



continuous conversion

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little gods

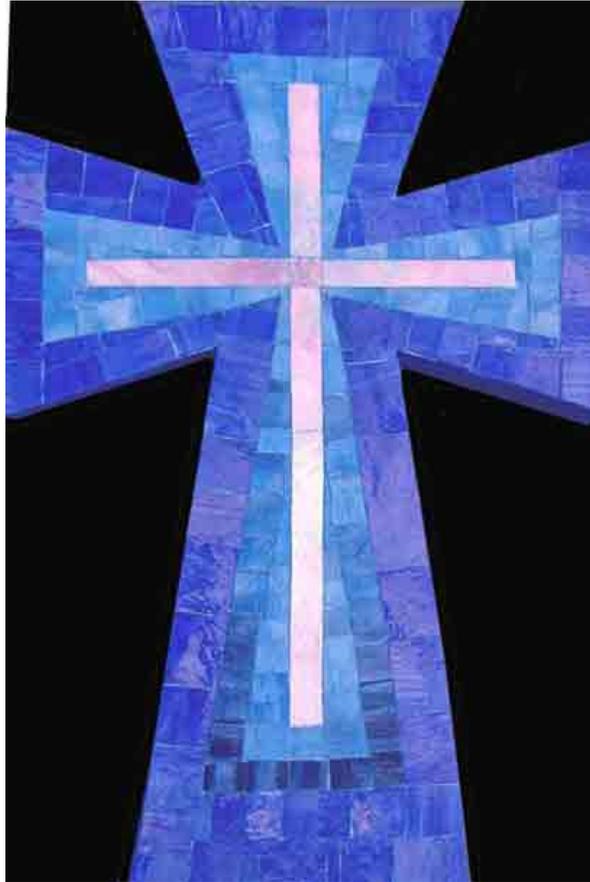
by Sara Tusek

Exodus 20:1 says this:

"God spoke all these words, saying: 'I am the LORD your God... 'You shall have no other gods before Me.'

This is the first of the Ten Commandments, which most Christians agree are a dependable list of God's priorities. It appears that God is very serious about our keeping a proper perspective on exactly who is God and what place he holds in our lives.

Yet there is a persistent predilection among Christians (just as among non-Christians) to create and worship little gods. Here are a few commonly-seen "Christian" manifestations of the "little god syndrome."



Even more dramatically, the story of Abraham's willingness to sacrifice Isaac to God illustrates that our commitment to God is greater than our commitment to family. As Hebrews 11:17 reminds us, "By faith Abraham, when God tested him, offered Isaac as a sacrifice."

Yet the religious climate in many American evangelical churches stresses that our prime responsibility is to our families. "Family values" and putting the interests of your own family above the families of others are expected behaviors in the life of the average American Evangelical Christian.

family

Jesus clearly indicates that his disciples must be willing to give up everything (including family) to follow him. In Matthew 19:29 Jesus says, "And everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or fields for my sake will receive a hundred times as much and will inherit eternal life."

This is quite straightforward: if we leave our family and home for Jesus' sake (to be His disciple) we will be rewarded. This echoes Genesis 12:1: "The LORD had said to Abram, "Leave your country, your people and your father's household and go to the land I will show you."

This elevation of the family can be seen in the nepotism and "helicopter parents" found in many Evangelical churches and schools. Hiring your relatives and monitoring how the school treats your children to be sure they are always given preference are completely normal in many church communities. Yet these practices are at odds with the call to put God first, not our own families.

If Jesus came into one of our churches on Sunday and asked us to put our faith in Him above our love for our families, most of us would be puzzled. The idea of leaving our family for the sake of Jesus would be alien in a subculture that puts family first. Family, in this case, is a little god.

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pastors, ministers, and teachers

Paul establishes a hierarchy of Christian workers in I Corinthians 12:28: “And in the church God has appointed first of all apostles, second prophets, third teachers, then workers of miracles, also those having gifts of healing, those able to help others, those with gifts of administration, and those speaking in different kinds of tongues.” By this listing, those we now call “the clergy” (ordained church workers) are on top, followed by teachers, then everyone else.

Unfortunately, some Christians have taken this verse to heart, and decided that (to quote *Animal Farm*), “some pigs are more equal than others”—some Christians are more holy than others. The clergy and Christian teachers have a special calling, and hold a kind of special status with God, perhaps meriting some extra grace. It’s easy to revere and follow them without thinking.

This is not biblical. James 3:1 states, “Not many of you should presume to be teachers, my brothers, because you know that we who teach will be judged more strictly.” Far from expecting leniency from God, teachers can expect stricter judgment. They are not little gods at all.

my calling

Passion, vocation, ministry, calling—all these terms describe the belief that God has asked us to do particular tasks for His kingdom. It is intoxicating to feel that we’ve found our calling. Suddenly everything falls into place and we are exalted above the tedious, mundane aspects of living. The tiniest inconvenience becomes a sacrifice to God; we are full of thankfulness that He has given us such a holy calling and is allowing us to serve Him. Our small accomplishments are magnified into great accomplishments for His glory.

“My calling” is a most seductive little god. The wonderful feelings of importance and sanctity associated with do-

ing God’s work can become an irresistible little god. In effect, we make of ourselves little gods, for we are no longer mere humans doing a job—we are selected and empowered by God for His sacred deeds.

No doubt the Crusaders felt *called* to demolish Constantinople (a Christian city) on the way to conquer the infidel Muslim in Jerusalem. No doubt the Grand Inquisitors felt *called* to tighten the screws while torturing heretics. No doubt the Republican Religious Right feels *called* to block President Obama’s efforts to correct the destructive inequities of the Bush administration.

“Called” Christians can be dangerous if they justify their lack of compassion, explicit racism and disregard for justice by saying they are acting for God’s greater glory (which only they can see). Their calling can become self-righteousness, giving birth to a witch-hunt mentality and a militant spirit that is just the opposite of the meek spirit of God, as described in Galatians 5:22,23: “the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.”

God is big, not little

Apparently it just goes against human nature to put all our faith in the real God. He is, after all, unseen. Worshipping an unseen being is one sign of being a madman.

Christians are in the uncomfortable position of being asked to surrender so much that gives life meaning for most humans: family loyalty, unthinking trust in their leadership, and the excitement of going on a “Don Quixote”-type quest. These are all worthwhile pursuits, but none of them is God. God is bigger and more mysterious than any of these earthly manifestations. I John 4:4 notes: “You, dear children, are from God and have overcome them, because the one who is in you is greater than the one who is in the world.” Why bother with a little god when you can have the Great God?



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