important in terms of the fruitfulness of one's labors. Individually and collectively, Christians' connections to Jesus determine whether or not labor is fruitful. If Christians' connections to Jesus are superficial - if churches are not deeply committed to following and obeying Jesus - then Christians' labor and/or church programs will not bear much fruit. On the other hand, if Christians' connections to Jesus are deeply-rooted - if there exists an incarnational relationship where Jesus and believers abide in each other - then indeed Christians' labor and ministries will be fruitful. Thus "internal" Christian organization determines "external" fruitfulness. And thus it is important to ask: How well do church structures organize Christians? How well do churches connect their members to Jesus? The questions are important because to work and labor for little fruit may bring frustration, cynicism, despair, and burn-out.

The present time is critical both for the world and for Christianity. The world is in crisis and cries out for deliverance. As a consequence of social injustice there is in the world today overwhelming poverty and human suffering. At the same time there is a growing consciousness that modern economic development is seriously harming fragile ecosystems and producing unmanageable amounts of pollution and waste. Thus continuing on the world's present course will only heighten suffering and social turmoil. How is Christianity responding to this world crisis? Among Christians throughout the world there is a stirring - a budding movement that seeks to integrate faith with social justice work and ministries for the poor. In the United States, many Christians have labored to push their churches to deeper levels of involvement with the poor. Many also have chosen to become involved with social justice organizations outside the churches. But what most Christians involved in serving the poor and working for justice have found is that they must work on two fronts: change is needed both in society and in the churches. In large part, the Christian churches in the U.S. have not fully integrated faith with social commitment: the churches do not deeply identify with the suffering of the poor and are unwilling to confront the root causes of social injustice. The fact that the church itself is compromised and is an area for confrontation and conflict should give concerned Christians pause to consider: How fruitful are efforts within the

churches to bring change? How fruitful for spreading the love and justice of God are programs within compromised church organizations?

A clear vision of Jesus' gospel - which proclaims God's commonwealth on earth - can assist Christians in putting their labor into fruitful work. This vision can emerge by focusing on Jesus and by evaluating the "old" vision, faith, structures, and practices of the churches. Questions needing to be answered are: How have the churches compromised themselves with the powers of the world? To what degree have the churches become institutions serving/perpetuating themselves and erecting barriers against the inbreaking, liberating power of the Spirit? What are some of the forms of Christian idolatry in the United States? The answers will reveal areas of sinfulness for which repentance is necessary - and the emerging vision may call Christians to form a stronger "internal" organization. The emerging vision will help Christians decide whether to work for change from within churches or to join/form new Christian communities.

This book critiques Christianity in the U.S., calls Christians to repentance, and provides a new vision for reorganizing Christians. It is hoped that this book will contribute to bringing about a Christian revival - which depends upon "rebuilding the house of God" upon the "cornerstone" of Jesus. What is at stake in these times is the direction and fruitfulness of the fledgling Christian movement for integrating faith and social justice. The potential for the movement is unlimited. If it continues to grow in faith and maturity in Jesus Christ then it may lead to the "shaking down" of the churches as a prelude to the "shaking down" of the nations. The seeds of renewal among U.S. Christians are but part of a great struggle worldwide to reformulate and transform the universal church - to rebuild the "house of God" as a prelude to the final establishment of God's universal commonwealth on earth. The present world setting of massive human suffering, social turmoil, and environmental deterioration is the furnace for refining Christianity. Entering into this furnace, as demonstrated by many Christians in "Third World" countries, comes at great human cost. But the renewal of Christianity for the salvation of the world is the fruit. For the "house of God" must become a house of prayer for all the nations, (Is. 56:7) bringing salvation to the ends of the earth. (Is. 49:6)

While several important issues will be looked at in some depth, e.g., homelessness, abortion, homosexuality, the overall focus of this book

is on building a vision for Christian revival. To begin, let us start to understand the meaning of Christian idolatry.

### Idolatry in the "true religion"

How does a religion which upholds the name of the one true God become idolatrous? Understanding 3 aspects of religion can illuminate idolatry in the Bible and in the history of Christianity. The 3 aspects of religion are: liturgical, conceptual, and incarnational.<sup>1</sup> The liturgical aspect involves ceremony, rituals, and worship; the conceptual aspect involves knowledge of God, doctrine, studying and teaching; the incarnational aspect involves following God/Jesus, daily practices and lifestyle. While all 3 aspects are important the heart and core of the Judeo-Christian faith is its incarnational nature. This was definitively revealed through Jesus, the Word made flesh, God incarnate, our "Emmanuel," meaning "God is with us." The Holy Spirit given to Jesus' disciples reminds us, as Paul stated, "It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me." (Gal. 2:20) The John 15 passage about the vine and the branches confirms the intimate, incarnational relationship between Jesus and believers/followers. An incarnational faith actively involves all believers - calling each to daily obedience - calling all to incarnate the love and justice of God in a holistic way. While a healthy, living faith integrates all 3 aspects and emphasizes the incarnational aspect, organized religion often gives priority to the other 2 aspects. But when the incarnational aspect is neglected or deprioritized, religion degenerates and becomes a form of idolatry. For example, let us look at a passage from Jeremiah.

"Do not trust in these deceptive words: 'This is the temple of (Yahweh), the temple of (Yahweh), the temple of (Yahweh).'<sup>1</sup>...Thus says (Yahweh) of hosts, the God of Israel: 'Add your burnt offerings to your sacrifices, and eat the flesh. For in the day that I brought them out of the land of Egypt, I did not speak to your fathers or command them concerning burnt offerings and sacrifices. But this command I gave them, 'Obey my voice, and I will be your God, and you shall be my people; and walk in all the way that I command you, that it may be well with you.' But they did not obey or incline their ear, but walked in their own counsels and the stubbornness of their evil hearts, and went backward and not forward.'<sup>2</sup>...And you shall say to them, 'This is the nation that did not obey the voice of (Yahweh) their God, and did not accept discipline; truth has perished; it is cut off from their lips.'"

(Jer. 7:4,21-24,28)

Israel's liturgical practice of offering burnt offerings and sacrifices in the temple was not evidence of a living faith. On the contrary, Israel's religion had separated the incarnational aspect of daily obedience to God's word from worship of God. While religious practices were maintained the people were actually walking "in their own counsels." Thus their religion had degenerated and they "went backward and not forward." As a degenerative religion it took on an idolatrous nature: the people were going through the motions of serving and praising God while in their everyday lives they were serving "other gods." Idolatry is serving "other gods" and not following daily the way of the living God. "Other gods" does not just refer to foreign gods or idols, as was prevalent in biblical times, but includes any "gods," such as wealth or military power, which people place their trust and security in.

Degenerative religion is religion that fragments faith. It emphasizes certain liturgical and conceptual components of faith but does not integrate all aspects of faith into a holistic way of life. Degenerative religion offers pieces of truth, supporting a fragmented lifestyle and a double-mindedness which purports to uphold the name of God while in fact "other gods" are served. In other words, degenerative religion, on the surface, may appear to be faithful, but it actually supports an idolatrous way of life. By going below the surface one can see that degenerative religion doesn't enhance faith and it is not "neutral" towards faith - but rather its structures and practices actively work against the development of a mature, holistic, living faith. Degenerative religion misdirects faith at its inception and throughout a believer's life. Thus degenerative religion is itself idolatrous and it supports an idolatrous way of life.

Because degenerative religion compromises on daily obedience to God it involves less risks and faces less conflict with the world than an incarnational faith. (See Table 1.) This is particularly true of degenerative religion in this predominantly "Christian" country where persecution is seldom viewed as an integral part of a living faith.

Let us look at more examples of idolatry.

### Idolatry in Old Testament times

In the Old Testament, the Hebrew faith degenerated into principally liturgical and conceptual forms. Israel was guilty of idolatry - not

TABLE 1  
3 ASPECTS OF RELIGION

<u>Aspect</u>	<u>Features</u>	<u>Primary Emphasis Leads to:</u>	<u>Risk Factor</u>
1. liturgical	worship, sacraments	formal cultic rituals	low
2. conceptual	study, knowledge of God	dogma, law	medium
3. incarnational	following Jesus/God	unique lifestyle (or Way) & conflict with the world	high

because they were lacking in ritual sacrifices and feasts or in pronouncing religious statutes - but because they weren't incarnating God's love, God's justice. The Hebrew people believed they were still worshiping God, but they were following and walking in the way of false gods. One cannot worship God and follow false gods. By following false gods the people had broken their covenant with the God who commanded, "You shall have no other gods before me" (Deut. 5:7) and, "You shall worship the Lord your God, and (God) only shall you serve." (Lk. 4:8) By following false gods Israel was no longer serving the only God of justice and righteousness. Without an incarnational faith Israel's worship of God and religious teachings were in vain. The prophets Amos and Hosea declared that Israel's liturgical practices were no substitute for justice.

"I hate, I despise your feasts, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies. Even though you offer me your burnt offerings and cereal offerings, I will not accept them, and the peace offerings of your fatted beasts I will not look upon. Take away from me the noise of your songs; to the melody of your harps I will not listen. But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an everflowing stream." (Amos 5:21-24)

"What shall I do with you, O Ephraim? What shall I do with you, O Judah? Your love is like a morning cloud, like the dew that goes early away....For I desire steadfast love and not sacrifice, the knowledge of God, rather than burnt offerings." (Hos. 6:4,6)

The prophets confronted Israel's delusion that it could know God



without practicing justice. In Hos. 4:1 and Jer. 9:3,6 the prophets declared that there is "no knowledge of God in the land" and "they refuse to know" God. The Old Testament prophets declared that without first incarnating God's love, God's justice, one cannot know God, one cannot worship the living God.

"Bring no more vain offerings; incense is an abomination to me. New moon and sabbath and the calling of assemblies -- I cannot endure iniquity and solemn assembly. Your new moons and your appointed feasts my soul hates; they have become a burden to me, I am weary of bearing them. When you spread forth your hands, I will hide my eyes from you; even though you make many prayers, I will not listen; your hands are full of blood. Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean; remove the evil of your doings from before my eyes; cease to do evil, learn to do good; seek justice, correct oppression; defend the fatherless, plead for the widow." (Is. 1:13-17)

### Idolatry in Jesus' time

In Jesus' time, as in Old Testament times, the poor in the land were oppressed, lacking leadership, and yearning for justice. The Jewish people were referred to as "the lost sheep of the house of Israel" (Mt. 10:6) and as "sheep without a shepherd" (Mk. 6:24) - revealing that their religion had lost the incarnational aspect which would keep the people intimately connected with God. Of course the religious leaders bore much responsibility for presiding over a degenerative religion - and therefore they "will receive the greater condemnation." (Mk. 12:40) The religious leaders "neglected the weightier matters of the law, justice and mercy and faith." (Mt. 23:23) The religious leaders placed a high priority on ceremony and ritual purity - but Jesus rebuked them saying, "Go and learn what this means, 'I desire mercy, and not sacrifice.'" (Mt. 9:13) As leaders who maintained the form and appearance of a religion while emptying it of its essential content they were rightly assailed by Jesus:

"Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for you are like whitewashed tombs, which outwardly appear beautiful, but within they are full of dead men's bones and all uncleanness. So you also outwardly appear righteous to (people), but within you are full of hypocrisy and iniquity." (Mt. 23:27-28)

Conceptually, the religious leaders controlled the reading of the scriptures and greatly expanded the requirements of the law. Jesus warned his disciples "to beware...of the teaching of the Pharisees and Sadducees." (Mt. 16:12) The rich and powerful Sadducees, who

supported status quo power and who taught there was no resurrection of the dead, were rebuked for their faith in a god-of-the-dead. (Mk. 12:24,27) Jesus confuted the teachings of the scribes and Pharisees, saying,

"Well did Isaiah prophesy of you hypocrites, as it is written, 'This people honors me with their lips, but their heart is far from me; in vain do they worship me, teaching as doctrines the precepts of men.' You leave the commandment of God, and hold fast the tradition of men." (Mk. 7:6-8)

Thus the people were no longer incarnating, serving, and worshiping the living God - but had fallen into the trap of degenerative religion.

Why did Jesus and the prophets so harshly condemn the people's liturgical and conceptual practices? Of course it was due to their idolatrous nature - but also because they were so insidious. The Israelite people thought of themselves as "the elect" who knew the one true God. They could sometimes see that the "pagan" nations were following and worshiping false gods/idols, but they became just as blind when their own religion ensnared them. As their religion degenerated, their sins and their attachment to "other gods" were hidden. The faith that was meant to enlighten people with its liberating knowledge of the only God of justice and righteousness was instead ensnaring, blinding, and mesmerizing the people. Instead of being a means of coming to and knowing God - it was an obstacle. As Jesus said,

"But woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! because you shut the kingdom of heaven against (people); for you neither enter yourselves, nor allow those who would enter to go in." (Mt. 23:13)

"Woe to you lawyers! for you have taken away the key of knowledge; you did not enter yourselves, and you hindered those who were entering." (Lk. 11:52)

At stake was entry into the commonwealth of God, and consequently, the fruitful expansion of God's commonwealth on earth.

### Christian idolatry

"Unless (Yahweh) builds the house, those who build it labor in vain."  
(Ps. 127:1)

We have seen how, in Old Testament times and in Jesus' time, the people "of the true faith" were led astray by degenerative religion. How have the people "of the true faith" fared under the Christian religion?



Has the Christian religion developed the very same idolatrous tendencies that the Hebrew religion did? In the United States, to what extent have the Christian churches been expanding the "house of God" and to what extent have they been spreading degenerative religion?

After Jesus' resurrection the disciples began to spread the Judeo-Christian faith and the good news of the liberating commonwealth of God. Very early on Jesus' disciples had to confront degenerative liturgical and conceptual tendencies which restricted an incarnational faith. James argues against a conceptual spiritualization of faith:

"What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but do not have works? Can faith save you? If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, and one of you says to them, 'Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill,' and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that? So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead." (Jas. 2:14-17 NRSV)

John, likewise, advocates for an incarnational faith:

"We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us - and we ought to lay down our lives for one another. How does God's love abide in anyone who has the world's goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses help? Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action." (1 Jn. 3:16-18 NRSV)

Paul, in particular, wrote extensively against the transfer of degenerative Jewish liturgical and conceptual practices into the faithful's life. Paul also castigated the new liturgical practice of communion at Corinth:

"When you come together, it is not really to eat the Lord's supper. For when the time comes to eat, each of you goes ahead with your own supper, and one goes hungry and another becomes drunk. What! Do you not have homes to eat and drink in? Or do you show contempt for the church of God and humiliate those who have nothing?" (1 Cor. 11:20-22 NRSV)

The communion practice at Corinth bore no resemblance to an incarnational community of justice and love centered in Jesus/God. Despite the disciples' leadership unhealthy practices arose. But even though factions developed in early Christianity, the existence of incarnational communities fostered the rapid spread of faith, even during times of heavy persecution from Roman authorities.

A major change in the Judeo-Christian faith occurred after 300 AD during the reign of Emperor Constantine. Constantine issued some commands making Christianity the official religion of the state. At the

same time the church became Roman. This transformation, while reducing state persecution, had severe consequences for an incarnational faith. New-found respectability allowed the faithful to institutionalize their religion. The meaning of "the church" came to be associated with a physical institution of professional leaders, their bureaucracy and physical possessions (land and buildings). By establishing itself in alliance with the state, the church distanced itself from the daily lives and struggles of poor people. These changes fostered the growth of liturgical and conceptual aspects of religion while discouraging the incarnational aspect which conflicts with state and culture. From this compromised position many forms of degenerative Christianity have spread throughout the world.

In North America, Christianity spread alongside the white European conquest of native peoples and lands. Today, Christianity is without question the predominate religion in the United States. The success of the Christian churches mirrors the success of a country which has become the wealthiest and most powerful in the world. Magnificent churches now cover the land and Christian teachings are expansively broadcast, pronounced, and published - inundating Americans everywhere with religious messages. Most Americans will state that Jesus is the Son of God. But do the images of successful Christian mission - attractive church buildings, large memberships, important positions in their communities - signify conversion of members to the living God? Or have the churches been neglecting the most important aspect of faith?

### The Questions

"King Herod heard of it; for Jesus' name had become known. Some said, 'John the baptizer has been raised from the dead; that is why these powers are at work in him.' But others said, 'It is Elijah.' And others said, 'It is a prophet, like one of the prophets of old.' But when Herod heard of it, he said, 'John, whom I beheaded, has been raised.'" (Mk. 6:14-16)

The churches and their leaders, never short on teachings, have provided answers to religious questions that members may ask and to questions that members wouldn't ever think of asking. In the process, however, the power of questioning for each individual's growth in faith has been stifled. The key questions of faith, if they are raised, are answered by rote. The questions and the answers have

become largely irrelevant to the daily lives of most believers. This was not always the case.

In Jesus' time, the key questions of faith were raised. Their significance did not escape the attention of even the highest of rulers. As a result, King Herod slaughtered the male infants of Bethlehem, tetrarch Herod Antipas beheaded John the Baptist and sought to kill Jesus (Lk. 13:31), the highest Jewish religious and political leaders plotted against and arrested Jesus, and governor Pilate crucified Jesus. The questions: 1. Who is Jesus? 2. What are Jesus' new practices? and 3. How shall the Messiah establish God's commonwealth on earth?<sup>2</sup> These 3 questions put the faith of Jews to the test and their answers had great implications for daily life. The first question could not be answered on its own. Only by answering the second question could one begin to answer the first. And the 3 questions taken together provoked decisions of faith creating a clear distinction between disciples, deeply-committed to following and incarnating Christ, and everyone else. The 3 questions brought to the forefront of life the call for conversion to a new Way of life. But today the questions are obscured by religious institutions that provide answers which sedate the minds of believers. The challenge and call for deep-rooted conversion is muted.

What answers have U.S. churches given to these 3 key questions? A few of the answers given by a fragmented and compromised Christian church will be examined here.

#### Q1: Who is Jesus?

Most of Christianity has separated question 1 from question 2. Many churches that herald Jesus as Lord proclaim salvation through the grace of a faith that is separated from works. That is, the faith prescribed is a verbal confession of Jesus' lordship, a recital of a creed, and a commitment to a church that requires little personal change. Knowledge of Jesus and God is mediated to believers through the administration of authority and sacraments by a church hierarchy. But this is the administration of "cheap grace."

"Cheap grace means grace as a doctrine, a principle, a system. It means forgiveness of sins proclaimed as a general truth, the love of God taught as the Christian 'conception' of God. An intellectual assent to that idea is held to be of itself sufficient to secure remission of sins....Cheap grace means the justification of sin without the justification of the sinner....Cheap grace is the preaching

of forgiveness without requiring repentance, baptism without church discipline, communion without confession, absolution without personal confession. Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without Jesus Christ, living and incarnate."<sup>3</sup> (Dietrich Bonhoeffer)

Many churches and religious leaders emphasize an instant in time when one becomes "born again" and "saved" by accepting Jesus as Lord. But conversion may not go much further than the altar. The lack of emphasis on a long-term personal transformation in a discipleship community serving the poor and working for justice is reflective of a religion that stunts faith at its conception.

Jesus is proclaimed as the risen Lord who is to be worshiped and as a heavenly Savior to be praised for dying on a cross. These "parts" of Jesus' identity are separated from all of Jesus' and God's liberating works. It is as if the history of God's liberating works and Jesus' life and ministry up to the time of his crucifixion are largely irrelevant to knowing who Jesus is. But Jesus never said, "Worship me and you will be saved." In fact, Jesus never said, "Worship me." But Jesus did say many times, "Follow me." Jesus desired that people follow him and, as disciples, incarnate his liberating practices. By so doing, then people would know God, then people could worship the living God. Religion that stresses worship of Jesus but not the imperative to follow and obey him is degenerative.

"A deep impulse throughout history, including in our present moment, is for the church to preserve the institution at the expense of fidelity to the gospel. Like the disciples who witnessed the transfiguration, we want to build a shrine and substitute worship for discipleship. Building or maintaining a shrine isn't risky. Discipleship is. Risk-free Christianity should be called by some other name. It is faith lived at the least common denominator. The church, with few exceptions, is good at building shrines and poor at discipleship."<sup>4</sup> (Jack Nelson-Pallmeyer)

To proclaim Jesus as Lord, but not to follow his ways and practices is idolatrous. It dis-empowers believers and makes Jesus into an idol perched in heaven, removed from personal and historical struggles.

## Q2: What are Jesus' new practices?

Church answers to question 2 often serve degenerative religion by minimizing the importance of Jesus' practices. Jesus' practices are treated in various ways. One view sees Jesus' practices as

supernatural miracles which cannot form the basis for normative practices among Christians. Thus Christians are excused from serious discipleship. Or Jesus' extraordinary power, and that exhibited by a few disciples, is downplayed. Either the biblical writer "exaggerated" it to support a lesson or it is relegated to a "special" time in the past - thus denying to believers the power of faith in our present time. The Sadducees, great supporters of the status quo, would have supported this view which tries to keep the power of God under wraps. Jesus' practices and in particular his teachings in the Sermon on the Mount are viewed by many religious leaders as idealistic, impractical for the present, and merely descriptive for a distant future time. At best one can derive from them generic moral principles to guide decision-making - which is a far cry from a summons to a unique Way of life. Following Jesus has often been portrayed as unrealistic for the "common" person - as if only professionals or a chosen few are called to such a vocation. Around the time of the Middle Ages, when the church hierarchy minimized the role of the laity, the monastic orders began to arise. While opening up space for more people to seek and serve God, the orders did not challenge the church as a whole. Low expectations of the laity encouraged a passive following. Another view translates Jesus' practices into pietistic disciplines. Instead of calling people to a holistic communitarian lifestyle, believers are encouraged to practice private individual disciplines in their spare time. Faith becomes private and personal, removed from issues of social injustice and societal conflict. These answers displace Jesus' leadership and encourage faith without discipleship.

### Q3: How shall the Messiah establish God's commonwealth on earth?

As a result of degenerative religion's answers to the first 2 questions, most believers view question 3 as an academic issue largely irrelevant to daily life. The churches' answers to question 3 do little to change that. The churches' pronouncements of God's kingdom are not "good news to the poor." (Lk. 4:18) Most answers place God's kingdom almost entirely in the future - to be established only at the end of time. The theology of premillennialism supports this. Premillennialism views history with some fatalism - looking for signs of humankind's apocalyptic demise which will usher in Christ's second coming and the establishment of Christ's "1000-year reign" on earth. Jesus' second coming is more closely associated with God's curse upon an unremittently evil humankind than with the extension of God's blessing and fruitfulness through making disciples of all nations. A narrow-minded view sees the few "pure and righteous" being saved

through a dramatic end-times rapture while the "evil pagan" people and world are doomed to destruction. Emphasis is placed on unmediated divine action as the faithful patiently keep watch, remain diligent against "backsliding," and evangelize to save a few souls. Efforts toward peacemaking, social justice, and reconciliation between enemy peoples are seen as naive - without hope for fulfillment.

Another answer may be associated with the theology of "two kingdoms." The kingdoms are: one of "worldly" temporal authority, the kingdom under the state, and one of spiritual authority, the kingdom of God. While locating God's kingdom both in the present (incomplete) and the future (complete) this view basically excludes the possibility of seeing the expansion of God's commonwealth on earth. This view creates a dualism of separate spheres for religious life and civic duties. Christians are to live in and serve both kingdoms. It encourages a fragmented lifestyle where believers serve the world, i.e., obey state authorities, and serve God, i.e., obey religious leaders. Rather than bearing an active, incarnational faith, believers often become passive followers of various human authorities. This view tends to foster a fatalistic view of history where believers, instead of being empowered co-creators of God's liberating commonwealth on earth, are passive pawns of larger forces shaping history towards a predetermined cataclysmic end.

Degenerative religion's answers to question 3 generally deny the immediacy of God's commonwealth, confess the churches' lack of faith in the world being redeemable, and portray God's commonwealth being established by divine action apart from believers' participation. By disassociating God's commonwealth from discipleship, religion stifles a living hope of the blossoming of God's commonwealth on earth - putting out the fire that fuels radical lifestyle changes based on an incarnational faith.

## Conclusion

Even in the "true religion" idolatry can be a prevalent reality. The Bible describes at length how the Hebrew faith became idolatrous through degenerative religion. Christianity too can become idolatrous. Can we see it?

Most of Christianity today in the United States is represented by a religion that fragments faith. The incarnational aspect of faith is



separated from a religion which emphasizes the liturgical and conceptual aspects. Most churches have departed from the gospel of Jesus which proclaims the immediacy of God's commonwealth. The call for repentance and deep-rooted conversion is muted by churches' mind-numbing answers to the 3 key questions of faith. Even Jesus can be turned into an idol by worshiping but not following and obeying him. Discipleship to Jesus is presented as a part-time endeavor, supporting a fragmented lifestyle. By neglecting the incarnational aspect of faith the possibility of living a holistic life of discipleship is seldom even discussed. It becomes clear that degenerative religion is not benign - it works against the development of incarnational faith communities. Degenerative religion always seeks to promote itself, seeks to ensnare new members, and directs people's energy, commitment, and devotion towards a false house of God. To be committed to a church or other religious institution that spreads degenerative religion is to be committed to idolatry. Being committed to such a church is not the same as laboring for the true house of God. For when the "cornerstone" is left behind, all such labor is in vain.

#### Footnotes

1. I was introduced to these 3 aspects of religion and how they can be separated by Fr. Charles McCarthy.
2. These 3 questions, with slightly different wording, are brought out in Fernando Belo's book, A Materialist Reading of the Gospel of Mark, Orbis Books, Maryknoll, NY, 1981.
3. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Cost of Discipleship, MacMillan Company, New York, NY, 1963, pp. 45-46.
4. Jack Nelson-Pallmeyer, Brave New World Order, Orbis Books, Maryknoll, NY, 1992, p. 154.

## Spirit of the Living God

Apathy

is no substitute

for justice

Complacency

cannot feed

the hungry

Indifference

will not cause wars

to cease

But

Righteous anger

awakens the spirit

Mourning

cleanses the soul

Sacrifice

disciplines the body

Righteous suffering

focuses the mind

Rage and rebellion

at injustice

speak more to living

than any proper business

for

Passion

is the hallmark

of a righteous God

The living God

is not silly putty

to fill in

spiritual holes

Nor did Jesus

suffer persecution

to puff up

pseudo-evangelists

Creator

of the universe

Liberator

of the slaves

Savior

of the downtrodden

Judge

of the hard-hearted

God of gods

Spirit of fire and water

Hear our plea:

Revive us

from the depths

of nothingness

Make us bearers

of your righteousness

to alleviate suffering

and to suffer unrighteousness

Strengthen our passion

for justice

and our compassion

for those who are suffering

Light our fire

Burn in us

without ceasing

all our days

Blaze a trail before us

'til your love brings forth

the everlasting commonwealth

and we meet together

with all the saints

in the holy city of God

All praise, honor,

and glory belong to

the one who is

the Alpha and the Omega

the First and the Last

the light

that will never go out

Praise to you Lord Jesus

forever and ever

(Amen and amen)