

# Living in a Pluralistic Society

## Participants Guide



*"You shall have no other gods before me."*

*Deuteronomy 5:7*





# Living in a Pluralistic Society

## Idolatry and modern society

### Preface | Idolatry

#### IDOLATRY – A topical Bible study

Idolatry is one of the main themes of the Bible.

#### **Idolatry as the story of the Bible**

The entire story of the Bible can be seen as a struggle between true faith and idolatry.

#### **Idolatry in the beginning**

In the beginning, human beings were made to worship and serve God, and to rule over all created things in God's name (Gen. 1:26-28). Instead, we "fell into sin". When Paul sums up the "fall" of humanity into sin, he does so by describing it in terms of idolatry. We refused to give God glory (i.e. to make him the most important thing) and instead chose parts of creation to glorify in his place. *"They exchanged the glory of the immortal God... and worshipped and served created things rather than the creator."* (Rom. 1:21-25) In short, we totally reversed the original intended order. Human beings came to worship and serve created things, and therefore the created things came to rule over them. Death itself is the ultimate emblem of this, since we toil in the dust until finally we become just dust (Gen. 3:17-19).

#### **The Law against Idols**

The great sin of the Mosaic period is the making of a golden calf (Exod. 32), and the Mosaic law most emphatically forbid the use of any concrete "form" for the worship of God — whether it was meant to represent the Lord or not (Exod. 20:4; Deut. 4:12-19). When God made a covenant with Israel, he gave them a code of covenant behavior in Exodus 20-23, and it ended with a warning not to make *"a covenant with... their gods"* (v.32) lest they *"snare you"* (v.33).

Just like in Romans 1, this passage does not envision any "third" option. We will either worship the uncreated God, or we will worship some created thing (an idol). There is no possibility of our worshipping nothing. We will *"worship and serve"* (Rom. 1:25) something. Whatever we worship we serve, for it "snares" us. Therefore every human personality, every human community, and every human thought-form will be based on some ultimate concern or some ultimate allegiance to something.

#### **The Polemic against Idols**

The prophets, especially Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel, leveled an enormous polemic against the worship of idols. Some of the key elements in their teaching:

**1. First, an idol is empty, nothing, powerless.**

The idol is nothing but what we ourselves have made, the work of our own hands (Is. 2:8; Jer. 1:16). Thus an idol is something we make in *our* image. It is only, in a sense, worshipping ourselves, or a reflection of our own sensibility (Is. 44:10-13). It has no ability or power of its own (Is.41:6,7); it will eventually rot (Is. 40:20); it cannot tell the future nor control it (Is.41:22-24). Even within its own claims, each idol or god is only part of a pluralistic world. No idol is all-powerful and lord over every area of life. Every god is simply the god of this or that city, this or that vocation, this or that arena, this or that person. Everyone has his or her own gods. No god demands exclusive superiority over all of life and over all people.

Idols, then, contrast with the true God, who makes us in *his* image, who is not a reflection of our experience but one who shows himself through authoritative self-revelation. He is the only true God, the Lord of heaven and earth.

**2. Second, (paradoxically) an idol is all and only about getting power.**

Idolatry is so often associated by the prophets with social injustice (Amos 2:6-8). Why? Because the dynamic of idol worship was to achieve power and security by appeasing the god through rituals and good works. All systems of idolatry were always centered on localized dieties that were mediated by royal and priestly elites. This is why when Naaman went to Israel's God to get healed of leprosy, he went to the King of Israel with loads of money (2 Kings 5:6,7). The idols helped people "at the top" maintain the status quo. Idolatry is a way to perform and appease a god so it will give you security, influence, comfort, and power.

Idols, then contrast with the true God, who saves us completely by grace. Idols are manipulated by religion and performance, while God can only be responded to by repentance — a loss of power. While idolatry is the attempt to manipulate God to obtain power and security/salvation for oneself or one's group, the gospel is that we are saved by sheer grace, and thus we surrender ourselves in grateful love and become willing, sacrificial servants of everyone. We now become agents in God's kingdom which comes full of justice and mercy to all who are suffering.

**3. Third, an idol is a spiritually dangerous power which saps you of all power.**

Paradoxically, idols are seen by the Bible as terribly dangerous evil powers.

First, the idol brings about terrible spiritual blindness of heart and mind (Is.44:9,18). The idolater is self-deluded through a web of lies (Is.44:20). When we set our 'worship apparatus' in our hearts upon something smaller than the true God, it produces a 'delusional field' which causes us to live in deep denial of the truth and reality. This can be the delusion of an idol that makes something into a *psychological* idol — such as power, approval, comfort, or control. This can be the delusion of an idl that makes something into a *social-*

*cultural* idol — such as nationality (fascism), the state (socialism), reason (rationalism), science (empiricism), experience (existentialism), and infinity.

Second, the idol brings about slavery. Jeremiah likens our relationship to idols as a love-addicted person to his or her lover (Jer.2:25). We cannot help ourselves — we *must* follow our god. They poison the heart into complete dependence on the idol for salvation and hope (Is.44:17) and yet, when we are in trouble, they cannot save us (Jer.2:28). In Ezekiel 14:1-11, we have the unique term “*idols in their hearts*” which the people “*set before their face*” (v.3, 4). God says that we set up idols in our hearts, but he will seek to “*recapture the hearts of the people*” (v.5) This means that an idol is not primarily a material image, but some thing or relation or person or cause that we make the center of our hope and affection. It is that thing that we “*face*” with our whole being, that which absorbs our thoughts and imaginations.

### **The New Testament and Idolatry**

“ If ‘idolatry’ is the characteristic and summary Old Testament word for our drift from God, then ‘lust’ [inordinate desires], **epithumiai** is the characteristic and summary New Testament word for that same drift. (See summary statements by Paul, Peter, John, and James as Gal.5:16ff; Eph.2:3, 4:22; I Pet.2:11, 4:2; I John 2:16; James 1:14ff, where **epithumiai** is the catch-all for what is wrong with us.) The tenth commandment [against ‘coveting’, which is idolatrous, inordinate desire for something]... also... makes sin ‘psychodynamic’. It lays bare the grasping and demanding nature of the human heart, as Paul powerfully describes in Romans 7... the NT merges the concept of idolatry and the concept of inordinate, life-ruling desires... for lust, demandingness, craving and yearning are specifically termed ‘idolatry’ (Eph.5:5 and Colossians 3:5).

– David Powlison – “*Idols of the Heart and Vanity Fair*”

### **Sum: The sin under every sin.**

The Ten Commandments begin with two commandments against idolatry. Then comes commandments three to ten. Why this order? It is because the fundamental problem is always idolatry. In other words, **we never break commandments 3-10 without first breaking 1-2.**

“The principle crime of the human race, the highest guilt charged upon the world, the whole procuring cause of judgment, is idolatry. For although each individual sin retains its own proper feature, although it is destined to judgment under its own proper name also, yet they all fall under the general heading of idolatry... [All murder and adultery, for example are idolatry, for they arise because something is loved more than God — yet in turn, all idolatry is murder for it assaults God, and all idolatry is also adultery for it is unfaithfulness to God.] Thus it comes to pass, that in idolatry all crimes are detected, and in all crimes idolatry.”

– Tertullian, *On Idolatry* Chap. I

“There is not one in a thousand who does not set his confidence upon the works, expecting by them to win God’s favor and anticipate His grace; and so they make a fair of them, a thing which God cannot endure, since He has promised His grace freely, and wills that we begin by trusting that grace, and in it perform all works, whatever they may be.

– Excerpts from Martin Luther, *Treatise Concerning Good Works* (1520) (Part IX)

“All those who do not at all times trust God and do not in all their works or sufferings, life and death, trust in His favor, grace and good-will, but seek His favor in other things or in themselves, do not keep this [First] Commandment, and practice real idolatry, even if they were to do the works of all the other Commandments, and in addition had all the prayers, fasting, obedience, patience, chastity, and innocence of all the saints combined. For the chief work is not present, without which all the others are nothing but mere sham, show and pretense, with nothing back of them... If we doubt or do not believe that God is gracious to us and is pleased with us, or if we presumptuously expect to please Him only through and after our works, then it is all pure deception, outwardly honoring God, but inwardly setting up self as a false [savior]...”

– Part X. XI

“This faith, faithfulness, confidence deep in the heart, is the true fulfilling of the First Commandment. Without this there is no other work that is able to satisfy this Commandment. And as this Commandment is the very first, highest and best, from which all the others proceed, in which they exist, and by which they are directed and measured, so also its work, that is, the faith or confidence in God’s favor at all times, is the very first, highest and best, from which all others must proceed, exist, remain, be directed and measured...”

– Part IX

“Note for yourself, then, how far apart these two are: keeping the First Commandment with outward works only, and keeping it with inward trust. For this last makes true, living children of God, the other only makes worse idolatry and the most mischievous hypocrites on earth...”

– Part XII

**Point:** All people sin in general because we are sinners, but why do we sin in any particular instance? Luther — any sin is rooted in the inordinate lust for something which comes because we are trusting in that thing rather than in Christ for our righteousness or salvation. Therefore, in sin we are always ‘forgetting’ what God has done for us in Christ and instead are being moved by some idol. Luther says that to fail to believe God accepts us fully in Christ and to look to something else is a failure to keep the first commandment — love *God* with all the heart. Thus beneath any particular sin is the general sin of rejecting Christ-salvation and indulging in self-salvation.

**Belgic Confession Chapter 24**

“We believe that this true faith, being wrought in man by the hearing of the Word of God and the operation of the Holy Spirit, regenerates him and makes him a new man, causing him to live a new life, and freeing him from the bondage of sin. Therefore it is so far from being true that his justifying faith makes men remiss in a pious and holy life, that on the contrary without it they would never do anything out of love to God, but only out of self-love or fear of damnation. Therefore, it is impossible that this holy faith can be unfruitful in man; for we do not speak of a vain faith, but of such a faith which is called in Scripture a ‘faith working through love,’ which excites man to the practice of those works which God has commanded in His Word... We would always be in doubt, tossed to and fro without any certainty, and our poor consciences would be continually vexed if they relied not on the merits of our Savior.”

**Point:** Unless we believe the gospel, we will be driven in all we do — whether obeying or disobeying — by pride (“self-love”) or fear (“of damnation”) because we are serving God idolatrously. We are manipulating him for power with our good-works. Apart from ‘grateful remembering’ of the gospel, all good works are done then for sinful motives. Mere moral effort, may restrain the heart, but does not truly change the heart. Moral effort merely ‘jury rigs’ the evil of the heart to produce moral behavior, out of self-interest. It is only a matter of time before such a thin tissue collapses.

**Sum:** This means then, that *idolatry is always the reason we ever do anything wrong*. Why do we ever lie, or fail to love or keep promises or live unselfishly? Of course, the general answer is “because we are weak and sinful”, but the specific answer is always that there is something besides Jesus Christ that you feel you must have to be happy, something that is more important to your heart than God, something that is spinning out a delusional field and enslaving the heart through inordinate desires. So the secret to change is always to identify the idols of the heart.









**7. How does Daniel 1:1-2 seem to have the same perspective toward the exile as that of Jeremiah's letter? How can we apply this insight in general to troubles in our own lives? How can we apply this in particular to our own 'sojourn' as believers in an unbelieving culture?**

**8. Summary: Make a list of all the possible attitudes or stances to a pagan culture that believers may take.**







# Living in a pagan society: Five models

Daniel 1:1-21

## INTRODUCTION

At Mt. Sinai, God constituted Israel as a nation. In the history of Israel covered by the Bible, there were two eras in which they lived as believers in a pluralistic, pagan environment. First, when they got to Canaan, they failed to drive out the idol-worshipping people groups and, instead, settled in among them. Secondly, when Nebuchadnezzar defeated Jerusalem, he carried most of the Israelites off to live in the city and environs of Babylon. In both situations, believers did not live in a believing nation or culture, where the government, the arts, the cultural institutions were committed to the Lord and his Word and will. They lived in an environment where the dominant and privileged culture was pagan.

Christians in Europe and North America today live in a similar situation. Once, Christianity was privileged in society — it was the dominant culture. The government/culture was either formally or implicitly committed to the Bible and Christianity. But now that has changed, and we find ourselves in pluralistic culture. Therefore, we have been studying Judges and we are about to study Daniel, Esther, and Joseph (in Genesis). Last week we discussed the exile itself and the various reactions that the Jews had to it. Why? When we study these books we learn good and bad models for how believers can relate to an unbelieving, dominant culture. Before we plunge in to Daniel, let's take stock of what we've learned.

## MODEL 1 – THE “UN-CULTURE” – JUDGES 14-16

**“Accommodationist”** – In this model, believers simply give in and adopting the pagan culture's values and world-view, both internally (in their fundamental values and perspectives) and externally (by learning and adopting the customs and habits of dress, food, language). This is also an **“immigrant”** model. The immigrant comes to a new culture with the goal of blending in and losing any distinct identity. Judges gives us many sad examples of this. By the time of Samson (Judges 14-16), the Israelites were so accommodated to Philistine culture that they were within a generation of losing all distinct identity.

## MODEL 2 – THE “SUB-CULTURE” – JUDGES 17-18

**“Privatization”** – In this model, believers keep the external trappings of Christian faith and practice, but they adopt the more fundamental values and perspectives of the dominant culture. Often this is called ‘privatization’ because one's faith is kept to Sunday services externals and does not really shape the way we actually live. To use an obnoxious term, this may be called an **“oreo”** model, in which we are externally one way and actually another. For example, believers may not smoke or drink too much or have sex outside of marriage, yet in their core beings they may be as materialistic and selfish and individualistic, and status- or image-conscious as the society around. In this model, believers may even stay somewhat apart from unbelievers in various Christian ministries, yet they have just ‘sprinkled’ Bible verses and pious

language on a lifestyle that is fundamentally no different from those around them. Thus they are a “sub-culture” is just a sub-set of the dominant culture. The story of Micah and his mother is a perfect example. Though not externally and formally worshipping the Lord, the idolatrous attitude of the surrounding culture had penetrated them to their core. They sought to manipulate God into giving them prosperity and comfort through limited ‘buy-offs’ of the deity rather than surrender to his grace.

### MODEL 3 – THE “ANTI-CULTURE” – PSALM 137

**“Ghettoization and/or militancy”**. In this model, believers respond to the unbelieving culture with a sense of superiority and hostility. They feel highly polluted by the very presence of the unbelieving schools, entertainment, arts, and culture, and feel they cannot really function in the society without having the cultural power. This is the **“soldier”** model, in which believers consider themselves hostile visitors, seeking to undermine the culture. Some take a more passive approach and withdraw from any real interaction, just denouncing and bemoaning the moral decay, while others aim to get the cultural power back. Psalm 137 gave us a picture of people who are more angry than repentant over their new powerless situation, and who cannot envision how they can worship and function outside of the land where they had sovereignty.

### MODEL 4 – THE “PARA-CULTURE” – JEREMIAH 28

**“Revivalist”** – In this model, believers respond not with too much pessimism but too much optimism. They expect a miraculous, sweeping intervention by God which will convert many or most and explosively transform the culture. Therefore, instead of becoming deeply engaged with the society and people around them, working with others to roll back the troubles and problems, believers concentrate completely on evangelism and discipleship building up the church and their own numbers. Christians are pressed to go into ‘full-time ministry’ but not to become playwrights, artists, lawyers, or business people. They form a happy parallel alternative culture, with a goal of picking off individual converts and bringing them in. This is a **“tourist”** model in which the believers are just ‘passing through’, enjoying the society but not becoming involved. The prophet Hananiah in Jeremiah 28 is a great example of this kind of optimistic approach.

## MODEL 5 – THE COUNTER-CULTURE” – JEREMIAH 29

**“Engagement”** – In this model, believers engagement with the pagan culture and co-working with pagan people but in ways that reveal the distinctiveness of the values of the kingdom of God. If anything, they become very conversant with and adaptive to the dominant culture externally (language, customs), but they are at their core very different in the way they understand money, relationships, human life, sex, and so on. This is the **“resident aliens”** or **“colony of heaven”** model. Believers are truly resident, yet not seeking the power or approval of the dominant culture. Rather they show the world an alternative way of living and of being a human community. Jeremiah letter to the exiles in chapter 29 lays this model out. And Daniel, Esther, and Joseph show us how to live it out.

Harvie Conn has a marvelous way of putting this ‘model’:

“Perhaps the best analogy to describe all this is that of a model home. We are God’s demonstration community of the rule of Christ in the [unbelieving] city. On a tract of earth’s land, purchased with the blood of Christ, Jesus the kingdom developer has begun building new housing. As a sample of what will be, he has erected a model home of what will eventually fill the urban neighborhood. He now invites the... world into that model home to take a look at what will be. The church is the occupant of that model home, inviting neighbors into its open door to Christ. Evangelism is when the signs are up, saying ‘Come in and look around’... As citizens of, not survivalists in, this new city within the old city, we see our ownership as the gift of Jesus the Builder (Luke 17:20-21). As residents, not pilgrims, we await the kingdom coming when the Lord returns from his distant country (Luke 19:12). The land is already his... in this model home we live our out new lifestyle as citizens of the heavenly city that one day will come.

We do not abandon our jobs or desert the city that is... We are to “seek the peace and prosperity of the city” to which God called us in exile (Jer.29:7). And our agenda of concerns in that seeking becomes as large as the cities where our divine development tracts are found.”

## THE ONLY TRUE MODEL

The first two ‘models’ are over-adaptations (too close to the world) and the third and fourth model are under-engagements (too far from the world). These are not perfectly distinct categories of course, and nobody ‘gets it right’. Nobody except for one. Jesus Christ became really and fully human, one of us, completely “engaged” with us — yet without a bit of sin. The “incarnation” then becomes our ultimate model. We knew God was loving, wise, and holy, but Christ brought the love, wisdom, and holiness of God down and showed it to us in concrete form. That is what we are to do. Christians to be truly “incarnate” in the culture, yet our “citizenship” is in heaven (Phil.3:20). We are to bring the love, wisdom, and holiness into the midst of our culture, yet without sin.





- 4. 2:31-45. What might the following features of the dream mean? a) The four kingdoms are all parts of one image — and they are all broken “at the same time” (v.35) by the stone. b) They are increasingly strong yet less valuable and coherent. c) The image is pretty clearly an idol. d) How important do you think it is to determine what empire/civilization is represented by each metal section?**
- 5. 2:31-45. a) What differences between the kingdoms of the world and the new kingdom are indicated by the images of the statue and stone? List all you can tell about this coming kingdom from the dream. b) Why is the time of this new kingdom ‘set up’ given so vaguely (see v.44)?**
- 6. 2:27-48. What purposes or results did the dream accomplish?**







**4. vv.13-18. There is a remarkable balance in the striking answer of the young men to the king. a) How do they balance respect and defiance? b) How do they balance confidence and humility?**

**5. vv.19-25. a) What two things amaze Nebuchadnezzar? b) cf. 1 Peter 1:12-14. What does this incident teach us about going through 'fiery' trials?**

**6. vv.28-30. Compare what Nebuchadnezzar knows about God now with what he knew in 2:46-49.**











**10. Read the following quotes. a) What are the marks of pride in this classic Christian teaching? b) How does Nebuchadnezzar illustrate the marks of pride (see esp. 4:30)? What do we learn about human pride in this passage? What harm did it cause Nebuchadnezzar? How did God heal it? c) What are your main temptations to pride?**

Pride is faith in the idea that God had when he made us. Most people are not aware of any idea God had in the making of them... or else it has been lost, and who shall find it again? They have got to accept as success what others decide success is, and to take their happiness, even their own selves, at the quotation of the day."

– Isaak Dinesen

Pride... leads to every other vice. It is the complete anti-God state of mind...

1) Pride is essentially competitive... Pride gets no pleasure out of having something, only out of having more of it than the next man. We say that people are proud of being rich, or clever, or good-looking, but they are not. They are proud of being richer, or cleverer, or better-looking than others...

2) Pride can often be used to beat down the simpler vices. Teachers often appeal to a boy's Pride (or, as they call it, his self-respect) to make him behave more decently: many a man has overcome cowardice or lust or ill-temper by learning to think that they are beneath his dignity. The devil laughs. He is perfectly content to see you becoming chaste and brave and self-controlled provided he is setting up in you Dictatorship of pride... For Pride is spiritual cancer: it eats up the very possibility of love, or contentment, or even common sense.

3) Pleasure in being praised is not Pride. The child who is patted on the back for doing a lesson well, the woman whose beauty is praised by her lover, the saved soul to whom Christ says 'well done', are pleased and ought to be. For here the pleasure lies not in what you are, but in the fact that you have pleased someone you wanted (and rightly wanted) to please. The trouble begins...the more you delight in yourself and the less you delight in the praise [and the pleasure of the praise-er]. That is why vanity, though it is the sort of Pride that shows most on the surface, is really the least bad... sort. The vain person wants praise, applause, admiration too much and is always angling for it... It shows that you are not yet completely contented with your own admiration... The real diabolical Pride comes when you look down on others so much that you do not care what they think of you...

Do not imagine if you meet a really humble man he will be what most people call 'humble' nowadays: he will not be... always telling you that, of course, he is nobody. Probably all you will think about him is that he seemed a cheerful, intelligent chap who took a real interest in what you said to him. If you do dislike him, it will be because you feel a little envious of anyone who seems to enjoy life so easily. He will not be thinking about humility: he will not be thinking about himself at all. [*Real humility is not thinking less of yourself, but thinking of yourself less.*]

4) In God you come up against something which is in every respect immeasurably superior to yourself. Unless you know God as that — and, therefore, know yourself as nothing in comparison — you do not know God at all. As long as you are proud you cannot know God. A proud man is always looking down on things and people: and, of course, as long as you are looking down, you cannot see something that is above you. That raises a terrible question. How is it that people who are quite obviously eaten up with Pride can say they believe in God and appear to themselves very religious? I am afraid they are worshipping an imaginary God... Whenever we find that our religious life is making us feel that we are good — above all, that we are better than someone else — I think we may be sure that we are being acted on, not by God, but by the devil.

– C.S. Lewis, “The Great Sin” in [Mere Christianity](#)



# Living in a Pluralistic Society

## The writing on the wall

### Study 19 | Daniel 5:1-31

- 1. vv.1-4. a) What hints are there that this party is more frenetic than is ordinary?**  
**b) Considering the fact that an army took over Babylon that night, what might the reason for the party have been?**
- 2. How can entertainment and recreation function in a similar way in the lives of us today?**
- 3. vv.5-9. Why is Belshazzar more terrified, seemingly, than Nebuchadnezzar ever was (v.6 and v.9)? How does this manifestation of God compare with those to Nebuchadnezzar? Read Exod.19:9-22, Is.6:1-8, and Heb.12:18-24,28. Why is this response typical? What does it teach us about God and ourselves?**

**4. vv.10-12. Commentators have noted how odd it is that 'the queen' comes in though all the king's wives are in the hall (v.2-3). Also, she comes in without permission (cf. Esther 4:11). a) Who might she be? b) What role does she play in the story?**

**5. vv.18-24. What four things is Belshazzar accused of?**

**5. How does God write on our wall? What are some of the ways he shows us our pride, our assumption of divine perogatives for ourselves?**











