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# NO OTHER GODS

*You shall have no other gods before me.*

—EXODUS 20:3

*T*wo religious convocations, one ancient and one modern, set the scene for our consideration of this first commandment.

In 1993 a parliament of the world's religions convened in Chicago. Seven hundred attendees sought common ground by minimizing their differences. They were in search of a multi-faith unifying consciousness. The mutual tapestry of understanding, respect, and cooperation, which marked the initial discussions, quickly unraveled as they began to tackle the substantial areas of disagreement. That event was separated from the ancient gathering by a few thousand miles and a few thousand years.

On Mount Carmel God's prophet Elijah went before the people and confronted them with their failure to give to God the loyalty He demanded and deserved. There was to be no attempt at blending the worship of Baal with the worship of Jehovah.

“How long will you waver between two opinions? If the LORD is God, follow him; but if Baal is God, follow him.”

—1 KINGS 18:21

Met with total silence, Elijah proposed “the battle of the prophets.” There were 450 prophets of Baal and on the opposing side, Elijah. If the numbers were any indication, it would appear that the odds were heavily in favor of Baal. The people were about to discover that one plus the living God is a majority.

The terms of engagement were clear. The 450 would cut a bull in pieces and put it on the wood. Then they would call on the name of their god, imploring him to set fire to it. Elijah would then do the same, calling on the name of the Lord. Victory would be clearly established: The god who answers by fire—He is God.

What followed was a scene that almost defies description. The prophets of Baal spent the entire morning wailing and howling to no avail. Elijah’s taunts hit them where it hurt. Maybe their “god” was “deep in thought,” in which case it was pretty obvious that he wasn’t thinking about them. Maybe was “busy”—responding to a call of nature—therefore, subject to human limitation. If he is “traveling” and can’t be present to help them, he is obviously not omnipresent. Perhaps he has grown weary and has fallen asleep, and so they’ll need to shout louder and awaken him. What a picture of ecstatic frenzy as they pierce themselves and produce red blood but are totally unable to ignite red flames to burn the bull. “There was no response, no one answered, no one paid attention” (1 Kings 18:29).

In direct contrast and with ordered calm, Elijah repaired the altar and had the offering doused three times with water. God answered his prayer, and the people fell prostrate, pro-

claiming, “The LORD—he is God! The LORD—he is God!” (v. 39).

At issue was the question, Is there a God who hears prayer? The answer came with dramatic impact. Only one. *Yahweh*. He is the real God. In contrast, the gods of the nations are “nothing.” The prophets Isaiah and Jeremiah seem to be constantly calling God’s people away from the worthless foreign idols to the exclusive worship of the true and living God.

Their words do not fit the twenty-first century category of political correctness! Listen to Jeremiah: “For the customs of the peoples are worthless; . . . Like a scarecrow in a melon patch, their idols cannot speak; they must be carried because they cannot walk. Do not fear them; they can do no harm nor can they do any good” (Jeremiah 10:3, 5). In contrast, *Yahweh* declares, “There is no God apart from me, a righteous God and a Savior; there is none but me” (Isaiah 45:21).

God’s demand for His people’s total devotion is firmly based upon who He is and what He has done. He is both Creator and Redeemer. But why, the reader may be asking, have we launched immediately into this hotbed of debate? Should we not be facing up to our proneness to worship at the shrines of materialism, egotism, and intellectualism? Should we not begin by toppling some of these “gods” from the perches they occupy in our wayward hearts? True, each of us must face up to the peculiar personal temptation to idolatry, but it would be possible to do so and at the same time fail to be present where the battle rages. The Christian must resist the spirit of the world in the form it takes in his own generation. Is the epicenter of the storm really that obvious? I believe so.

In the 1960s, science, education, finance, arts, and the

media voted God out of office. No one wanted to hear from the “God-squad,” and the prevailing mind-set was more than casual indifference towards God; it was willful disregard. The seeds planted in the 1960s blossomed in the 1970s and 1980s. But the quest for free love and unlimited self-expression issued not in beautiful foliage but in ugly weeds. Lawlessness, violence, and greed began to spoil and spread, as freedom, instead of being defined as the right to do what is right, became codified as the “unrestricted right to do whatever one pleases.” As we careened toward the end of the millennium, Western culture was beset by a range of discontents and confusion. While the stock market took many to unimaginable heights of financial success, the culture was showing signs of futility, foolishness, and deep darkness. Drugs—made freely available to children at school. Perverted lifestyles—given the stamp of approval by the entertainment industry and of normality by segments of the church. Rap music—taking language to a new level of degradation, and young people working out their own damnation in the murder of their teachers and fellow students.

And so it appeared that Judge Bork was right when he said that we were “Slouching Towards Gomorah.”

Meanwhile, as the natural, scientific quest for utopia fizzled and materialism was yielding only greater hunger and lonelier heights, spirituality was waiting in the wings for a chance at the leading role. So there was hope, after all, we were told. We have come to the end of the age of disbelief, and as the new millennium beckons, perhaps the dawning of the age of Aquarius, about which the 1960s dreamed, was about to become reality. At least it was reckoned we were entering a new age of faith. In casual conversation, it was not difficult to get general agreement that as a

society there would have to be more emphasis on responsibilities and less on our rights if we were going to pull out of what might be realistically seen as a moral and spiritual death spiral.

The frenzied greed, which had fueled the dot.com explosion, turned to wholesale panic as billions in value were flushed from the financial markets in less time than it had taken to accumulate. And then came the sad and horrific day at the dawn of this new millennium, 9/11/01, bringing many to their knees.

The “God is dead” slogan of the 1960s was to be replaced. “God is back,” the newspapers declared, as countless individuals who had been quite content to live without any thought of God went in search of spiritual solace.

What a moment of opportunity! When Jesus saw the crowds, He was moved with compassion because He saw them as sheep without a shepherd. Responding as Christ did, we may declare Him to be the Good Shepherd who gives His life for the sheep. We must affirm that all who came before Him were thieves and robbers and that He alone is the gate that leads to the safety of forgiveness and eternal life.

Aye, but here’s the rub. Surveys in this “new age of faith” reveal that more than three-fourths of all Americans believe that “many religions can lead to eternal life.” Staggeringly, nearly half of those who identify themselves as “highly committed” evangelicals agree with this statement. The extent of the confused muddle-headedness on this matter within the ranks of professing evangelicalism is frightful but not surprising. Congregations that have been amassed without being instructed in basic Christian doctrine are devoid of the theological acumen and conviction necessary to hold firmly to the faith of our fathers.

It is here that the battle rages, and it is here that we must take our stand. Instead of mumbling some mushy religious pluralism, we need to be prepared to take our Bibles in hand and graciously, yet courageously, declare a worldview that begins with the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who in the person of His Son Jesus (with whom He and the Holy Spirit are co-equal and co-eternal) has stepped out of eternity and into time, demonstrating that He is neither anonymous nor vague.

The grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to all men.

—TITUS 2:11

The exclusive claims of the gospel are designed to reach all nations throughout the whole world. But if we are going to uphold this first commandment, we dare not flee from the battlefield at this point. Martin Luther said:

*If I profess with the loudest voice and clearest exposition every portion of the truth of God except precisely that little point which the world and the devil are at that moment attacking, I am not confessing Christ, however boldly I may be professing Christ. Where the battle rages, there the loyalty of the soldier is proved, and to be steady on all the battlefield besides, is mere flight and disgrace if he flinches at this point.*

On the basis of this first commandment we must be prepared to declare that there is a decisive difference between the Christian faith and other religions. God is revealed in Scripture as powerful having spoken the world into being. He is perfect, self-existent, in need of no one and nothing. He is praiseworthy on account of His person and His works,

and He is plural. He is *They*. Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. It is thus not possible for us to talk of God except in light of the unity that exists within the Trinity. The unity between Father and Son has clear implications for our reading of the first commandment. For example, how can Judaism claim to be worshipping God when they refuse to honor the Son?

He who does not honor the Son does not honor the Father  
who has sent him.

—JOHN 5:23

It is not arrogance that finds Christians making such declarations. Jesus is not simply a prophet standing on the same level as Muhammad. He is the incarnate God, and one day at the name of Jesus every knee, including that of Muhammad, will bow.

When we think this issue through, we realize why Paul describes the Ephesians before their conversion as living *without God*. Despite the fact that pagans can clearly be very religious (Acts 17 testifies to man's capacity to skillfully and imaginatively fashion idols for worship), that doesn't deny the necessity of their turning from their empty ways to the true and living God (Acts 14:15–16).

In stating these things, we must keep in mind that the warnings given by the prophets not to run after idols were directed not to the surrounding natives but to the people of God. The distinct contrast between the Christian faith and other religions should not be the basis of animosity or aversion toward non-Christians. In reaching our children about this we must affirm the importance of social tolerance. We must lead by example in treating our Hindu, Muslim, and Jewish neighbors and friends with genuine courtesy and respect. However, we must at the same time save our children



from being swallowed up by a form of intellectual tolerance that fails to recognize the clear differences that exist between our Christian faith and the religions of our neighbors. For example, Hinduism says that God has been incarnated multiple times, but Christianity declares the Incarnation to be a unique event—we cannot both be right. Judaism says that Jesus was not the Messiah, but Christianity affirms that He is—again, we cannot both be right.

Of course, one of the peculiar challenges of our time is the rejection of the idea of universally valid truth. The collapse of scientific rationalism has paved the way for the idea that truth is what I reckon it to be. The huge change in the way people think about truth is humorously illustrated by Os Guinness, who tells the story of three baseball umpires discussing their profession.

*The first umpire, who represents a traditional Christian view of the world, says, “There’s balls and there’s strikes, and I call them the way they are.” In other words, he is saying, “There is such a thing as a ball and there is such a thing as a strike, and my job is to call them the way they actually are. The second umpire says, “No. No. There’s balls and there’s strikes and I call them the way I see them.” This umpire says what’s important is not whether or not it is a ball or a strike that comes over the plate, but what he sees. This relativistic view says that truth is what is true to me. In conversation with friends we find them saying—you have your truth, I have my truth. The underlying notion is that truth is what I perceive it to be and in the end all truths converge. The third umpire says, “No. No. No. There’s balls and there’s strikes and they ain’t nothing till I call them.” Balls and strikes don’t even exist until he calls them into being by his own word. His radical perspective denies the idea of absolute truth.<sup>1</sup>*

It is not easy in this philosophical climate to hold firm to the biblical conviction that there is such a thing as truth and it is knowable and that when we say *God* it doesn't mean whatever we want it to mean. When Paul addressed the intelligentsia of Athens he was bold and unashamed: "The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth and does not live in temples made by hands. And he is not served by human hands, as if he needed anything, because he himself gives all men life and breath and everything else" (Acts 17:24–25).

Why was the city full of idols? Calvin writes of the way in which man makes for himself "shadow deities" so that he does not have to face the true God, whom he should reverence and adore. Paul explains in the first chapter of Romans that man is created with an awareness of divinity. Creation reinforces this awareness as we contemplate the order of the universe. Created to praise and worship the one true God, man suppresses the truth that is plain and invents for himself all kinds of pseudodeities. These are the sorry creations described by Isaiah as he pictures a man taking wood from the forest and with some of it lights a fire and with the rest of it fashions an idol.

Half of the wood he burns in the fire;  
    over it he prepares his meal, . . .  
From the rest he makes a god, his idol;  
    he bows down to it and worships.  
He prays to it and says,  
    "Save me you are my god."  
They know nothing, they understand nothing;  
    their eyes are plastered over so they cannot see,  
    and their minds closed so they cannot understand.

No one stops to think,  
no one has the knowledge or understanding to say,  
“Half of it I used for fuel;  
I even baked bread over its coals,  
I roasted meat and I ate.  
Shall I make a detestable thing from what is left?  
Shall I bow down to a block of wood?”  
He feeds on ashes, a deluded heart misleads him;  
he cannot save himself, or say,  
“Is not this thing in my right hand a lie?”  
—ISAIAH 44:16–20

As we have noted before, the prophet was not abusing the surrounding nations. Instead, he was confronting God’s people with the amazing incongruity of their dilly-dallying with these “nothings” when their creator and redeemer called for their total devotion.

There is a sense in which the children of God are called continually to choose wisely and to ratify their choice in their lifestyle. **This first commandment excludes all the gods invented by men.** The Law of God is the lifestyle of the redeemed. His liberated people must not be foolish enough to go looking for the old gods beyond the river. This is the significance of the scene that comes at the end of the book of Joshua. Having summoned the leaders of Israel, this great general reminded them of how God had redeemed them and provided for them. Surely their hearts were so full of gratitude that they were shining examples of exclusive loyalty. Actually, no. Listen to what Joshua has to say:

Now fear the LORD and serve him with all faithfulness.  
Throw away the gods your forefathers worshiped beyond  
the River and in Egypt, and serve the LORD. But if serving

the LORD seems undesirable to you, then choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your forefathers served beyond the River, or the gods of the Amorites, in whose land you are living.

—JOSHUA 24:14–15

So Bob Dylan was right when he wrote the song, “Gotta Serve Somebody.” Either the people of God will worship and serve the true and living God, or they must choose for themselves shadow deities for the object of their devotion.

The application of this historic incident is clear for the Christian. The liberation of God’s people from Egypt foreshadows the even greater deliverance and redemption that is ours through the work of Christ upon the cross. The Christian’s supreme loyalty is to the Lord Jesus, who loved him and gave Himself for him.

The point made so clearly in Joshua’s call to the people is that to serve the living God means putting away other gods that are pretenders to the throne.

We make a grave mistake in assuming that because our houses are free of idols fashioned of metal, wood, or stone we have dealt with this and are ready to move on to the second commandment. The sobering truth to be faced up to is this: Anything or any person (including myself) that claims our primary loyalty has become “another God.”

As we work our way through these commandments, we will constantly be on our guard against the spirit of the Pharisee, which contents itself with an outward conformity to the Law that is unmatched by the submission of the heart.

“Above all else guard your heart, for it is the wellspring of life.” Solomon gives directions about our words and the

gaze of our eyes and the path of our feet but the heart of the matter is the matter of the heart. Every idolatrous inclination begins in the heart.

—PROVERBS 4:23

While we are certainly not immune to the temptation to that which is clearly evil, the majority of our challenges will have to do with taking good things given for our enjoyment and devoting ourselves to them to such an extent that we make idols of them.

For example, let's take intelligence or academic success, physical fitness or sports and wealth as a reward for honest endeavor. We would be hard-pressed to argue against the benefit and enjoyment that are offered in these things. We recognize, as the Puritan Richard Sibbes said, "God has created worldly things to sweeten our passage into heaven."

Wisdom is described in Proverbs as being more precious than rubies. Paul tells Timothy that physical fitness has a certain value. Moses reminds the people that their ability to produce wealth is from the Lord.

The perversity of the human heart is such that even these good things may become the occasion of idolatry. In C. S. Lewis' *Screwtape Letters*, the devil instructs his under-study to encourage Christian to take these good things at the wrong time or in the wrong quantities. When that happens, the sweetness quickly turns sour. If we are not careful, wealth, wisdom, and strength quickly become grounds for boasting. So God issues this warning through His servant Jeremiah: "Let not the wise man boast of his wisdom or the strong man of his strength or the rich man of his riches, but let him who boasts boast about this: that he understands and knows me, that I am the LORD" (Jeremiah 9:23–24).

In a similar vein, Moses reminds the people of just how

crucial it is to “observe the commands of the LORD your God” and to reverence Him in their hearts as they walk in His ways (Deuteronomy 8:6). These commands would serve as an antidote to the temptation to forget the Creator because of a preoccupation with the creation. They were enjoying the “good life” on account of God’s provision, and it was imperative that they did not lose focus. After enjoying a good meal, they should worship and praise God the giver. They should pay careful attention to all His commands, laws, and decrees. “Otherwise, when you eat and are satisfied, when you build fine houses and settle down, and when your herds and flocks grow large and your silver and gold increase and all you have is multiplied, then your heart will become proud and you will forget the LORD” (Deuteronomy 8:12–14).

Moses clearly did not believe that the people had no need of “the ought” and “the should” but instead required “an adventure.” The blessings they enjoyed could so easily become the opportunity for the worship of self, and the people’s propensity to pride needed to be harnessed by the reminder, “You shall have no other gods before me.”

Each of us needs to come before God in a spirit of humility and be prepared to face up to the scrutiny we experience as we pray: “Search me, O God, and know my heart; . . . See if there is any offensive way in me” (Psalm 139:23–24).

I wonder if you have considered the possibility that some of our most precious earthly relationships can cause us to violate the first commandment. It is clear from the opening chapter of 1 Corinthians that Paul, Apollos, and Cephas had been granted a place in people’s affections and loyalty that at least verged on idolatry.

Within the framework of marriage there is the distinct danger that a spouse may take first place in his or her partner’s

devotion. Have you never heard it said of a husband's loyalty to his wife, "He worships the ground she walks on"?

C. T. Studd recognized this tendency and wanted to prepare his wife for life without him. He encouraged her to remind herself routinely, "Lord Jesus, you are to me dearer than Charlie ever could be." The husband and wife will never find a greater mutual love than when urging each other to love the Lord with all their heart, soul, mind, and strength.

Dare we risk the scorn that may accompany the suggestion that our children may become idols? Again, is it not the case that a parent may be described as just "idolizing" his offspring? The family unit as a whole may actually become our focus when our focus should be on the Lord of the family. There is little doubt that family ties are the most frequent and acceptable excuses for disengaging from the gatherings of God's people in worship and the company of God's people in witness.

When we've been tempted to dismiss this idea as being un-Christlike, we do well to give careful thought to two brief scenarios in Luke's gospel, Luke 8:19–21 and 11:27–28. In each instance, Jesus places the hearing of and obedience to God's Word before considerations of family. The fact that this strikes us as so unbelievably strange is a further indication of the extent to which we have allowed the family to vie for that primary loyalty which belongs to God alone. He will not share His praise, which includes our loyalty, with anyone else. "I am the LORD; that is my name! I will not give my glory to another or my praise to idols" (Isaiah 42:8).

The series of sermons to which I referred earlier was titled *Guidelines for Freedom*. God demands our exclusive loyalty, and we find that in this complete devotion to the one God there is freedom. This is the freedom that comes from knowing that we are not held in the grip of blind forces or

tossed about on the sea of chance but instead that in all things God is at work for the good of those who love Him. Surely providence is a soft pillow!

There is no limit to the benefits that we enjoy as we seek to remain faithful in our loyalty to the Lord. Even death does not bring an end to all that God has in store for those who love Him. The psalmist declares:

You will show me the path of life;  
In Your presence is fullness of joy;  
At Your right hand are pleasures forevermore.

—PSALM 16:11 NKJV

In conducting a wedding ceremony, I often urge the couple to ensure that they do not allow their eyes to wander, their minds to ponder, or their hearts to settle upon anyone or anything that will draw them away from each other. I have little doubt that on their wedding day they acknowledge my remarks, affirming them with every beat of their hearts. Such exclusive loyalty, if it is to be established over the long haul of married life, will demand from them sincerity, an unswerving focus, and a commitment to carefully maintain such devotion.

Christ loved the church and gave Himself up for her to make her holy. As His bride, the church is to keep herself from idols, to keep herself only unto Him. There can be no toying on the part of the bride with the seductive suggestions of pluralism or with the blatant advances of secularism. This commandment demands our exclusive and zealous worship. As individuals we must pay careful heed to the exhortation with which John ends his first letter: “Dear children, keep yourselves from idols” (1 John 5:21).

Such necessary vigilance demands that we are self-



controlled and alert, for behind idolatry of every kind we will discover the deceitful scheming of the Evil One. In this endeavor we will be strengthened and renewed as we fix our eyes upon the Lord, “for only he will release my feet from the snare” (Psalm 25:15).

*The dearest idol I have known,  
Whate'er that idol be,  
Help me to tear it from Thy throne,  
And worship only Thee.*