

# Dethroning the idols

OUR IDOLATRY – PROSPERITY, EDUCATION – RUNS SO DEEP WE DON'T SEE IT.

**D**r Mike Goheen occupies the Geneva Chair of Reformational Worldview Studies at Trinity Western University, Langley, British Columbia, and is a teaching fellow in mission at Regent College, Vancouver. A long-time pastor and lecturer, he seeks to communicate the concept of “worldview” in a new (post or late modern) era, to many different confessional traditions. He lives with his wife of 31 years, Marnie, in British Columbia, and has four adult children, and two grandchildren. He spoke with Peter Hastie recently in Sydney.

## **Mike, in what sense do all societies live out of some sort of story, and what role does this story play in our lives?**

Peter, I think there are two ways that you can talk about the place of story in our lives. The first kind of story is the actual history of which we are a part. So, when we talk about this sort of story we are talking about a certain understanding of our history. For example, Australia, Canada, and Europe share in a common story in the sense that we all have similar historical roots. We are related to one another in a cultural and historical connectedness. Each of our national histories has been influenced by some very significant events during the Enlightenment. That is one way of speaking about our story.

Another way to speak about the story is to regard it as our own particular interpretation of that history. When you go back and tell your story, the particular perspective that you bring often shapes



**Mike Goheen**  
talks to  
**Peter Hastie**

your identity as well. In this sense we are shaped by both kinds of stories. While many of us may not fully understand the influence of the Enlightenment on our culture, the story that is derived from it has profoundly shaped our identities. At the same time, our own national history has shaped us too.

Prior to the past few decades, the story that you found in the history books is the Enlightenment story of progress. It is the story about how Western culture finally reached its heights in European culture. This story became popular around the beginning of the 20th century. In more recent times we are not really proud of that story any more. Nowadays, we are more conscious of the oppression involved in much of the industrial revolution, in colonialism, and in the racism that grew out of some Enlightenment views.

Many people today want to create a new story to explain our history and our basic identity. Whether we think of our national history or our understanding of how our culture has shaped us, we need to realise that our fundamental beliefs are always being shaped by the way we tell the story about our history to this point.

**The early Christians thought of themselves as a “new race”. Does this imply that the identity of the**

**early Christians was shaped by an entirely different story that explained the ancient world?**

Yes, that's true. The Christian faith has its own story to explain this world in which we live. It is a story that centres in the person of Jesus Christ. Christians claim that Christ and His gospel are the clue to understanding this world. Christians believe that the great realities which shape life on earth are the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, the gift of the Holy Spirit, and the promise of the new heavens and the new earth.

Christians believe that the Bible contains the key to helping us understand the great events which have shaped world history and life in the present. However, the modern story that we have in the West takes its cue not from the story of Christ but from the claims of science and technology. Naturally, there are many elements in this story that contain some truth. However, the story of modern science is not the true story and is, to some degree, shaped by Western idolatry.

It is inevitable that Christianity will always be in conflict with the prevailing cultural story. For instance, in the first 300 years of the church's life, Christians believed that they were a distinctive people shaped by a different story. In fact, this conviction meant that they would often spend several years catechising adult converts so that they would be able to live consistently within this different story. The early Christians were quite deliberate in saying “no” to the story of the Roman Empire and its pagan explanation of life and “yes” to the

story of the Bible. When they saw themselves as the “third race” they were rejecting the idea that they were pagans living out of the Roman story or Jews who were living solely out of the story of the Old Testament. Instead, they were expressing the conviction that the meaning to life was to be found in the Jewish Messiah, Jesus Christ.

By rejecting the Roman story and the partial Jewish one, they were clinging to the story that we find in the Old and New Testaments, which points to Christ as the fulfillment of all of God’s purposes. By believing in Him, they saw themselves as the third race.

**Is this how we are meant to understand Augustine’s *City of God* – an attempt to demolish the Roman story and provide a new Christian meta-narrative to explain the world as we know it?**

Absolutely. I think that is exactly what he is doing. In the first half of *The City of God* he deconstructs the pagan story upon which the Roman Empire was built. Then in the second half of the book he sets out the biblical story which begins with the creation and ends with the final judgment and the revelation of God’s eternal city. Augustine played a huge role in making the Christian story a dominant force in the development of Western culture.

Augustine’s *City of God* was an enduring influence for more than a thousand years. It was the most widely read book throughout that period and impressed itself on medieval culture in a profound way. The interesting thing about all the forces that have contributed to Western culture – Judaism, Christianity, Islam, and Humanism – is that they all understand the world in terms of a story. It is Augustine’s book, *The City of God*, which has been the most powerful expression of the Christian story on Western culture.

**Should Christians be attempting a similar project to Augustine’s in the modern world?**

Yes, I think so. There is a book that has come out recently called *Who Gets to Narrate the World?* by Robert Webber. Webber was dying of cancer and he felt a tremendous need to produce this book. Why did he do this? Why didn’t he spend the time with his wife and children when he was dying? He said that he had to produce the book because it involved the

most important question facing the Western world today. Webber was simply pointing out that the most important task in life is to interpret the world from God’s perspective. The problem is that everyone else wants to tell the story and explain it from their own angle. Secularists want to explain life in terms of the Enlightenment. Muslims think that their story is the most powerful global story around. However, Christians believe that the story that we find in the Bible provides the key to the meaning of life.



**FOR INSTANCE, IN THE FIRST 300 YEARS OF THE CHURCH’S LIFE, CHRISTIANS BELIEVED THAT THEY WERE A DISTINCTIVE PEOPLE SHAPED BY A DIFFERENT STORY.**

Humanism and Islam are not telling the true story of the world; only the Bible does.

This is why I believe that Augustine was engaged in a vital spiritual task. He was narrating the world from the standpoint of the Bible.

**What is it about the biblical story that is so powerful?**

The biblical story shapes us at an individual level so that it leads us to personal conversion. However, it does more than that. It provides the whole context for our life and orientation. It begins with the creation and ends with the renewal of the universe. It gives meaning and shape to history. As such, this story must not only touch us as isolated individuals; it must shape the way we think and behave as we engage with the world. It affects the way we view politics, how we behave with our finances, the way we approach sport, the way we look at art and how we understand marriage. The Bible controls every aspect of life in the world. This explains why it is so important to understand the Bible as a story.

The problem is that if our lives are not being directed by the biblical story, then Western culture will provide the default story for us. This is a serious problem because Western culture is largely shaped by idolatry. Many Christians do not realise that we are deeply compromised by the idols of our culture. If this is so, and we are serving other gods (even though we think we are Christians), it becomes impossible to bear a serious witness to the coming kingdom of God.

**If we want to think of the Bible as a story, where do we start?**

Probably the best place to start is with the coming of Jesus Christ in the Gospels. After all, He is the clue to interpreting the story of the Bible. Personally, I would start with either Mark or Luke’s Gospel. Mark is the shortest of the Gospels and is the easiest to read, however, Luke has the biggest sense of the story. I would have loved to have been there in Emmaus in Luke 24 where Jesus explained how He was the focus of the law, the prophets and the writings of the Old Testament.

The other thing I tell my students is that if they want to see the skeletal outline of the Bible story, they should read the books of Genesis, Exodus, Numbers, Joshua, Judges, Samuel, Kings, Ezra and Nehemiah. Then they should read the Gospels, one or all of them. I have said to them, “If you have read those books, you have the major outline of the Bible story.” The interesting thing about reading the Bible is that while we may have difficulty grasping some of its doctrines, we can still live in the light of its overall story. I thank God that the story of Scripture is more powerful than our bad hermeneutics. I can think of people who are deeply committed Christians who, despite some unusual views, have nevertheless soaked themselves in the story of the Bible. Their lives have been profoundly shaped by the account of what God has done in and through Christ. So reading the basic storyline of the Bible and absorbing it is critical to our spiritual growth.

**Are there certain major events in the story that we need to grasp?**

Yes, there certainly are. The key elements of the biblical story are creation, fall, and restoration. The Bible is essentially a story about God restoring the human race and the entire creation

to Himself. Of course there are many images that are used in the Bible to describe its promise of salvation. Some of the more common terms are redemption, renewal, reconciliation and restoration, to name just a few. However, what we need to remember is that the Bible story is one of salvation; it provides the account of how God restores His creation by delivering it from the power, condemnation and effects of sin.

If you ask me whether there are certain images that are more helpful than others in understanding God's work of restoring the creation to himself, I think the terms covenant and kingdom are particularly illuminating in helping us to understand the meaning of the biblical story.

**How does covenant unlock the meaning of the biblical story for us?**

Herman Ridderbos, a Dutch theologian, once used an image of a cathedral in describing Paul's theology. He said that you can enter the old cathedrals of Europe in many different ways. They all have a number of entry points that will take you into the heart of the building. I think the same is true of the Old Testament. It has a number of entry points that will take you to its central message, but as my colleague, Craig Bartholomew, says, "while it is good to be able to get into the cathedral through any number of doors, the most obvious one is the front door". He argues quite

convincingly that the front door, or entry porch, into the Old Testament is found in the ideas of covenant and kingdom.

The term covenant has to be understood against the backdrop of the covenants of the Old Testament. The notion of covenant reminds us that God is someone who makes binding promises to His people and calls them to respond



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in faith, love and obedience. To be in relationship with God is a solemn thing. We are obliged to commit ourselves in love and obedience to Him in response to His promises.

**Are there certain events in the Bible that are absolutely crucial to its power as a story?**

Yes, there certainly are. God's creation of the world and our fall into sin are definitive events in the Bible. We don't have a biblical story if we do not believe that God created the world out of nothing. Creation is the starting-point for everything. It is not surprising that the doctrine of creation is often fiercely opposed by non-Christian thinkers. The same is true for the fall. You undermine the Christian faith when you challenge the biblical account of our fall into sin in Genesis 3.

Other key events in the Bible are God's mighty acts of salvation, seen in the book of Exodus. These events displayed God's power at work in redeeming His people. Again, the conquest of the Promised Land is an important event, as is the establishment of the kingdom of Israel. So, too, are the events of the exile and the return.

Naturally, the most important event of all was the coming of Christ. His incarnation, death and resurrection provide the key to understanding God's plan to restore the whole creation, as is the outpouring of the Spirit at Pentecost and the return of Jesus. So the great events which provide meaning to our lives are best summarised as creation, fall, redemption and ultimate restoration.


**To what extent has the church underestimated the impact of creation and the fall for its own sense of story?**

For some time now, evangelicals have focused their theology mainly around redemption. Many within the Protestant community have a very poor view of the biblical account of creation. In the mid-1980s, as a young Presbyterian pastor, I started reading an important book by Al Wolters on world view called *Creation Regained*. As I was reading the section on creation, I realise that I had a very narrow view on what it meant. For me, creation was what happened at the beginning when God made the world. It was a distant past event. However, I discovered it was much more than that. It required me to see God's hand and ordering in everything. The fact that God upholds and sustains all things not only relates to the natural world but it also undergirds the whole of my spiritual life. Sadly, this conviction that God is upholding everything moment by moment has been deeply eroded since the time of the Enlightenment.

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**In what sense did the Enlightenment pose a challenge to the biblical doctrine of creation?**

The Enlightenment was intolerant of any idea of Christian revelation and asserted the primacy of reason and the scientific method. This meant that people were vulnerable to scientific theories that masqueraded as truth, especially when they appeared to contradict the Bible.

**For example, was this true of the theory of evolution?**

I think the theory of evolution in the long run is an attempt to answer a deep worldview question. And, evolution as a worldview is more dangerous than evolution as a scientific theory. Of course, both of them are dangerous. Evolution is an attempt to answer the deepest question of our lives: where did we come from? It offers an answer which, in its classical form, discounts any need for God. I think the influence of evolution has had a corrosive effect on Christian thought, even for those who may regard the Genesis account of creation as a true and historical record of how the world began. It's possible to defend a six-day creation but to spend much of your life living with a worldview that is largely shaped by evolutionary assumptions. I know that was true of me in my early Christian life.

I grew up in an evangelical church, loved Jesus and wanted to serve Him. However, I had no sense of what it meant to live in God's creation. I would have said that God was present with me in my devotions when I prayed to Him and had fellowship with Him. Nevertheless, for me, God was someone who was outside the natural order.

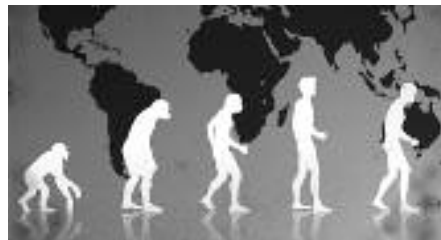
**So you were living as a deist?**

Yes, in many ways I was. I have a friend who says that almost all Christian evangelicals in the West are functional deists to some degree. For the most part, we do not really understand the impact of the doctrine of creation. This is something with which I struggle constantly. I think it is part of my sanctification. I have been so affected by the spirit of the age that I will struggle all my life to be able to see God's hand in the growing grass and the melting ice. In other words, I'm going to have trouble saying with the Psalmist, "He makes grass grow for the cattle and plants for man to cultivate" (Psalm 104:14). The theory of evolution has had a very subtle

effect on the whole church and often we are unaware of it.

**You have mentioned the corrosive influence of modern science on some of the key elements of the biblical story. Were there other forces that arose at the time of the Enlightenment that have robbed the biblical narrative of its power?**

Yes, there were other influences that undermined the power of the biblical story. Hans Frei wrote a book called, *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative*. Frei says that up until the 18th century the church had always seen the Bible as a story that shaped people's lives. However, from the



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18th century onwards, scholars began to look at the Bible from a totally different perspective. They approached it from a naturalistic point of view. They saw it first and foremost as a human document, no different from any other piece of literature. Using the tools of higher criticism, liberal scholars lost interest in the overall story of the Bible and looked at it in terms of its sources and textual traditions. They broke it down into little textual bits. Evangelical scholars did much the same when they focused on certain parts of the Bible to warm their hearts. They broke it down into small devotional bits. So the biblical narrative was eclipsed.

What led to this approach? I think one of the things that led to it was a new way of looking at the world. Sir Isaac Newton was a very influential figure who said that if you want to understand the world you need to break it down into its smallest bits, or atoms. Once you

broke the world down into its most basic parts, you then understood the relationship of those parts in terms of the laws that brought them together. Newton's worldview began to affect every area of knowledge. For instance, it had an immediate effect on economics. People looked at economics by approaching it from the point of view of the individual consumer and then the economic laws that held those consumers together.

John Locke applied the same principle in politics by looking at the individual and his rights and then relating those conclusions to government. This view of breaking down a body of knowledge into its smallest bits as the best way to understand it as a part of reality began to shape the way that people approached the Bible. Scholars thought that if they could break down the Bible into little bits and understand those little bits using the methods of the natural sciences, then somehow they could understand the Bible better.

**Are there other influences that have come from the Enlightenment that have undermined the influence of the biblical story?**

I think one of the most powerful forces that was unleashed in the Industrial Revolution following the Enlightenment was the notion that man's highest end was achieved through economic prosperity. This is an enormously powerful force that has been multiplied in its effect by globalisation.

What few people realise is that Western culture began making choices during the 18th century that were based on the idea that human progress was to be measured by material prosperity. Paul sounds a warning three times in the first chapter of his letter to the Romans, where he warns us that God gives people over to what they desire when they want to serve created things rather than the Creator Himself. In the post-Enlightenment period, the West decided that the pursuit of material wealth and a growing economy was the social ideal.

The Industrial Revolution in the 19th century was the first step towards realising that vision. The second step was the creation in the 20th century of the consumer society. Tragically, we have not heeded God's warnings. We have pursued economic prosperity above all else and God has given us over



to our desires. Now, in the 21st century, we have discovered that setting our hearts on ever increasing wealth is far from satisfying. It has left us empty. I think one of the best ways of thinking of the creed of Western culture is the song by the Rolling Stones, "I can't get no satisfaction..."

Of course, there are other forces such as technology which are also very powerful. These are all good aspects of God's creation but we have allowed them to become our idols. This has meant that we have elevated them to an improper status and, in the process, have surrendered the biblical story.

**How has the Enlightenment affected our understanding of religion and morality?**

The key to understanding the Enlightenment is to recognise that it presented a different story of the world than the Bible. The Enlightenment gave birth to the story that human beings can build a better, more prosperous and freer world through science and technology. The leaders of the Enlightenment believed that man had the capacity to create his own paradise on earth through human ingenuity. What happened then was that the Enlightenment's story of the world came into conflict with the biblical story.

When a head-on collision between two comprehensive stories takes place, there are only a few options as to what can happen. The first is that one story will win and the other story will die out. The second option is that one story will assimilate major parts of the other story so that a new story is created from the two earlier ones. The third option, and this is what I think happened when the Enlightenment and biblical stories collided, is that the biblical story gave up its comprehensive claim to truth and tried to accommodate itself to the modern scientific view of the Enlightenment. It seems to me that many Christians have settled for option three. They have assumed that the modern scientific view of life is the true one and then have tried to fit their religion into that. This has meant that Christianity is confined exclusively to the spiritual realm, to matters of theology and ethics. It has no place in the public square. It is a private religion.

**How has the church's ignorance of the Enlightenment world view affected modern Christian thought?**

I think the first thing that we can say is that the liberal Protestant church has settled on option three. Liberal scholars have tried to make the Bible fit into the Enlightenment story. Incidentally, there are many evangelicals who are being seduced into a similar line of thinking. The reason for this is that they do not see the Bible as opposing the Enlightenment story.

The problem that the church faces whenever it accommodates its own story to that of the Enlightenment is that it has less and less to say about all of life. When evangelicals accept the comprehensive claims of the Enlightenment, they narrow their interest to subjects

so much like the world these days when it has surrendered its claim to the absolute truth of the biblical story.

I think this explains why evangelicals, in particular, have conformed so much to the world in recent times. When we ignore major parts of the biblical story and narrow the scope of the Gospel to personal matters of salvation, we miss the idea that salvation involves the renewal of the entirety of our lives as well as the whole creation.

**You mentioned earlier that the Enlightenment has nurtured the vision that the goal of society is material prosperity. Has this goal become an idol even to many Christians?**

Paul tells us in Romans 1 that idolatry involves taking a good part of the creation and arranging your life around it so that it becomes the centre of your reality. Now there is nothing inherently wrong with wealth but there is if you set your heart upon it rather than upon God. And this is what has happened in the West over the last two centuries.

In 1776, Adam Smith, a Scottish ethicist, wrote an important book, *The Wealth of Nations*. Smith looked at the incredible poverty and despair in Europe and asked the question, "How can we feed these people? How can we give them the basics of life?" This is a legitimate question for any Christian to ask. His answer was, "We have to build a growing economy that will lead to greater prosperity. That prosperity, in turn, will enable us to make more and more goods and these will gradually trickle down to the common man."

Smith's solution to the problem was to use more technology and make people as efficient as possible in producing goods. The key to greater prosperity was the specialisation and mechanisation of labour. His vision was translated into the Industrial Revolution, and sure enough, prosperity began to grow.

The problem was that while material abundance is a worthwhile pursuit, it should never become the ultimate goal of human society. When we make economic prosperity our supreme aim, we engage in idolatry. The problem today is that the West, under the economic and technological forces that were unleashed by the Enlightenment, has made material progress the measure of everything. Our standard of living has become the way we judge whether we have made a worthwhile contribution to



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like theology or ethics. They no longer see the importance of the biblical story for other aspects of living such as economics, law, sport, music and art. These are all important areas of life which will be deeply affected by the story in which we live, whether the biblical one or that of the Enlightenment.

When we conform the biblical story to the story of the modern West, we see our role as Christians as being polite, kind and loving people. We individualise our ethics and focus exclusively on the personal fruits of the Spirit. If we adopt this approach, it is fairly easy to fit comfortably into the Enlightenment story. Once we do that, we can then live by their economics, their politics, their view of sport and the arts. In other words, once we surrender the comprehensive truth claims of the Christian stories, it is relatively easy to conform to the ways of the world. It is hardly surprising that the church looks

our society. At the end of each year in Canada, we are judged on how large our GDP was. We don't think in terms of the number of people who remained faithful in marriage, or whether husbands were more loving to their wives, or how many friendships we made, or whether we played sports more fairly. We don't get any of that; we are judged according to economic growth measures.

The whole of Western society is driven by this materialist vision. When we personally subscribe to that goal of material prosperity, it becomes our ultimate aim, and we are guilty of idolatry. One writer has compared this to a beehive. Everything revolves around the queen bee. She rules the culture and the whole beehive is dedicated to enabling her to do her work. The beehive principle works in the West when all of the culture is driven by the one goal of material prosperity and the economic forces necessary to get there. Sadly, this affects all aspects of society including education. Education is now one of the drones around economics where the whole goal of education is seen in terms of helping kids get good jobs.

**How should the Christian story affect the way we educate children?**

The first thing we must do is realise that the kinds of schooling that we have today are about 150 years old. Second, we need to see that the forms of schooling that we have are deeply shaped by the Enlightenment view of the world. Did you realise that the Enlightenment produced more educational treatises in the 18th century than all 17 centuries before? Why? Well, people realised that a better education was the first step to building this new world of science and technology. So the kind of education we have today is a relatively recent invention. If you look at the curriculum of modern education and the social goals that are set out there you can see that they have grown from the Enlightenment worldview. The problem for Christians is that we have been handed this huge tradition of modern education and it is a very powerful one.

**So how should Christians deal with it?**

Take the example of curriculum. Frankly, I don't think we have the option to draw up an entirely different curriculum. I think that what Christians are called to do in the educational

process is to dialogue with curriculum from within the Christian story. Christians need to ask questions such as, "What insights does modern science have into creation," and "How have those insights been twisted to tell the wrong story? How have they been twisted by our idolatry?"



**THE WEST, UNDER THE ECONOMIC AND TECHNOLOGICAL FORCES UNLEASHED BY THE ENLIGHTENMENT, HAS MADE MATERIAL PROGRESS THE MEASURE OF EVERYTHING.**

If someone asked me to take a state curriculum, I would cover all the material but I would be constantly asking questions from within the Christian story. I would be asking, "How has the Enlightenment story been shaping those insights?" I once had a

Year 12 teacher, whose students were about to sit a major state exam, say to me, "You know, if I actually began a dialogue between the biblical worldview and the state curriculum, there would be a number of consequences. First, the kids would have a far more interesting education. Second, they would be thinking far more analytically and critically. And third, they would all develop a more Christian mind. The kids would be sharper thinkers and become more mature Christians. It would be great!" Then he said, "The trouble is that we would only get half way through the state curriculum because we would be doing it at a far deeper level and my students wouldn't get the best possible results." He sought his principal's advice about it and the principal said, "You can't do it because the families will stop sending their kids to the school. They're here to get the best marks in the state exams so they can get into a good university, get a good job, and participate in a consumer society."

Sadly, this shows how even the Christian community is caught up in modern Western consumerism. The challenge for Christians is to dialogue with modern curriculum from the perspective of the Bible, to discover what truths we share in common and how many of the modern insights have been twisted by the wrong story. ap

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