

2012 Pastoral Care Emphasis: “Hope-Filled Pastors”

May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit. ^{NIV} Romans 15:13

Emphasis: To produce **Hope-Filled Pastors** who rid themselves of personal and professional idols to promote the God of Hope without idols.

For most pastors, idolatry brings to mind pagan worshipers bowing down to a grotesque image carved out of wood or chiseled out of stone, the kind of idolatry Isaiah confronted (Isaiah 45:20). Such overt examples of idolatry pose little threat because they appeared long ago and far away. Furthermore, they have no appeal to my “modern cultural Christianity.” No! My idols are much more cunning. While some idols may be material, they are far more likely to be *mental*.

Allow me to define idolatry as *any false hope that I have invited or allowed to position itself between me and the true and living hope I have in Jesus Christ, my Lord*. False hopes can couch themselves in material “things” or mental “images.”

“If we sense that life is drab, haunting, unsettling, and dismal, then perhaps we should check what is eclipsing the Son.”¹

While materialism remains a frontrunner among affluent western idolaters, I am apt to think my colleagues in ministry are more likely to become ensnared by mental idols – hopes that eventually prove to be broken cisterns (Jeremiah 2:13). Wait a minute. Not so fast. We are constantly bombarded by messages that promote toys, tools and treasures as the hope of our “happiness”. If we cannot afford them, we can still dream about them in the hope that someday a wealthy parishioner might give or loan them to us.

We are apt to possess some material goods that have the potential of slipping between ourselves and our eternal treasures in Jesus Christ. If your house was on fire and your family was all safe and sound, what would you be tempted to retrieve from the fire?

On April 3, 1980, five-year-old Nickol broke free from her 12-year-old sister and ran back into her burning home to retrieve a plastic Easter egg filled with jelly beans. Nickol died of smoke inhalation. (Quad City Times)

What would *you* be tempted to run back into your burning home to retrieve that is worth little more than jelly beans (assets, cash, a will, antiques, mementos, etc.) in light of your treasures in heaven (Matthew 6:21) or the “eternal weight of glory”? (II Corinthians 4:17)

¹ Joseph Stowell, *Following Christ* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan 1996), 104.

The first victim officially identified inside the wreck of the Costa Concordia Cruise liner was on board as a performing artist. “Sandor Feher, 38, disappeared after he went back to his cabin to get his prized violin.”²

I find it difficult to criticize this man who returned for what was probably not only his lifetime possession but his livelihood. Especially since he paused to place lifejackets on crying children. The scene does cause me to ask, “What possession of my profession would I dare to retrieve if my ship was tipping over or my house was burning down?”

This professional violinist returned for the tool of his God-given talent. As you reflect on this example, you may imagine yourself returning for the tools your God-given calling (books diplomas, manuscripts, thank-you notes, pictures, journals, etc.). As long as they remain “tools”, they are unlikely to become idols of hope that disappoint. If they creep up in rank and become “treasures”, you run the risk of idolatry of the heart. Such hope is not only shakeable, clouding your countenance; it renders you less than hope-filled. Our congregations deserve better. Our God will not share His glory with any idol, material or mental.

The focus of Christ’s work is to deliver us from our bondage to ourselves! This is our most subtle, yet most foundational form of idolatry (Paul Tripp).³

Paul David Tripp will be our featured speaker at the North Central Conference in April. Anticipate reading more from Paul Tripp in next month's *Pastoral Care Zipline*.

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² *Toronto Star*, Thursday, January 19, 2012.

³ Paul David Tripp, *Instruments in the Redeemer's Hands* (Phillipsburg, New Jersey: P and R Publishing, 2002), 108.