

ILLINOIS LUTHERAN CONFERENCE

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It's certainly beneficial for Christians to review basic doctrines learned earlier in life, such as the Ten Commandments. Therefore, in this month's Topical Bulletin we will take a fresh look at the First Commandment: **Thou shalt have no other gods before me. (Exodus 20:3)** {As usual, all Scripture quotations are taken from the Holy Bible, King James Version}

Most readers of this bulletin learned the Ten Commandments in Sunday school and further studied them in confirmation class, using Luther's Small Catechism alongside the Holy Bible. Luther's Small Catechism renders the 1st Commandment thus:

Thou shalt have no other gods before Me.

What does this mean? We should fear, love, and trust in God above all things.

As we proceed with this bulletin we shall see that Luther's explanation is truly Scriptural and therefore well put.

Consider who gave us the 1st Commandment, as well as the other nine, for by merely looking at the two verses which precede the first commandment as given in Exodus chapter twenty we can ascertain important facts as we read: "And God spake all these words, saying, I am the LORD thy God, which have brought thee out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage." (Exodus 20:1-2)

Comment: The God who by His mighty hand brought the children of Israel out of bitter bondage in Egypt is who gave the Ten Commandments. Notice how God identifies Himself in Exodus 20:2 with the terms "LORD" and "God". The word "LORD" is a translation of the Hebrew yeh-ho-vaw' Jehovah, meaning "the existing one"; the word "God" is a translation of the Hebrew el-o-heem' Elohiym, a plural noun meaning "God". Accordingly, the one true God is THE EXISTING ONE TRUE GOD WHO IS PLURAL IN PERSONS, that is, the Triune God, for "we know that an idol is nothing in the world, and that there is none other God but one." (1 Corinthians 8:4) [And] "there are three that bear record in heaven, the Father, the Word, and the Holy Ghost: and these three are one." (1 John 5:7) Indeed, the one true God is the Triune God, three distinct Persons and yet one divine essence, as is clear from the Baptismal formula given to us by the Lord Jesus Christ, "Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost." (Matthew 28:19) Observe that the term "name" is singular while three distinct Persons are given: the "Father," the "Son," and the "Holy Ghost". Therefore any "god" other than the Triune God is a false god. The Triune God in reality is the ONLY GOD with a capital "G"; all other "gods" are to be properly designated with a lower case "g".

Among some professed Christians in their instructional materials the 1st Commandment has been shortened to read: "Thou shalt have no other gods." The phrase "before me" is left out, which creates an error since God's Word is not to be added to or taken away from, for Deuteronomy 4:2 declares: "Ye shall not add unto the word which I command you, neither shall ye diminish ought from it, that

ye may keep the commandments of the LORD your God which I command you." *Furthermore, God knew exactly what He was doing when He gave the commandment, "Thou shalt have no other gods before Me." Realize that in a certain sense God Himself has given us other "gods" that come after Him— "gods" that are to be respected but NOT worshiped, "gods" such as civil authorities, as the following Bible passages reveal: "For the LORD your God is God of gods, and Lord of lords, a great God, a mighty, and a terrible, which regardeth not persons, nor taketh reward." (Deuteronomy 10:17) "God standeth in the congregation of the mighty; he judgeth among the gods. I have said, Ye are gods; and all of you are children of the most High." (Psalm 82:1, 6) Therefore, the First Commandment is to be held just as God gave it: **Thou shalt have no other gods before me.***

The FIRST COMMANDMENT God gave first for a reason: the true God is to be number ONE, first and foremost, in our hearts and minds, which is why He commands: **Thou shalt have no other gods before me. (Exodus 20:3)** Our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ makes it clear that the command applies to all people of all times and not only to the Israelites of the Old Testament, for Jesus states in the New Testament: "it is written, Thou shalt worship the Lord thy God, and him only shalt thou serve. Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind. This is the first and great commandment." (Matthew 4:10; 22:37-38)

Comment: ONLY THE LORD GOD IS TO BE SERVED AND LOVED WITH ALL OF OUR HEART, SOUL, MIND AND STRENGTH, for a scribe once asked Jesus, "Which is the first commandment of all? And Jesus answered him, The first of all the commandments is, Hear, O Israel; The Lord our God is one Lord: And thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind, and with all thy strength: this is the first commandment." (Mark 12:28-30) Hence, all idolatry is definitely forbidden, for our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ when tempted by the devil said: "Get thee behind me, Satan: for it is written, Thou shalt worship the Lord thy God, and him only shalt thou serve." (Luke 4:8)

Yes, all idolatry is forbidden, for the LORD God – the Triune God – in Exodus 20:4-6 states: "Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image, or any likeness of *any thing* that *is* in heaven above, or that *is* in the earth beneath, or that *is* in the water under the earth: Thou shalt not bow down thyself to them, nor serve them: for I the LORD thy God *am* a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children unto the third and fourth *generation* of them that hate me; And shewing mercy unto thousands of them that love me, and keep my commandments." And, as we considered earlier, Jesus says: "it is written, Thou shalt worship the Lord thy God, and him only shalt thou serve." (Matthew 4:10) Accordingly, ALL idolatry is forbidden by God!

Comment: Idolatry is the worshiping of anything or anyone other than the one true Triune God, and is FORBIDDEN BY GOD! The crass idols made of wood, stone, metal, plastics, pottery, and the like are obvious objects of sinful idolatrous worship. For example, statues of various persons like "mother Mary" or other "saints" or the "Buddha" are common objects of sinful idolatrous worship by millions of people throughout the world to this very day. The Apostle Paul writes in regards to the idolatry of the heathen: "What say I then? that the idol is any thing, or that which is offered in sacrifice to idols is any thing? But I say, that the things which the Gentiles sacrifice, they sacrifice to devils, and not to God: and I would not that ye should have fellowship with devils." (1 Corinthians 10:19-20) Hence,

crass idolatry, the worship of man-made objects, is devil-worship. *However, there are other less obvious idols frequently worshiped which we will consider next.*

The holy angels of God are NOT to be worshiped because such a practice is idolatry, for we read in Revelation 22:8-9, "And I John saw these things, and heard *them*. And when I had heard and seen, I fell down to worship before the feet of the angel which shewed me these things. Then saith he unto me, See *thou do it* not: for I am thy fellowservant, and of thy brethren the prophets, and of them which keep the sayings of this book: worship God."

The sun, moon, stars, and planets are NOT to be worshiped because such a practice is idolatry, for in Deuteronomy chapter four we read: "Take ye therefore good heed unto yourselves... Lest ye corrupt *yourselves*, and make you a graven image, the similitude of any figure, the likeness of male or female, The likeness of any beast that *is* on the earth, the likeness of any winged fowl that flieth in the air, The likeness of any thing that creepeth on the ground, the likeness of any fish that *is* in the waters beneath the earth: And lest thou lift up thine eyes unto heaven, and when thou seest the sun, and the moon, and the stars, *even* all the host of heaven, shouldest be driven to worship them, and serve *them*, which the LORD thy God hath divided unto all nations under the whole heaven." (Deuteronomy 4:15-19)

Possessions, whether material objects, money, or pets and so forth are NOT to be worshiped because such a practice is idolatry which will result in one going to hell if one does not repent and amend one's life and embrace the true God in heart-deep faith, for "There was a certain rich man, which was clothed in purple and fine linen, and fared sumptuously every day: And there was a certain beggar named Lazarus, which was laid at his gate, full of sores, And desiring to be fed with the crumbs which fell from the rich man's table: moreover the dogs came and licked his sores. And it came to pass, that the beggar died, and was carried by the angels into Abraham's bosom: the rich man also died, and was buried; And in hell he lift up his eyes, being in torments, and seeth Abraham afar off, and Lazarus in his bosom. And he cried and said, Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus, that he may dip the tip of his finger in water, and cool my tongue; for I am tormented in this flame. But Abraham said, Son, remember that thou in thy lifetime receivedst thy good things, and likewise Lazarus evil things: but now he is comforted, and thou art tormented. And beside all this, between us and you there is a great gulf fixed: so that they which would pass from hence to you cannot; neither can they pass to us, that *would come* from thence. Then he said, I pray thee therefore, father, that thou wouldest send him to my father's house: For I have five brethren; that he may testify unto them, lest they also come into this place of torment. Abraham saith unto him, They have Moses and the prophets; let them hear them. And he said, Nay, father Abraham: but if one went unto them from the dead, they will repent. And he said unto him, If they hear not Moses and the prophets, neither will they be persuaded, though one rose from the dead." (Luke 16:19-31)

Additionally, Matthew 19:16-26 reports: "And, behold, one came and said unto him, Good Master, what good thing shall I do, that I may have eternal life? And he said unto him, Why callest thou me good? *there is* none good but one, *that is*, God: but if thou wilt enter into life, keep the commandments. He saith unto him, Which? Jesus said, Thou shalt do no murder, Thou shalt not commit adultery, Thou shalt not steal, Thou shalt not bear false witness, Honor thy father and *thy*

mother: and, Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself. The young man saith unto him, All these things have I kept from my youth up: what lack I yet? Jesus said unto him, If thou wilt be perfect, go *and* sell that thou hast, and give to the poor, and thou shalt have treasure in heaven: and come *and* follow me. But when the young man heard that saying, he went away sorrowful: for he had great possessions. Then said Jesus unto his disciples, Verily I say unto you, That a rich man shall hardly enter into the kingdom of heaven. And again I say unto you, It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle, than for a rich man to enter into the kingdom of God. When his disciples heard *it*, they were exceedingly amazed, saying, Who then can be saved? But Jesus beheld *them*, and said unto them, With men this is impossible; but with God all things are possible." *Thus, possessions can never gain one entrance to heaven, and therefore it is foolish sinful idolatry to set one's heart on one's possessions.*

Another very common form of idolatry in modern society is the worship of sinful human beings, such as political figures, movie and other entertainment people, sports stars, family, and one's own self. NO SINFUL HUMAN BEING IS TO BE WORSHIPED! For example, consider what happened when a political leader named Herod "stretched forth *his* hands to vex certain of the church. And he killed James the brother of John with the sword" (Acts 12:1-2); consequently, Herod was a popular leader among the unbelievers whose heart was focused on him, for "upon a set day Herod, arrayed in royal apparel, sat upon his throne, and made an oration unto them. And the people gave a shout, *saying, It is the voice of a god, and not of a man.* And immediately the angel of the Lord smote him, because he gave not God the glory: and he was eaten of worms, and gave up the ghost." (Acts 12:21-23) *Hence, we see that no sinful human being is to be worshiped and idolized.*

We are certainly blessed when we have close family members with whom we have a loving relationship; but, we are NOT to idolize family members by placing them before God since the Lord Jesus plainly states in Matthew 10:37, "He that loveth father or mother more than me is not worthy of me: and he that loveth son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me." *Thus, we see that no sinful human being is to become an idol to us.*

Another example of sinful idolatry that is all-too-common is the worship of one's own self by high self-esteem coupled with the denial of the true God (atheism), thereby placing one's self as one's god, for we read in the book of Psalms: "The wicked, through the pride of his countenance, will not seek *after God*: God *is* not in all his thoughts. His ways are always grievous; thy judgments *are* far above out of his sight: *as for* all his enemies, he puffeth at them. The fool hath said in his heart, *There is no God.*" (Psalm 10:4-5; 14:1) And, Philippians 2:3 instructs: "*Let nothing be done through strife or vainglory; but in lowliness of mind let each esteem other better than themselves.*"

Additionally, Luther rightly remarks in his Large Catechism [Triglot, pgs. 585, 587], "there is also a false worship and extreme idolatry, which we have hitherto practiced, and is still prevalent in the world, upon which also all ecclesiastical orders are founded, and which concerns the conscience alone, that seeks in its own works help, consolation, and salvation, presumes to wrest heaven from God, and reckons how many bequests it has made, how often it has fasted, celebrated Mass, etc. Upon such things it depends, and of them boasts, as though unwilling to receive anything from God as a gift, but desires itself to earn or merit it superabundantly, just as though He must serve us and

were our debtor, and we His liege lords. What is this but reducing God to an idol, yea, an apple god, and elevating and regarding ourselves as God?" Hence, Luther emphasizes that those who seek to earn salvation by their own works thereby worship and idolize themselves and do not worship the true God who saves sinners only by His grace through faith in Christ who has paid for the sins of the whole world with His shed blood. Therefore, we best beware of all forms of self-worship.

Conclusion:

Let us fear the one true Triune God above all things, for Psalm 33:8 says: "Let all the earth fear the LORD: let all the inhabitants of the world stand in awe of him."

Let us love the one true Triune God above all things, for Matthew 22:37 says: "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind."

Let us trust in the true Triune God above all things, for Psalm 118:8-9 says: "It is better to trust in the LORD than to put confidence in man. It is better to trust in the LORD than to put confidence in princes." Proverbs 3:5-6 adds: "Trust in the LORD with all thine heart; and lean not unto thine own understanding. In all thy ways acknowledge him, and he shall direct thy paths."

Again, looking at Luther's Large Catechism on the First Commandment, he rightly remarks [Triglot, pg. 593]: "Let us, then, learn well the First Commandment, that we may see how God will tolerate no presumption nor any trust in any other object, and how He requires nothing higher of us than confidence from the heart for everything good, so that we may proceed right and straightforward and use all the blessings which God gives no farther than as a show maker uses his needle, awl, and thread for work, and then lays them aside, or as a traveler uses an inn, and food, and his bed only for temporal necessity, each one in his station, according to God's order, and without allowing any of these things to be our lord or idol. Let this suffice with respect to the First Commandment... since it is of chief importance, because, as before said, where the heart is rightly disposed toward God and this commandment is observed, all the others follow."

If we are honest we must all admit that we've broken the 1st Commandment on multiple occasions and need God's forgiveness, "For *there is* not a just man upon earth, that doeth good, and sinneth not." (Ecclesiastes 7:20) Therefore, let each and every one of us, in sincere repentance and living faith in Jesus Christ as our personal Savior and Lord, go forward in gratefulness to God for His grace and mercy, striving to fear, love, and trust in the one true Triune God above all things, avoiding idolatry in all its forms.

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