

## Idolatry and the church: Towards an old paradigm for describing how Christians relate to a pagan culture

Blurb: The terms "liberal" and "conservative" are common terms for expressing how Christians choose to interact with culture, but it seems that they are becoming increasingly devoid of any objective meaning. I would like to explore how the early Christians were instructed to relate to their surrounding culture, with the instructions in the Old and New Testament about idolatry as a starting point.

### Introduction

If we were to look at the doctrinal statements from 10 protestant churches (without showing their names), I believe that we would be struck by how similar they are. There would be differences, to be sure, enough that we might be able to guess whether they were dispensational or covenant, Calvinist or Arminian. We could probably even categorize some within a particular denominational association: Lutheran, Methodist, Presbyterian, or Baptist.

However, if you were to inquire about their morning worship service, I doubt whether anyone would ever think to say, "We have a Baptist worship service," or a "Presbyterian worship service." This is not to say that what happens between 11am and noon in our local churches is identical. It's simply that those terms might not communicate much.

Instead, we might describe a service as "formal" or "casual," but for the last several decades, these terms have given way to terms like "conservative" or "contemporary." Sometimes a single church will hold two morning services, not simply to handle the number of people who want to come, but to provide two different kinds of worship services.

I happen to be a member of a (small), independent Baptist church. If you asked me about our worship service, I would probably tell you it is "conservative."

However, some time ago I became curious about whether "conservative" was really the best word to use to describe the underlying thinking behind my choices, not just in worship, but with my relationship with culture in general.

Around the same time, for reasons not worth detailing here, I became especially interested in working through the passages in Scripture that dealt with liberty. Some people seemed to be especially fond of it, and other people seemed to be very wary of it. Their perspective on Christian liberty seemed to correspond to their stance towards culture.

Furthermore, it seemed that Christian liberty had to be more than something that could be misused or abused. If there was a misuse of it, there had to be a proper function of it as well. I started reading Galatians, Romans 14-15, and 1 Corinthians 8-10 over and over. But especially 1 Corinthians 8-10, and then increasingly wider ranges of the book. Over time, a particular picture started to emerge about how Paul thought—and how he wanted Christians to think. And other

parts of the New Testament and the Bible as a whole started to fill in with harmony that matched the melodic line.

In some cases, the lines of thought led me away from ideas I had held previously. In other cases, ideas I already held were upheld, but sometimes for different reasons than I had expected.

### Culture as what is “normal”

Most dictionaries give quite similar definitions of culture. Merriam-Webster provides the following:

1. the customary beliefs, social forms, and material traits of a racial, religious, or social group; *also* : the characteristic features of everyday existence (such as diversions or a way of life) shared by people in a place or time (e.g. popular *culture*, Southern *culture*)
2. the set of shared attitudes, values, goals, and practices that characterizes an institution or organization (e.g. a corporate *culture* focused on the bottom line)
3. the set of values, conventions, or social practices associated with a particular field, activity, or societal characteristic
4. the integrated pattern of human knowledge, belief, and behavior that depends upon the capacity for learning and transmitting knowledge to succeeding generations.

While these details are worthwhile, I’m going to propose an easier, more portable definition for “culture”:

“what’s normal around here.”

Culture is whatever makes a community of people accept certain actions (and reactions) as “normal.” Culture establishes what is deemed acceptable or unacceptable, the approval an individual receives for operating within normal boundaries, and the range of sanctions for those who move beyond those boundaries. Culture determines how much deviation from the “norm” is acceptable, and when such change is beyond the pale. It guides how and how long members of a community feel comfortable within their social setting.

Culture includes how we greet one another. When you tip and how much. What chair you select in a room (depending on who else is present). Whether you pay to use a public restroom, or whether a restaurant charges for water. Symbols exist because of culture, because the normal meaning associated with an object must be shared by a community in order for it to be more than a mere object or picture. It includes the unwritten rules of communication, customs, and manners that helps a society hold together.

Oddly enough, all of us get used to different kinds of “normal.” There’s a normal for home, for school, for the office, for visiting your grandparents. Actions you would (or would not) do. Things you would—or would not—say. The older and more experienced we get, the more versatile we are in moving from one “bubble” of normal to another.

Where did all these different “normals” come from? Why are human cultures so different?

## Culture and idolatry

In the beginning, God created two human beings, male and female, in his image yet finite, and He gave them dominion over His created order. The first example of this dominion was Adam's assigning names to all the animals. From that point on, the name Adam chose was its name. A first normal was established.

Adam also discovered that there was a certain divine order to the world he had been given dominion over. There was morning and evening. There were physical needs (eating and sleeping). He had social needs that could not be met except by one "of his own kind." All these things were part of what was "normal." Whatever habits of daily life Adam and Eve followed were the beginnings of human culture.

We don't know how much time elapsed between creation and man's rebellion, but regardless, I want to imagine what would have happened if Adam and Eve had never sinned. The sinless human race could have spread around the world. But the worldwide moral conformity to God's law would not have necessarily produce a single, homogenous human culture.

God created a world with a large number of variables that are independent of the curse. There are many places to live. There are many food options, even without meat, especially once man gets creative in experimenting with combinations of food. God gave human beings a wide range of abilities, including expression, playing with language, creating idioms, building means of transportation, cultivating plants for food and for beauty. These and a multitude of other factors could certainly produce a wide variation of sinless cultures, each of which would feel "normal" to its members. If those from one community of perfect human beings were to visit another community in another part of the unfallen world, I believe that they would be struck by differences in what was considered "normal" in their distinct, yet sinless communities.

However, because of Adam, sin and death passed upon all men. Each human being now possessed a rebellious nature. Sin and the divine curse became an integral part of whatever was normal for the human race.

In spite of the wickedness of human culture prior to the flood, there is no real mention the worship of false gods until mankind has spread after the tower of Babel, although the roots of idolatry could be arguable traced to that part of human history.

Based on archaeology, we know that the moon god Nanna was the primary deity of Abraham's hometown of Ur. Scripture first mentions idols when Laban catches a fleeing Jacob, accusing him (among other things) of stealing his gods (Genesis 31:30-32). By this point in history, people must have been producing portable objects (idols) that represented their gods. When God tells Jacob to return to Bethel (Genesis 35:1-4), we learn that his family owned "gods" that they could carry in their hands and wear on their ears, which Jacob buries under a tree.

It is during the exodus that we explicitly learn God's perspective on idolatry: the plagues are not merely a show of divine power. In Exodus 12:12 God says he will execute judgement against the

gods of Egypt. He is doing more than keeping his promise to liberate Abraham's descendants and give them the promised land. He is humiliating Egypt's gods (which don't exist), and even more so, humiliating the nation that promoted their worship and protected their temples.

After God leads Israel from Egypt, he does more than just establish them as an independent nation: He ordains a social and religious culture that had never existed before then. The weekly Sabbaths, the feasts, the year of jubilee, the tabernacle and priesthood, even the system of government established a new "normal" for a massive group of people. The new culture had many purposes, but a primary one is found in the first of the ten commandments: God had conquered the so-called gods of Egypt, and he forbade his people to give them any further recognition. Once they entered the land, they were to eliminate the Canaanites specifically because God did not want his people to be drawn into their idolatry (Deuteronomy 20:17-18).

(17) But thou shalt utterly destroy them; *namely*, the Hittites, and the Amorites, the Canaanites, and the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites; as the LORD thy God hath commanded thee: (18) That they teach you not to do after all their abominations, which they have done unto their gods; so should ye sin against the LORD your God.

God's expresses anger and even sarcasm against the nations for their idolatry; when Israel followed after idols, it provokes him jealousy. After generations of Israel's profaning his name, following after false gods again and again, God finally judges his people. Their eventual return would be accompanied by God's removing their impulse to worship idols (Ez 36:19, 25).

### From Israel's culture to the church

When we reach the Gospels, Israel is again in her land with a functioning temple and priesthood. Significant problems within Jewish culture abound, but worship of pagan deities is gone. Jesus accomplishes his mission, ascends to heaven, and commissions his apostles to make disciples, spreading the kingdom of God beyond Israel's borders.

However, the spread of the kingdom takes an unexpected shift. When the disciples asked if the kingdom would be restored to Israel, Jesus tells them that those times are in the Father's hands.

The assumption that a restored Israel would be the vehicle of the spread of God's kingdom is certainly not without any basis. However, there were hints even during the incarnation that this was not God's plan. In Luke 4 when Jesus announced that he was the Messiah, he reminded his synagogue audience about specific times when God had shown special attention and favor for those outside Israel.

However, Moses himself had prophesied in his final message that God would not only judge Israel for her idolatry, but that his judgement would involve an unspecified (action toward those outside Israel:

"They have moved me to jealousy with *that which is not* God; they have provoked me to anger with their vanities: and I will move them to jealousy with *those which are not* a people; I will provoke them to anger with a foolish nation. (Deut 32:21).

By the nature of its founders and first converts, the early church was naturally primarily Jewish, and Jewish Christians built a new normal on the foundation of Jewish culture. However, in Acts 10 the Spirit leads Peter to preach to Cornelius; it is Peter's testimony at Jerusalem in Acts 15 that convinces the council that the Gentiles were to be regarded as full members in Christ, apart from circumcision.

If we read Acts 15 through post-reformation lenses, it seems that one primary lesson stands out: No sinner can be saved by adherence to God's law. The Jerusalem council drove a stake through salvation by works.

But the Jerusalem council did something else: It created an uncomfortable tension between "normal" religious life for believing Jews and "normal" religious life for believing Gentiles. Before Acts, converts to Jehovah expressed their loyalty in a range of ways, from being "God-fearing" Gentile to becoming proselytes, sometimes undergoing circumcision so that they could participate as fully as possible in the worship of the one true God. A new Gentile believer who professed that Jesus is Lord, especially in the first century A.D., would have felt that same pull. After the Jerusalem council, that impulse was not only no longer encouraged; Paul explicitly tells the Gentile believers that if they become circumcised, that Christ will profit them nothing (Gal. 5:1-2).

So what is a Gentile believer to do? He would feel like a foreigner in his native idolatrous culture, but he's now forbidden to join the divinely-established Jewish culture either. He's left in a cultural "no man's land."

However, the Jerusalem council also issued some commands to the Gentiles concerning their lifestyle: to avoid fornication, meat offered to idols, things strangled and things with blood in them. These first appear in their deliberations (Acts 15:19-20) and then are issued as ordinances within the final declaration (15:28-29). We find them again in Paul's final visit to Jerusalem, just before the riot in the temple that puts him under Roman arrest. After debriefing the elders regarding the Gentiles' reception of the gospel, they inform Paul that the Jews in Jerusalem have been told that he has been instructing ex-patriot Jews not to circumcise their children. The implication is that this report is false, and they encouraged him to pay the cost and join with some fellow Jews in a rite of consecration to put to rest the rumor among the believing Jews.

There appears to have been no conflict in the minds of the Jerusalem elders (and of Paul) that it was acceptable for Jewish believers to express their loyalty to God through some of the rituals and practices of Jewish culture. In contrast to what was acceptable for Jewish believers, the elders restate their expectations for the Gentiles:

As touching the Gentiles which believe, we have written *and* concluded that they observe no such thing, save only that they keep themselves from *things* offered to idols, and from blood, and from strangled, and from fornication (Acts 21:25).

If we were Gentiles in the first century, I believe that we would have received this declaration with both a sense of liberation and consternation. I would be happy that I need not adopt Jewish

culture (i.e. circumcision, pilgrimages, etc.), but was I really responsible to track the supply chain of any piece of meat I eat? Besides, the command raises some significant questions (it's a bit of a head-scratcher). Wasn't the gospel a declaration that there was only one God, and that remission of sins had been offered fully and freely by his Son, Jesus Christ the Lord? That makes the whole pantheon was a fraud, and every god represented in it was nothing more than a figment of human imagination. What could possibly be wrong with a piece of meat offered to it?

## Gentiles and Idolatrous Culture

The flow of thought in I Corinthians 8-10 makes a great deal of sense if we read it in the context of the questions that Gentiles would have naturally asked in response to the Jerusalem council's commands. When Paul begins to discuss the issue of meat offered to idols in 1 Corinthians 8, he acknowledges a series of very rational implications of their newly found monotheism:

(4) As concerning therefore the eating of those things that are offered in sacrifice unto idols, we know that an idol *is* nothing in the world, and that *there is* none other God but one. (5) For though there be that are called gods, whether in heaven or in earth, (as there be gods many, and lords many,) (6) But to us *there is but* one God, the Father, of whom *are* all things, and we in him; and one Lord Jesus Christ, by whom *are* all things, and we by him. (7) Howbeit *there is* not in every man that knowledge: for some with conscience of the idol unto this hour eat *it* as a thing offered unto an idol; and their conscience being weak is defiled. (8) But meat commendeth us not to God: for neither, if we eat, are we the better; neither, if we eat not, are we the worse.

Paul acknowledges that a necessary implication of monotheism is that no pagan god has any existence whatsoever. Since all "other gods" are non-existent, it follows that a piece of meat offered to an idol has been offered to nothing. And if the meat has been offered to nothing, there can't be any reason for the command not to eat it.

But Paul had started the entire section by warning the Corinthians that there were considerations beyond merely this inarguable line of thought. Love, he argues, is the basis his upcoming explanation regarding how he thinks about eating meat offered to idols.

First, Paul warns the believers that if they act according to their knowledge, they could set in motion a sequence of events that could result in "the weak brother perishing" (8:11). The stakes are incredibly high here; the weak brother may be emboldened to return to the practices of idolatry, which would invariably result in divine judgement.

In chapter 9, Paul illustrates the way he is thinking by explaining why he works instead of receiving offerings. He has a God-given right to receive compensation for being an apostle. But he has determined that not using this particular right enhances his ability to fulfill his apostolic commission. God had tasked him with preaching the gospel, and he was at liberty to use his right to be paid, and he was at liberty not to. In his present situation, no could accuse him of being motivated by the money. His message could be heard without the distraction of a particularly devastating accusation. It was Paul's love and concern for the spiritual welfare of those he

preached to (both those who had converted and those who had not) that caused him to strategically limit his use of this God-given right.

In chapter 10, Paul ends his parenthetical illustration about his use of his apostolic right to be paid, with the final statement that he does not want to be a “castaway” through carelessness in how he fulfilled his commission. He reminds the Corinthian believers that they are not the first group to receive divine favor. Their fathers received amazing blessings from God, but God’s favor did not mean that they could become presumptuous.

(1) Moreover, brethren, I would not that ye should be ignorant, how that all our fathers were under the cloud, and all passed through the sea; (2) And were all baptized unto Moses in the cloud and in the sea; (3) And did all eat the same spiritual meat; (4) And did all drink the same spiritual drink: for they drank of that spiritual Rock that followed them: and that Rock was Christ. (5) But with many of them God was not well pleased: for they were overthrown in the wilderness. (6) Now these things were our examples, to the intent we should not lust after evil things, as they also lusted. (7) Neither be ye idolaters, as *were* some of them; as it is written, The people sat down to eat and drink, and rose up to play. (8) Neither let us commit fornication, as some of them committed, and fell in one day three and twenty thousand. (9) Neither let us tempt Christ, as some of them also tempted, and were destroyed of serpents. (10) Neither murmur ye, as some of them also murmured, and were destroyed of the destroyer.

The concern for the weaker brother who might be pulled into idolatry is gone. Paul is speaking directly to those who think they are strong. No one can afford to presume that he cannot fall to the temptations to fornication, or idolatry, or the disastrous conclusion that God’s prior choice to bless prevent him from judging what he condemns. None of us can afford to take these temptations lightly: “Wherefore let him that thinketh he standeth take heed lest he fall.” In fact, without God helping us, we would never have a way of escape (10:13). Earlier, he had told the Corinthian believers to “flee fornication” (6:18). Now, he tells them to “flee idolatry” (10:15).

Paul then tells the Corinthians believers that they cannot consume the ritual elements of idolatry without partaking in something inherently opposed to the worship of God. Just as consuming the “cup of blessing” and the “bread that we break” makes us partakers with Christ, so consuming the cup and break used in the worship of an idol makes us partakers with idolatry. And at this point, Paul appears to contradict something that he has said earlier. Any “god” other than Jehovah is merely nothing, but the Gentiles are not sacrificing to nothing: they are sacrificing to demons. Moses himself had said this in his “swan song” (Deuteronomy 32):

(16) They provoked him to jealousy with strange *gods*, with abominations provoked they him to anger. (17) They sacrificed unto devils, not to God; to gods whom they knew not, to new *gods that* came newly up, whom your fathers feared not.

Paul is very close to authorizing a key exception to the Jerusalem council’s command, but he concludes with an absolute statement some mutually exclusive options...

Ye cannot drink the cup of the Lord, and the cup of devils:  
ye cannot be partakers of the Lord's table, and of the table of devils (10:21).

...followed by an exhortation eerily reminiscent of the Old Testament prophets:

Do we provoke the Lord to jealousy? are we stronger than he? (10:22).

With that as prelude, Paul then launches into detailed instructions about simple, everyday life for a first-century believer living in a pagan, idolatry-saturated culture. He details three scenarios with two opposite commands.

**Scenario 1:** When buying meat, don't ask where it comes from. Just purchase it and eat it. The reason for this: "The earth is the Lord's." God made the world and its fulness—including meat—so I am free to eat it (10:25-26).

**Scenario 2:** I am at an unbeliever's house and he serves me meat. Again, I can eat it without asking about whether it was ever offered to an idol.

Paul had told us to flee idolatry, but apparently I can obey that injunction without figuring out where the meat came from. I'm feeling a bit less constrained now by the Jerusalem council's command.

The command for these first two scenarios, based on the idea that the earth is the Lord's, also hearkens back to Paul's statement that meat itself cannot be essentially defiled by being offered to an idol. No one's spiritual condition or direction—ours or anyone else's—is affected by what we eat in the first two scenarios.

However, without overturning the truths that Paul has just established, he turns the command around 180 degrees in a third scenario, and with only one simple change to the situation:

**Scenario 3:** As in scenario 2, I am at an unbeliever's house, but there is a key variation: Someone informs me that the meat was offered to an idol. The meat is certainly no different between scenarios 2 and 3, but it now has become a symbol—something more than itself in my immediate situation. Even though I know that there is nothing wrong with the meat (Paul assures me that my liberty is not constrained, 10:29), he does apply the Jerusalem council's command to this situation.

This leads me to a key idea that exists not only here, but I've found to be extremely important: A principle doesn't stop being true merely because it's not actionable in every scenario. The earth is always the Lord's, but that principle leads me to eat a piece of meat in only two of the three scenarios. God always hates idolatry, but that principle is relevant only in the third scenario, and is not actionable in the first two scenarios. I'm not denying a truth simply because another truth is the relevant one to apply to a particular situation.

Paul continues the line of thought, explaining that by not eating the meat, I am alerting his conscience to the fact that the thing he is inviting me to do would be an affront to the one true



God (10:29-31). In this third scenario (not that the topic of idolatry has been raised and a symbol of it is on my plate in front of me), I am to avoid doing anything that would keep an unbelieving Jew or Gentile from the faith (10:32a) or that would make it hard for a believer to remain in the faith (10:32b).

Give none offence,  
neither to the Jews,  
nor to the Gentiles,  
nor to the church of God (10:32).

When an object of idolatry is present, my actions—however counter-cultural they may be—could lay the groundwork for the salvation of an unbeliever (10:33).

Finally, Paul says that these commands are modeled after his practice, and that he believes he is imitating what Christ would do (11:1).

### A Tentative Interpretation

Based on this brief history of God's interaction with and commands regarding idolatrous culture, I have tentatively reached the following conclusions:

1. No single human culture that can lay exclusive or even primary claim to carrying the current mission of the kingdom.
  - This idea does not deny that some cultures may tolerate especially egregious and harmful sins, or that other cultures may be closer to what God will one day restore as “normal” human culture.
  - Given the opportunity to establish guidelines for a single, unified culture, the apostles—led by the Holy Spirit—did not do so. They did not elevate the divinely-ordained Jewish culture (and a lot of human additions) on the church as a whole, nor did they prevent Jewish believers from continuing to practicing the rituals of Jewish consecration. The Gentiles were merely excluded from them, but were given some very basic instructions regarding how to interact with the symbols and rituals of idolatry.
  - During the final dissolution and renewal of all things, God does two things that seem potentially relevant to the issue of what God both permits and values in human culture: (1) He silences Babylon so that nothing is heard any longer in it (Rev 18:1-24), and (2) he brings the glory of the nations into his kingdom (Rev. 21:26). This statement could simply be another way of saying that there will be people from every nation and tribe entering in, but it seems to be inclusive of more than just the eternal destiny of people.
2. God's jealous response when his people participate in idolatry is not limited to the Old Testament. Israel provoked God to jealousy by her idolatry, and God warns New Testament believers against provoking him to jealousy in like manner.
  - God's commands regarding eating meat offered to idols is not only here in 1 Corinthians 10. Two of the seven churches in Revelation are noted as tolerating

such behavior (with allusions to Balaam and Jezebel); God's response in both cases is punishment by death (2:14, 20).

- This command continued to be repeated even after the close of the canon: the *Didache* includes the following: περὶ δὲ τῆς βρώσεως, ὃ δύνασαι βάστασον· ἀπὸ δὲ τοῦ εἰδωλοθύτου λίαν πρόσεχε· λατρεία γάρ ἐστι θεῶν νεκρῶν. ("Now concerning food, bear what you are able, but in any case keep strictly away from meat sacrificed to idols, for it involves the worship of dead gods." (Didache, 6.3).<sup>1</sup>
3. My interaction with culture (both through participation or non-participation) is guided by two principles: (1) The earth is the Lord's, and (2) God hates idolatry. Determining which is the appropriate principle for a particular situation is guided by a number of factors:
- The danger of being once again ensnared by idolatry, which invites divine judgement (for both myself and other believers, 1 Cor 8:7-13; 10:1-13).
  - The spread of God's fame/glory as the one true God (10:31).
  - The opportunity the unbeliever under conviction regarding his sin of idolatry (which could lead to their turning from idols to the living God, 10:27-33; cf 1 Thess 1:9),

### A Tentative Step Towards Application

For cultures **where idolatry is still practiced**, I propose that this principle of abstaining from symbols that are associated with idolatry can be applied almost directly.

Cultures change all the time, and most current cultures have no "named" idolatry, which definitely poses a significant hermeneutical gap to cross. I hear people talk about "individual" or "heart" idols, and perhaps that there is some good advice regarding them. However, Paul and the Jerusalem elders were not dealing with "individual" idols, but with named idols with temples and culturally established rituals. Before detailing some options for bridging the gap, one key thought about a secular culture is worth mentioning.

If demons were behind the idolatry of the ancient world, we cannot fall into the trap that C.S. Lewis reveals in *Screwtape Letters*. Screwtape instructs Wormwood to hide his existence from his patient, because they can spread certain kinds of rebellion against God when they don't believe in the supernatural at all. I concur that Satan is currently using secular society, and I think there is a good case to be made that it is his best current tool in battling a trans-national, trans-cultural kingdom. But I do not believe it will be his last cultural weapon.

As our current "secular" culture **where there is little-to-no "named" idolatry** (e.g. Zeus, Aphrodite, etc.), the hermeneutic gap is wider. There seem to be a couple options:

1. (Secular Culture) Option 1: There is no real direct application to be made between the idolatry in ancient cultures and secular society. I believe this is the tacit option taken by those who find little more in 1 Cor 8-10 than for principles for training our consciences or dealing with "personal idols." It's a potentially valid use of the passage, but I think it needs to acknowledge the original situation that Paul is addressing, which has to do with

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<sup>1</sup> Holmes, Michael W. *The Apostolic Fathers: Green Texts and English Translations of Their Writings*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition. Trans. J. B. Lightfoot and J. R. Harner. Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1992.

cultural idols with massive, regular social pressure to participate in the rituals of its idolatry. We can't replace this original referent of cultural idolatry with a merely individual idols without doing some violence to the original intention of the passage, I believe.

2. (Secular Culture) Option 2: Christians in secular culture should attempt to identify our culture's "unnamed idols," determine what symbols are associated with them, and gauge our interaction with those symbols accordingly. This is fraught with peril, because I've heard very odd things referred to as idols. Nevertheless, it is not that unusual for all of us to interact with symbols in other areas of life based on whether we affirm or hate the ideas associated with them. This is where I'm going to leave it, and I would love to know if you think that a secular society can have symbols of unnamed idols, and if so, whether and how the 2 principles from 1 Corinthians 10 can be applied.

## Conclusion

Although I would still use the term "conservative" to describe my relationship with human culture, I find myself increasingly thinking of these two principles when I decide what parts of culture I can interact with, and how I interact with them: (1) The earth is the Lord's, and (2) God hates idolatry.

I end up being conservative, but not because that's what I'm aiming at. Things that have been around in culture tend to lose some of their associations over time.

As culture continually shifts, it is possible for old symbols to lose their meanings, and for objects that were never before symbolic to take on meanings. I believe that it's incumbent for us as teachers of God's word to be aware of the kinds of symbols that anti-Christian religions use as they emerge. Every new package of old errors needs symbols to represent it to its adherents. Sometimes old symbols are brought back, and sometimes new ones are created. Ironically, the growth of paganism and Wiccan is on the rise, and I think that the New Age Movement that blossomed when I was young may have just been a practice-run. It appears that Satan intends to normalize some form of shared, socially constructed idolatry (named or unnamed) in every culture, enforced by the unwritten social rules that govern every society. But whether it is shaped by fallen man or demonic forces, culture is an ever-moving target, and I've found the line of thought in this presentation to be more biblical and helpful in navigating my interaction with culture than simply aiming to be "conservative."