

THE REFORMED WITNESS HOUR

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"The First Commandment"  
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Of all the books written, of all the writings of thoughts and ideas, one writing stands out as completely unique. Libraries are filled with the productions of men. It would seem that every conceivable subject has been treated. Still, one writing stands out from all the rest as unique. I refer to a writing on stone tablets presented to Moses for the children of Israel who were camping at the foot of Mount Sinai. God Himself wrote with His finger upon these stone tablets what we know as the ten commandments. Though God also wrote the whole of the Bible, inspiring holy men to pen the words He would have us hear, yet only the ten commandments were written directly by God's finger. That must mean that these commands are of unique importance.

And they are of great importance: both to reveal the sinfulness of mankind and to show the way of obedience which God expects of born-again Christians. The Lord willing, we will consider each of these commandments in following weeks.

The first commandment is brief, to the point, though negative: Thou shalt have no other gods besides me. This first commandment is the doorway into all the remaining commands. Only a proper understanding of and obedience to this command makes possible obedience to the remaining nine.

But what does God tell us in this command? In speaking to us in a negative manner, we are reminded of the fact that too often we do exactly the forbidden. Just as a child may repeatedly try to do what is forbidden, so also mankind. Each must be reminded: "Don't do that."

Yet the positive instruction of the first command is clear and unmistakable. One can have no other gods for the simple reason: there is only One True God! There are not other gods nor lesser gods than He. There are not two gods: one good and the other evil. There are not two co-eternals. There is but one living God. That is a foundational confession of the church.

A related truth in this commandment is that of the absolute sovereignty of this God. Many have been willing to concede His sovereignty--yet will not recognize the full implications of that confession. Absolute sovereignty means that God is the full and complete Ruler over everything without exception. He rules over the universe. His is complete control over every moral, rational creature: whether angels, devils, or men of every stripe. His is absolute control over all of the events which take place on this planet. He fully governs and directs the course of history. He determines even the very destiny of every creature, including men and angels. There is nothing over which God has no control. All things are governed as by His hands. This truth may indeed give rise to difficult questions and hard objections--but the thrust of the command is clear.

The truth of this command is verified both in God's creation and especially in His infallible Word, the Bible. Creation itself testifies of the greatness and power of God. Of this we read in Romans 1:20, "For the invisible things of him from the creation of the world are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even His eternal power and Godhead...." To put it bluntly, the evolutionist is a fool to believe and teach that all things as we see them happened by chance. There is no way that the complex universe and the complexities of life could have been self-originating. It is far more realistic and honest to recognize within creation the clear evidence of a Supreme Originator.

But we have the more sure Word of Scripture. Creation has been affected by the curse because of Adam's sin and the interpreter of creation, man, is blinded by his own sin. But Scripture is itself the inspired and

infallible Word of God. It is entirely reliable. Through it, God reveals Himself and His work both of creating and of saving a people from their sins. It is by faith that one turns to that Bible to hear also what it says of its Author: the Sovereign God. Many passages could be quoted, but I mention only a few.

The classic passage pointing to the oneness of God is found in Deuteronomy 6:4, "Hear O Israel: The Lord our God is one Lord." But other passages reinforce and reemphasize this same truth. There is Isaiah 44:6, "Thus saith the Lord the King of Israel, and his redeemer the Lord of hosts: I am the first, and I am the last; and beside me there is no God." Or again, God says in Isaiah 45:7, "I form the light, and create darkness: I make peace and create evil: I the Lord do all these things." And in I Samuel 2:6-8 we read: "The Lord killeth, and maketh alive: he bringeth down to the grave, and bringeth up. The Lord maketh poor, and maketh rich: he bringeth low, and lifteth up. He raiseth up the poor out of the dust, and lifteth up the beggar from the dunghill, to set them among princes, and to make them inherit the throne of glory: for the pillars of the earth are the Lord's, and he hath set the world upon them." The clear teaching of the Bible is, therefore, that God is the Absolute Ruler over all. Whatever compromises His Sovereignty is a violation of the first commandment which God gave.

The first command, coming in a negative way, serves to remind us of the many things which man does that indeed compromise God's sovereignty. Apart from salvation in Christ, a man will always place his trust other than upon the Living God. Throughout history, men have been idolators. Man appears to know in his heart that there is God, but he perverts this knowledge in worshipping idols. The Old Testament speaks of some of these idols, Dagon, Molech, Baal, and others. How often even Israel, known as the people of God, began worshipping the idols of the heathen. And even today, vast segments of mankind continue to worship images. These bow down to idols of stone or wood. Or they worship and reverence animals. Or in our own land we have those who worship the devil and even erect places of worship to him.

But idolatry is often manifested in more subtle ways. How often do not civilized people reveal a superstitious nature? How often do they not seek help and guidance from the stars or from those who purport to know the future? How often do not people buy the newspapers displayed often in grocery store checkout lanes which purport to contain the prophecies of noted clairvoyants, about destinies of famous people? How often do not people turn to the section of the newspapers where is found the daily horoscopes? Recently I was in the apartment building associated with a well-known modern state university. The building had no 13th floor. The floors were numbered from 12 directly to 14. Why was this true? Others still show fear of black cats crossing one's path; or fear of breaking mirrors. What must one say? There is shown here the awful fact that man does not desire to trust in the one true God--but rather he trusts in or fears the superstitious. He shows a certain religious fear of material things or of certain persons. All of this is idolatry. Man places these things above or instead of the living Sovereign God.

Others worship or show homage to man. Some pray to Mary, the mother of Jesus, and to the saints--making intercession of them. Still others place trust in doctors, lawyers, psychologists, or others. Men expect these experts to provide for them in their trouble. This sort of reliance upon men is idolatry--and violation of the first commandment.

In our day there are many who trust in chance or "Lady Luck." The growing evil of gambling is an example of this. Many seek to enhance their financial position by purchasing tickets in the lottery. These trust not on the living God Who directs all things and provides, but they trust in blind "luck" to enhance their position.

All such idolatry is sin. The Word of God demands that idolators repent of these sins and turn unto the living God Who alone can provide.

All self-reliance, all reliance upon the creature, must be taken away. Often we look to self, or to other men, to provide what we want. In health and prosperity we hardly think of the controlling power of God. In sickness and poverty, we turn to men who apparently can provide. But this ought not to be. In obedience to this command, we turn from self and all other creatures, in order to seek the face of this Sovereign God. He alone can provide all that we need both for body and for soul. This lesson must be learned well--God is the only Refuge and our Strength.

There must be too, that readiness and willingness to condemn our own idols. You are aware, I assume, of the idols in your own lives. Perhaps you place undue emphasis on material possessions. Perhaps these are things upon which you set your heart. Perhaps your wealth, in your eyes, can provide comfort, pleasure, and deliverance in times of trouble. Put away that idol of materialism! It has no place in the life of the Christian. Perhaps the gods in which you find comfort and reassurance are those of entertainment and pleasure. Do these get your mind from your troubles? Do you find peace and joy in the godless entertainment this world so readily provides? Then repent. This is not the god upon which you can place your trust. This god deceives and deludes--but does not provide true deliverance and spiritual peace. Or do you place your trust in your job or your family? You look for them to care for and defend you? But trust in such proves to be but a broken reed. God commands: rely upon God, the Sovereign of heaven and earth:

Ah, what miserable sinners we are. How often we too transgress this first commandment of God. And if we transgress already the first, what are we doing with all the others? Two things ought to be clearly evident: first, we are all sinners. We all transgress and are deserving of the eternal wrath of God. How ungrateful, how unthankful we are! We who are creatures of His hand, have taken upon ourselves to trust in something other than God. Dare any say that he is innocent? That he has not transgressed?

But then we understand too the great need of the cross of Jesus Christ. If we cannot obey God's good command, if we are under the sentence of death because of transgression, if we cannot deliver ourselves--only God could provide the way out. And He did. He sent His only Son, the second person of the Trinity, into human flesh. Jesus provided the only possible payment, and full payment, for the transgressions of His own elect. And through this good work of Jesus Christ, His people now are so led to obey God's good laws. Thank God, children of God can (though it be but in beginning) obey and serve God through our Lord Jesus Christ. If you too are a Christian indeed, then the fruits of righteousness and thanksgiving are seen now in your lives.

And what is seen within the Christian who seeks to obey the first commandment? First, it is his earnest desire to know this one true Sovereign God. That truth can hardly be emphasized strongly enough. The Sovereign God has revealed Himself insofar as we can and may know Him. His Word is deep and rich. One must search that out in order to know more of that great and glorious God.

This requires, first, faithful hearing of the Word of God preached. God has ordained that the preaching of His Word would bring sinners to repentance and lead the godly into ever higher knowledge of His truth. In that, one had better not be satisfied with that which does not properly present the Word of God. Pet theories, philosophies, social programs have no place on the pulpit. God's people want to hear the Word about God Himself. Therefore, in obedience to this command, they attend faithfully the pure preaching of the Word.

Under the direction of the Word of God preached, one also is encouraged to continue his understanding and learning of Scripture through personal study. We have our Bibles available within the home. We can read and study that Word daily. And why ought we not to do so? Does that Bible not tell us of our God? Does it not unfold the wonder and glories of His perfect Being? Does it not show to us what we need to know in order to praise and glorify His holy Name? It does. Therefore we ought to study that Word faithfully.

Parents ought to be instructing their children in the Word of God about this same glorious Sovereign. Covenant children must not grow up in ignorance. These must be taught and directed that they too may understand the greatness of our God.

Secondly, such a God must be loved from the heart. I do not mean simply that one is attracted to God. But there must be a spiritual recognition of the perfections of God--and an admiration of these. The Christian must adore Him Who is so holy, so righteous, so glorious. And then one will also seek to worship and praise Him at all times and under all circumstances. Because one loves Him, he engages properly in his work, in his play, and in all of his activities.

Finally, there must be trust in such a God. With humility and patience we submit to Him. We are not ungrateful nor rebellious and unthankful because of anything which He sends to us. We believe and understand that God works all things together for our profit. He knows and understands what is best for us. Without complaint, and even with thanksgiving, I can receive what He sends. I need not fear this Almighty Sovereign God. Because Jesus paid for my sins, I can confidently come to Him and believe that He cares always for me.

Are you walking yet in sin and rebellion? Do you deny or ignore this Sovereign God? Then this Word of God requires repentance and confession of sin. God cannot allow such disobedience to go unpunished. There is no other god--therefore worship and praise the One true and eternal God.

Or are you of those who know that your sins are forgiven through the blood of Jesus? You had before disobeyed and rebelled--but you were led by God's grace to repentance. Then you rejoice in the opportunity and privilege to praise the name of this great God. Then your pleasure and joy is to acknowledge God as God alone. You flee from all your idols. You worship God alone. Your life and your conversation reflect this.

Where there is obedience to this very first command, then the others will be honored also. Obedience was expected and demanded by God from the time of the creation of all things. Obedience now by those saved through the blood of Jesus Christ, results also in obedience to all of the commands of God.

Are you an obedient and faithful Christian? Do you recognize and confess the greatness of our God in everything? Are you ready to sacrifice all, even life itself, for God's sake? Then you do indeed show the work of God's grace in your heart--and you enjoy heavenly peace and joy even now and forevermore. Amen.

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