2

Reflections on No Other Gods

READINGS

The immense power of money has made it into the most powerful idol. Money has many characteristics of deity. It has power, it is omnipresent, gives us freedom, makes us feel guilty, can make changes in our lives and gives a sense of security. Unlike many idols in history, it actually has a visible power which can be seen at work every day, and that characteristic makes it especially attractive. It is the perfect god for a rationalistic society.

As an idol with actual power, money has both positive and negative features. It would be so much simpler if everything about money were evil. But money allows most of us to live comfortably. It makes possible higher education and artistic creation. It provides health care in ways never thought possible even fifty years ago. It allows us to travel great distances, and by virtue of electronic communication, allows us to be in contact with the whole world so that a sense of global community is emerging.

Unfortunately, it has also created complex problems. We measure the worth of people by what they earn. This method of evaluation creates some grotesque comparisons. Is a person who entertains us by singing or swinging a bat worth ten times as much to society as a high-school principal? People who are

The Golden Calf, by Ulrich Henn. Detail, bronze gate, west facade, Washington Cathedral.

unable to work in our competitive, highly skilled job market are considered only of marginal value, with a right to live at the lowest level which keeps them alive . . . .

The power of money as an idol is a formidable challenge to the religious community of Christians, whether Protestant, Catholic or Orthodox. The church has proclaimed the power of God revealed in Jesus Christ. A significant minority feels that God still has supreme power. Another segment says God is powerful, but the depth to which that is what they feel is questionable. The third group sees money as having the true power, and dismiss a belief in God as fantasy or weakness. For those who are trying to hold to a faith which believes in a transcendent God, the strain is great.

–Allen Hollis, in "A Study Paper on Money"[1]

* * * * *

Enticed by a dollar
some rebuff
the King of kings

In favor of a dollar
some reject
the Lord of lords

For the promise of a dollar
some turn aside
the Creator of the Universe

And God said,
"Thou shalt have no other gods before me"

Lois Shank Hertzler[2]

* * * * *

We live in an age of increasing self-awareness, a time when many are striving for honesty in emotions, desiring personal

[1] Used by permission of Wellspring.

[2] Used by permission of Loel Publishers.

growth, and seeking to realize the maximum of human potential. People today are more willing than ever to get in touch with and express their anger, to experience their sexuality guiltlessly, and to assert themselves in positive, self-caring ways. Yet many of these same emotionally emancipated people are stuck in self-defeating money traps. They engage in hidden money manipulations and are preoccupied with secret money obsessions that motivate much of their behavior. The way they deal with money seems incongruous with their otherwise liberated, humanistic life-style. For example, a man whose parents were both well-known psychiatrists relates that when he was a child, his parents talked freely in front of him about sex and aggression but went into the bedroom and closed the door when they discussed money.

—Herb Goldberg and Robert T. Lewis,
in *Money Madness*, p. vii [1]

* * * * *

The Next Time You Visit A Bank

Just walk into any bank, whether you're known there or not, go to the center of the lobby, keeping your hands at your side, stop, take about two minutes to turn around slowly and look at everything. Now, how do you feel? I'd be surprised if you would have feelings that strong even in a church. A bank is a modern day sacred place, and it evokes very strong culturally-ingrained reactions. Three things from my experience illustrate this.

First, as a banker I occasionally had reason to visit branch offices, sometimes taking friends with me. I would go behind the teller line for some reason, simply lifting the latch (I've never seen one that was secured by anything more than a simple latch) and walk through. My guests, however, wouldn't go near the back of the teller line; it was a taboo area. I could never even get them to put their little toe across.

[1] Copyright 1978 by Herb Goldberg and Robert T. Lewis. Used by permission of the publisher, William Morrow & Company, Inc.

Second, no promotion, scheme or display attracts attention when placed in a lobby. Paintings on display never sell, unless they are hanging near the loan officers desks where people sitting down have a chance to look at them. Even a TV set turned on during the World Series doesn't attract attention, unless it's in a window so people can see it from outside or in a corner far away from the bank transaction area.

Third and finally, a sociologist, Jane Prather, worked with me on a project where she was employed as a teller for three months. Jane noticed that within twelve feet of the bank entrance 95% of the customers would act in some way to show that they had a reason for being in the bank—like taking a pen out of a purse or reaching into a pocket for a wallet. And, of course, while waiting in line people almost never looked anywhere except straight ahead. Maybe we're all crooks and feel guilty about being in a bank.

Yeh, a bank is a strange place.

—Michael Phillips, in *The Seven Laws of Money*, p. 70[1]

QUESTIONS

1. List some of the reasons why your money is important to you. How does this help you understand why most of us tend to put our trust in our money and possessions?

2. It has been said that many of us find our self-identity through our money. What do you think this means? How does it relate to your life?

3. Ernest Becker says that money is the most perfect object we have to immortalize ourselves (building family fortunes, memorials, and esteem) thus making it a more fundamental drive in our lives than sex, which Freud proclaimed as most primary. In what ways is this true in your life and in the lives of persons you know?

4. Would you be willing to share honestly with two or three friends the details of your personal finances–how you make your money, how you have invested it, and how you spend it? What does your answer tell you about the importance you attach to money in your life?

5. What are some specific changes you could make in your financial situation to help restore God to his rightful place at the center of your life?

MEDITATION

"I wait for the Lord, my soul waits, and in his word, I hope. . ." *(Psalm 130:5)*

God of all creation, I wait for you expectantly as for the morning. Sitting comfortably with closed eyes. I put cares and concerns aside and know with a deep kind of knowing that your love enfolds me. As dawn breaks after night, my spirit lifts.

Quiet for relaxing body, emotions and mind.

How wonderful it is to know that you are waiting for each of us to come to you in prayer, and experience the marvelous gift of real and renewing communion with you.

Eternal and almighty God, it is easy to deny idolatry and quickly dismiss the thought of worshiping other gods. But idols can also be attitudes that are pervasive, subtle and difficult to uproot. Open my eyes to false gods. If money or power is central in my life, forgive me. If my trust is in possessions rather than in you, forgive me. Heal the fear, doubt and insecurity that may generate faith in the wrong things. Restore a wholesome perspective that puts you at the center. I know you will help me structure my life around lasting values. My hope is in you, the one true God.