

The First Commandment

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Introduction

A biblical understanding of the law of God is crucial if people are going to have a right understanding of doctrine and Christian living (e.g., one's views of God, sin, grace, justification, sanctification, the family and society are all affected by one's understanding of biblical law). In the present generation there is an appalling, widespread ignorance of God's law, a hatred and rejection of biblical law and many heretical (antinomian) views of the law taught in professing Christian churches. The only way to reverse this present trend (which has been a disaster for many churches and society at large) is to examine the validity, meaning and purpose of God's law. In this study we will consider various topics related to the law, then we will examine the Ten Commandments which are a summary of the whole moral law of God.

Chapter 1: Is God's Law Still Binding?

One of the most dangerous false doctrines to plague "Bible-believing" churches in the modern era is antinomianism. This modern form is usually the old dispensational idea that believers are set free from God's law not only as a means of justification, a legal sentence of death and the curse of the law, but also as a rule for life, a guide to holy living and sanctification. As a modern hymn caricature says: "Free from the law O happy condition. I can sin as I please and still have remission." It is argued that the Old Testament (from Moses onward) is the dispensation of law and the New Testament is the dispensation of grace. The Jews had to keep the law, but (we are told) Christians do not. In order to understand and refute this popular error let us briefly examine and refute the typical antinomian arguments.

One argument is based on a misunderstanding of Paul's statement that believers "have become dead to the law" (Rom. 7:4; cf. Gal. 2:19). When the apostle uses the metaphor of death in relation to the law he never means that Christians are somehow no longer obligated to obey God's moral commandments. Such a thought is absurd given the fact that: (a) Paul endorses God's law by saying: "Therefore the law is holy, and the commandment holy and just and good" (Rom. 7:12); (b) Paul repeatedly appeals to God's law to teach biblical ethics to believers (e.g., Rom. 13:9-10; 1 Cor. 5:9 ff.; 6:9; 9:9; Gal. 5:19ff; Col. 3:9; 1 Tim. 5:18; etc.). (c) The apostle teaches that the law is universal in its application to all men, not just the Jews (e.g., Rom. 3:19). The phrase "dead to the law" means that the believer is no longer under the legal indictment—the curse and penalty of the law (cf., Gal. 3:10, 13). Also, the believer is not obligated to perpetually and perfectly obey every jot and tittle of the law to be justified before God (cf. Lk. 10:28; Rom. 2:13; Gal. 3:12) as the Pharisees falsely taught. Jesus Christ by His perfect obedience to the law and His sacrificial death removes the guilt and penalty of sin and merits eternal life for the believing sinner.

Another argument is based on a misinterpretation of Paul's statement that Christians "are

not under law but under grace” (Rom. 6:14). When the apostle tells the Roman believers they are not under law but under grace, he is not tossing aside God’s moral law as a guide to holy living. Instead, he is condemning the Jewish error common in his day that people can be saved and sanctified by keeping the law. Paul is teaching that the only way that a person can have the power or dominion of sin broken in a person’s life is through grace. That is, by virtue of being united to Christ in His life, death and resurrection (cf. Rom. 7:4-6; Gal. 3:20) a person is regenerated by the Holy Spirit, given a new heart (Ez. 18:31; 1 Jn. 3:9) and progressively enabled to obey God’s law (although imperfectly in this life, cf. 1 Jn. 1:8). Jesus’ perfect work of redemption not only justifies the believing sinner in God’s court (Rom. 3:24, 28, 30; Gal. 2:16) thereby eliminating the curse of the law (Gal. 3:10, 13), but it also gives the believer victory or power over the inward pollution of sin. Christ is our sanctification (1 Cor. 1:30). “The purpose of Christ’s atoning work was to restore man to a position of covenant keeping instead of covenant breaking, to enable man to keep the law by freeing ‘from the law of sin and death’ (Rom. 8:2), ‘that the righteousness of the law might be fulfilled in us’ (Rom. 8:4).”¹ Given this truth regarding the comprehensive nature of salvation Paul can say, “Do we then make void the law through faith? Certainly not! On the contrary, we establish the law” (Rom. 3:31). “The law is good if one uses it lawfully” (1 Tim. 1:8). Demar writes: “Our love for Jesus is expressed in terms of law-keeping. Jesus said, ‘If you love Me, you will keep My commandments’ (John 14:15). Are Jesus’ commandments different from those of His Father? No. He came to do the same (Matthew 6:10; 7:21; Luke 22:42; John 4:34). Keeping God’s law is God’s will.”²

A passage that is often appealed to as a proof text that Jesus came to do away with God’s law is Matthew 5:17, “Do not think that I came to destroy the Law or the Prophets. I did not come to destroy but to fulfill.” This passage is interpreted as teaching that Jesus came to bring an end to the law. There are a number of reasons why such a view must be rejected. First, that interpretation which has Jesus in essence saying, “Don’t worry, I did not come to abolish the law, I came rather to eliminate it or bring it to an end” is absurd. Our Lord would not comfort Jewish ears with such contradictory nonsense. Second, the immediate context (vs. 18-19) indicates the perpetuity of the moral law. Disciples in Jesus’ kingdom had better teach and obey “these commandments” (v. 19). Third, the broader context (vs. 21-48) exhibits Christ as a champion of the moral law over against the legalism (i.e., the human traditions) of the Pharisees. “God has never repealed a single provision of the moral law. Christ Himself declared that his mission was not to set aside any of its enactments but to fulfill them. And long after Christ’s ascension the apostles repeated in various forms the precepts of the decalogue as in full force. This law is unrepealed and unrepealable.”³

Another proof text used to argue for the abrogation of the law is Galatians 3:23-25, “But before faith came, we were kept under guard by the law, kept for the faith which would afterward be revealed. Therefore the law was our tutor to bring us to Christ, that we might be justified by faith. But after faith has come, we are no longer under a tutor.” What does Paul mean when he says that we are no longer under a tutor? Does he mean that the whole Old Testament

¹Rousas John Rushdoony, *The Institutes of Biblical Law* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1977 [73]), p. 3.

²Gary North and Gary Demar, *Christian Reconstruction: What It Is, What It Isn’t* (Tyler, TX: Institute for Christian Economics, 1991), p. 102.

³William S. Plumer, *The Law of God as Contained in the Ten Commandment, Explained and Enforced* (Harrisburg, VA: Sprinkle Publications, 1996 [1864]), p. 29.

law has been annulled by Christ? A careful examination of the book of Galatians reveals that the word tutor refers to the ceremonial law, to the types and shadows of the old covenant administration. There are a number of reasons for this assertion. First, the broad context of the passage indicates that Paul is refuting the Judaizers' doctrine that Gentiles are obligated to keep the whole system of the Mosaic ceremonial laws in order to be a Christian. In the book of Galatians Paul deals with two serious and related doctrinal errors. One is salvation through Christ *and* human merit (keeping the law). The other is that Gentiles must become Jews in order to be Christians. Paul rebukes the Galatians for turning to the weak and beggarly elements (4:9); for observing Jewish holy days (4:10); and warns them by strongly condemning circumcision (5:22ff.). Note, the apostle is focusing upon what is distinctive to the Mosaic administration. This interpretation is supported by Paul's illustration of Mount Sinai which gives birth to bondage (Hagar) and corresponds to the earthly Jerusalem (cf. Gal. 4:24-28). The Jews were still in bondage to the ceremonial law and their heretical notions of salvation by human merit. Christians, however, belong to the heavenly Jerusalem which is free.

Second, the immediate context also points to what was distinctive to the Mosaic economy. Immediately after saying that "after faith [i.e., Christianity] has come, we are no longer under a tutor," Paul says "For you are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus. For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek...for you are all one in Christ Jesus. And if you are Christ's then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise" (Gal. 3:26-29). What separated Jews and Gentiles in the Old Covenant--the ceremonial law, "the middle wall of separation" [Eph. 2:14; cf. 2:11-22]--has been abolished in Christ. There is now one church, one body, one covenant people, all of which are true Jews by faith in Jesus (Gal. 3:29; cf. Eph. 4:4).

Third, the idea that Paul was teaching the abrogation of the whole Old Testament law including the moral law is rendered impossible by the fact that in the book of Galatians itself, the apostle appeals to the Old Testament moral law. He approvingly quotes Leviticus 19:18, "For all the law is fulfilled in one word, even in this: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself'" (Gal. 5:14). He then discusses a number of sins that are all violations of the Old Testament moral law (cf. Gal. 5:19-21). But doesn't Paul say in Galatians 5:18 that, "if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law?" Yes, he does. However, "In Galatians 5:16-18, the contrast is between the way of 'the flesh,' fallen, unaided human nature, and the way of 'the Spirit,' the redeemed and aided new man. The law is associated in this context with 'the flesh,' so that the reference is again clearly to misuse the law as a way of justification."⁴

Another common argument against the continuing validity of the law is that the law was given to Israel and therefore was only meant for the Jewish nation, not the Gentiles. While it is true that there are parts of the law that only applied to the covenant people (e.g., the ceremonial laws and various aspects of the judicial laws [boundaries, political system, laws protecting blood lines--Levirate marriage; etc.]), the Bible clearly teaches that the moral law was and is binding on all nations. In Deuteronomy 4:5-8 Israel is commanded to carefully observe God's law in order to be an example to the pagan nations around them. Such godly behavior would cause the surrounding nations to acknowledge the wisdom of Israel, Israel's close relationship to Jehovah and the superiority of God's law. The Gentiles would say, "And what great nation is there that has such statutes and righteous judgments as are in all this law which I set before you this day?"

⁴R. J. Rushdoony, *Institutes*, p. 738.

(Dt. 4:8). This section of Scripture presupposes that the moral laws given to Israel (the “righteous judgments” vs. 8) apply to every nation and peoples of the whole world.

In the Old Testament God repeatedly judges nations for violating His moral law. “When you come into the land which the LORD your God is giving you, you shall not learn to follow the abominations of those nations. There shall not be found among you anyone who makes his son or his daughter pass through the fire, or one who practices witchcraft, or a soothsayer, or one who interprets omens, or a sorcerer, or one who conjures spells, or a medium, or a spiritist, or one who calls up the dead. For all who do these things are an abomination to the LORD, and because of these abominations the LORD your God drives them out from before you” (Dt. 18:9-12; cf. Dt. 20:17-18; Is. 10:5-11; 19:1; 46:1; Jer. 46:25; 48:35; 50:1, 2, 38; 51:17, 18, 47, 52, etc.). Note also, how Paul argues that all men (even those without written revelation) are under God’s law. “For when Gentiles, who do not have the law, by nature do the things in the law, these, although not having the law...who show the work of the law written in their hearts” (Rom. 2:14-15). “Now we know that whatever the law says, it says to those who are under the law, that every mouth may be stopped, and all the world may become guilty before God” (Rom. 3:19).

The binding nature of the Old Testament moral law is taught throughout the New Testament (as noted above—cf. Mt. 5:17ff.; Rom. 2:14-15; 3:19, etc.). Bahnsen writes, “He [Paul] applied God’s law to judges (Acts 23:3; cf. Leviticus 19:15). He endorsed God’s prohibition of reviling rulers (Acts 23:5; cf. Exodus 22:28). In dealing with social relationships and conditions he appealed to the Mosaic case laws regarding incest (1 Corinthians 5:1; cf. Leviticus 18:8), homosexuality (Romans 1:27, 32; cf. Leviticus 20:13), and fair treatment of slaves (Colossians 4:1; cf. Leviticus 25:43, 53). He endorsed the use of God’s law to curb social crimes like killing one’s parents, kidnapping, homosexuality, perjury, etc. (1 Timothy 1:8-10). He expected the civil sanctions of God’s law to be applied (Acts 25:11), teaching that civil magistrates must pursue their offices as “ministers of God” (Romans 13:1-4). He indicted the emperor for his ‘lawlessness’ (2 Thessalonians 2:8).”⁵

The leaven of dispensational theology has had many devastatingly negative effects on professing Bible-believing churches throughout the twentieth century. The church’s prophetic role as a shining light (Mt. 5:14) and preserving salt (Mt. 13) to society and culture has largely been negated by a theology which denies God’s law, its voice in the public square. Without the needed emphasis on God’s law as a crucial aspect of a Christian social order, secular humanists, relativists and statists have filled the void. Churches in many ways are directly responsible for the widespread lawlessness of modern American culture. Churches that do not preach the law of God have as a result perverted both the gospel and the doctrine of sanctification. The Reformed emphasis on the doctrine of justification (which is a forensic [i.e., legal-law related] act) has been replaced by a personal subjective experience, “ask Jesus to come and live in your heart.” The necessity of sanctification is often denied today; that is, the biblical requirement for Christians to lead a holy life is considered optional or only for believers who decide to make Christ Lord of their life (i.e., the carnal Christian heresy). The persistent antinomianism of modern evangelicalism is demonstrated by the fact that statistically the rates of adultery, fornication, divorce, theft, etc. among professing Christians in America is virtually identical to the surrounding pagan population. Churches that despise God’s law are impotent, salt-less and

⁵Greg L. Bahnsen, *No Other Standard: Theonomy and Its Critics* (Tyler, TX: The Institute for Christian Economics, 1991), p. 159.

lukewarm. They commit unconditional surrender by neglecting the tools of dominion that God has given them and set themselves up for persecution by handing society over to their enemies.

The Necessity of Biblical Law

In order to emphasize the necessity of biblical law for all areas of life (the family, business, the church and the state) one must recognize the fact that all law is inescapably religious. Once Christians understand this fact, they will no longer accept humanistic law presented under the guise of neutrality, freedom and fairness. Many American Christians have bought into two popular (yet thoroughly unscriptural) concepts of law. One says that a person should not legislate morality. The other states that a nation must remain neutral with respect to religion when making civil laws. The thinking behind such slogans is that since America is a large nation composed of hundreds of religions, the path toward “liberty for all” involves keeping all religious beliefs out of civil affairs. The state must be totally “secular” in its foundation and outlook.

There are a number of things to note regarding these unbiblical conceptions of law. First, the idea that a civil law can exist that is not based on morality and religion of some type is a myth. Rushdoony writes: “The statement, ‘You can’t legislate morality,’ is a dangerous half-truth and even a lie, because *all* legislation is concerned with morality. Every law on the statute books of every civil government is either an example of enacted morality or it is procedural thereto. Our laws are all moral laws, representing a system of morality. Laws against manslaughter and murder are moral laws; they echo the commandment, ‘Thou shalt not kill.’ Laws against theft are commandments against stealing. Slander and libel laws, perjury laws, enact the moral requirement, ‘Thou shalt not bear false witness.’ Traffic laws are moral laws also: their purpose is to protect life and property; again, they reflect the Ten Commandments. Laws concerning police and court procedures have a moral purpose also, to further justice and to protect law and order. Every law on the statute books is concerned with morality or with the procedures for the enforcement of law, and all law is concerned with morality. We may disagree with the morality of a law, but we cannot deny the moral concern of law. Law is concerned with right and wrong; it punishes and restrains evil and protects the good, and this is exactly what morality is about. It is impossible to have law without having morality behind that law, because all law is simply enacted morality.”⁶ This point does not mean that man can be saved through law or that laws can change people internally making them moral. It simply makes clear what should be obvious to all, that all laws are a reflection of what people consider right or wrong (ethics) and what people consider to be right or wrong is based on a particular world and life view (religion). (A person’s world-view is equivalent to his or her religion because it deals with an ultimate view of reality or an interpretation of the meaning of life).

Second, these unbiblical conceptions of law are rooted in the myth of neutrality. Does the Bible teach that man can somehow transcend himself, his environment and his own presuppositions regarding reality to autonomously discover truth and ethics in the universe? No. Man is a sinful creature who is dependent on God at every single point. While it is true that man is created in the image of God, lives in a God-created and conditional environment, is exposed to natural revelation at every moment and has a knowledge of God (Rom. 1:19ff.) and His law

⁶Rousas John Rushdoony, *Law and Liberty* (Valletico, CA: Ross House Books, 1984 [1967]), pp. 1-2.

(Rom. 2:14-15), the Bible teaches that this knowledge is continually suppressed in unrighteousness (Rom. 1:18). Natural revelation is enough to condemn man. However, it cannot be used in an autonomous manner to develop a consistent and thorough biblical system of justice. It was never intended by God to be used apart from special revelation. The Bible unequivocally condemns the idea of neutrality in favor of a total allegiance to Jesus Christ and His law word. “The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge” (Pr. 1:7). Believers are told to bring “every thought into captivity to the obedience of Christ” (2 Cor. 10:5). If Jesus is to direct every thought, why and how can this exclude laws directed to families and society? The only way that nations can have real justice is to “kiss the Son” (Ps. 2:12) and become disciples of *all* that He has commanded (Mt. 28:20). Unbelievers who walk in the futility of their mind, who have a darkened understanding (Eph. 4:17-18); who have futile thoughts and foolish darkened hearts (Rom. 1:21) obviously cannot develop a just body of laws apart from thinking God’s thoughts after Him. God’s special revelation is the only place mankind can find a truly just, infallible, reliable, non-arbitrary law-system. “In Your light we see light” (Ps. 36:9). “The commandment is a lamp, and the law a light” (Pr. 6:23). One cannot serve two masters (Mt. 6:24). It is impossible to simultaneously adhere to biblical law (the law of Christ) and heathen law-systems. Although there may be surface points of agreement between a Christian law order and a pagan system (e.g., murder is wrong) at bottom each is fundamentally different for one stands upon the bedrock of Scripture while the other flows from rebellious, sinful human autonomy. “Whoever therefore wants to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God” (Jas. 4:4).

Modern professing Christians who have adopted a position of “neutrality” with regard to civil laws and affairs have themselves adopted a position that is really not neutral at all. They unwittingly have endorsed a position that is hostile to a Christian law order. The results have been predictable. First, society adheres to a quasi-Christian form of natural law. Direct revelation is viewed as an embarrassment to intellectuals and much too specific for civil magistrates. As a result an appeal is made to general revelation, which in a post fall world is vague and malleable. Society at this time is directed in a general manner by the Christian world-view. Second, natural law theory is co-opted by anti-Christian secularists. Men appeal to natural law as something objective, but the transcendent, the supernatural and the divine are rejected for an immanent natural order. The personal God of the Bible and His special revelation are left out of the picture. At this point men pretend to be objective; however, it is their autonomous minds, apart from God’s word, that determine what is true and right. Third, there is a shift among intellectuals toward evolutionary thinking. Law is then considered as something that is non-objective and always changing. This last stage leads directly to legal positivism, pragmatism and secular humanism. Law is simply whatever society says it is. This view says that there are no ethical absolutes.

When Christians accept neutrality (e.g., any non-biblically defined version of natural law) in the civil sphere they sign a peace treaty with those at war with Christ and His people. They open the gates for the Trojan horse of secular humanism and its fruits (statism, abortion on demand, sodomite rights, anti-Christian legislation, etc.). Because law is inescapably religious, believers who adopt a portion of neutrality enable their enemies to disestablish the Christian law order (e.g., as seen in the puritan and colonial eras) and replace it with a godless humanism. “Christian scholars have endlessly asserted the existence of neutral, ‘natural’ laws that can serve as the church’s earthly hope of the ages, an agreeable middle way that will mitigate the conflict

in history between the kingdom of God and the kingdom of man. The winner of such a naive quest will always be the kingdom of man. Theoretical neutrality means man's operational autonomy: men do not have to consider what God requires or threatens in history."⁷

Third, given the fact that neutrality is impossible, all law systems are founded on a particular world-view or faith commitment. As Rushdoony has pointed out, "It must be recognized that in any culture *the source of law is the god of that society*."⁸ In a society where laws are determined by majority vote and/or public opinion, one could say that mankind (or a majority of the populace) is the god of that society. In an Islamic society the Koran or the false god taught by Mohammed (or perhaps Mohammed himself) is the god of that society. There are Buddhist, Shinto, Hindu and even animist law orders. This fact does not mean that in the modern world cultures do not pragmatically borrow laws and rules from other cultures; they often do. (e.g. In the nineteenth century Japan, which had a Shinto religious base and an emperor cult, borrowed laws and procedures from the west as a path to power, economically and militarily.) However, it does give us insight regarding any society. One can examine the laws of a particular culture and ask: "Why is it wrong to discriminate against homosexuals?" or even, "Why does your culture outlaw murder?" If one responds, "Well, it is against the law;" then one should ask, "Yes, but *why* is it against the law? Why does your society say that it is wrong (i.e., unethical) to commit murder, or discriminate against sodomites or disallow infanticide (i.e., partial birth abortion)." If one drives the argument, the reasoning, back to its original starting point, then one can discover the faith commitment or presupposition regarding reality behind the laws of a particular culture.

When one applies this process to the American law system it is evident that our society is functioning under a secular humanistic law order with some remaining remnants of a Christian law system (e.g., laws based on biblical ethics which are intended to protect the family). In a Christian nation the state understands its responsibility under Christ to implement biblical law by applying the moral principles of divine revelation to modern culture. Neither government leaders, nor judges nor the people have the right to add or detract from Jehovah's perfect ethical standard (Dt. 4:2; Pr. 30:6). "Nothing is more deadly or more derelict than the notion that the Christian is at liberty with respect to the kind of law he can have....Neither positive law nor natural law can reflect more than the sin and apostasy of man: *revealed law* is the need and privilege of Christian society."⁹ However, in modern America laws are made or changed solely based upon the opinion of the people. This law-making process can be by direct vote (the will of the majority), by persons elected by the majority (e.g., the congress and senate), or by declaration of a court (e.g., the Supreme Court). But, what is the standard, foundation or basis of the various decisions by the people, legislature or courts. Is it God's law, the unchanging standard of righteousness? No. Appeals to the Bible are deemed a violation of church and state. The only decision acceptable is one based on the autonomous choice of the people. Appeals can be made to human reason, utility, fairness, pragmatics, equality and so on. But, by eliminating all appeals to the transcendent and absolute (the unchanging law of God) society is set adrift on an ocean of arbitrary human desires. Such is the essence of humanism—the exaltation and worship of man. It

⁷Gary North, *Political Polytheism: The Myth of Pluralism* (Tyler, TX: The Institute of Christian Economics, 1989), p. 640.

⁸Rousas John Rushdoony, *The Institutes of Biblical Law*, p. 4.

⁹*Ibid.* pp. 9-10.

is the religion of the serpent who said to Eve, “you will be like God, knowing good and evil” (Gen. 3:5). In American circles of power, truth is whatever idea wins the latest popularity contest. “Everyone did what was right in his own eyes” (Jdg. 17:6). “There is a way that seems right to a man, but its end is the way of death” (Pr. 14:12).

America’s radical departure from biblical law toward secular humanistic law raises an important question. Why does the majority of professing Christians in this nation ignore or disregard the emergence of an anti-Christian secularism in the schools, courts and legislatures? A major reason is that modern humanism has disguised its hatred of biblical Christianity under the cover of “pluralism.” America, it is argued, is a nation of great diversity that can only exist peacefully under the flag of religious tolerance. Therefore, the humanists have nurtured a two-tiered system. There is the polytheism and pluralism of the masses. But in the important matters of law there is the secular rule of the humanistic elite. One often observes Jewish, Roman Catholic and Protestant politicians on television assuring people not to worry, that their personal religious beliefs have no influence on the manner in which they will vote and determine legislation. In other words, “In my personal life I believe in God but when I enter the public arena I am an operational atheist.” In the name of neutrality and tolerance the humanists have taken power with the full consent of a majority of Christians. It is only in the last forty years as the humanists have grossly perverted justice (e.g., the legalization of abortion) and openly expressed its hatred of Christianity that many Christians have become alarmed. Secular humanism is an aggressive religion that is evangelistic and expansive; it seeks total jurisdiction over every area of life. It is the same philosophy that at bottom lies behind Nazism and Marxism.

Christians today must wake up and understand that there are two alternatives for American culture. There is theonomy or autonomy. There is humanistic law or biblical law. There is the tyranny of the secular state that rules by its own decrees and grants or repeals rights as it sees fit; or there is liberty, freedom and justice under God’s unchanging, objective, absolute standard. With God’s law all men, both rulers and citizens, are under the same objective law-word. The freedom and incredible cultural advances of the West did not happen by accident. As societies place themselves under the rule of Christ and submit to His law they make great advances in godly dominion. When Christians reject the necessity of biblical law for all areas of life (including the public square) they invite rival philosophies to fill the void. We must put into use the tools of dominion. We must conquer by the Word and Spirit or we will be persecuted by a rival religious faith.

Chapter 2: The Giving of the Law

Before we turn our attention to the Ten Commandments we should examine the unique circumstances in which the law was given. This will involve a brief consideration of Exodus 19. This chapter consists of two major sections. The first section tells of Israel’s arrival at Sinai and God’s covenant with Israel (19:1-9). The second section describes the God-given preparations for receiving the law (19:10-25). There are a number of reasons why an understanding of this narrative is important. (1) It tells us a great deal about the Mosaic covenant. This “covenant of law” has been grossly misunderstood by evangelicals. (2) It informs us about the relationship between grace and law. (3) It gives us important information about Israel’s role as a covenant people in a pagan world. (4) The section on the preparation for receiving the law focuses our

attention on the awesome, majestic holiness of Yahweh and His law.

1. The Law as a Covenant

In chapter 19 we have the beginning of the establishment of the Mosaic covenant or the covenant of law. There are a number of things to note regarding this covenant. First, note that the Mosaic covenant does not set aside or replace earlier covenants (e.g., the covenant of promise to Abraham) but rather builds upon their foundation.¹⁰ The whole miraculous exodus experience and the covenant made at Sinai is founded upon Israel's prior status as God's covenant people. The story of Israel's deliverance begins with God hearing the groans of His oppressed people and remembering "His covenant with Abraham, with Isaac, and with Jacob" (2:24). Indeed, there is an emphasis on Israel's special elect status throughout the book of Exodus. God identifies Israel as "My people" (3:7, 10; 5:1; 7:4, 16; 8:1, 20-22; 9:1, 13, 17; 10:3-4) and "My son, My firstborn" (4:22-23). Moreover, God repeatedly identifies Himself as the covenant God. Jehovah instructs Moses to say to "the children of Israel": "The Lord God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has sent me to you" (3:15). Because God made a covenant with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, he is obligated to deliver their children from bondage in Egypt and restore them to the promised land (6:3-5). God's promise of deliverance is rooted in the phrase "I have remembered My covenant" (6:5). "This suggests that for Exodus the covenant at Sinai is a specific covenant within the context of the Abrahamic covenant. Other Old Testament texts also suggest that the covenant at Sinai...has been drawn into the same orbit as the covenant with Abraham, and hence it too has a fundamentally promissory character (32:13; Lev. 26:42-45; Dt. 4:31; 9:27; Jdg. 2:1; cf. 1 Sam. 12:22; Ps. 105:8-11; 106:45)."¹¹ "God renews an ancient commitment to his people by the covenant of Moses. The law serves only as a single mode of administering the covenant of redemption. Originally established under Adam, confirmed under Noah and Abraham, the covenantal relationship renewed under Moses cannot disturb God's ongoing commitment by its emphasis on the legal dimension of the covenant relationship."¹²

¹⁰The classical dispensational view is set forth in the old Scofield reference Bible (p. 20). C. I. Scofield writes, "The Dispensation of Promise ended when Israel rashly accepted the law Ex. xix. 8)." Oswald T. Allis points out the absurdity of Scofield's position. He writes, "The word 'rashly' is startlingly significant. It implies either that Israel without due consideration forsook a more favorable for a less favorable status, or that, in accepting the more favorable one, the people did not weigh sufficiently the conditions attached to it, did not realize their utter inability to perform it" (*Prophecy and the Church* [Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed (1945, 47)], p. 32). He adds, "Scofield declares that the law 'was not imposed until it had been proposed and voluntarily accepted' (RB, p. 93). We cannot but wonder whether Dispensationalists seriously face this gracious offer of God on the ground—there was no other—that they did not wish to 'obey' His voice" (*Ibid.*, p. 293).

¹¹Terence E. Fretheim, *Exodus* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1991), p. 209.

¹²O. Palmer Robertson, *The Christ of the Covenants* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1980), p. 172. Robertson adds: "Not only did the covenant of law not disannul the covenant of promise; more specifically, it did not offer a temporary alternative to the covenant of promise. This particular perspective is often overlooked. It is sometimes assumed that the covenant of law temporarily replaced the covenant of promise, or somehow ran alongside it as an alternative method of man's salvation. The covenant of law often has been considered as a self-contained unit which served as another basis for determining the relation of Israel to God in the period between the Abrahamic covenant and the coming of Christ. In this scheme, the covenant of promise is treated as though it had been set aside or made secondary for a period, although not 'disannulled.' However, the covenant of promise made with Abraham always has been in effect from the day of its inauguration until the present. The coming of the law did

When we examine the gracious promises to Abraham and compare them to what God accomplished under Moses' leadership at the beginning of the Mosaic covenant, it is clear that the covenant under Moses was a continuation and partial fulfillment (at least in an external provisional manner) of God's covenant with Abraham. When the LORD ordered Abram to move to the land of Canaan, He promised, "I will make you a great nation" (Gen. 12:2). It was in the wilderness that Israel did indeed become a great nation. This was due to the great increase in population during their sojourn in Egypt, the large number of Egyptians that joined themselves to the sons of Israel and Israel's God, and their organization under Moses. At Sinai, Israel covenanted with Jehovah as a nation. God also promised Abraham all the land of Canaan (Gen. 17:8). Moses took the people to the border of the promised land and his successor Joshua took the nation into the land as a conquering army. But what about the promise that Abraham would be a blessing to all the nations (Gen. 18:18; 22:18; 26:4)? This promise was also partially fulfilled in that: (a) The Mosaic laws set forth the religious antithesis between Israel and all other nations. (b) The Mosaic law order was to serve as a witness to all the nations (Dt. 4:6-8). (c) The ceremonial cultis set before the nations the necessity of a blood sacrifice for atonement. Jesus Christ was therefore exhibited in the Mosaic law. (d) The Mosaic covenant set the stage for the Davidic promise and the coming of the Messiah. (e) The deliverance of Israel from Egypt is the great redemptive event of the Old Testament and the type of Jesus' redemption of His people. (f) Moses himself was the most significant type of the coming Savior (the prophet, priest and king). All of this proves that the Mosaic covenant was part of the Old Testament administration of the covenant of grace.

Much confusion has arisen regarding the Mosaic covenant because the "covenant of law" is sometimes mistakenly equated with the Jewish-rabbinical perversion of the law as a means to obtain eternal life. The old traditional form of dispensationalism held to a version of this false view. In addition, some professing Christians have confused the "covenant of works" with the "covenant of law." The covenant of works refers to God's requirement of a perfect obedience on the part of Adam in the garden before he could be granted eternal life. The "covenant of works" was a test given to man before the fall, before the guilt and pollution of sin. The "covenant of law" was given to man in a state of sin. Under the "covenant of law" man was *never* instructed that the path to eternal life lay in keeping the law or human achievement. This point is clearly evident in the fact that the sacrificial system (which is an integral aspect of the Mosaic law) pointed men to blood atonement, to a substitutionary sacrifice as the necessary means to eliminate sin. Obedience to the law never was a means to achieve justification before God. The law, however, was the divine standard for daily living (sanctification) and a godly social order.

Second, the "covenant of law" is founded upon God's prior love and grace toward Israel. Before God asks Israel to "obey My voice and keep My covenant" He first reminds Israel of His divine acts of salvation in their behalf. "You have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles wings and brought you to Myself" (19:4).¹³ This point itself disproves all

not suspend the Abrahamic covenant. The principle enunciated in Genesis 15:6 concerning the justification of Abraham by faith never has experienced corruption. Throughout the Mosaic period of law-covenant, God considered as righteous everyone who believed in Him" (*Ibid.*, p. 174).

¹³P. C. Craigie writes, "Thus the Exodus is the 'gospel' placed at the head of the law. In the language of treaty and covenant, his people had formerly been vassal subjects to the suzerain authority of the worldly power of the pharaoh; the liberation of the Exodus took them away from the subjection to the old suzerain authority, but introduced them to a new suzerain authority, God Himself. The new authority, however, had acted in love for the

notions that the Mosaic covenant based salvation on an obedience to the law. Obedience to the law (i.e., to this new covenant which emphasizes God's objective written standard) grows out of a prior relationship of grace already established by God. The law is to be obeyed as a response of gratitude to a loving, merciful Father who out of His own good pleasure saved an enslaved people. God initiates and He saves, then He expects obedience. Pink writes: "The very fact that it is the law of God should at once show us that it cannot contain anything inimical to man's welfare. Like everything else that God has given, the Law is an expression of His love, a manifestation of His mercy, a provision of His grace. The Law of the Lord was Christ's delight (Ps. 1:2); so also was it the apostle Paul's (Rom. 7:22). In Rom. 7, the Holy Spirit has expressly affirmed, 'Wherefore the law is holy, and the commandment holy, and just, and good' (v. 12); yea more, He has declared 'The Law is spiritual' (v. 15). How terrible then for men to despise that Law and speak evil of it! What state of soul must they be in who wish to be delivered from it!"¹⁴ That the law is an expression of God's love and grace is emphasized in the preamble to the ten commandments, "And God spoke all these words saying: I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage" (20:1-2; cf. Dt. 33:2-3).

This order (grace then law) is also found in Deuteronomy where the Mosaic covenant is renewed before a new generation enters the promised land. After a section in which God's great love of Israel is set forth (i.e., God uniquely chose, revealed Himself to and saved Israel, Dt. 4:32-39), Deuteronomy 4:40 says, "You shall therefore keep His statutes and His commandments which I command you today." In Deuteronomy 10:15-16 we read, "The LORD delighted only in your fathers, to love them; and He chose their descendants after them, you above all peoples, as it is this day. Therefore circumcise the foreskin of your heart, and be stiff-necked no longer" (see also 10:22-11:1; 11:7-8). When covenant children ask their fathers why they must keep God's law (Dt. 6:20-24) the reason given is God's mighty acts of deliverance from Egypt on behalf of Israel to give them their promised land. Salvation by grace does not set aside the moral law as a rule for life, but rather increases our responsibility to be faithful to what God has commanded.

This point raises a question. If all men are already required to obey God's moral law by virtue of the fact that they are all creatures of God, then why does Scripture repeatedly appeal to salvation as an additional reason and motive for recognizing and obeying God's precepts? One reason is that God's redemption brings people into a special covenant relationship with Him. All the Old Testament covenants (which are expressions of the covenant of grace) bring people under great blessing with great obligation. The covenants presuppose faith in God, and faith in God is manifested in this life by obedience. Yahweh's people are to be holy because He is holy (Lev. 11:44; 1 Pet. 1:16). The covenant people are bound in a spiritual vassal-union with God as Father (Dt. 32:6; Ps. 103:13) and as Husband (Is. 54:5).¹⁵ To violate God's law-word is spiritual

people and the obligations imposed upon them in the covenant reflected no less the love of God" (*The Book of Deuteronomy* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976], p. 151).

¹⁴Arthur W. Pink, *Gleanings in Exodus* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1972), pp. 156-157.

¹⁵The covenant with Israel is repeatedly compared in Scripture to a vow of marriage. In Hosea 2:14-23 God's restoration of Israel is compared to an adulterous wife who returns to a husband who allures, forgives and restores His wife with a new marriage. "Therefore, behold, I will allure her, will bring her into the wilderness, and speak comfort to her. I will give her her vineyards from there, and the Valley of Achor as a door of hope; she shall sing there, as in the days of her youth, as in the day when she came up from the land of Egypt." 'And it shall be, in that day,' says the LORD, 'That you will call Me "My Husband," and no longer call Me "My Master," for I will take

adultery (Ez. 23:37). It brings down covenant sanctions and if not repented of is cause for divorce (Jer. 3:8-9), the covenantal death penalty. Therefore, for the believer, obedience to the law is not simply a matter of common sense, wisdom, pragmatic considerations or even a means of self-fulfillment. Obedience to God's law-word is an expression of covenant fidelity and a whole soul commitment of love to God. "The supreme test of love is the desire and effort to *please* the one loved, and this measured by conformity to his know wishes. Love to God is expressed by *obedience* to his will."¹⁶ Boston writes: "All true obedience to the ten commandments now must run in the channel of the covenant of grace, being directed to God as our God in that covenant, Deut. xxvii. 58. This is to fear that glorious and fearful name, THE LORD THY GOD. And so legal obedience is no obedience at all. This obedience is performed not for righteousness [i.e., human merit], but to testify our love to the Lord our Righteousness; not in our own strength, but in that of our Lord God and Redeemer; not to be accepted for its own worth, but for the sake of a Redeemer's merits; not out of fear of hell, or hope to purchase heaven, but out of love and gratitude to him who has delivered us from hell, and purchased heaven and everlasting happiness for us."¹⁷ Jesus said, "If you love Me, keep My commandments" (Jn. 14:15). "By this we know that we love the children of God, when we love God and keep His commandments. For this is the love of God, that we keep His commandments. And His commandments are not burdensome" (1 Jn. 5:2-3). Indeed, those who are backslidden are described as having "left your first love" (Rev. 2:4).

The tender loving protective care of Yahweh toward Israel is emphasized in Exodus 19. The covenant people's enemies are destroyed in a miraculous manner before their eyes. God protects and guides Israel by His special presence. The "eagle wings" metaphor indicates that God loves, protects and nurtures His people as a mother would care for her young and vulnerable children. Yahweh carefully provided for Israel in the wilderness even though she was rebellious and undesiring of such love. Israel was totally dependent upon God's grace for her very existence. "Thus, in the Red Sea, the pillar of cloud and fire, the token of God's presence, interposed itself between the Israelites and their pursuers (lines of defense which could not be forced, a wall which could not be penetrated)."¹⁸ "He mentions the eagle rather than other birds, in my opinion, that He may magnify their difficulties, and thus command His grace...thus the people, as if carried above the clouds on the wings of God, had surmounted every obstacle,

from her mouth the names of the Baals, and they shall be remembered by their name no more. In that day I will make a covenant for them with the beasts of the field, with the birds of the air, and with the creeping things of the ground. Bow and sword of battle I will shatter from the earth, to make them lie down safely. I will betroth you to Me forever; yes, I will betroth you to Me in righteousness and justice, in lovingkindness and mercy; I will betroth you to Me in faithfulness, and you shall know the LORD. It shall come to pass in that day That I will answer,' says the LORD; 'I will answer the heavens, and they shall answer the earth. The earth shall answer with grain, with new wine, and with oil; they shall answer Jezreel. Then I will sow her for Myself in the earth, and I will have mercy on her who had not obtained mercy; then I will say to those who were not My people, "You are My people!" And they shall say, "You are my God!"'" (Hos. 2:14-23). Note, that there is a specific reference to the time when Israel covenanted with Jehovah at Sinai (vs. 15). The language used in this passage reminds one of an older man reminiscing about the time he courted and first loved His betrothed.

¹⁶A. W. Pink, *Gleanings in Exodus*, p. 156.

¹⁷Thomas Boston, *Commentary on the Shorter Catechism* (Edmonton, AB, Canada: Still Water Revival Books, 1993 [1853], 2:90.

¹⁸Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible* (McLean, VA: MacDonald Publishing, Co., no date), 1:354.

however great.”¹⁹ Yahweh not only sets Israel free but brings them to Himself. Likewise, Christ sets us free from bondage to sin and slavery to Satan and brings us into covenant and communion with God. “For Christ also suffered once for sins, the just for the unjust, that He might bring us to God” (1 Pet. 3:18).

The fact that God’s law comes to His people in a covenant rooted in grace, love and concern means that His law is personal. The law is not an abstraction gleaned from some fictional realm of ideals as in ancient Greek thought. It rather is a reflection of God’s own nature and character. It also is set before the people in the language of personal commitment, “Obey My voice and keep My covenant” (Ex. 19:5). God says, “I saved you, I protected you. I brought you to Myself. You have seen My love for you with your own eyes. Now obey Me. Love me will all your heart.” When the Mosaic covenant is viewed in this context of love all the modern heretical notions of the law as harsh, negative, and as bondage melt away. Bondage comes when the law is misused as a system of works salvation. But when properly understood and used it is a charter of liberty. It is a marriage vow (of the old covenant church) taken after being liberated from a cruel slave master by a loving bridegroom.

Third, the salvation of Israel and her acceptance of and obedience to the covenant has a distinct purpose or goal in mind (note the “if...then” of verse 5). Israel is to be God’s special possession and a kingdom of priests, a holy nation (Ex.19:5-6). The covenant defines Israel’s relationship with God and with her neighbors. “If Israel will obey God’s will by being faithful to His covenant, then a special relationship is promised. Three terms spell out Israel’s uniqueness: a special possession in distinction from all the peoples...a kingdom of priests...and a holy nation...”²⁰ Israel is Yahweh’s special treasure. “The image presented is that of the unique and exclusive possession.”²¹ “The Lord emphasized His sovereign election: ‘the whole earth is mine,’ including all nations (cf. 9:29). It was therefore grace that moved God to make Israel His ‘treasured possession’ His people.”²²

As God’s special nation Israel has a responsibility to be holy, separated, and pure as a showcase and example to the whole world (cf. Dt. 4:6-8). “This is a commitment to take on the responsibility of being a kingdom of priests. This, essentially, is the task of mediation, of obeying the law, not [merely] for its own sake, but for the sake of the world. It is a means by which the will of God can move toward realization in the entire earth.”²³ Israel was not to be a kingdom of politicians who wielded power and manipulated the masses, but a kingdom of servant priests who had faith in Yahweh, whose faith issued forth in obedience to God’s law-word. As a covenanted holy nation they were God’s kingdom. However, their power depended not on weapons but on their faithfulness to God.²⁴ The law covenant was given to the elect nation

¹⁹John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Four Last Books of Moses* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1981), 1:317.

²⁰Brevard S. Childs, *The Book of Exodus* (Louisville: The Westminster Press, 1974), p. 367.

²¹John I. Durham, *Exodus* (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1987), p. 262.

²²W. H. Gispen, *Exodus* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1982), p. 180.

²³Terence E. Fretheim, *Exodus*, p. 213.

²⁴The law of God is needed to minister to the nations and must be diligently learned, taught and obeyed for there to be covenant continuity. Hosea writes, “My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge. Because you have rejected knowledge, I also will reject you from being priest for Me; because you have forgotten the law of your God, I also will forget your children” (4:6). The ten northern tribes instead of being priest-kings to the pagan nations by their covenant keeping (through obedience to God’s law-word) instead became gross idolaters and law-breakers like their pagan neighbors. The result was covenant sanctions. Both they and their children were cut off. “If the salt loses its flavor...It is then good for nothing but to be thrown out and trampled underfoot...” (Mt. 5:13).

with a wider universal purpose. Biblical law was a standard for Israel and a blueprint for dominion under God. This relationship between covenant revelation and dominion is found throughout the Bible. Rushdoony writes, “God called Adam to exercise dominion in terms of God’s revelation, God’s law (Gen. 1:26 ff.; 2:15-17). This same calling, after the fall, was required of the godly line, and in Noah it was formally renewed (Gen. 9:1-17). It was again renewed with Abraham, with Jacob, with Israel in the person of Moses, with Joshua, David, Solomon (whose Proverbs echo the law), with Hezekiah and Josiah, and finally with Jesus Christ. The sacrament of the Lord’s Supper is the renewal of the covenant: ‘this is my blood of the new testament’ (or covenant), so that *the sacrament itself re-establishes the law*, this time with a new elect group (Matt. 26:28; Mark 14:24; Luke 22:30; 1 Cor. 11:25), *The people of the law* are now the people of Christ, the believers redeemed by His atoning blood and called by His sovereign election.”²⁵ The universalism of the Abrahamic covenant continues in the covenant of law and comes to fruition in the New Testament where the church is commanded to make disciples of all the nations (Mt. 28:20). The Jews failed to disciple the nations because they were unfaithful to God’s law and rejected their Messiah. The special covenantal kingdom status (articulated in the Mosaic covenant) was taken from the Jewish nation and given in its completed, superior New Testament form to the church. Note Peter’s description of Christians: “But you are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, His own special people, that you may proclaim the praises of Him who called you out of darkness into His marvelous light” (1 Pet. 2:9; cf. Isa. 61:1; Rev. 5:10).

The fact that both the Old and New Testaments emphasize the priesthood of all believers is significant for a number of reasons. First, it shows us that both the Old and New Covenants had a vision for a world wide redemptive kingdom. Some of the major differences between Israel and the church are: (a) The church of the Old Testament period from Sinai on was tied to a particular nation with a fixed Temple cultis in Jerusalem. During this period of history if pagans wanted to join the church they would have to move to Israel. After Pentecost and the coming of the Holy Spirit the church is *sent out* to aggressively pursue the heathen. (b) Before the death of Christ under the Mosaic administration the world outside of Israel and the Gentiles themselves were unclean. Thus there was to be a radical separation with the world geographically, and culturally with special laws regarding food and clothing. Therefore, at this period of history Israel’s role as royal priests was primarily by *national example*. Being providentially situated at the crossroads of the ancient world, Israel was perfectly situated to be a showcase of the true God’s perfect justice and love. After the death of Christ the world is no longer defiled (Ac.10, 11). The church is to infiltrate the world to salt it (Mt. 5:13) and leaven it (Mt. 13:31-33). Once again, the power of Christ’s Spirit brings aggressiveness to the New Covenant priesthood. The New Testament church is to be in the world but not of the world.

Second, it refutes all unbiblical notions of “ecclesiocentrism.” The covenant law that Israel receives speaks to all areas of life. God wants His people to apply His law-word to science, agriculture, politics, history, literature, music, the family—everything! When professing Christians restrict the Bible to the church, or to “spirituality,” or individual ethics they develop little Christian ghettos that have no positive salting effect on culture. Jordan writes: “The result of this is a *restricted priesthood*. Only churchmen are *really* able to read the Bible. If anyone else wants to read it, he should read it in a “devotional manner, seeking for an experience or some

²⁵R. J. Rushdoony, *The Institutes of Biblical Law*, p. 8.

word of individual morality. But the ‘layman’ should never read the Bible with an eye to his profession. Doctors must not read the Bible for help in medicine. Lawyers must not read it for ideas about law. We have to repudiate this notion. The Bible is a book of life. It is for *all* of life, not only for sabbatical life (worship, the Church), but also for cultural life (work, business, family, government, medicine, etc.). We believe in *the priesthood of all believers*. A priest is a judge, and in whatsoever capacity he is to read the Bible. Doctors should read for Bible medical clues. Lawyers should consult biblical law. Historians should take the chronology of the Bible as their starting point. Geologists should consult the carefully recorded description of the Flood year. And so forth.”²⁶ As priest-kings, believers are to apply the law to all of life and are to be conduits of God’s special redemptive grace to all the nations.

When churches reject the role of believers as priest-kings, they look inward and focus their attention on church programs (youth groups, men and women’s segregated social activities, basketball courts, health clubs, tennis courts, elaborate stage presentations, etc.). As a result churches lose their dynamism and become hedonistic, self-fulfilling, entertainment centers. Families are weakened by all the fluff and the state is left to the devil. God saved His people for service not escapism.

In Exodus 19:8, Israel gladly accepts the condition of the covenant which is obedience to God’s voice, His law-word (cf. 19:5). “Then all the people answered together and said, ‘All that the LORD has spoken we will do.’” “Exodus 19:8 is then an *open-ended* commitment to God, to whatever God may have to say at any point in its history. This would include, for example, the Deuteronomic law.”²⁷ “They readily agreed to the covenant proposed. They would oblige themselves to obey the voice of God, and take it as a great favour to be made a kingdom of priests to him.”²⁸ Israel will shortly learn what God’s revealed will is (the stipulations of the covenant); first, by a summation of the whole moral law of God (the Ten Commandments) then by various other detailed laws that apply the decalogue to particular situations in life.

Given the theological confusion regarding the Mosaic covenant, it is important to emphasize that the condition, “if you will indeed obey My voice” is not new or unique to the covenant of law. Many modern evangelicals have been erroneously taught that the Mosaic covenant was conditional while the Abrahamic covenant was unconditional. In other words God required obedience under the Mosaic covenant but did not require obedience under the Abrahamic covenant. The truth regarding this matter is that God requires obedience in *all* the covenants that are part of the covenant of grace, including the New Covenant. People become confused because they equate the requirement of keeping the law with earning salvation by works. The requirement of obedience in the Mosaic covenant is not to earn salvation but to show forth and live out one’s faith in Yahweh. As Paul says, “We are created in Christ Jesus for good works” (Eph. 2:10). Remember, the law is given after redemption, not before. The people are to express their gratitude for their salvation by keeping covenant, by obeying God’s voice. There is not a shred of salvation law in the Mosaic covenant. Although in the Abrahamic covenant the requirement of obedience is not stated explicitly, it nevertheless is repeatedly implied in the Genesis narrative. Oswald T. Allis writes: “The claim which is often made that the Abrahamic

²⁶James B. Jordan, *The Law of the Covenant: An Exposition of Exodus 21-23* (Tyler, TX: The Institute for Christian Economics, 1984), p. 9.

²⁷Terrence E. Fretheim, *Exodus*, p. 212.

²⁸Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible*, 1:355.

covenant was unconditional while the Mosaic was conditioned on obedience, finds no support in Scripture. God's first word to Abram was a Command: 'Get thee out of thy country...into a land that I will show thee' Gen. xii.1). Abram obeyed this command. The performance of the rite of circumcision was made an indispensable condition to covenant blessing (Gen. xvii). Abram performed it at once. The claim that the Abrahamic covenant was 'unconditional' has dangerous implications; for it suggests an antithesis between *faith* and *obedience* that is not warranted in Scripture. Paul joins the two together, when he speaks of the 'obedience of faith' (Rom. i. 5, xvi. 26). The condition, 'if ye will obey my voice,' is merely the echo, we may say, of Genesis ii. 16, 'and the Lord God commanded the man.' The reply of the people, 'All that the Lord hath spoken we will do,' was the oath of allegiance of a loyal people to its ruler or king. They did not realize all that it involved, nor how unable they were to keep the law of God. Their words may show self-confidence and self-righteousness. But God's requirement has always been perfect obedience (Gen. iii. 11). And the law which so stresses this requirement also contains and unfolds that system of expiations by sacrifice by means of which the penitent sinner may find forgiveness and acceptance with his God."²⁹ This same requirement—the obedience of faith—is set forth in the book of James. "Thus also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead. But someone will say, 'You have faith, and I have works.' Show me your faith without your works, and I will show you my faith by my works....For as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is dead also" (2:17-18, 26). Covenant fidelity is always expressed in outward acts, in obedience. This point does not mean that man is saved by works but that true faith loves God and seeks to please Him.

The false understanding of the mosaic covenant by dispensationalists is very similar to the pharisaical perversion of the purpose of the law popular in the days of Christ and Paul. O. Palmer Robertson helps us understand why such a misapprehension is common. He writes: "It may be acknowledged that something in the form of law-administration lent itself to an easy misapprehension of its proper purpose in man's redemption. The externalized, codified form of law readily came to be understood as offering a way of life other than the faith-principle crystallized under Abraham. It was possible to understand the law properly as a schoolmaster that would lead to Christ by increasing awareness of sin. Or was it possible to misunderstand law as a taskmaster that led away from Christ by diverting concentration from faith-righteousness to works-righteousness. It is this latter perspective that the apostle has in mind when he addresses himself to those who wish to be 'under law.' 'Law' in this context points to the misapprehension of the law's purpose as reflected in Abraham's misdirected efforts to provide a son for himself and in the Judaizer's efforts to provide righteousness for themselves."³⁰ A proper understanding of the purpose of the Mosaic covenant and its relationship to the Abrahamic covenant is needed to understand faith's role as the instrument which lays hold of Christ (in both Testaments) as well as the relationship of sanctification to justification. Men are *never* saved by keeping the law. However, once they are saved they are expected to keep the law. In other words, justification also leads to sanctification. Christ delivers from the guilt and penalty of sin as well as its power (Rom. 6).

The Mosaic covenant is characterized by the detailed revelation and enscripturation of God's law. The Ten Commandments are written on tablets of stone by God (Dt. 4:13; 9:9, 11).

²⁹Oswald T. Allis, *God Spake By Moses* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1951), p. 72.

³⁰O. Palmer Robertson, *The Christ of the Covenants*, p. 182.

Moses writes down “all the words of the LORD” (Ex. 24:4). Indeed, Exodus 20 to 23 is even referred to as “the Book of the Covenant” (Ex. 24:7). God caused His law to be written comprehensively by Moses at this particular period of redemptive history. “The patriarchs certainly were aware of God’s will in general terms. On occasion, they received direct revelation concerning specific aspects of the will of God. Under Moses, however, a full summary of God’s will was made explicit through the physical enscripturation of the law. This external-to-man, formally ordered summation of God’s will constitutes the distinctiveness of the Mosaic covenant.”³¹ John Owen writes: “Heavenly teaching, the knowledge of God, had been gradually revealed and expanded on various occasions since the foundation of the universe, and now at length it was brought together and systematized into one general and stable method of worship and obedience, and presented to the church as body a of unified truth. These truths, down to this period, had been mostly preserved by *oral* transmission, and had suffered by being totally lost in some parts of the world while, in others, they were rendered useless by the mixture of superstitious and heretical opinions. Now, by the wonderful love of God for His church, and by His special provision, this was enshrined in written records. In this way theology was removed from the responsibility of mortal men and was protected from the results of human defilement or corruption, whatever the spiritual state of the theologians themselves. To that earlier body of revelations and institutions, now collected into a compact body, were added new revelations, and thus arrived that complete rule of right worship of God, and of living to His glory, which would suffice the Church, with no need of further new teachings until the advent of Him whom all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge were to dwell.”³² Thus the apostle Paul could write: “What advantage then has the Jew, or what is the profit of circumcision? Much in every way! Chiefly because to them were committed the oracles of God” (Rom. 3:1-2).

Why was an externalized, enscripturated, detailed objective standard of law necessary? Although man was created in the image of God and had the work of the law written upon the heart (Rom. 2:15), and the people of God through direct revelation had God’s law in an unorganized incomplete manner prior to Moses (e.g., Gen. 9:6; Ex. 16:16ff., etc.), the covenant of law was necessary and was a progression over earlier covenants for a number of reasons. (1) As noted above, the law needed to be enscripturated and comprehensive because, as a sinful fallen being, man could not be depended upon to develop a godly law-order based on “natural law” and the small and possibly corrupt remnants of direct revelation from the distant past. Sin and the curse have rendered natural revelation and oral tradition (not in the Pharisaical sense but in the sense of orally transmitted past revelations) unreliable as a source for ethics. “The law of nature is defective, because natural judgment is thoroughly distorted and infatuated, so that it is ready to reckon evil good and good evil, light darkness and darkness light.”³³

(2) At Sinai the families or tribes of Israel are established as a nation for the first time. As a nation (covenanted with Jehovah) Israel needed an externally codified law system. (Israel is first identified by God as a kingdom of priests in Exodus 19:6.) In God’s unfolding plan of redemption of the whole world (Gen. 18:18; 22:18; 26:4; Rom. 4:13), Israel is given a just body of laws not only for a righteous rule among her own people but also as an evangelistic example

³¹*Ibid.* p. 172.

³²John Owen, *Biblical Theology* (Pittsburg: Soli Deo Gloria, 1994 [Latin edition first published 1661]), pp. 373-374.

³³Thomas Boston, *Commentary on the Shorter Catechism* (Edmonton, AB, Canada: Still Water Revival Books, 1993 [1853]), 2:68.

to the Gentile nations (Dt. 4:6-8). This body of laws (minus the ceremonial laws and the laws unique to Israel, plus any New Testament alterations) is the blue print for all Gentile nations after the coming of Christ. When Jesus commanded the apostles to disciple the nations (Mt. 28:19), He did not have in mind some vague notion of natural law or the common rule of nations but the whole counsel of God including the whole moral law which includes the moral case laws of the Mosaic covenant.

(3) The comprehensive nature of the revelation at Sinai gives the people of God a far greater understanding of how to love and please Jehovah as well as how to love and serve one's neighbor. As a revelation of God's nature and character the law reflects the holiness of God. It tells the covenant community how to be holy, separate, sanctified and faithful to the covenant bridegroom. Certainly a people who love God want to know in exhaustive detail what pleases or displeases Him. As a loving wife would not like to remain ignorant in what pleases or displeases her husband, the church studies, memorizes and meditates on God's precepts to know His will, to love and cherish Him. "Blessed are those who keep His testimonies, who seek Him with the whole heart! They also do no iniquity; they walk in His ways....With my whole heart I have sought You; oh, let me not wander from Your commandments! Your word I have hidden in my heart, that I might not sin against You" (Ps. 119:2-3, 10-11).

The comprehensiveness of the Mosaic law helps us as individuals. It identifies our sins so that we will not continue on a destructive path due to ignorance. We study the law for sanctification and self-government. The law gives us detailed instructions on how to love our neighbor and even our enemies (e.g., Ex. 23:4-5; Dt. 22:4). The law gives detailed instructions for families (e.g., covenant headship, childrearing, jealousy issues, sexual immorality, etc.), and for society. A detailed system of justice (including penalties) and instruction in righteousness is a great advancement over the earlier covenants. Individual, family and social justice is an incredible blessing to any people. One reason the comprehensive nature of biblical law is a great blessing is because men are sinful and need a detailed objective standard to restrain their depraved urge for autonomy. Jordan writes: "*Generalities leave a lot of room for man to think as he pleases and to do as he pleases.* Specifics are humbling to the intellect and to pride. It is all right to say that God created the world, but surely one should not try to *date* creation by studying Genesis 5 and 11! It is true that stealing is wrong, but surely we don't need to start quoting an "Old Testament laws" about charging interest on a charity loan to a fellow believer, or about a six-year limit on charity loans. *Generalities leave room for a word from man.* The particularity of the Bible forces man to bow the knee."³⁴ Sadly many modern evangelicals take the opposite view that liberty from the details of the Old Testament moral case laws is a great blessing, an advancement over the Old Covenant. Many teach that God has set the New Testament believer free to follow "Spirit-directed" inner prompting. The opposite of God's law, however, is not freedom but slavery to the arbitrary ordinance of sinful man. The unbiblical aversion to the details of God's law has rendered modern evangelicalism for the most part salt-less to society.

(4) The Mosaic law is an advancement over earlier covenants in its ability to show men their inability to approach God on their own merits. Paul says "by the law is the knowledge of sin" (Rom. 3:20). Regarding his own experience he writes, "I would not have known sin except through the law. For I would not have known covetousness unless the law had said, you shall not covet" (Rom. 7:7). The law revealed to the apostle his own sinfulness. Paul elaborates, "Has then

³⁴James Jordan, *The Law and the Covenant*, p. 21.

what is good [i.e., the law, cf. 7:12, 14] become death to me? Certainly not! But sin, that it might appear sin, was producing death in me through what is good, so that sin through the commandment might become exceedingly sinful” (Rom. 7:13). Hendriksen writes: “Paul had stated that the commandment brought death (verse 10). But how can something that is holy and righteous and good (verse 12) bring death? Paul answers, as it were, ‘It is not the commandment, operating by itself, that brings death. It is the transgression of the commandment that does this.’ In the final analysis, therefore, the real cause of death is *sin*. The serious character of sin became apparent in this very fact that, in order to expose the sinner, it makes use of something which in itself is perfect, namely, God’s holy law. The very *whiteness*—that is, moral-spiritual purity—of God’s commandments makes the *blackness* of sin stand out all the more sharply!”³⁵ After telling the Galatians “that no one is justified by the law in the sight of God” (Gal. 3:11), Paul asks and answers a crucial question. “What purpose then does the law serve? It was added because of transgressions, until the seed should come...” (Gal. 3:19). The law reveals sin (Rom. 3:20). It makes sin as a violation against God *explicit*, for “where there is no law there is no transgression” (Rom. 4:15). It lays our behavior out on the table and shines a bright light upon it. It shows us our sinful nature by revealing and provoking transgressions (Rom. 7:7ff., 13). “As a revealer of sin the law supplied a vital service to the Abrahamic covenant of promise. By exposing fully men’s inadequacy to establish righteousness by law-keeping, the Mosaic covenant has contributed to the cause of redemptive grace.”³⁶

(5) The covenant of law is an advancement over earlier covenants by its greater revelation of the Christ to come through its expansion (and greater detail) of the types and ceremonies. Paul says that the law is a tutor that leads to Christ (Gal. 3:24). The ceremonial laws were directed to the people of Israel to teach them about their own sinfulness, uncleanness and unworthiness and to instruct them of the absolute need for salvation through the atoning act of an unblemished, God-given substitute. John Owen writes: “The outer forms of sacrifice were carnal, imposed on the people of Israel by the free and gracious purpose of God, who required them to wait for the divine and sacred consummation which these things prefigured and showed forth in type. Those, therefore, who were instructed in this theology, although they were to submit to the yoke of external rites as presented to them by the legislator, still they knew and believed in faith that all spiritual good was concealed beneath the shadows of these legal ceremonies, and that all were summed up in eternal life through the Messiah yet to be revealed. So it is that Christ Himself affirms that Moses, and Moses’ interpreters the prophets, all gave testimony to *Him*, and to his work as *Mediator*. The Apostles also asserted that, by preaching the death and resurrection of Christ and the eternal life which flows therefrom, they were teaching nothing else but what had been written before in Moses and the prophets.”³⁷ The law of Moses was preaching Christ. It

³⁵William Hendriksen, *Romans* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1980, 81), pp. 222-223.

³⁶O. Palmer Robertson, *The Christ of the Covenants*, p. 188.

³⁷John Owen, *Biblical Theology*, p. 376. Geerhardus Vos adds: “The people of God of those days did not live and die under an unworkable, unredemptive system of religion, that could not give real access to and spiritual contact with God. Nor was this gospel-element contained exclusively in the revelation that preceded, accompanied, and followed the law; it is found *in the law itself*. That which we call ‘the legal system’ is shot through with strands of gospel and grace and faith. Especially the ritual law is rich in them. Every sacrifice and every illustration proclaimed the principle of grace. Had it been otherwise, then the idea of positive, vital continuity would have been abandoned. There would be conflict and opposition instead. Such is the Gnostic position, but it is not the view of either of the Old Testament itself, or of Paul, or of the Church theology.” (*Biblical Theology: Old and New Testaments*, [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1948], p. 129.

was instructing the people about the Messiah to come.

The ceremonial laws also helped the covenant people in their sanctification by teaching them about their religious, ethical and covenantal separation from the surrounding pagan nations. Jordan writes: “Because the Old Testament Church was relatively weaker than the New Testament Church, God made special provisions to protect the Church during her Old Testament infancy. This varied from period to period, and at some times we see very few such special provisions (as during Abraham’s day). What we think of as the definitive expression of the Old Covenant, however, the Mosaic administration through the monarchy, does show such special provisions. During this time, God’s protection took the form of tying the Church closely to a particular nation, with geographical boundaries, with a military force, with supernatural acts of protection and special supernatural guarantees. Moreover, since the people were to be holy, but since the Holy Spirit had not been poured out in power, God gave them many peculiar regulations as reminders of obedience. They were, for instance, to dress in a peculiar manner.”³⁸

All of the points enumerated above explicate the great advantage of having a detailed enscripturated law code. The Mosaic covenant was an immense amplification of theological light for the covenant people. Indeed, the rest of the Old Testament is built upon the Mosaic covenant. The book of Proverbs sets forth a practical application of the law for daily living. The Psalter was in large part written from meditating on the Torah. The historical books tell us the consequences of keeping or not keeping the covenant. The prophetic books are largely covenant lawsuit documents. The prophets told the people the dire consequences of breaking God’s law-covenant and repeatedly called the people to repentance—to obedience to what God had commanded to Moses. To ignore such a crucial part of God’s word is foolishness. If Christians do not study and apply the details of God’s moral law they will be ruled by relativistic, arbitrary tyrants.

2. The Advent of Yahweh at Sinai

After the conditions for the covenant have been set forth and accepted, God orders Moses to prepare the people for His descent upon Mount Sinai. The things that need to be done are: (1) Boundaries are to be placed at the bottom of the mountain (This task apparently is to be done by Moses, v 12); (2) The people are to wash their clothes (v. 14); (3) All sexual relations are to be avoided (“Do not come near your wives,” v. 15). What is the purpose of these preparations? The main focus is upon the awesome majestic holiness of Yahweh as well as the people’s need to be sanctified before receiving the law. Each preparation will be considered in turn.

Moses is required to set boundaries around the mountain and consecrate it (vv. 12, 23). Anyone who goes up on the mountain or even touches it “shall surely be put to death” (v. 12). The mountain will become holy only because God’s special presence will descend upon it. Indeed, it will be so holy that persons who violate its space are to be executed at a distance by archers or stone throwers (possibly slingers, cf. Jdg. 20:16). If the people or even the priests (with the exception of Moses and Aaron—the high priest) “break through” the LORD Himself may break out against them (v. 24). The whole mountain is to be treated like the Holy of Holies. The people must be protected from God’s special presence because Jehovah is infinitely holy while the people are sinful and impure. To approach such a God without a mediator would cause

³⁸James Jordan, *The Law and the Covenant*, p. 13.

sudden death. Matthew Poole writes: “By symbolic injunction God designed, 1. To restrain men’s curious and bold inquiries into the things of God. 2. To possess the Israelites then present, and all succeeding generations, with the dread reverence of the Divine Majesty, and of his holy law. 3. To prepare and inure the people to the obedience of God’s commands, even when they discern not the reasons of them. 4. To make them sensible of their own impurity and infirmity, and of their absolute need of a mediator, through whom they might have access to God. See Gal. iii. 19.”³⁹

In preparation for God’s presence the people are to sanctify themselves by washing their clothes and abstaining from sexual relations. “The holy God of the covenant demands as preparation a separation from those things which are normally permitted and good in themselves. The giving of the covenant is different from an ordinary event of everyday life. Israel is, therefore, to be prepared by a special act of separation.”⁴⁰ The washing of clothes refers to a ritual purification (cf. Gen. 35:2). “Calvin points out that, although these external cleansings are no longer prescribed for us, their truth and essence remain necessary for us: if we want to be admitted to and participate in the heavenly doctrine, we must cleanse ourselves of all contamination of flesh and spirit (cf. Jude 23).”⁴¹ The external washing of clothes points to the need of the internal washing of the Holy Spirit before man can in faith, receive and handle God’s holy law.

The prohibition on sexual relations between a husband his wife has reference to the necessity of cultic purity. The emission of semen in the Old Testament made a person cultically impure (Lev. 15:16-18). Moses is to command the people to be ritually clean by the third day when Yahweh’s special presence is manifest. Another reason may be the Israelites need to focus all of their attention on the hearing of God’s law. Paul says that husbands and wives are only to abstain from lawful sexual relations during periods of prayer and fasting (1 Cor. 7:5). That is, during special seasons of close communication with God. Regarding all the preparations Calvin’s comments are excellent. He writes,

Before propounding His law, it is not unreasonable that God should command the people to be sanctified, lest he should cast pearls before swine, or give that which is holy unto dogs; for although by right of adoption they were holy, yet, as regarded themselves, the filthiness of their nature unfitted them for participating in so great a blessing. It was by no means right or just that the inestimable treasure should be polluted by foul and stinking vessels. Therefore, in the injunction that they should be sanctified, two things were pointed out,—that the sacred doctrine of God was not to be handled by unwashen hands, and that the whole human race is impure and polluted, and, consequently, that none can duly enter God’s school save those who are cleansed from their filthiness. And, doubtless, it is the just reward of their unworthy profanation that so many readers or hearers profit not by heavenly doctrine, because they rush in without fear or reverence, as to some ridiculous stage plays. This preparation, then, is seasonably commanded, to make ready God’s scholars and render them fit to be taught. But while the inward purity of the heart is chiefly demanded, this ceremony was not without its use to accustom an ignorant people to meditate upon true holiness. That they should wash their clothes and abstain from the nuptial bed were things of nought in themselves; but when external rites are

³⁹Matthew Poole, *A Commentary on the Holy Bible* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1962 [1865]), 1:156.

⁴⁰Brevard S. Childs, *The Book of Exodus*, p. 369.

⁴¹W. H. Grispen, *Exodus*, p. 182.

referred to their proper end, viz., to be exercises unto spiritual worship, they are useful aids to piety; and we know that God, in considerations of the times, before Christ's coming, employed such figures which now have no place under the brightness of the Gospel. But although the use of them be grown obsolete, yet the truth, which I spoke of, still remains, viz., that if we desire to be admitted to a participation in heavenly doctrine, we should "cleanse ourselves from all filthiness of the flesh and spirit." (2 Cor. vii. 1.)⁴²

After the preparations are completed Jehovah descends upon Mount Sinai the morning of the third day. The phenomena that accompany the theophany are awe-inspiring and terrifying to the people. There are thunderings and lightnings (v.16). There is the loud sound of "the trumpet" which grows louder and louder and causes the people to tremble (vv. 16, 19). God comes to the mountain in "the thick cloud" (v. 9) and the whole mountain is enveloped in smoke, "like the smoke of a furnace" (v. 18). The whole mountain quakes greatly with God's presence (v. 19). The LORD descends upon the mountain in fire (v. 18). The climax of these events is that God speaks: first, once again to tell Moses to warn the people; then second, to speak the Ten Commandments directly to the covenant people.

What is the significance of the phenomenon that accompany Yahweh's presence? The phenomena (thunder, lighting, a thick cloud, a loud trumpet blast and an earthquake) are often associated in Scripture with God's special presence (e.g., the cloud, Ex. 13:21-22, 14:19-20, 24:16:10; 24:15-18; 34:5; 40:34-36; Lev. 16:2; Nu. 9:15; Rev. 4:5; 11:9) and with hatred of sin and judgment (e.g., Ex. 9:23; 1 Sam. 2:10; 7:10; 12:17-18; 2 Sam. 22:14-15; Job 26:14; Ps. 18:13-14; 104:7; Rev. 8:5). These phenomena are often associated with God's judgment of His enemies. In David's song of deliverance we read, "In my distress I called upon the LORD, and cried out to my God; He heard my voice from His temple, and my cry entered His ears. Then the *earth shook and trembled*; the foundations of heaven quaked and were shaken, because He was angry. *Smoke* went up from His nostrils, and *devouring fire* from His mouth; coals were kindled by it. He bowed the heavens also, and came down with darkness under His feet. He rode upon a cherub, and flew; and He was seen upon the wings of the wind. He made *darkness* canopies around Him, dark waters and *thick clouds* of the skies. From the brightness before Him coals of fire were kindled. The LORD *thundered* from heaven, and the Most High uttered His voice. He sent out arrows and scattered them; *lightning bolts*, and He vanquished them" (2 Sam. 22:7-15). This pattern of phenomena is associated with God's presence and judgment in the book of Revelation. "And from the throne proceeded lightnings, thunderings and voices" (4:5). After a song celebrating God's power for deliverance and judgment is given we read, "And there was opened the temple of God that is in heaven; and there was seen in his temple the ark of the covenant; and there followed lightnings and voices, and thunders, and an earthquake, and great hail" (11:19 RSV). After the seventh bowl is poured out we read, "and there were noises and thunderings and lightnings; and there was a great earthquake..." (Rev. 16:18). The terrifying phenomena that exhibit God's glorious presence are also signs of His infinite holiness. They especially accompany the giving of the law to set forth the wrath of God to those who break His holy law. Those who break the covenant will receive dreadful punishments.

In the Bible the trumpet blast is used to announce various things (e.g., gathering at the tabernacle, Nu. 10:3, 4; to sound an alarm, Nu. 10:9) and is used to increase drama and solemnity

⁴²John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Last Four Books of Moses* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1981), 1:322-323.

(e.g., trumpets were to be blown during the sacrifices, Nu. 10:10). In Revelation the sound of a trumpet is associated with the voice of the glorified Christ (Rev. 1:10) and is used to announce horrifying judgments (Rev. 8:2, 7, 8, 10, 12,; 9:1, 13; 11:15). The trumpet blast announces the descent of Jehovah upon the mount (Ex. 19:16-19) and the public spectacle of God Himself speaking the law to the people. The trumpet blast was very loud so as to startle and strike fear into the people. Jesus' second coming (a very public and terrifying event) will also be announced by the trumpet of God (1 Th. 4:16).

God descends upon the mountain in fire (Ex. 19:18). When Moses warns Israel not to break the covenant by committing idolatry he says, "For the LORD your God is a consuming fire, a jealous God" (Dt. 4:24). God appears in fire; and He also destroys and eternally punishes by fire those who break His laws. "*The Lord descended in fire* for further terror to obstinate sinners. Hence this law is called a fiery law, Deut. xxxiii..."⁴³ When Jesus returns He will descend in flaming fire taking vengeance upon those who do not obey the gospel (2 Th. 1:8). "Such were the terrors of Sinai, the mount of God's law, where because of their sinfulness the people were unable to draw near to God's presence. How different are the circumstances of Zion, the mount of God's grace, where, thanks to the perfect law-keeping and the all-sufficient sacrifice of himself offered by the incarnate Son in our stead, we are invited to draw near with boldness into the heavenly holy of holies (Heb. 10:19ff.)!"⁴⁴

The importance of God's law is also evident from the fact that the Ten Commandments were spoken by God Himself *directly* to the people. Exodus 19 contains the only instance in the Old Testament where God spoke publicly to a gathering of people without speaking through a mediator, spokesman or prophet. (The next direct, audible, public statement will not occur for another fifteen hundred years when God the Father says at Jesus' baptism, "This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased" [Lk. 3:21-22]). Although the phenomena surrounding the theophany were terrifying, the voice of Yahweh made the strongest impression and inspired the greatest fear. After hearing God speak the people "begged that the word should not be spoken to them anymore" (Heb. 12:19) "You speak with us and we will hear; but let not God speak with us, lest we die" (Ex. 20:19). When a sinful people receive but a few rays of God's glorious majesty and holiness they immediately draw back in fear and trembling.

The terrifying phenomena that accompany God's presence on Sinai, the great fear caused by Jehovah's voice, the necessity of strict boundaries around the mountain and the people's need of consecrating themselves teach us a number of things regarding God and His law. First, it clearly is designed to set forth the importance of God's moral law. The Ten Commandments are spoken directly to the people. They are written on tablets of stone by God Himself to signify their importance and perpetual nature (Ex. 24:12, 32:26). They are taken and placed with the ark of the covenant (Ex. 25:16). "The ark was the cabinet in which He put the Ten Commandments, as ten jewels."⁴⁵ On the day of atonement, sacrificial blood would be sprinkled on and before the mercy seat which rests on the ark, placing the blood of an innocent, spotless lamb between God's special presence and His violated law (cf. Lev. 16:2, 15). When God delivered the Ten Commandments He did so in the midst of a multitude of angels (Dt. 33:2). The very throne room of God descended to glorify the law. "A parliament of angels was called, and God Himself was

⁴³Matthew Poole, *A Commentary on the Holy Bible*, 1:157.

⁴⁴Philip Edgcumbe Hughes, *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977), p. 543.

⁴⁵Thomas Watson, *The Ten Commandments* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1965 [1692]), p. 13.

the speaker.”⁴⁶

All of Scripture is God’s word and therefore is authoritative and demands our utmost attention and obedience. The Ten Commandments, however, being spoken directly by God in spectacular circumstances are underlined and in bold capital letters. “The Scripture, as Chrysostom says, is a garden, and the moral law is the chief flower in it: it is a banquet, and the moral law is the chief dish in it.”⁴⁷ The law reveals God’s nature and character (Num. 23:19; Jn. 14:6; 2 Tim. 2:13), is perfect (Ps. 19:7), holy (Rom. 7:12), just (Rom. 7:12), good (Neh. 9:13; Rom. 7:12), spiritual (Rom. 7:14), leads the elect sinner to Christ (Gal. 3:24; Rom. 3:20), restrains the wicked (1 Tim. 1:9), is unalterable and remains in force to sanctify believers (Rom. 13:8-10; Gal. 5:14; 19-21; Jn. 17:17; Ps. 119:9ff.). The law is something that Christians should treasure and delight in (Ps. 119:16; Rom. 7:22) and not ignore and treat with contempt as if God’s perfect ethical standard is somehow dangerous and evil. Machen writes, “A new and more powerful proclamation of that law is perhaps the most pressing need of the hour; men would have little difficulty with the gospel if they had only learned the lesson of the law....So it always is: a low view of the law always brings legalism; a high view of the law makes a man a seeker after grace. Pray God that the high view may again prevail.”⁴⁸

Second, the manner in which the law is given sets forth the importance of the fear of God. This point is emphasized in the covenant renewal preaching of Moses in Deuteronomy. “Now this is the commandment, and these are the statutes and judgments which the LORD your God has commanded to teach you, that you may observe them in the land which you are crossing over to possess, that you may fear the LORD your God, to keep all His statutes and His commandments which I command you, you and your son and your grandson, all the days of your life, and that your days may be prolonged” (6:1-2). The events of Sinai strike fear in the people. God is to be approached and served with reverence and awe. Men are to study the law and be cautious regarding their behavior, avoiding sin and walking in His ways out of covenant love coupled with a fear of the LORD. “‘Fear’ is certainly a prominent element in OT religion; the ‘fear of God’ or Jeh, ‘the fear of the Lord,’ is indeed synonymous with [biblical] religion itself (Ps. 34 11; Prov.1 7; Isa. 11 2-3; Jer. 2 19; Eccl. 12 13, ‘the whole duty on man,’ RVm ‘the duty of all men’).”⁴⁹ “[T]he reason for the giving of these commandments is to awaken the fear of God, and that fear might prompt obedience. Because God is God, the absolute and law-giver, fear of God is the essence of sanity and common sense. To depart from a fear of God is to lack any sure sense of reality.”⁵⁰ “The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom” (Prov. 1:7). Charles Bridges writes,

But what is the fear of the Lord? It is the affectionate reverence, by which the child of God submits himself humbly and carefully to his Father’s law. God’s wrath is so bitter, and his love so sweet; that there naturally arises an earnest desire to please Him. And also—in view of the danger of falling short because of his own weakness and temptations—a holy watchfulness and fear, so

⁴⁶*Ibid.*

⁴⁷*Ibid.*, p. 12.

⁴⁸J. Gresham Machen, *What is Faith?* As quoted in Ernest Kevan, *Moral Law* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1991), p. ix.

⁴⁹W. L. Walker, “Fear” in James Orr, General Editor, *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1939 [1929]), 2:1102.

⁵⁰Rousas John Rushdoony, *The Institutes of Biblical Law*, p. 16.

“that I may not sin against Thee.” This enters into every thought and every activity of life. The most mature pupil in God’s school wants to be more completely molded by His teaching. The godly parent trains up his family under the Word’s influence. The Christian scholar honors it as the beginning, the most important part of all his knowledge. He sees that it gives meaning and purpose to learning, and saves him from all the treacherous temptations that accompany knowledge.⁵¹

When a society mocks God’s law and makes sport of biblical religion on television, in movies and in various publications, it reveals a mindset of apostasy and gross unbelief. When a people fear God they treat Him with respect by paying close attention to His law-word and by applying that word to their lives. “We must always have in our minds a reverence of God’s majesty, a dread of his displeasure, and an obedient regard to his sovereign authority over us: this fear will quicken us to our duty and make us circumspect in our walking. Thus *stand in awe, and sin not*, Ps. 4:4.”⁵²

Third, the events at Sinai also set forth the necessity of a mediator between a thrice holy God and a sinful people. “You speak with us, and we will hear; but let not God speak with us, lest we die” (Ex. 20:19). Even the hard-hearted Israelites knew that they dare not approach such an awesome, all-powerful, holy God without a mediator. Throughout the Exodus narrative there is an emphasis on Moses as the redeemer of, intermediary and intercessor for Israel. All of this served to teach Israel of the need of the greater Moses—Jesus Christ. Geerhardus Vos informs us of the typological significance of Moses:

There was in his work such a close connection between revealing words and redeeming acts as can be paralleled only from the life of Christ. And the acts of Moses were to a high degree supernatural, miraculous acts. This typical relation of Moses to Christ can easily be traced in each of the three offices we are accustomed to distinguish in the soteric work of Christ. The ‘prophet’ of Deut. 18.15, reaching his culmination in the Messiah, is ‘like unto’ Moses. Moses fulfilled priestly functions at the inauguration of the Old *Berith*, before the Aaronic priesthood was instituted [Ex. 24.4-8]. Our Lord refers to this as a typical transaction, when inaugurating the New *Diatheke* at the institution of the supper [Lk. 22.20]. Moses intercedes for Israel after the commission of the sin of the golden calf, and that by offering his own person vicariously for bearing the punishment of the guilty [Ex. 32.30-33]. A royal figure, of course, Moses could not at that time be called, for Jehovah alone is King of Israel. None the less, through his legislative function Moses typified the royal office of Christ.

All this reflected itself in the peculiar relation the people were made to sustain toward Moses. This relation is even described as one of faith and of trust [Ex. 14.31; 19.9]. The resemblance of this relation of the Israelites towards Moses to the relation of the Christian towards Christ had not escaped the notice of Paul, who says that ‘our fathers were all under the cloud, and all passed through the sea; and were all baptized unto Moses in the cloud and in the sea’ [I Cor. 10.1-3]. Just as in baptism an intimate relation is established between the believer and Christ, based on the saviourship of Christ, even so the mighty acts of divine deliverance wrought through Moses pledged Israel to faith in him. And, as during the ministry of Jesus faith and unbelief proved the two decisive

⁵¹Charles Bridges, revised by George F. Santa, *A Modern Study in the Book of Proverbs* (Milford, MI: Mott Media, 1978), p. 4.

⁵²Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible*, 1:363.

factors, so during the wilderness journey a great drama of faith and unbelief was enacted, deciding the people's fate [Heb. 3,4].⁵³

Indeed, there is not found a prophet like unto Moses who had such a continuous and direct access to God in the whole Old Testament. Moses, however, could only reflect the divine glory (Ex. 24:29ff.) while Jesus Christ radiated the divine glory from His own being (Mt. 17:1-2).

3. The Prologue to the Ten Commandments

The prologue serves as a covenant declaration or preface to all the commandments and thus is not exclusively tied to the first commandment. "And God spoke all these words saying: 'I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage' (Ex. 20:1-2; cf. Dt. 5:6). The preface to the law sets the Ten Commandments in their covenant context. God first identifies Himself, as "the LORD" and then states his relationship to Israel as redeemer. The preface of the law gives very personal weighty reasons why the covenant people should obey His commands. Jehovah speaks to Israel as a Father to a son. There are four reasons within the prologue as to why God's law must be diligently and sincerely obeyed.

(1) There is the historical observation of Moses (the preface to the preface) that "God spoke all these words." As noted earlier the Ten Commandments are spoken directly to the people to emphasize their importance, to set them apart. The fact that they are given in the form of direct, unmediated communication is repeatedly set before Israel as a reason for attentiveness and obedience. "Then the LORD said to Moses, 'Thus you shall say to the children of Israel: "You have seen that I have talked with you from heaven. You shall not make anything to be with Me—gods of silver or gods of gold..."'" (Ex. 20:22-23). Before the law is restricted in Deuteronomy the people are reminded of their unique experience at the foot of Sinai: "The LORD talked with you face to face on the mountain from the midst of the fire" (5:4).

(2) There is the self-identification of God as the LORD or Yahweh.⁵⁴ "The promise of

⁵³Geerhardus Vos, *Biblical Theology: Old and New Testaments*, p. 104.

⁵⁴The Hebrew tetragrammaton (four components) *YHWH* translated as LORD (KJV, NKJV, RSV, NIV, NASB, A New Translation of the Holy Scriptures According to the Masoretic Test), "Jehovah" (ASV), or "Yahweh" (Jerusalem Bible) is God's most frequent designation in Scripture occurring 5,321 times. In the King James Version of the Bible the word God is used to translate *YHWH* where the title "Lord" also occurs. Sometimes the KJV will use the word Jehovah when God's name is being emphasized (e.g., Ex. 6:3; Ps. 83:18; Isa. 12:2; 26:4), or when the divine name is combined with a word describing God's character or action (e.g., Jehovah Jireh—"The LORD will provide," (Gen. 22:14). Various cults have insisted that the KJV's use of LORD instead of Jehovah or Yahweh is a sign of apostasy and part of a malevolent conspiracy. The truth regarding the various translations of the tetragrammaton is that while everyone knows the consonants *YHWH*, *no one* knows the vowels. Therefore, the true pronunciation of the word has been lost forever. The vowels chosen are merely educated guesses. Grispen writes, "Sometimes the name is also represented by Jehovah, but this based on a misunderstanding. Hebrew consists of consonants only; the vowels were never written. God's name was Jhwh. In a literal application of the third commandment this name was never pronounced, but in reading was replaced by "Adonai" or "Lord," another name for God. Most English versions translate both Jahweh and Adonai as "Lord," but indicate the difference by using small capitals for Jahweh ("LORD"). When the vowel system that expressed vowels by means of dots and lines placed under and next to the consonants was developed, the vowels of Adonai (a, o, a; i=j and is thus a consonant) were placed under and next to the consonants of Jhwh. The purpose was to say: read her "Adonai." But sometimes the vowels of Adonai are read together with the consonants of Jhwh, and thus we get Jehovah, which is actually nonsense. The correct vowels of Jahweh are not known, however, since the Jews did not pronounce the name. Most

Israel's deliverance from Egypt had been tied to Yahweh's name in Exodus 3:14 and 6:2. Now that the promise had become a reality, he proclaims his name yet once again with the giving of the law.⁵⁵ "The word for 'Lord' is 'Jehovah,' who is the Supreme, Eternal and Self-existent One, the force of which is (as it were) spelled out for us in 'which was, and is, and is to come' (Rev. 4:8)."⁵⁶ The word for LORD (*YHWH*) is related to the Hebrew verb *hayah*, "to be." This point is evident from Exodus 3:14 where God identifies Himself as the absolute self-existent one, "I am who I am" (the gal. imperfect of *h-wâ*—"to be"). This divine name sets forth not only "permanence, but of permanence self-contained, and being a distinctive title, it denies such self-contained permanence to the others."⁵⁷ This covenant name denotes God's aseity, eternity and immutability that emphasize the eternality and immutability of Jehovah's moral law as well as His covenant faithfulness and constancy as a Father and Husband to Israel. "Sanctify yourselves therefore, and be holy, for I am the LORD your God. And you shall keep My statutes, and perform them: I am the LORD who sanctifies you" (Lev. 20:7-8).

(3) The lawgiver identifies Himself as "the LORD *your God*." Jehovah reminds Israel of their covenant relationship. The LORD has become their God by His gracious acts, by giving Himself to Israel. As noted earlier God speaks to Israel as a bridegroom does to his bride, or as a caring father does for his children. Matthew Henry writes: "He was their God, a God in covenant with them, their God by their own consent; and, if they would not keep his commandments, who would? He had laid himself under obligations to them by promise, and therefore might justly lay his obligations on them by precept. Though that covenant of peculiarity is now no more, yet there is another, by virtue of which all that are baptized are taken into relation to him as their God, and are therefore unjust, unfaithful, and very ungrateful, if they obey him not."⁵⁸

(4) Finally God identifies Himself as the redeemer of Israel. Fretheim writes: "...God identifies *himself* in relation to a particular history. This ties the law back into the prior narrative (see 19:1). The activity of God in redeeming Israel *from bondage* means that the law and the service to God and world it entails is not understood to be another form of bondage. The law is a gift of a redeeming God, and a particular redemptive act is seen as undergirding and informing the law, not the other way around. Those who are given the law are already God's people. Hence the law is not understood as a means of salvation but as instruction regarding the shape such a redeemed life is to take in one's everyday affairs."⁵⁹ The covenant people have been taken from the bondage of a satanic, oppressive law order and by grace have been given the liberty of God's law. God's enscriptured law is a great gift and blessing.

The preamble to the Ten Commandments teaches a very important principle: God's people are saved for the purpose of obeying and serving God. "For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them" (Eph. 2:10). "To grant us that we, being delivered from the hand of our enemies, might serve Him without fear, in holiness and righteousness before Him all the days of our life" (Lk.

probable is Jahweh since the Samaritans appear to have pronounced the name of God that way. (*Exodus*, pp. 55-56). Modern scholars generally favor *Yahweh* based on the corresponding verbal form, the imperfect of *h-wâ* which in ancient times was *Yahweh*.

⁵⁵Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., *Toward Old Testament Ethics* (Grand Rapids: Academic Books, 1983), p. 83.

⁵⁶A. W. Pink, *The Ten Commandments: A Guide for Living* (Swengel, PA: Reiner Publications, n.d.), pp. 12-13.

⁵⁷W. Robertson Nicoll, editor, *The Expositor's Bible* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1940), 1:135.

⁵⁸Matthew Henry, *Commentary of the Whole Bible*, 1:359.

⁵⁹Terrence E. Fretheim, *Exodus*, p. 224.

1:74-75).

Chapter 3: The First Commandment Expounded

The first commandment says, “You shall have other gods before Me” (Ex. 20:3). This commandment is foundational and basic to the covenant people’s relationship to Jehovah and to the keeping of the other nine commandments. Thus, the first commandment is the most important commandment of all. If one keeps this commandment then one will keep the entire law. Our relationship to God has a profound effect upon our thinking, speaking and actions. Jesus called this commandment (as stated in positive form, Dt. 6:5) “the first and great commandment” (Mt. 22:37). Loyalty, faithfulness and submission to God are needed to comprehend and obey the whole law. “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge” (Pr. 1:7). By implication the first commandment teaches that true faith always precedes obedience. “Without faith it is impossible to please Him, for he who comes to God must believe that He is, and that He is a rewarder of those who diligently seek Him” (Heb. 11:6).

Before we consider the duties required in this commandment a brief exegesis of the passage is in order. As in all the eight commandments that are negative, this commandment is *emphatic* in the Hebrew. “God absolutely did not want the Israelite to do this, and He fully expected that he would not do it.”⁶⁰ The commandment is given in the *singular* “you” indicating that every individual person has a moral obligation to worship and serve the true God. The phrase “before [or besides] Me” (Heb. “*al-panay*”) is liable to different translations and thus has aroused some debate among scholars. The words can have the sense of “above me,” “besides me” or “over against me” (cf. Gen. 16:12, 25:18; Ex. 20:20; Dt. 21:16). They also can be rendered “before my face,” “in my sight” or “in my presence.” Both translations essentially teach the same thing: that God does not tolerate for one second the believing in, serving, or worshiping or having any relationship to any other supposed god. The meaning of “in my sight or presence” is rooted in God’s omniscience. Those “who secretly turn aside to false worship, and cherish their errors within their own bosoms, may be able to evade the eyes of men, yet their hypocrisy

⁶⁰W. H. Grispem, *Exodus*, p. 189. Victor P. Hamilton writes, “Eight-tenths of the Decalogue are negative apodictic (i.e., categorical) prohibitions, put in the second person singular. The Hebrew language has two ways of expressing a prohibition: the negative particle ‘*al*’ with the jussive form of the verb (reproduced in the Septuagint usually by *m* with the imperative or aorist subjunctive); the negative particle *l’* with the imperfect form of the verb (reproduced in the Septuagint usually by *ou* with the future indicative). John Bright has analyzed the distribution of these two formulations of prohibitions in the Old Testament. As to the difference in nuance between the two, he concludes that ‘*al*’ with the jussive is the weaker of the two, and is concerned with a specific command for a specific occasion, with no implication for the future. [“The Apodictic Prohibitions: Some Observations,” *JBL* 92 (1973): 185-204] The first formulation predominates in wisdom literature, where a prohibition is often justified by a motive clause: “do not walk in the way with them...for their feet run to evil” (Prov. 1:15-16). The second is clearly the choice in the Pentateuch, especially in sections dealing with legal and cultic matters. Thus, in the four chapters of Exodus occupied with the laws of the covenant—21-23, 34—the first occurs but twice, while the second is used fifty-five times. It is not incidental that the laws of prohibition in the Decalogue have been consistently couched in the strongest form of negation the Hebrew language had available. The commandments are not open to review and/or revision by any advisory panel, which may freely abandon them if convenience warrants. They have, linguistically, a built-in permanence. Obsolete they are not. Absolute they are. (*Handbook on the Pentateuch: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy* [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1982], p. 197).

and treachery will not escape the notice of God.”⁶¹ “Cursed is the one who makes a carved or molded image, an abomination to the LORD, the work of the hands of the craftsman, and sets it up in secret” (Dt. 27:15).

Modernists often have taken the phrase “beside me” in a henotheistic sense, meaning that at this particular time in Israel’s history Jehovah was not regarded as the only God, but only as supreme among the gods. Such a view, however, is based on social evolutionary presuppositions and not upon the biblical text. That Jehovah is the one and only God is assumed throughout the creation narrative that was penned by Moses. Obviously, if God created all things whether spiritual or material, there can be no other gods. Moses also excludes all polytheistic conceptions of God when he asks the rhetorical question: “Who is like You, O LORD, among the gods? Who is like You, glorious in holiness, fearful in praises, doing wonders” (Ex, 15:11)? The answer is no one. God is the one and only, a totally unique being. The Bible teaches a strict monotheism from cover to cover. When the ark was placed in the temple Solomon declared, “that all the peoples of the earth may know that the LORD is God; there is not other” (1 Ki. 8:60). Isaiah said, “There is none besides Me. I am the LORD, and there is no other....And there is no other God besides Me, a just God and a Savior; there is none besides Me (Isa. 45:6, 21). Likewise, Paul wrote: “there is one God, the Father, of whom are all things...and one Lord Jesus Christ” (1 Cor. 8:6; cf. 1 Tim. 2:5). Oswald T. Allis writes: “Does it [the first commandment] deny the existence of other gods (monotheism) or merely prohibit their worship (monolatry)? The answer is given in such passages as Genesis i, xxiv. 3; Exodus XX. II, which describes the God of Israel as the Creator of heaven and earth. The Old Testament writers, of course, recognize that the nations, and often even Israel herself, worshiped ‘other gods.’ But again and again they point out how empty, vain, and sinful is such worship. The people gathered at Sinai have just a wonderful demonstration of the impotence of the gods of Egypt (xxii. 12). Moses’ estimate of such gods is given quite clearly in Deuteronomy iv. 28. They are ‘no god,’ they are ‘vanities’ (Deut. xxxii. 21), while Jehovah is the creator of heaven and earth (Deut. iv. 35, 39, vi. 4, x. 14 cf. Exod. xxxi. 17). Yet, on the other hand, the appeal which they make to men is due to the fact that the worship given to these vanities is really offered to ‘demons,’ to Satan and his angels (Deut. xxxii. 17; Ps. cvi. 37). This is especially clear in I Corinthians x. 20. The idol is ‘nothing,’ but the worship rendered to it is given to ‘demons’ (cf. Eph. vi. 12) and the powers of darkness are very real and terrible (I Pet. v. 8) as well as subtle (2 Cor. xi. 14)”⁶²

The Duties Required in the First Commandment

The first commandment (like all the other commandments) has both positive and negative duties. Although the commandment is stated in a negative form (“Thou shall not”), the keeping of this commandment would result in the service and worship of the one true God—Jehovah. The positive form of this commandment is given in Deuteronomy 6, “Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one! You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength” (vv. 4-5).

God sets before man only two alternatives. One either worships the true God or one

⁶¹John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Four Last Books of Moses*, 1:419.

⁶²Oswald T. Allis, *God Spoke by Moses: An Exposition of the Pentateuch* (Nutley, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1951), p. 74.

serves idols. Jehovah by His very existence, His perfect and infinite attributes, His role as the Creator and preserver of all reality, His love and mercy in Christ's redemption demands and deserves our faith, loyalty, service and love. There can be no middle ground or neutrality in this area. Those who claim that they neither believe in nor reject God, who say they are merely neutral seekers of the truth, who have not yet made up their minds regarding God's existence are living in self-deception. This point is proven in two ways by Scripture. (1) The apostle Paul teaches that no one has an excuse for being an atheist or agnostic. He writes: "For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who suppress the truth in unrighteousness, because what may be known of God is manifest in them, for God has shown it to them. For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even His eternal power and Godhead, so that they are without excuse, because, although they knew God, they did not glorify Him as God, nor were thankful, but became futile in their thoughts, and their foolish hearts were darkened. Professing to be wise, they became fools, and changed the glory of the incorruptible God into an image made like corruptible man—and birds and four-footed animals and creeping things" (Rom. 1:18-23). Paul says that Jehovah's created order (what theologians call "natural revelation") reveals God in such a manner, that all men know that the true God exists; and thus have a responsibility to worship their Creator. What this means is that even people who do not have access to a Bible ("special revelation") cannot claim ignorance as an excuse to violate the first commandment. Murray writes: "The inexcusableness resides in the fact that being in possession of this knowledge they did not render to God the glory and the thanks which the knowledge they possessed ought to have constrained. To glorify God as God is not to augment God's glory or add to it; it means simply to ascribe to God the glory that belongs to him as God, to give to him in thought, affection, and devotion the place that belongs to him in virtue of the perfections which the visible creation itself makes known. This glory they failed to ascribe to him and they were destitute of that gratitude which the knowledge possessed should have elicited and which ought to have expressed itself in thanksgiving."⁶³ Everyone in the entire world has a moral obligation to glorify God as God.

This point raises an important question. If all men are without excuse because they have a true knowledge of God from natural revelation, then why is idolatry universal in the world apart from the saving operation of the Holy Spirit? The answer is simple, yet tragic. Before man fell into sin, Adam had a personal loving relationship with Jehovah. He walked with God in a constant consciousness of worship and adoration. His deep love of God flowed from his own nature. He was created in the image of God with true knowledge, righteousness and holiness. Being created good, he was naturally drawn to God as a moth to a light. Loving and serving God was part of his being. But when Adam sinned he became a fallen being. The fall of man has rendered man totally depraved; thus, all men from birth are morally corrupt (Gen. 6:5; 8:21; Ps. 14:2-3; 51:5; 58:3; Mt. 15:19; Jer. 17:9; Rom. 8:7-8; Eph 2:3). Everything about their nature is in rebellion against God. Unlike Adam, who before the fall had a natural innate love and devotion toward Jehovah, fallen man has an inborn aversion to and hatred of God. Therefore, (as Paul says) even though he knows the true God exists, he *continually* suppresses or holds down that knowledge in unrighteousness. In other words (apart from Jesus Christ) all men are born idolaters. People do not glorify the true God, because they do not want to glorify Him. The God

⁶³John Murray, *The Epistle to the Romans* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1968), 1:41.

of the Bible is *repugnant* to man. This means that all conceptions of man as a sincere seeker after religious truth are totally false. The natural man is always running from the true God. “They have all turned aside, they have all together become corrupt; there is no one who does good, no not one” (Ps. 14:3). “There is no one who understands; there is none who seeks after God” (Rom. 3:11).

According to the Bible, pagan idolatry is not some primeval development out of which mankind gradually evolved into a superior monotheism. The exact opposite is true. Man rejected the true God and turned to idols to escape reality. “The mind of man is never a religious vacuum; if there is the absence of the true, there is always the presence of the false.”⁶⁴ Van Til writes: “When man fell it was therefore his attempt to do without God in every respect. Man sought his ideals of truth, goodness and beauty somewhere beyond God, either directly within himself or in the universe without reference to God; we mean of course without reference to the kind of God defined above [i.e., the Christian God].”⁶⁵ Without the transcendent, uncreated, self-contained triune God of the Bible, man is left with that which is immanent, created, fallen and finite. By rejecting God, man commits himself to the blasphemous monstrosity of worshiping filthy little creatures and dumb inanimate objects. By seeking wisdom and truth autonomously (i.e., apart from God and His word) men become ethical degenerates and utter fools.

(2) Apart from the worship of the true God, idolatry is inevitable because man was created a religious being. Man was created to worship and serve Jehovah. Although man is now a fallen being, mired in sin, at enmity with God and in rebellion against Him, the religious impulse that is a fabric of his being has not been and cannot be eradicated. The vacuum created by the hatred and rejection of God must be filled by the service toward a new god. Man must find something in this world to believe in, trust, love and serve. Therefore, idolatry is not simply worship of an explicitly religious object or statue. Anything that takes the place of God is a violation of the first commandment. Herbert Schlossberg writes: “Idolatry in its larger meaning is properly understood as any substitution of what is created for the creator. People may worship nature, money, mankind, power, history, or social and political systems instead of the God who created them all. The New Testament writers, in particular, recognized that the relationship need not be *explicitly* one of cultic worship; a man can place anyone or anything at the top of his pyramid of values, and that is ultimately what he serves. The ultimacy of that service profoundly affects the way he lives.”⁶⁶ Thus, the words of Jesus the divine-human mediator are most appropriate. “He who is not with Me is against Me” (Mt. 12:30). There is no fence-sitting or middle ground possible on this issue. “Next to the Lord there is nothing. He is God, and God alone. Beside Him there is no Savior. All things and every creature are but means in His hand. And therefore, to place our trust in things or creatures is to rob the living God of His glory and is to serve idols.”⁶⁷

⁶⁴*Ibid.* p. 42.

⁶⁵Cornelius Van Til, *The Defense of the Faith* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1955), p. 31.

⁶⁶Herbert Schlossberg, *Idols For Destruction* (New York: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1983), p. 6.

⁶⁷Herman Hoeksema, *The Triple Knowledge: An Exposition of the Heidelberg Catechism* (Grand Rapids: Reformed Free Publishing Association, 1972), 3:135.

Positive Requirements

The first commandment in its positive form requires all men to love the one true God with all their heart, mind and soul (Dt. 6:5; Mt. 22:37). What does it mean to love God? How is this love of God achieved? What are the fruits of love toward God? When the Bible discusses the love of Jehovah it is not primarily concerned with our feelings or emotional state but with a saving faith directed at the proper object (the triune God) that is accompanied by obedience. There are a number of things that are necessary to have a biblical love of God.

The first thing that men need to love God is a biblical knowledge of Him. Men must believe in Jehovah the one true God *as He is defined by Scripture*. Obedience to the first commandment is contingent upon gaining a certain amount of knowledge that can only be found in the Bible. It is not enough that a person assert a belief in one God alone as in modern Judaism, Islam or the many monotheistic cults (e.g., The United Pentecostal Church, Jehovah's Witnesses, The Way International, The Unitarian Church, etc.). One must know the God who is (Heb. 11:6), the true God, the God of Israel. "Knowledge is the foundation of all religion, for religion is a reasonable service. The mind of man should be clear and distinct in the uptaking of divine things."⁶⁸

The Samaritans of Jesus' day were a people who rejected the prophetic and poetical books of the Old Testament and who mixed their own superstitions with their concept of God. Thus, they did not know the true God and received the strong disapprobation of our Lord when He said to the Samaritan woman, "You worship what you do not know" (Jn. 4:22). Because the Samaritans did not carefully define God according to the whole of divine revelation, they worshiped a god of their imagination. Indeed, everyone who ignores or perverts the Scriptures will create and worship idols. We must look to the Bible, the whole Bible and nothing but the Bible for a saving knowledge of God.

To love God, our knowledge of Jehovah must extend not only to the fact that He exists but also to His nature and character. The Christian God is personal. He thinks (Isa. 58:8-9), communicates with mankind (Heb. 1:1-2), acts in history (Heb. 2:14), is self-reflective (Isa. 44:24), self-conscious (Ex. 3:14) and self-determinative (Jn. 5:26). The God of the Bible is not some impersonal force, particle field or energy mass. He is an independent (Ac. 17:25), eternal (Ps 102:12; 9:2) living being (Jn. 6:69; 1 Th. 1:9; 1 Tim. 3:15; 4:10). God is kind (Ac. 14:17), merciful (Ps. 86:15), compassionate (Ps. 145:8-9), absolutely righteous (Ps 98:9), holy (Rev. 4:8), and good (Dt. 32:4). He is infinite; therefore all of His attributes are unlimited. God is everywhere present (omnipresent) without being part of the universe because He is pure, uncreated Spirit (Jn. 4:24). His essence is totally different from created reality. The universe is finite; it is a speck of dust in God's sight. God is all knowing (omniscient, Heb. 4:13; Rom 11:33). His knowledge is exhaustive; nothing can be added or subtracted from it. Therefore God, not man, is the source of truth. God is all-powerful (omnipotent, Jer. 32:17; Isa. 14:27). His power cannot be diminished; He cannot run down or get tired. All energy in the universe is created energy and is running down. Because God is all-knowing and all-powerful, whatever He wills, will come to pass. He cannot be taken off guard, surprised or frustrated in His plans for He is totally sovereign (Ps. 139:16).

⁶⁸Thomas Boston, *Commentary on the Shorter Catechism* (Edmonton, AB, Canada: Still Water Revival Books, 1993 [1853]), 2:92.

The God of the Bible is transcendent (Job 11:7-9). He is above, beyond and separate from the created universe. God is eternal (Ps. 90:2). He is not subject to time. Indeed, He created time, space and matter. The universe had a beginning (Gen. 1:1ff.) but God has existed from eternity. God does not change (immutability, Ps. 102:27; Ja. 1:17). God will always be God; He does not evolve. He does not become the universe for He is uncreated, independent and self-existent (ontological, Jn. 5:26; Ac. 17:25). God is in need of nothing outside of Himself. The universe, however, is totally dependent on God for its existence.

Jehovah, the God of the Bible is a triune God (Mt. 3:16-17; 28:19; 2 Cor. 13:14; Jn. 1:14; 15:26). There is one God existing eternally as three persons: God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit. There are not three Gods but only one God. The Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit are not one-third God each or parts of God, but all are fully God of one indivisible essence, power and eternity. The Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit are not three manifestations of one God. Each is completely equal, possessing the full divine nature. When the Bible teaches that God is three persons, it does not mean that there are three individuals “but only personal self-distinctions within the Divine essence, which is not only generically, but also numerically one.”⁶⁹ Any form of theism that teaches that Jesus Christ is not both man *and* God is a violation of the first commandment. When modernists, Unitarians, Jews and Mohammedans claim that Jesus was only a man and nothing more, they explicitly deny the God of the Bible and are idolaters. When Arians and Jehovah’s witnesses claim that Jesus is the first created being (a mighty angel) they deny the God of Scripture and worship an idol. “Whoever denies the Son does not have the Father either; he who acknowledges the Son has the Father also” (1 Jn. 2:23). Further, when cults claim that the Holy Spirit is not a person but an emanation of God’s power or energy, they reject the God of the Bible.

The fact that God must be believed in and worshiped as He is revealed in Scripture, needs to be emphasized in our day when in most nations religious pluralism reigns supreme. In this climate of opinion it is repeatedly said that Jews, Mohammedans, Mormons and Christians, etc. all serve the same God. This statement is untrue, unbiblical and irrational. The only God who exists is carefully defined in His own revelation of Himself (the Bible). All other definitions come from man’s imagination and thus have no basis in reality. If one wants to know the true God then one must diligently search the Scriptures for they and they alone contain the sum of saving knowledge. “And this is eternal life, that they may know You, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom You have sent” (Jn. 17:3). “The LORD, the LORD God, merciful and gracious, longsuffering, and abounding in goodness and truth, keeping mercy for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, by no means clearing the guilty...” (Ex. 34:6-7).

Furthermore, in order to love God we must not only have a biblical knowledge of Him, we also must believe in Him. We must acknowledge Jehovah to be our God by trusting in His Son (Jesus Christ) as our Lord and Savior. It is not enough that people have a mere intellectual assent to certain biblical propositions about God. There must also be a faith in God. It is one thing to understand that God exists; and another to believe in a saving manner, to know and love God. When James discusses the need of a genuine faith he points out that, “Even the demons believe—and tremble” (Ja. 3:19). The Israelites who wandered and died in the wilderness because of their unbelief (Heb. 3:12-19; 4:2, 6) knew that God existed for they were eyewitnesses of His miraculous power. “The knowledge of God is either speculative or practical. The former we may

⁶⁹L. Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1939), p. 87.

have and be none the better, but only the more guilty. The practical knowledge of God is saving. It controls the heart and life; it brings our moral nature into a blessed conformity to the truth of God.”⁷⁰ People who say they believe in God but do not act in a manner consistent with that profession are practical atheists. As Paul says, “They profess to know God, but in works they deny Him, being abominable, disobedient, and disqualified for every good work” (Tit. 1:16). What then does a saving and practical knowledge of God mean? “It is to have a lively apprehension of his relation to us, as our God in Christ, as is accompanied with an habitual conformity to his will, in heart and life.”⁷¹ “Now by this we know that we know Him, if we keep His commandments. He who says, ‘I know Him,’ and does not keep His commandments, is a liar, and the truth is not in him” (1 Jn. 2:3-4).

In a fallen world ravaged by sin, obedience to the first commandment cannot be separated from a belief in and love of Christ. “For we see in the gospel, the glory of God the Father, Son and Holy Ghost; or behold the perfections of the divine nature as displayed in and through a Mediator. To know God thus, is to possess that knowledge which is absolutely necessary to salvation.”⁷² There is a common notion today that all paths (i.e., religions) lead a person to God. Such an idea is totally false and spiritually deadly. There is only one path to God and that is Christ. Jesus said, “I am the door. If anyone enters by Me, he will be saved” (Jn. 10:9). “I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me” (Jn. 14:6). “Nor is there salvation in any other, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved” (Ac. 4:12). “If anyone does not love the Lord Jesus Christ, let him be accursed” (1 Cor. 16:22).

A saving belief in Christ is absolutely necessary for obedience to the first commandment and all other commandments. There are a number of reasons why this statement is true. First, Christ is God the Son, the second person of the trinity. He must be worshiped, adored, served and obeyed. Second, as noted above, God the Father can only be approached through Christ. None of our service, works or worship can be accepted as pleasing in His sight unless our sins are covered by the blood of the Lamb. Third, Christ alone delivers us from the guilt and power of sin. It is because we were united with Christ in His death and resurrection, that we receive new hearts of flesh that love and believe in God. Jesus enables us by His grace to serve the living and true God. “We love Him because He first loved us” (1 Jn. 4:17).

In order to love God we must obey His word in every area of life. “Therefore, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God” (1 Cor. 10:30). “Now by this we know that we know Him, if we keep His commandments” (1 Jn. 2:3). Craigie writes: “Thus the implications and obligations of the first commandment are far-reaching in their significance. The commandment calls for a style of life dominated by a relationship to God. The commandment was not merely ‘theology,’ nor was it concerned simply with the proper form of worship. It affected the whole life of the whole covenant community. Its implications remain the same today; the relationship to one God must dominate every sphere of life, whether the life of action, of thought, or of emotion. There can be no area of life in which a person or thing comes before

⁷⁰William S. Plumer, *The Law of God as Contained in the Ten Commandments, Explained and Enforced* (Harrisburg, VA; Sprinkle Publications, 1996 [1864]), p. 107.

⁷¹By Several Ministers of the Gospel, *The Westminster Assembly’s Shorter Catechism Explained by Way of Question and Answer* [Commonly Called Fisher’s Catechism] (Philadelphia: A. Walker, 1818), 2:29.

⁷²Thomas Ridgeley, *Commentary on the Larger Catechism* (Edmonton, AB, Canada: Still Waters Revival Books, 1993 [1855]), 2:316.

the commitment to the one God. The *other gods* may take on forms more subtle than wooden images or stone idols; indeed anything that relegates the relationship with God to second place functions in effect as ‘another god.’”⁷³ Because this commandment has implications for all of life, there are a number of areas that need to be considered under obedience. All of these areas are inter-related.

First, there must be a confession of Christ before men (Rom. 10:9; Mt. 10:32; 1 Jn. 4:15) and a willingness to acknowledge God in all our ways (Pr. 3:6). The first commandment like all the other commandments has both an internal and external aspect. If there is a love and devotion to the true God in the heart, it will express itself in the life. There is no such thing as a private Christian or a true believer who is unwilling to confess Jesus publicly before men. A love of Christ requires a willingness to take a stand for Him whatever the cost, whether that means being an outcast, suffering economic hardship or undergoing persecution. The cowardice common among professing Christians today, that leads evangelicals to repeatedly compromise the truths of God’s word in the areas of science, morality, doctrine and worship is a reflection of lack of true faith in and love of God. True love of God leads to a boldness in confessing His name and seeking first His kingdom.

Second, the fear of God must permeate all of our thinking and actions (Lev. 25:17; 1 Pet. 2:17; Ps. 34:9). Believers must always have their mind focused on God and His word as they make decisions. There must be a perpetual God-consciousness. Does this thought, or word or action please my God? Because sin and idolatry always begin in the heart, our hearts must be permeated with a holy reverence and fear of God coupled with love. Calvin writes: “We manifest a becoming reverence for him, only when we prefer his will to our own. It follows then that there is no other legitimate worship of him, but the observance of righteousness, sanctity, and purity.”⁷⁴ Those who fear God always have Him in their thoughts and before their eyes. They know that God is watching everything we say or do. A holy fear of God restrains our hand from evil even when we are alone, when no one can see but God. We must have the mentality of Joseph who said, “How then can I do this great wickedness, and sin against God” (Gen. 39:9)? Or, the attitude of Anselm, “If hell were on one side, and sin on the other, I would rather leap into hell, than willingly sin against my God.”⁷⁵

Third, there must be a steady and continuous trust in God’s word and His providence. The root cause of Israel’s rank idolatry prior to their captivity in Babylon was a refusal to trust in Jehovah. When the Israelites moved into Palestine and had an economy based on agriculture they almost immediately began worshiping the Canaanite fertility gods. Why? The primary reason was their lack of trust in Jehovah’s absolute control over the realm of nature. In Canaan, agriculture and religion were bound together. The fertility cult’s whole purpose was to insure proper rains, the fertility of livestock and an abundant harvest. The covenant people looked to the fertility gods for prosperity instead of Jehovah. The people looked to the tangible, visible gods and sensual rites of the heathen instead of trusting in God’s providential care. Professing Christians are often tempted to worry about finances and compromise ethically in their business practices to attain food, shelter and clothing. Jesus, however, instructs us not to worry but to trust in God. “But seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things shall be

⁷³P. C. Craigie, *The Book of Deuteronomy*, p. 153.

⁷⁴John Calvin, as quoted in William S. Plumer, *The Law of God*, p. 109.

⁷⁵Anselm of Canterbury, as quoted in Thomas Watson, *The Ten Commandments*, p. 51.

added to you” (Mt. 6:33).

It is often adversity in life whether financial, medical or from persecution that tests our faith in God. When hardship or tragedy arises do we imitate righteous Job who blessed and worshiped God in his time of crisis (Job 1:21) or do we act like faithless Saul who turned to rebellion and sorcery (1 Sam. 28:7)? Those who do not trust in God’s providence for sustenance will instead invariably trust in an idol. “A good Christian believes, that if God feeds the raven, he will feed his children; he lives upon God’s all-sufficiency, not only for grace, but for food. He believes if God gives him heaven, he will give daily bread; he trusts his bond: ‘verily thou shalt be fed.’ Psa. xxxvii 3. Can we trust God in our fears? When adversaries grow high can we display the banner of faith?”⁷⁶

Fourth, there must be a habitual obedience to God’s word. Can a person say “Jesus is Lord” when he refuses to submit to His lordship, when he is living in open rebellion against God’s precepts? Jehovah said to Abraham, “I am Almighty God; walk before Me and be blameless” (Gen. 17:1). The Israelites were repeatedly commanded to “be holy, for I am holy” (Lev. 11:44). When Israel affirmed the covenant with God they said, “All that the LORD has said we will do, and be obedient” (Ex. 24:7). There is only one true God and thus there is only one true and binding ethical standard. This one standard reflects God’s nature and character. Therefore it is absolute, eternal, unchanging and non-negotiable. Anyone who rejects God’s law either explicitly by adopting a humanistic or pagan law order or implicitly by refusing to obey God’s voice and following the lusts of his own heart is an idolater. As we noted earlier, the first commandment is foundational and basic to all the other divine imperatives in Scripture. There is one God and the belief in and service to this God involves a total allegiance to His one law-word.

Everyone who rejects the true God will in some manner reject divine revelation and those who reject the Bible will always reject the God of the Scripture. Israel’s idolatry was always accompanied by a blatant disregard of all the commandments. When the Israelites worshiped the golden calf (Ex. 23:1 ff.) they rose up to play (Ex. 32:6) like a heathen mob. When Israel joined itself to Baal of Peor (Num. 25:3) their act of treachery was accompanied by rampant fornication (Num. 25:8-9). The period of the judges was a time of idolatry (Jdg. 2:11-13, 17-19) and blatant lawlessness (Jdg. 17:6; 21:25). The period of the kings of Israel after Solomon is a history of rank idolatry (1 Kgs. 15:26, 34; 16:19, 26, 31; 22:52; 2 Kgs. 3:3; 10:29; 13:2, 11; 14:24; 15:9, 18, 24, 29; 17:21-22) coupled with murder, intrigue, sexual immorality and war. The major prophets present a picture of society full of idolatry (Isa. 42:17; Jer. 8:19), oppression, injustice, adultery, selfishness, dishonesty, treachery, sorcery, divination, theft and wickedness. “They weary themselves to commit iniquity” (Jer. 9:5).

The prophet Samuel places disobedience to God and idolatry in the same category. “Has the LORD as great delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices, As in obeying the voice of the LORD? Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice, and to heed than the fat of rams. For rebellion is as the sin of witchcraft, and stubbornness is as iniquity and idolatry. Because you [Saul] have rejected the word of the LORD, He also has rejected you from being king” (1 Sam. 15:22-23). When people reject God’s commandments they reject His authority; rejecting Jehovah’s authority is the same as rejecting God Himself. Rejecting God’s authoritative word is compared to divination because when God’s word is rejected, truth, meaning and justice must be derived from another source. It is a form of idolatry because it is based on the philosophical idea that truth, meaning

⁷⁶Thomas Watson, *The Ten Commandments*, p. 52.

and ethics can be found outside of God. Whatever men look to for ultimate meaning and ethics is the god they serve. Why is such idolatry always accompanied by lawlessness and societal decay? The answer is simple. Because the triune God of the Bible is the only source for meaning and ethics, a rejection of the true God leaves a society with finite gods determined by the autonomous mind of man. Whatever the god is that idolaters serve (even monotheistic non-Christian conceptions), it is always a creation of man's imagination. It is always some form of human autonomy dressed up in religious or scientific terminology. What this means is that all non-Christian ethical systems are at bottom relativistic and arbitrary.

The rejection of the true God always comes with God's judgment; and, this judgment Paul says always begins with lawlessness. The apostle says that the gross sexual immorality of the Gentiles (e.g., homosexuality and lesbianism) and the great wickedness of heathen society is ultimately the direct result of their idolatry (cf. Rom. 1:23-32). God gives them up to uncleanness (Rom. 1:24), vile passions (Rom. 1:26) and a debased mind (Rom. 1:28) because they first became godless in their thinking. They suppressed the true knowledge of God and pushed Him out of their lives in order to live for themselves. God gives them what they want and what they deserve. They wanted human autonomy and self-gratification and they received their lot, a society in chaos, a culture full of evil, distrust, hatred, pride, envy, covetousness and immorality.

We must understand the interrelationship that exists between a prompt and cheerful obedience to God's revealed will and the keeping of the first commandment. Likewise, we must keep in mind the correlation between idolatry and lawlessness in general. Paul preached the gospel "to make the Gentiles obedient" (Rom. 15:18). A turning to the true God always involves a rejection of the false. Therefore, "Let everyone who names the name of Christ depart from iniquity" (2 Tim. 2:19).

What does a habitual obedience to God's word involve? It involves studying, applying and obeying the whole word of God in every area of life. This entails diligently working for sanctification by: (1) studying and obeying God's law; (2) attending the means of grace (e.g., public worship, the sacraments, etc.); (3) worshiping and serving God only as He has authorized in His word; (4) engendering covenant continuity by the diligent upholding of family religion; and (5) working for the sanctification of all earthly institutions and nations.

What is the nature of biblical obedience?⁷⁷ It must be a cheerful obedience. It is not an outward obedience with inner grumbling and complaints. A child who is asked to take out the garbage and does so while railing against his father under his breath, is offering a hypocritical obedience. He obeys with his hands while he disobeys with his heart. While it is true that we must render obedience to God in all circumstances whether we feel like it or not, we must strive to obey with the proper attitude of gladness to please our blessed Savior. If we are to properly love God and His law, then we need to cherish our duty to obey the law. Whatever the Lord requires of us there must be a cheerful and prompt response of "Yes, Lord, here I am, your servant." A willing obedience is rewarded with great blessings. "If you are willing and obedient, you shall eat the good of the land" (Isa. 1:19).

Our obedience to God must be fervent. We must be fanatical in our love and obedience toward Christ. It is a sad state of affairs when communist rebels serve their Marxist delusions with utmost sacrifice and fanaticism while many professing Christians have a hard time reading a few chapters of the Bible each day or getting out of bed to go to church. Obedience without

⁷⁷This section of the nature of biblical obedience is based on Thomas Watson, *The Ten Commandments*, pp. 2-4.

fervency is a half-hearted, lukewarm obedience. Do we not profess to believe in a God who created all things, that gave us life, that saved us by His own Son's precious blood from and eternal torment. To whom much is given, much is required (Lk. 12:48). Jesus has forgiven us a mountain of debt and delivered us from a life of slavery and vanity. We who have been forgiven much ought to love much (Lk. 7:47). "As water boils over, so the heart must boil over with hot affections in the service of God."⁷⁸ Now that we are saved by Christ we are to live not for ourselves but for Him. We must be fervent in seeking first His kingdom. "He who loves father or mother more than Me is not worthy of Me. And he who loves son or daughter more than Me is not worthy of Me. And he who does not take his cross and follow after Me is not worthy of Me. He who finds his life will lose it, and he who loses his life for My sake will find it" (Mt. 10:37-30).

Our obedience must be comprehensive. That is, it must extend to all of God's commands. In other words, a partial repentance is no repentance at all. Many professing Christians fool themselves into thinking they have repented before God by putting away a few sinful habits while clinging to others. All of God's commands, however, come with the same divine authority. We do not have the option of following only our favorite statutes or the easier commandments. Such a view is rooted in a self-deluded hypocrisy. Did not Jesus tell the rich young ruler that he lacked one thing (Mt. 19:21)? Did not John the Baptist call attention to Herod's incest at the cost of his own life (Mt 14:4)? Our Lord rebuked the scribes and Pharisees for their hypocritical partial obedience. He said, "For you pay tithe of mint and anise and cummin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faith. These you ought to have done, without leaving the others undone" (Mt. 23:23). Jesus said to His disciples, "He who is faithful in what is least is faithful also in much; and he who is unjust in what is least is unjust also in much" (Lk. 16:10). "Whoever therefore breaks one of the least of these commandments, and teaches men so, shall be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever does and teaches them, he shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven" (Mt. 5:19).

Our obedience toward God must be sincere. All of our thoughts, words and actions must have their aim the glory of God (1 Cor. 10:31). Many people do good deeds with the wrong motives. They seek to glorify themselves and receive the praise of men. Jesus said that such people have their reward (Mt. 6:5). Yes, they will be praised by men, but not by God. We often observe such behavior in Hollywood and Washington where good deeds are announced by microphones and done under the glare of lights in front of cameras. It reminds one of the Pharisees who blew their trumpets to call attention to their giving of alms (Mt. 6:2). "Alms should shine, but not blaze. Jehu did well destroying Baal-worshipers, and God commended him for it; but, because his alms were not good (for he aimed at setting himself in the kingdom), God looked upon it as not better than murder. 'I will avenge the blood of Jezreel upon the house of Jehu.' Hos i 4."⁷⁹ Today, there are many governmental agencies and multitudes of charities dedicated to the service of others. However, since their service is offered solely to men and done in the name of humanity, it at bottom is humanistic and thus dishonors God. When we obey God we must do so not only in accordance with His law, but we must consider the proper end. Just as ultimately all sin is directed against God, all obedience must ultimately be directed toward the exaltation of God and the expansion of His kingdom.

⁷⁸Thomas Watson, p. 2.

⁷⁹*Ibid.*, p. 3.

Our obedience toward God must be in and through Christ. Why must every good deed we do be offered to God through our Savior? The Bible says that all of our good works are tainted with sin and unacceptable before God (Lk. 17:10; Isa. 64:6; Phil. 3:8). Indeed, Isaiah says that all of our works are as filthy rags in God's sight (Isa. 64:6). That is why works that are done because of faith in Christ are acceptable to God. "Not our obedience, but Christ's merits procure acceptance. In every part of worship we must present Christ to God in the arms of our faith. Unless we serve God thus, in hope and confidence of Christ's merits, we rather provoke him than please him. As when King Uzziah would offer incense without a priest, God was angry with him, and struck him with leprosy (2 Chr. xxxvi 20); so, when we do not come to God in and through Christ, we offer up incense to him without a priest; and what can we expect but severe rebukes?"⁸⁰ Solomon says, "the plowing of the wicked, is sin" (Pr. 21:4). "[W]hatever is not from faith is sin" (Rom. 14:23).

Our obedience to God must be constant. That is, obedience which flows from a living vibrant faith will persevere to the end. What good is it if a man joins himself to the visible church, reforms his life, lives in apparent faithfulness for a season only to abandon all to serve his lusts? Of such men Peter says, "it would have been better for them not to have known the way of righteousness, than having known it, to turn from the holy commandment delivered to them" (2 Pet. 2:21). "Hypocrites' obedience is but for a season; it is like plastering work, which is soon washed off; but true obedience is constant."⁸¹ Paul said with sadness, "Demas has forsaken me, having loved this present world" (2 Tim. 4:10). Jude warned the church of hypocrites who are "clouds without water, carried about by the winds; late autumns trees without fruit, twice dead, pulled up by the roots..." (Jude 12). John wrote of false professors saying, "They went out from us, but they were not of us" (1 Jn. 2:19). If we want the crown of life then we must persevere. We must continue in obedience to the end. "And he who overcomes, and keeps My works until the end, to him I will give power over the nations—...and I will give him the morning star" (Rev. 2: 26, 28). "Blessed are those who keep justice, and he who does righteousness at all times" (Ps. 106:3).

The necessity of a constant obedience is not only the biblical remedy against apostasy and reprobation but also applies to the backsliding Christian. A believer who repeatedly falls may not be an open apostate and will always certainly repent. However, such a person brings shame on the name of Christ and is of little or no use in the advancement of godly dominion. People who want to enter heaven by the skin of their teeth because they are wedded to their lusts must examine their own hearts as to whether they are really even saved. We have been saved to fight in Christ's army. Therefore, no matter what the temptation or affliction we must fight on to victory. "We have vowed constancy; we have vowed to renounce the pomps and vanities of the world, and to fight under Christ's banner to death. When a servant has entered into covenant with this master, and the indentures are sealed, he cannot go back, he must serve out his time; so there are indentures drawn in baptism, and in the Lord's Supper the indentures are renewed and sealed on our part, that we will be faithful and constant in our obedience; therefore we must imitate Christ, who became obedient unto death. Phil ii 8."⁸² For constancy in obedience we must look to Christ the author and finisher of our faith (Heb. 12:2). "He will not allow your foot to be

⁸⁰*Ibid.*

⁸¹*Ibid.*, p. 4.

⁸²*Ibid.*

moved; He who keeps you will not slumber....The LORD shall preserve you from all evil; He shall preserve your soul. The LORD shall preserve your going out and your coming in from this time forth, and even forevermore” (Ps. 121:3, 7-8).

Negative Requirements

Believing in, loving and serving the true God as *our* God of necessity involves the rejection of false gods in every form whether mental, philosophical, material or cultic. Boston writes: “God says, thou shalt have me for thy God; therefore thou must let these go their way. As one would rise up and say to a woman giving herself in marriage to another, I have a prior right to thee, thou shalt have no other husband but me. So that, could the voice of this command be heard, it would be heard saying and crying out of injury done to thy God, whensoever anything lawful or unlawful gets away the heart inordinately.”⁸³ Therefore the first commandment is exceedingly broad in its requirements. We will consider the main areas forbidden by this law.

The first commandment explicitly forbids atheism in all its forms. There are at least three main forms of atheism, classical, skeptical and practical. A classical atheist is a person who maintains that there is no God. He would argue in a dogmatic manner that the sentence “God exists” expresses a *false* proposition. A skeptical atheist is a person who does not believe in God with the excuse that we do not know whether there is a God or not. This position, which on the surface appears to be non-dogmatic and more polite than classical atheism, is called agnosticism. This term was coined by T. H. Huxley in the nineteenth century. Biblically considered, agnosticism is a form of atheism because an agnostic rejects the God of the Bible and His voice in natural and special revelation and in God’s place substitutes a faith in mankind. An agnostic’s trust is placed either in speculative human philosophy (e.g., Kant, Hume, Darwin, Marx) or in theories supplied by the physical sciences which are based not on reality but on the apostate, unbelieving presuppositions of men. The agnostic continually *suppresses* the truth of God revealed in nature and *presupposes* that God cannot reveal Himself to mankind in propositional form. A common thread that runs through much agnostic thought is the idea that the finite cannot know or understand an infinite and absolute deity. While it is true that Jehovah is incomprehensible and cannot be known exhaustively, the fact remains that man can and does have a limited knowledge of God. God has made Himself known to mankind in His Word. Men will never have a comprehensive knowledge of Jehovah, but they can have truth as far as it goes. The Bible gives us enough information to have a saving knowledge of and a loving relationship with God.

Believers must understand that classical atheism and agnosticism are both totally hostile to the Christian faith. Agnosticism pretends to be neutral and scientific while it rejects God and seeks to undermine faith in Jesus Christ. Note the open hatred of God in the following statements of prominent agnostics. “J. S. Mill declared it was impossible for a thoughtful person to ascribe ‘absolute perfection to the author and ruler of so clumsily made and capriciously governed a creation as this planet (*Three Essays on Religion*, 1874). He found ‘moral difficulties’ also in ‘the recognition...of the object of highest worship, in a being who could make a Hell’ and create creatures whom he foreknew to be destined to suffer in it eternally.”⁸⁴ Note the hostility of T. H.

⁸³Thomas Boston, *Commentary on the Shorter Catechism*, 2:94.

⁸⁴Ronald W. Hepburn, “Agnosticism” in Paul Edwards, editor-in-chief, *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (New York:

Huxley: "In 'Agnosticism and Christianity' (1889) he wrote, 'I, and many other Agnostics, believe that faith, in this sense, is an abomination.' In 'Agnosticism' (1889) he said, 'I verily believe that the great good which has been effected...by Christianity has been largely counteracted by the pestilent doctrine...that honest disbelief in their more or less astonishing creeds is a moral offense, indeed a sin of the deepest dye..."⁸⁵ R. Flint (*Agnosticism*, Kroll lectures, 1887-1888, published in 1903) writes: "All that the mind can do on the side of the Unknowable is to play at make believe, to feign faith, to worship nothingness."⁸⁶ In other words, Bible believing Christians are morons who believe in pure fantasy, are immoral for adhering to evil doctrines and are wicked in their dogmatism and exclusivity.

The agnostic's lack of neutrality, hatred of God and hostility to Christianity is easily exposed as inconsistent and arbitrary if we examine the presuppositional foundation of his ideas. The agnostic assumes that the final criterion of truth can only be found within himself. He, therefore, presupposes that God cannot speak authoritatively to mankind. The agnostic (like all secular humanists) looks to reason and/or empiricism in the hands of autonomous man (i.e., men who *a priori* reject the God of the Bible) as the only source for truth. By rejecting the Christian God at the beginning, the agnostic is forced to reject the Creator-creature distinction and the doctrine of creation. This *a priori* rejection forces the agnostic to adhere to the materialistic doctrine of evolution by chance. Reality, it is argued, is simply matter plus time plus chance. By adopting the evolutionary chance concept of the universe, however, the agnostic and atheist have in principle completely undercut any possibility of truly understanding any given fact in the universe. Why? Because a chance universe by definition is a universe of flux in which everything is changing. Thus, the universe is an ocean of facts with no bottom, no shore and no fixed reference point. It is as though man is made of water in an ocean of water climbing a stairway of water into a sky of water. The atheistic or agnostic scientist or philosopher could at best only attempt to define a particular thing at a particular instant of time. Even this, however, would be impossible since man himself is ruled by chance and is in constant flux. In such a scheme of things man is a mutating speck in a universe of mutating specks. The only constant is change itself. This is the world-view of nihilism, absurdity and irrationality. Cornelius Van Til writes,

On the assumptions of the natural man logic is a timeless impersonal principle, and facts are controlled by chance. It is by means of universal timeless principles of logic that the natural man must, on his assumptions, seek to make intelligible assertions about the world of reality or chance. But this cannot be done without falling into self-contradiction. About chance no manner of assertion can be made. In its very idea it is the irrational. And how are rational assertions to be made about the irrational? If they are to be made then it must be because the irrational is itself wholly reduced to the rational. That is to say if the natural man is to make any intelligible assertions about the world of "reality" or "fact" which, according to him is what it is for no rational reason at all, then he must make the virtual claim of rationalizing the irrational. To be able to distinguish one fact from another fact he must reduce all time existence, all factuality to immovable timeless being. But when he has done so he has killed all individuality and factuality as conceived of on

Macmillan Publishing Co. and The Free Press, 1967), 1:57.

⁸⁵*Ibid.*

⁸⁶*Ibid.*, 1:58.

his basis. Thus the natural man must on the one hand assert that all reality is structural in nature. He must even assert on the one hand that all reality is non-structurable in nature and on the other hand that he himself has virtually structured all of it. Thus all his prediction is in the nature of the case self-contradictory.⁸⁷

Because the agnostic or atheist cannot escape this dilemma he must steal important concepts from the Christian world-view (e.g., the doctrine of the universe created and controlled by God with fixed laws in which laws of logic can exist, in which reality and facts have meaning; in which history has a beginning and an end), in order to mock and criticize Christianity. He is like a little child who must sit on his father's lap in order to slap his face.

That atheists and agnostics are sinfully biased against the God of Scriptures is also proven by their blatant epistemological hypocrisy. Their major argument against God is that since God by definition is a pure Spirit, He cannot be observed by man or known by empirical means. Therefore, whether or not God exists cannot be known by man. In philosophical terms it is said that if God exists He exists beyond the phenomenological realm in the neumenal realm of the unknowable, of pure mystery. While it is true that the God of the Bible is a spiritual being and does not have a physical body (Jn. 4:24) the standard agnostic argument against God is fallacious for a number of reasons. First (as noted) it assumes that God has not only made Himself known, but He has done so in an awe-inspiring miraculous manner. Second, it assumes that the existence of God must be proved in the same manner as one proves the existence of a physical object. Obviously, God cannot be observed or handled like an apple or tennis ball. His existence, however, can be proved in a more indirect manner. When a person stands on the floor of a house, he cannot see the beams under the floor yet he knows that the beams exist, otherwise the floor would fall, crashing into the basement. Likewise, the triune God of Scripture is proven by His infallible word⁸⁸ and by the fact that reality can only be explained and made intelligible

⁸⁷Cornelius Van Til, *The Defense of the Faith* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1955), pp. 143-144. The unbeliever has no solution when it comes to real knowledge, meaning and ethics. On the one hand, the universe is said to be in a state of constant flux. The universe is the product of chance, a soup of random chaos. If meaning is sought by saying that the universe is static like a block of ice, then the fixedness of things is posited, but movement and all particulars are lost in static deadness. The biblical Christian does not have this problem, because the God who is, is transcendent (outside the universe), ontological (self-contained, in need of nothing outside Himself) and triune (three Persons, one God). The problem of unity and diversity, the one and the many, is resolved by the triune God of the Bible. God creates reality and controls it. He reveals truth to man through His revelation (the Bible); thus man can have truth as long as he is dependent on God's knowledge. He must think God's thoughts after him. The knowledge that the unbeliever has is stolen from the Christian worldview. "If we are to have coherence in our experience, there must be a correspondence of our experience to the eternally coherent experience of God. Human knowledge ultimately rests upon the internal coherence within the Godhead; our knowledge ultimately rests upon the ontological Trinity as its presupposition" (Cornelius Van Til, *An Introduction, to Systematic Theology* [1949], p. 22. The secular humanist comes under the Christian roof of truth to get out of the rain and then tells the Christian he is all wet.

⁸⁸"An argument based upon the Scriptures will be considered circular reasoning, unscientific and inadequate by many. However, one must keep in mind that the Bible is unique. Because it is God's word it must be self-authenticating, for there can be no authority above God Himself. The Bible is to be believed because it is God's Word. The author of Hebrews says that 'because He could swear by no one greater, He swore by Himself' (Heb. 6:13). This point, however does not mean that a Christian's belief in the Bible is irrational, or a blind leap into the dark (fideism). Belief in the Scriptures is supported by abundant evidences. As the Westminster Confession says: 'the heavenliness of the matter, the efficacy of the doctrine, the majesty of the style, the consent of all the parts, the scope of the whole (which is to give all the glory to God)...and the entire perfection thereof are arguments whereby

on the presupposition that the God of the Bible exists. In other words, He is proved by the impossibility of the contrary.

Secular scientists and philosophers (who reject belief in God because He cannot be known by direct empirical means) are hypocrites, because they believe in hundreds, even thousands, of things that cannot be observed or studied directly. No philosopher has ever observed a law of logic. No modern historian has ever observed the battle of Waterloo. No astronomer has ever seen a black hole or quasar. No biologist has ever observed evolution take place. No physicist observed the big bang. Yet all these things are believed in the scientific community. The God of Christianity is rejected not because of a lack of proof (indeed, every fact of the universe presses the existence of God on man's consciousness); but because sinful man does not want to submit to God's authority and face the coming judgment.

Let us now turn our attention to the practical atheist. A practical atheist is a person who professes to believe in God yet lives his life without regard to God and His word. In the United States practical atheists are far more numerous than classical or skeptical atheists. In fact, given the doctrine and practice of most professing Christian churches today, one could argue that practical atheism is the chief American religion. There are supposedly fifty million evangelicals in America and this nation is probably the most church going country in the world. Yet, the positive impact of evangelicals and professing Christians on culture is minuscule at best.⁸⁹ The pollster George Gallup, Jr. has done extensive research into American religious beliefs. What he has discovered is disturbing, yet obvious to the well informed. He writes: "[A]s a people, we lack deep levels of individual spiritual commitment. One sign of this is that the level of ethics in this country seems to be declining—at least in terms of public perceptions of ethical behavior.... [W]e found there's very little difference between the church and the unchurched in terms of their general view on ethical matters and also their practical ethical responses in various situations."⁹⁰ In other words, professing Christians engage in premarital sex, commit adultery, get divorced, commit fraud, lie, steal and vote for pro-abortion corrupt politicians at about the same rate as the general heathen population. Such people profess Christ with their lips but their hearts are far from Him (Mk. 7:6). They in reality do not believe in Christ, nor do they fear God. "His laws do not bind them. His mercies do not attract them. His judgments do not correct them."⁹¹ They know little or nothing of family religion. They hand their posterity over to the Molech-state by putting their children in the public schools. Their spiritual interest lies in prophetic fantasies

it doth abundantly evidence itself to be the word of God...." (1:5). One could add the amazing discoveries of archeology, perfectly fulfilled prophecy, signs and wonders and so on. While all these evidences testify to the truth of Scripture we must never forget that the Bible ultimately rests upon God's own authority. 'God "testifies to Himself" because there is nothing more epistemologically authoritative or morally ultimate that could authorize what He discloses.'" (Greg Bahnsen, "The Inerrancy of the Autographa" in Norman Geisler editor, *Inerrancy* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1980], p.

⁸⁹Mark A. Noll writes, "[O]n any given Sunday in the United States and Canada, a majority of those who attend church hold evangelical beliefs and follow norms of evangelical practice, yet in neither country do these great numbers of practicing evangelicals appear to play significant roles in either nation's intellectual life. What a British Roman Catholic said at midcentury after looking back over more than one hundred years of rapid Catholic growth in Britain may be said equally about evangelicals in North America: 'On the one hand there is the enormous growth of the Church, and on the other its almost complete lack of interest.'"

⁹⁰George Gallup, Jr., *Forecast 2000: George Gallup, Jr., Predicts the Future of America* (New York: William Morrow, 1984), p. 153.

⁹¹William S. Plumer, *The Law of God*, p. 115.

instead of sanctification and godly dominion. They are salt-less, good for nothing, hypocrites.

Practical atheism in America has taken many forms. There is liberalism or modernism where apostate theologians have openly rejected the Bible and the God defined by Scripture and have adopted a secular humanistic world view. Modernists say they believe in God, Jesus Christ, the resurrection and so forth but they define such terms not according to Scripture (which they regard as mythological and defective) but in terms of autonomous human reason. Modernists argue (in accordance with their anti-supernatural presuppositions) that God's law is the product of an ancient religious community that believed in many unethical, unjust and barbaric principles. Most of these laws, they argue, certainly do not apply to our modern progressive and enlightened culture. With this unbelieving and blasphemous mindset, modernists *replace* God's just and perfect law with man-made relativistic law. Thus we find modernist churches advocating many blatantly immoral practices such as: abortion on demand (i.e., murdering babies); homosexuality and lesbianism (i.e., abominable sexual perversions), communism/socialism/welfare fascism (i.e., state theft and redistribution), no-fault divorce, coercive labor unions, the state school system (which indoctrinates children in secular humanism, sexual immorality and ethical relativism) and so on. Among modernists there is no longer a Christian mind. They have been secularized to such a degree that socially, culturally and politically they have aligned themselves with militant atheists, sexual deviants and criminals against the Bible-believing Christians who are attempting to apply God's infallible word to society. When men reject God's law-word, they reject God.

It is not an accident that modernists are statists. When men abandon God's law they abandon ethical absolutes and the rule of law. The unchanging ethical principles of Scripture are replaced by an evolving positivistic law determined by man. In one decade homosexuality is considered a disgusting practice and a crime; then in another decade it is legal and even virtuous. One by one the ethical precepts of the Bible are cast aside simply on the basis of sinful-human and pragmatic considerations. The progressive abandonment of justice leads to greater and greater injustice. In such a corrupt system, dominion oriented Bible-believing Christians become the chief enemy of state bureaucrats and the secular humanistic intelligentsia. The civil government with the prodding and enthusiastic support of homosexual and lesbian groups will very likely persecute real Christians, beginning with hate-crimes legislation. Men who hate God's word hate God and His covenant people. There is no neutrality.

Another form of practical atheism is antinomianism. This expression of atheism exists in two major forms today: the carnal Christian heresy and the secular doctrine of ethical relativism. The most popular form of antinomianism among evangelical churches today is "the carnal Christian heresy."⁹² This teaching is based on the idea that a person can believe in Jesus as savior without also recognizing Him as LORD. This doctrine *divorces* sanctification from justification in such a manner that the necessity of sanctification in the Christian life is completely denied. This heresy (in its modern form) developed in large part from the old dispensational idea that repentance was a requirement for the dispensation of law and applied to the Jews but is not necessary for the covenant of grace and the Christian church. While we need to emphasize that

⁹²The apostle Paul does refer to some believers as "carnal" in 1 Corinthians 3:1-4. By the term carnal, however, Paul does not refer to professing Christians who are habitually practicing evil such as lying, theft, fornication, drunkenness, etc., but rather is referring to people who have a divisive-party spirit within the church. "When one says, 'I am of Paul,' and another, 'I am of Apollos,' are you not carnal?" (1 Cor. 3:4).

the Bible teaches salvation by grace *alone* (Rom. 3:28; 4:5-8; Gal. 2:16; 3:10-13; 5:2-4, etc.); that Scripture *never* gives holiness or sanctification a meritorious role in redemption, we must not neglect the biblical teaching that everyone who is truly saved will be sanctified and made holy. There is no such thing as a Christian who has not submitted to Christ as Lord and repented of his sinful lifestyle. The idea that Jesus came to suffer excruciating pain and agony in body and soul to eliminate the guilt and penalty of sin, so that people could live a life of sin, serve their evil lusts with abandon and follow the devil, is a blasphemous, damnable doctrine.

There are many reasons why the carnal Christian heresy (“easy believism”) must be rejected. (1) The Bible requires all believers to be holy because God is holy (Lev. 11:44-45; 19:2; 20:7, 26; Ex. 19:6; Nu. 15:40; Dt. 23:14). This doctrine is not just an Old Testament teaching but is also clearly taught throughout the New Testament. “Therefore you shall be perfect, just as your Father in heaven is perfect” (Mt. 5:48). “But as He who called you is holy, you also be holy in all your conduct, because it is written, ‘Be holy, for I am holy’” (1 Pet. 1:15-16). “And everyone who has this hope purifies himself, just as He is pure” (1 Jn. 3:3). (2) The Scriptures contain many imperatives that require obedience and holiness in Jehovah’s covenant people. “I am Almighty God; walk before Me and be blameless” (Gen. 17:1). “As God has said: ‘I will dwell in them and walk among them. I will be their God, and they shall be My people. Therefore come out from among them and be separate, says the Lord. Do not touch what is unclean, and I will receive you. I will be a Father to you, and you shall be My sons and daughters,’ says the LORD Almighty” (2 Cor. 6:16-18). “Therefore do not let sin reign in your mortal body, that you should obey it in its lusts. And do not present your members as instruments of unrighteousness to sin, but present yourselves to God as being alive from the dead, and your members as instruments of righteousness to God” (Rom. 6:12-13). “I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that you present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God, which is your reasonable service” (Rom. 12:1; cf. 12:2, 9ff.; 1 Cor. 5:1-11, etc.). “Pursue peace with all people, and holiness, without which no one will see the Lord” (Heb. 12:14). The Greek word for “pursue” indicates an earnest pursuit, a dedicated striving after. “In the Greek text *peace* is feminine; *holiness*, or the process of becoming holy, is masculine; the relative pronoun *which* is masculine singular; therefore the verse says that no one can see the Lord without going through the process of becoming holy.”⁹³

(3) The Bible teaches that people who habitually engage in wicked behavior are not Christians. “Do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived. Neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor homosexuals, nor sodomites, nor thieves, nor covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor extortioners will inherit the kingdom of God. And such were some of you. But you were washed, but you were sanctified, but you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus and by the Spirit of our God” (1 Cor. 6:9-11). “Now by this we know that we know Him, if we keep His commandments. He who says, ‘I know Him,’ and does not keep His commandments, is a liar, and the truth is not in him” (1 Jn. 2:3-4; cf. 3:4-9). “If we say that we have fellowship with Him, and walk in darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth” (1 Jn. 1:6). “Many will say to Me in that day, ‘Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in Your name, cast out demons in Your name, and done many wonders in Your name?’ And then I will declare to them, ‘I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness’” (Mt. 7:22-23)!

⁹³Gordon H. Clark, *What Do Presbyterians Believe?* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1965), p. 135.

(4) The apostle Paul says that professing Christians who refuse to repent of wicked behavior are to be excommunicated and cast out of the church. He writes (regarding a church member involved in sexual immorality): “deliver such a one to Satan for the destruction of the flesh....purge out the old leaven” (1 Cor. 5:4, 7). Paul adds: “But now I have written to you not to keep company with anyone named a brother, who is sexually immoral, or covetous, or an idolater, or a reviler, or a drunkard, or an extortioner—not even to eat with such a person” (1 Cor. 5:11). The apostle’s teaching is nothing new. He is simply reflecting the words of our Lord Jesus Christ who taught that if a professing Christian refuses to repent of sin, he is to be excommunicated from the church and regarded “like a heathen and tax collector” (Mt. 18:17; cf. 18:15-20). “A man professing to be a Christian professes to renounce all these sins [see 1 Cor. 5:11]; if he does not act consistently with his profession, he is not to be recognized as a Christian. We are not to do anything which would sanction the assumption that the offenses here referred to are tolerated by the gospel”⁹⁴ Spurgeon writes: “If the professed convert distinctly and deliberately declares that he knows the Lord’s will, but does not mean to attend to it, you are not to pamper his presumptions, but it is your duty to assure him that he is not saved. Do not suppose that the Gospel is magnified or God-glorified by going to the worldlings and telling them that they may be saved at this moment by simply ‘accepting Christ’ as their Savior, while they are wedded to their idols, and their hearts are still in love with sin. If I do so, I tell them a lie, pervert the Gospel, insult Christ, and turn the grace of God into lasciviousness.”⁹⁵ Can the biblical policy of excommunicating unrepentant church members (as taught by Christ and the apostles) be reconciled to the popular “evangelical” notion that a person can “accept Christ,” be saved, and then repent some time in the future when he decides to get serious about holiness? Absolutely not! Such a teaching is totally foreign to Scripture.

(5) The Bible teaches that Christians have been bought with the blood of Christ and belong to Him. Therefore they are His servants and have a responsibility to live for Him. Paul said, “whether we live or die, we are the Lord’s (Rom. 14:8). We must serve Him in every area of life. “Or do you not know that your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you, whom you have from God, and you are not your own? For you were bought at a price; therefore glorify God in your body and in your spirit, which are God’s” (1 Cor. 6:19-20). “Do you not know that to whom you present yourselves slaves to obey, you are that one’s slaves whom you obey, whether of sin leading to death, or of obedience leading to righteousness” (Rom. 6:16)?

(6) Believers are required to be holy because Jesus is both savior *and Lord*. The carnal Christian heresy is based upon the presupposition that believers can receive only a part of Christ. Can a person trust in only a part of Jesus’ work and still be saved? Can our Lord be received piecemeal? No. The whole savior and all of His redemptive work is necessary for salvation. One must look in faith not only to His suffering and death (humiliation) but also to his rising again and ascension to power (exaltation). Christians must believe in the resurrection and confess with their mouths *the Lord Jesus Christ* (Rom. 10:9). Can a person honestly confess “Jesus is my Lord” when he refuses to submit to His kingship and openly rebels against Christ’s precepts? Jesus’ exaltation is the conclusion and climax of His humiliation. These events are organically connected and cannot be separated. Thus Paul wrote: “For none of us lives to himself, and no

⁹⁴Charles Hodge, *I and II Corinthians* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1974 [1857, 59]), p. 60.

⁹⁵Charles Haddon Spurgeon as quoted in Ernest C. Reisinger, *Today’s Evangelism: Its Meaning and Methods* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Craig Press, 1982), pp. 25-26.

one dies to himself. For if we live, we live to the Lord; and if we die, we die to the Lord. Therefore, whether we live or die, we are the Lord's. For to this end Christ died and rose and lived again, that He might be Lord of both the dead and the living" (Rom. 14:7-9). The message of the apostles was "Believe on *the Lord* Jesus Christ, and you will be saved" (Ac. 16:31). Paul said, "For we do not preach ourselves, but Christ Jesus *the Lord*" (2 Cor. 4:5). In the book of Acts the "savior" appears only twice (5:31; 13:23), while the title "Lord" occurs 92 times. Throughout the New Testament the lordship of Christ is emphasized. In the book of Acts Jesus is always presented as the resurrected Lord and sinners are always exhorted to believe in and receive Him as the Lord, the prince or king. "There is not one example of Christ being offered any other way...God-centered evangelism proclaims the biblical message of the *lordship of Christ* at the outset, not as a second work of grace, or an act of optional consecration later."⁹⁶ True believers receive Christ as prophet, priest and *king*; and, as king, Jesus rules over us and subdues sin in our lives.

(7) The idea that holiness is optional for believers is disproved by the Bible's teaching on repentance. Repentance is never presented in Scripture as optional or for Israel only but is a vital element of the gospel message. "[A]nd that repentance and remission of sins should be preached in His name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem" (Lk. 24:47). Christ emphasized repentance in His preaching (Mt. 4:17; Mk. 1:14, 15). He warned His disciples, saying "Unless you repent you will all likewise perish" (Lk. 13:5). John the Baptist (Jesus' forerunner) emphasized the need for repentance (Mk. 1:4; Lu. 3:7-9). He told the Pharisees and Sadducees, "Brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Therefore bear fruits worthy of repentance, and do not think to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father.' For I say to you that God is able to raise up children to Abraham from these stones. And even now the ax is laid to the root of the trees. Therefore every tree which does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire" (Mt. 3:7-10). Those who reject the necessity of holiness often will argue that repentance is a Jewish doctrine that does not apply to the church (which they erroneously assert is a parenthesis in God's plan). Such teaching is refuted by the apostle Paul himself. Paul said, I "taught you publicly and from house to house, testifying to Jews, *and also to Greeks*, repentance toward God and faith toward our Lord Jesus Christ" (Ac. 20:21). To the Greek Athenians Paul said, "Truly, these times of ignorance God overlooked, but now commands all men everywhere to repent" (Ac. 17:30). "[W]herever there is true faith, there is also real repentance. The two are but two aspects of the same turning—a turning away from sin in the direction of God."⁹⁷ Just as no one is saved without the instrument of faith which lays hold of Christ, no one is saved without a change of mind concerning Christ and sin which leads to a changed life (Mt. 3:8; 7:16-20; 1 Jn. 1:6; 2:3, 4; 3:10; Jas. 2:14-16). Although repentance is non-meritorious and does not contribute one iota to a person's salvation it *always* accompanies regeneration and true faith.

(8) The Bible teaches that everyone united with Jesus Christ in His death and resurrection will be regenerated, justified and sanctified. Anyone who partakes of the benefits of Christ's death must also partake of the sanctifying power of our Lord's resurrection. Jesus' salvation is comprehensive. It involves the elimination of the guilt of sin (justification) and deliverance from sin's dominating power as well (sanctification). All genuine believers will die to sin and walk in

⁹⁶Ernest C. Reisinger, *Today's Evangelism: Its Message and Methods* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Craig Press, 1982), pp. 25, 27.

⁹⁷L. Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1939), p. 487.

newness of life. The carnal Christian heresy asserts that a person can be regenerated and justified while retaining the slavery to sin of the old nature. Paul says that this is impossible. “Shall we continue in sin that grace may abound? Certainly not! How shall we who died to sin live any longer in it? Or do you not know that as many of us were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into His death? Therefore we were buried with Him through baptism unto death, that just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life. For if we have been united together in the likeness of His death, certainly we also shall be in the likeness of His resurrection, knowing this, that our old man was crucified with Him, that the body of sin might be done away with, that we should no longer be slaves of sin. For he who has died has been freed from sin....And having been set free from sin, you became slaves of righteousness” (Rom. 6:1-7, 18). The indicatives of Romans chapter 6 which speak of the reality of a believer’s union with Christ in His death and resurrection lead immediately to the imperatives of 6:12 and following. Since in chapter 6 a Christian’s obligations are based on a historical reality (i.e., something that is true for every believer), one cannot deny the necessity of obedience without also denying the reality of the mystical union which is the foundation for personal holiness. Although the carnal Christian heresy may be a perfect match for our hedonistic, self-centered culture, it is a deadly, soul-destroying doctrine. How can a professing Christian adhere to a teaching that says that one can be truly saved without the fruit of love and obedience to our bridegroom (1 Jn. 2:3-5; Jn. 14:15)?

Antinomianism has leavened modern culture most effectively through the acceptance of secular humanism and its ethical relativism. What is secular humanism and ethical relativism? Secular humanism (which should not be confused with the historical term “humanist” or “the humanities” or “humanitarianism”)⁹⁸ refers to a world-view that is based on materialistic naturalism. The secular humanist presupposes that the God of Bible does not and cannot exist, that we live in a closed universe and that man is the measure of all things. Because the secular humanist rejects (*a priori*) any idea of the transcendent, he makes himself the ultimate reference point of truth, meaning, and ethics. While the biblical Christian seeks ultimate truth in God and His Word, the secular humanist is philosophically committed to judging all matters autonomously (from the Greek *autos*, self, and *nomos*, law). Because the secular humanist rejects the objective, absolute and unchanging law of God and replaces it with whatever he deems right or correct at any given moment, his law or ethical system is relativistic. The Humanist Manifesto openly and proudly proclaim that ethics are “*autonomous and situational*, needing no theological or ideological sanction.”⁹⁹ Man without God will determine for himself what is right or wrong. This belief (as we shall see) is a recipe for both anarchy and statism. Without any objective absolute ethical standard, the ethical determinations of man are arbitrary. All morality (in such a system) is equally good or bad, true or false. “Relativism gives only a rubber yardstick, which measures differently for every man, according to his personal measure and purpose.”¹⁰⁰

⁹⁸The term *humanist* originally applied to scholars in the Renaissance who focused their attention on classical literature. Many of these men were professing Christians and had no intention of bringing Christianity into ruins. As time progressed however, the pagan literature did indeed have a negative effect on a number of scholars. Classical thought was deemed superior by many to Christian philosophy. The term *humanities* refers to the study of human thought and relations, as distinguished from the sciences. The humanities focus on literature, art, philosophy and history. *Humanitarianism* refers to acts of philanthropy toward men.

⁹⁹“Humanist Manifesto II,” *The Humanist*, Sept.-Oct., 1973, vol. 33, no. 5, p. 5.

¹⁰⁰R. J. Rushdoony, *The Institutes of Biblical Law*, p. 330.

Secular humanism is a blatant expression of idolatry. We know that autonomous ethics and self-worship are interrelated, for the Bible places them together. When the serpent tempted Eve he offered her the ability to be as God, knowing [i.e., defining or determining] for herself good and evil (Gen. 3:5). Relativistic or pragmatic ethics is rooted in sinful pride and a desire to be rid of any transcendent, external, ethical restraint whatsoever. Eve believed she could determine reality apart from God's revelation. Her decision to eat the forbidden fruit was based on empiricism (i.e., the fruit looked good to her) and rationalism (i.e., she used reason independently of God's revelation to determine truth). She did not accept what Jehovah said on His own authority (i.e., Eve did not trust God's word) and she believed that she deserved blessing on her own terms (selfish pride) not as a result of grace or faith-directed obedience. The result of human autonomy in ethics is death. There is not only the death and misery that resulted from the fall but also the repeated death of nations and cultures in history which cling to the idolatry of self-law.

Before examining the consequences of adhering to a relativistic ethic one must first consider the irrationality or absurdity of such a system. The secular humanist destroys all possibility of sound, ethical absolutes when he rejects the God of Scripture and seeks ethical norms in this world alone.¹⁰¹ It is one thing to say that murder, theft, lying, adultery, bestiality, child molestation, torture and so on are wrong or immoral and quite another to give real, sound, foundational reasons for such an assertion. Indeed, the secular humanist's presuppositions regarding reality render any propositions regarding ethical norms as totally subjective and arbitrary. Why? The secular world-view presupposes that nothing can exist above and beyond the universe. The idea of an infinite personal God who is transcendent, who reveals ethical absolutes to man (e.g., the Ten Commandments) is anathema to an atheistic naturalist. Therefore, the secular humanist must derive an ethical system from this universe.

¹⁰¹Does the fact that most nations of the earth condemn many of the same activities prove that man can autonomously arrive at universal ethical norms apart from God and special revelation? Does this fact support the secular humanistic worldview? No. Only the Christian world-view can account for reality. The fact that most nations and cultures condemn activities such as murder, theft, rape, bestiality, and such is consistent with the biblical worldview and inconsistent with an evolutionary worldview. The Bible teaches that man was created in the image of God (Gen. 1:26-27). An important aspect of this image was man's original righteousness and the moral law of God written upon his heart (Rom. 2:15). After Adam and Eve sinned and mankind fell into sin, man's nature became corrupted, perverted and depraved. Therefore, man's conscience could not be depended upon as a reliable source for ethics, because of sin. But the image of God was not eradicated by the fall. Man is still man; he still has a conscience, he still has moral notions. The moral law of God written upon man's heart at creation explains why men and societies worldwide (and even false religions) condemn many of the same activities. The Bible also teaches that God restrains the evil in societies through his common grace. God does so because He is kind and compassionate, and for the sake of His elect. The evolutionary world-view that has man arising out of an impersonal chance beginning cannot account for the similarity of men in being and ethics found the world over. If evolution were true, moral laws (which, according to their secular humanists' own presuppositions, are totally arbitrary) would show radical differences not great similarities. If evolution were true, there would be wide differences between peoples who evolved under different conditions. If evolution really occurred, some human "races" would be vastly superior in intelligence, etc. to other "races." But we know that this is not true. Wherever you go on earth, man is man. Men are the same everywhere. The evolutionary worldview of secular humanism paved the way for the eugenics movement, the Nazi movement, Marxism, abortion on demand, and so on. All men are men *because they were created by God*. Human life has value because everyone is created in the image of God. If people repent and adopt the biblical view of man, racism, hatred and the Balkanization of America will cease.

But what is the modern view of the universe, of reality? The universe is evolving. It is a product of chance. It is impersonal and in a state of flux. Can ethical absolutes that are valid for all times and places be found in pure contingency? No. They clearly cannot. But what of man himself? Has not man evolved to the point where he can use reason to determine a valid ethical system? Note the misguided optimism of Julian Huxley: “Man the conscious microcosm has been thrown up by the blind and automatic forces of the unconscious macrocosm. But now his consciousness can begin to play an active part, to influence the process of the macrocosm by guiding and acting as the growing-point of its evolution. Man’s ethics and his moral aspirations have now become an integral part of any future evolutionary process.”¹⁰² The message of Huxley is that, by chance, blind impersonal forces have created a new god-humanity. With its new reasoning consciousness, humanity will determine its own future, ethics and meaning. Through chance evolution mankind has transcended its creatureliness. Man does not look to God for salvation but to himself. The second Humanistic Manifesto declares: “No deity will save us, we must save ourselves.”¹⁰³

The problem with all such thinking is that man himself is a product of chance and is in a state of flux. According to the secular humanistic world-view man does not have a soul or spirit but is solely a material organism. All of man’s emotions, endeavors and reasonings are simply the electro-chemical responses of the brain. Therefore, when the secular humanist attempts to ground ethics in love, sincerity, motive or sentiment, he (according to his own world-view) is looking to an illusion (epiphenomenon) of electro-chemical reactions between molecules. The modern humanist’s presuppositions regarding reality render “ethical or unethical decisions and actions” no more meaningful or significant than the activity of a pond scum. The humanistic view of ethics has absolutely no foundation.¹⁰⁴

Although humanists ground ethics on a bottomless and shoreless ocean of chance they insist that their own standard be adhered to as if their own morality was thundered from Mt. Sinai. They admit that according to their own world-view moral laws are merely opinion, custom, “community standards,” etc., that are constantly evolving and changing; yet, they hold to their own value system with a fanatical religious dogmatism. In fact anyone such as the Bible-believing Christian who adheres to a different definition of what is moral or immoral on such issues as abortion, gun control, property rights and homosexuality must be opposed with dogmatic fervor. The humanist bans the Christian God from existence in the public square and

¹⁰²Julian Huxley, “Conclusion” in *Touchstone for Ethics, 1893-1943* (New York: Harper & Bros, 1947), p. 255, as quoted in Gary North, *Genesis: The Dominion Covenant* (Tyler, TX: Institute for Christian Economics, 1982, 1987), p. 275.

¹⁰³“Humanist Manifesto II,” p. 6.

¹⁰⁴There are atheists who hold to a form of objectivist ethics, who argue strongly against relativism. Some men posit objectivity in nature (e.g., natural law theory). Others hold to a Greek concept of a realm of ideals that exist above and beyond man. Apart from the God of Scripture, however, who reveals His ethical standard to mankind, subjectivity cannot be avoided. Van Til writes, “To say that there is or must be an objective standard is not the same as to say what that standard is. And it is the *what* that is all important. Granted that non-Christians who hold to some sort of something, somewhere above man are better than non-Christians who hold nothing whatsoever above man, it remains true that in the main issue the non-Christian objectivists are no less subjective than are the non-Christian subjectivists. There is but one alternative that is basic: it is that between those who obey the God and Christ of Scripture and those who seek to please themselves. Only those who believe in God through Christ seek to obey God; only they have the true principle in ethics” (Cornelius Van Til, *Christian Theistic Ethics* [Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1980], p. 32).

then demands that the masses accept their own definition of morality as if they are God, all-knowing and absolute. Secular humanism is a religious faith with humanity as its god and a deceitful agenda against Christians. It begins with a plea for tolerance and the presupposition that every religious position (except their own which they regard as based on science) is equally mythological and false. All non-humanistic positions are declared equal in stupidity and superstition while the humanistic elite (in the name of science and objectivity) sit over all as lord. “It places man in God’s place and, in the name of toleration and equality, relegates Christianity to the junk heap.”¹⁰⁵ While they boldly proclaim the death of God and the end of absolutes, modern humanists demand a new faith in a new god (i.e., in humanity or the humanistic elite that rules in the name of all mankind) and demand an unquestioning obedience to a new law. With a fanaticism as strong as any fundamentalist, the humanistic activist seeks to impose his vision of morality on society (e.g., socialism or civil government directed theft and redistribution; environmental laws based on pseudo-science and earth worship; abortion on demand or infanticide; the full legalization and acceptance of sexual deviancy such as homosexuality, etc.).

There are a number of dangerous consequences of adhering to a secular humanistic ethic of relativism. First, the modern humanistic ethic destroys the rule of law, liberty, and justice, by giving men a god-like power over other men. With a Bible-believing Christian ethic, the state has a moral obligation to base its law code or system of justice upon the moral absolutes of Scripture. All men (including kings, presidents, senators, congressmen, bureaucrats and judges) must look to what God has said before making laws or rendering civil judgments over other men. Men are thus limited by law, by an objective, absolute standard that exists *outside* of men to which everyone can appeal. If a ruler sets aside God’s law in order to rule autonomously he should be impeached or removed by a lesser civil magistrate. In other words, no one is above the law—*God’s law*. The civil magistrate is to be a terror to those who do evil (Rom. 13:3-4) and evil can only be defined by God.

Second, the secular humanistic ethic leads to an antinomian degenerate society. Without laws that are based on God’s nature and are unchanging and absolute, the law loses all conviction of ultimacy. If the universe is a product of chance and is impersonal, then all law is pragmatic. Laws are simply the opinions of men and no more. People are left with no real reason not to lie, cheat, steal and murder other than the coercive power of the state (e.g., the police, prisons, etc.). The result of such thinking has been an explosion of immorality and a great increase in crime. In one area after another (as the remnants of Christian culture are cast aside) society keeps defining deviancy downward. Many activities that were considered grossly immoral, disgusting and even criminal are now perfectly acceptable and even popular. Premarital sex, drunkenness, drug abuse, theft, murder, abortion, lying, cheating, fraud, homosexuality, rape, cruelty, and pornography are now a normal part of American societal landscape. This moral decline corresponds to the rejection of the Christian ethic and its replacement by humanistic relativism.¹⁰⁶

¹⁰⁵R. J. Rushdoony, *The Institutes of Biblical Law*, p. 296.

¹⁰⁶The decline of the Christian worldview and the accompanying hostility to God’s law-word is even more extensive in Europe than America. Michael Elliott writes, “**Social liberalism.** Capital punishment is unknown in the EU [European Union]. Marriage is a dying institution. In 1999, 54 percent of all births in Sweden were out of wedlock, 39 percent in France and an astonishing 27 percent in supposedly devout Ireland. In Amsterdam and other cities, recreational drug use has been effectively decriminalized....**The death of God.** Modern Europe is a post-religious society. More accurately, what was once the heartland of Christendom is a post-Christian society. Throughout the

A very important aspect of any social order is self-government. Civil governments (even totalitarian states) are very limited in their knowledge of criminal activities. Further, apart from any concept of absolute law from an all-knowing, all-powerful God, the incentives for being a law-abiding citizen are greatly diminished. This reality was understood by most ancient pagan cultures. Therefore, the civil magistrate was often elevated to a god status to give a sense of ultimacy to the law order. Or, the people would be taught that the law code was given directly to the king by a god. “The famous Hammurabi Stone, for example, shows the sun god Shamash giving the Babylonian laws to the king.”¹⁰⁷ Modern humanistic states with their complete rejection of God and transcendency have a general breakdown in law and order as the populace casts off the Christian world-view and becomes epistemologically consistent with the new secularism. With only arbitrary pragmatic law at their disposal, humanistic states have used different methods for keeping law and order. Totalitarian states such as the old Soviet Union used mass terror, statist propaganda, and state education to keep people in line. Mass arbitrary terror is used to give people a sense of the “omnipresence” and “omnipotence” of the state. The so-called western democracies have not resorted to the terror of the prison camps. They have, however, depended on welfare statism, the public school system, massive fraud and propaganda and economic idolatry. People are not only taught to worship humanity and look to the state for peace, prosperity and concern; they are taught to look at life in terms of economic growth and hedonism. Like decaying ancient Rome, the secular state is left with bread and circuses. Purely immanent incentives, and lies couched in the language of love and concern, coupled with massive prison expansion programs will not preserve a law-abiding social order in the long run. All nations that forget God will be destroyed either from without, within or both.

When a people adopt biblical Christianity or at least when the majority of people in society are directed by the Christian world-view, serious societal decay is avoided. The need for statist “solutions” is also circumvented because the biblical world-view leads to self-government. It gives coherent, logical, foundational reasons for morality and obedience. Jehovah who is sovereign, all-powerful and all-knowing has given mankind the moral law (the Ten Commandments). The Bible teaches that violations against the moral law are violations against God. Good is good because God says so in His word, and likewise bad is bad because God says so. Jehovah has warned everyone that a day is coming when He will judge all men according to their deeds. Every thought, word and deed is done under the eye of omniscience and thus will receive a just reward. The ethical commands of Scripture—all of which are objective and unchanging—are backed up by a morally perfect God, who will punish every wicked act committed by man. In a personal universe where an absolute, infinite, perfect, moral God (who is the creator of meaning, the revealer and enforcer of ethical absolutes and the judge of wickedness) stands behind all created reality, people have a very real reason for personal responsibility.

If modern humanists were intellectually honest they would admit their system leads to nihilism (i.e., there is no meaning to life or ethics). Their message would be: “Do what ever you want—just don’t get caught. And if you get caught, blame it on someone else.” In a world without

continent, churches stand empty. Islam, however, is growing in influence; in France and Britain the most self-confident religious community is Muslim. “Europe: The Un-America” in *Newsweek* [New York: Newsweek, Inc. December, 2000-February 2001], p. 18.

¹⁰⁷Herbert Schlossberg, *Idols for Destruction*, p. 47.

meaning, various temptations can only receive a “why not” response. If God doesn’t exist and the Bible is not true then the only logical response to reality is: “Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die” (1 Cor. 15:32).

Third, ethical relativism or pragmatism leads eventually to the deification of the state. Belief in the relativism of truth and ethics, coupled with an evolutionary concept of man and history, leads to a populace that increasingly has no regard to past values or wisdom. Under the influence of a secular humanistic world-view, people are chiefly concerned with their own personal peace and affluence. They become narcissistic and look to the pleasure of the moment instead of building a godly family and society for the future. More and more people view ethics like a clothing fashion. If the spirit of the age says that a certain behavior (adultery, homosexuality, abortion or murder) is acceptable then the people follow suit. The standard for ethics is no longer the Bible but the changing fads of Hollywood, the media, the public school and the belt-way (Washington, D.C.).

One of course cannot build a good house with a jello yardstick or a solid long-term social order with arbitrary, changing moral standards. The result of humanistic law is predictable, the breakdown of law and order in society. Humanistic law leads to ethical chaos. With the incredible increase in juvenile delinquency, crime, sexual deviancy, divorce, family disintegration, school violence, gang warfare, drug abuse, drunkenness, etc., there comes a demand for solutions. The people want and need a savior. They demand answers to societal problems. But apart from a sovereign God who has given ethical absolutes to guide men; and, who has sent His Son Jesus Christ in order to save men and enable them to live according biblical principles, the answers or solutions are purely immanent. Because the state is the focal point of power and the determiner of law in a humanistic society, most people (in our post-Christian culture) look to the state as father and savior. Humanistic men seek power through political means (i.e., through legislation, court mandated laws, tax programs) and tragically the people love to have it so. The state plays God and the populace gladly embraces the new idolatry because they have abandoned a full-orbed, life-transforming, biblical Christianity. Secular humanism seeks salvation through legislation. All truth and wisdom is to be found in the president or congress or the courts, or more specifically the experts (i.e., the secular humanistic intelligentsia-- academics, sociologists, scientists, doctors, etc.) who direct and advise the state bureaucrats.

When a people and civil government reject Christ and His law for the relativistic law of humanism, the state will go beyond its biblical mandate of punishing crimes (biblically defined) and protecting citizens from rogue nations. State coercion will be used not simply to restrain evil (as defined by God) but will be used to achieve a particular social end (e.g., eliminate poverty, provide retirement benefits, healthcare, etc.). The Bible teaches that the state is to be a minister of justice—God’s justice. Secular humanism says that the state is man’s savior (provider, definer, predestinator and sovereign). Because the humanistic state takes to itself a role that belongs only to God, it begins to act as a god. It seeks control over every aspect of life. Rushdoony writes, “The state seeks, in terms of its claim to sovereignty, to become the determining and over-arching power over every domain: no sphere is allowed to function except by permission of the state. The earth, air, water, sky all belong to the state, are used only under the law and tax of the state, and are potentially or actually subject to repossession by the state. The state has assumed that ultimacy over man’s life which properly belongs only to God. The creed of the state

therefore requires holy warfare against the Christian creed and faith.”¹⁰⁸ Unfortunately, most people in America have become so accustomed to the big brother idol state that they accept and welcome their great loss of freedom.

In order to understand how the deification of the state has affected modern society lets us briefly consider three areas of statist control: education, money and property. The Bible teaches that education is the responsibility of parents and that the entire training process of a covenant child is to be “of the Lord” (Eph. 6:4). Every bit of training education and knowledge is to converge in total devotion and obedience to Jesus Christ (Dt. 6:5 ff.). Education is inescapably religious in nature for it is concerned with reality and of necessity must present facts in accord with a particular world and life view. Although the public or state schools claim to be religiously neutral they are indeed establishments of the state religion—secular humanism. The idea that morality, history, science and so forth can be taught from a neutral foundation is extremely naive. That state schools are anti-Christ and hostile to the Christian faith is proven by the following points. (1) Jesus Christ and His law word are banned from the classroom. God and His word are deemed unimportant, irrelevant and even dangerous for children. Such a position is implicitly atheistic. Jesus said, “He that is not with Me is against Me” (Mt. 12:30). Scripture says that the fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge (Pr. 17). Religious neutrality in education is impossible. (2) State schools teach the theory of evolution as a fact proved by science. Macro-evolution contradicts the scriptural doctrine of creation and is thoroughly disproved by the fossil records, genetics, geology, etc. Evolution is a dogmatic religious belief of secular humanism. Its acceptance completely undercuts all possibility of Christianity and an objective ethical standard. (3) State schools teach a religious pluralism under a secular statist rule. All religions are deemed equal in the public school as long as the sovereignty of the state is not challenged. Biblical Christianity is a totally exclusive religion. Salvation and godly rule are only found in Christ. (4) State schools teach a relativistic or pragmatic form of ethics (e.g., “premarital sex is not a great idea; but, since you’re going to have sex anyway, here is a condom”) Public schools are one of the greatest advocates of homosexual rights. God says that homosexuality in all its forms is an abomination worthy of the death penalty (Lev. 18:22, 20:13; Dt. 23:17-18; Rom. 1:24-28; 1 Cor. 6:9-10; Jude 7). (5) State schools teach that behavioral problems are not the result of sin but are problems that arise from a bad environment. Children involved in unethical activities (e.g., school shootings and murder) are often said to be victims themselves. Public schools are the greatest drug pushers in America (e.g., Ritalin®). Instead of teaching the children discipline, the schools send them to psychiatrists to get them drugged up for class. (At present the number of children on stimulants is around 6 million.) (6) Subjects such as history and social studies are taught from a statist anti-Christian perspective (e.g., the American Indians [who were violent satanic savages] are presented as noble humanitarians and environmentalists). In short, state schools are training up a generation of immoral, useful idiots, people who are indoctrinated in statist propaganda. What is the general population’s response to our secular humanistic—statist education? Not only do the vast majority of Americans send their children to public schools, but they also (by a large majority) oppose school vouchers and other programs that enable people to put their children in private education. Even the vast majority of evangelicals hand their children over to the big brother idol state.

¹⁰⁸R. J. Rushdoony, *The Foundations of Social Order: Studies in the Creeds and Councils of the Early Church* (Fairfax, VA: Thoburn Press, 1978), p. 221.

The modern state's god complex is also apparent in its attitude toward money and the economy. The attitude of many in civil government is that all money implicitly belongs to the state. This statist understanding of money is found in the current (2001) discussion in Washington over tax cuts. Liberal democrats and republicans opposed to tax cuts make the argument that the government cannot afford a tax cut. Such a statement presupposes that the present surplus belongs to the state and not the taxpayers who earned the money. The civil government's god complex is also evident in federal tax policy. Schlossberg writes: "When a provision in the tax laws permits the taxpayer to keep a portion of his money, the Internal Revenue Service calls this a 'tax expenditure' or an 'implicit government grant.' This is not tax money that the state has collected and expended but money it has allowed the citizen to keep by not taking it. In other words any money the citizen is permitted to keep is regarded as if the state had graciously given it to him. Everything we have is from the state, to which we owe gratitude. In fact, we are the property of the state, which therefore has the right to the fruit of our labor."¹⁰⁹ Robert Higgs gives an excellent summary of the consequences of a state that assumes a god-like sovereignty over its citizens. He writes,

There was a time, long ago, when the average American could go about his daily business hardly aware of the government—especially the federal government. As a farmer, merchant, or manufacturer, he could decide what, how, when, and where to produce and sell his goods, constrained by little more than market forces. Just think: no farm subsidies, price supports, or acreage controls; no Federal Trade Commission; no antitrust laws; no Interstate Commerce Commission. As an employer, employee, consumer, investor, lender, borrower, student, or teacher, he could proceed largely according to his own lights. Just think: no National Labor Relations Board; no federal consumer "protection" laws; no Securities and Exchange Commission; no Equal Employment Opportunity Commission; no Department of Health and Human Services. Lacking a central bank to issue national paper currency, people commonly used gold coins to make purchases. There were no general sales taxes, no Social Security taxes, no income taxes. Though governmental officials were as corrupt as then as now—maybe more so—they had vastly less to be corrupt with. Private citizens spent about fifteen times more than all the governments combined. Those days, alas, are long gone. Now, in virtually every dimension, our lives revolve within rigid limits circumscribed by government authorities; we are constrained continually and on all sides by Big Government. Regulations clutter the landscape. Governmental spending equals almost four-tenths of the gross national product.¹¹⁰

The state's god complex is also evident in its understanding of property. The Bible teaches that God has created all things and that ultimately He, and He alone, owns everything (Ps. 50:10). Although Scripture does teach the concept of private property over which the owner has control (Ac. 5:4), it is understood that man is the steward of property that really belongs to God. Man is to develop and use his property to glorify God and extend godly dominion in the earth. The modern secular state rejects the biblical view and instead regards itself as the ultimate owner and god over all property. This point is proved by the civil government's great expansion

¹⁰⁹Charles Schlossberg, *Idols For Destruction*, p. 187.

¹¹⁰Robert Higgs, *Crisis and Leviathan: Critical Episodes of the Growth of American Government* (New York: Oxford Press, 1987), p. ix.

of federal lands; the state's confiscation and regulation of land based on absurd environmental regulations; the property tax in which citizens pay large sums of money primarily to fund state schools and libraries. "Property owners" in a sense are paying rent to the civil government for the right to live on their land. If the property tax is not paid the property is confiscated by the state and sold to faithful renters. Regarding the overall economy, America has to an extent abandoned pure capitalism for a unique form of participatory fascism. Higgs writes: "Alone among collectivist systems, fascism preserves private property, but 'capitalism is turned inside out in this unlikely union.' Fascism recognizes people's desire to possess private property and admires the strength of the profit motive, but it 'uses these features of capitalism [only] *insofar as they do not conflict with the national interest as formulated by fascism's political authorities.*' Every part of economic life is ideologically, constitutionally, and legally vulnerable to governmental control. Hence 'fascism tolerates the *form* of private ownership at the government's pleasure, but it eliminates any meaningful *right* of private property.' It is 'a bogus capitalism indeed, a sham deferral to individual economic rights readily nullified whenever political leaders deem it expedient.'"¹¹¹ In the United States the means of production are left in the hands of the people while the state regulates, controls and reaps the monetary benefits of industry. Participatory fascism reaps the benefits of a market economy while maintaining a big intrusive civil government. While America may be one of the freest nations on earth today, the founding fathers would be utterly shocked at the present lack of freedom and the statist intervention in the affairs of its people. Sadly, modern Americans accept their slavery with pride.

The first commandment forbids all forms of polytheism. Polytheism refers to the belief in, worship of and service to many gods. Polytheism was the predominant religion of the ancient world at the time the first commandment was given. Virtually all of the nations of the world (e.g., Egypt, Babylonia, Assyria, Phoenicia, Syria, Moab, Edom, Tyre, the Philistines, the Amorites, Rome, Greece, etc.) had a pantheon of gods or deities. In the Bible adjectives are often used to make explicit the idolatry of polytheism in opposition to the true and only God—Jehovah. They are designated "other gods" (Ex. 20:3; Dt. 5:7) "their [the heathen] gods" (cf. Ex. 23:24, etc.), "strange" or "foreign gods" (Josh. 24:20, 23), "new gods" (Jdg. 5:8) or "no gods" (Gal. 4:8 KJV) or "those who are not gods" (Jer. 5:7).

The idols of the heathen nations are nothing like the true God of Scripture who is infinite, eternal, unchanging and absolutely holy. They are (in the minds of their followers) finite beings with super-human powers who often dominate a certain realm or aspect of nature. There are gods of the hills, gods of war, gods of the weather, gods of fertility, gods of wine and mirth, etc. The chief goal of the typical idolatrous religion is to appease and manipulate the god or gods to one's advantage. This appeasement is akin to paying off the mafia to conduct one's business in peace. Various rituals from the sadistic (e.g., child sacrifice) to the profane (drunken orgies etc.) are engaged in to procure the cooperation of the various deities.

Idolatry was the predominant sin of the Israelites prior to the Babylonian captivity. The constant tendency of Israel to lapse into polytheistic belief and worship can be attributed to a lack of faith in Jehovah as well as a strong desire to be like other nations who were abhorred by God. The covenant nation absorbed the surrounding pagan culture instead of transforming it by means of living faithfully within the realm of her covenant bond with God (cf. Dt. 4:5-4).

Idolatry is presented in Scripture as wicked, abominable and hateful to God (e.g., Jer.

¹¹¹*Ibid.*, pgs. 241-242. Higgs quotes from Twilight, *America's Emerging Fascist Economy*, pp. 14-17.

44:3 ff.). There are a number of reasons why idolatry is the ultimate sin against God and His law order. First, polytheism teaches the existence and validity of many gods which presupposes many legitimate forms of revelation and many ways of salvation. To accept such a teaching is an explicit rejection of covenant loyalty to Jehovah. Thus, the Bible refers to the worship of false deities as spiritual adultery. “She has gone up on every high mountain and under every green tree, and there played the harlot.... Then I saw that for all the causes for which backsliding Israel had committed adultery, I had put her away and given her a certificate of divorce; yet her treacherous sister Judah did not fear, but went and played the harlot also. So it came to pass, through her casual harlotry, that she defiled the land and committed adultery with stones and trees” (Jer. 3:6, 8-9). Later in the same chapter (3:20), the expression “faithless Judah” is used which applies to both covenant and marriage. “In the context of marriage, it denotes such acts as desertion and the establishment of a relationship with another person; in the context of covenant, it denotes the failure to maintain the responsibilities of relationship.”¹¹² Idolatry is such an act of covenant disloyalty that it destroys the covenant relationship between God and the nation and merits a bill of divorce.

Second, the polytheistic world-view can tolerate virtually any kind of belief except biblical Christianity. With polytheism there is the acceptance of a plurality of religions and gods. The unifying factor among polytheists is human autonomy which functions as the ultimate organizing factor in a world of chaos, a disorganized multi-universe. Orthodox Christianity is anathema to the polytheist because it teaches that God and God alone is sovereign; that all men must bow before His authority; that the whole earth is under Christ’s law and word. In such a system man is not the ultimate organizer of reality and determiner of truth but is merely a creature under absolute authority. Such an exclusive doctrine (one God, one revelation, one way of salvation) runs completely counter to both the modern secular pluralistic states as well as the polytheistic imperial empires of old. Both modern and ancient polytheistic states divine the state by making it the final arbiter of what is acceptable among the various religious philosophies and law orders instead of God’s infallible word. Politicians and judges stand in judgment over Jehovah’s law as if the one true God was just another idol and His word just another fallible human philosophy. The threat of biblical Christianity to modern “secular” polytheistic states can be seen in Frances Schaeffer’s analysis of ancient Rome’s great hostility toward believers. He writes,

Rome was cruel, and its cruelty can perhaps be best pictured by the events which took place in the arena in Rome itself. People seated above the arena floor watched gladiator contests and Christians thrown to the beasts. Let us not forget why Christians were killed. They were *not* killed because they worshiped Jesus. Various religions covered the whole Roman world. One such was the cult of Mithras, a popular Persian form of Zoroastrianism which had reached Rome by 67 B.C. Nobody cared who worshiped whom so long as the worshiper did not disrupt the unity of the state, centered in the formal worship of Caesar. The reason the Christians were killed was because they were rebels. This was especially so after their growing rejection by the Jewish synagogues lost for them the immunity granted to the Jews since Julius Caesar’s time.

We may express the nature of their rebellion in two ways, both of which are true. First,

¹¹²Peter C. Craigie, Page H. Kelly, Joel F. Drinkard, Jr., *Jeremiah 1-25* (Dallas, TX: Word, 1991), pp. 55-56.

we can say they worshiped Jesus as God and they worshiped the infinite-personal God only. The Caesars would not tolerate this worshiping of the one God *only*. It was counted as treason. Thus their worship became a special threat to the unity of the state during the third century and during the reign of Diocletian (284-305), when people of the higher classes began to become Christians in larger numbers. If they had worshiped Jesus *and* Caesar, they would have gone unharmed, but they rejected all forms of syncretism. They worshiped the God who had revealed himself in the Old Testament, through Christ, and in the New Testament which had gradually been written. And they worshiped him as the *only* God. They allowed no mixture: All other Gods were seen as false gods.

We can also express in a second way why the Christians were killed: No totalitarian authority nor authoritarian state can tolerate those who have an absolute by which to judge that state and its actions. The Christians had that absolute in God's revelation. Because the Christians had an absolute, universal standard by which to judge not only personal moral but the state, they were counted as enemies of totalitarian Rome and were thrown to the beasts.¹¹³

Third, polytheism in any form (e.g., religious pluralism) divorces every concept of ethics from God and His direct revelation. The law is abstracted from God and rendered impersonal, relativistic and purely immanent. With the modern political polytheism and the so-called separation of the state from any faith commitment to Christ, the civil laws of such a nation are at bottom antichrist. "The Bible does not recognize any law as valid apart from the law of God, and this law is given by revelation to the patriarchs and Moses, and expounded by prophets, Jesus Christ, and the apostles. To have two kinds of law is to have two kinds of gods."¹¹⁴ Although America and other western nations still have many laws that are based on a past commitment to the Christian world-view, these laws are now divorced from that world-view and founded upon the covenant-breaking axiom of political polytheism.

Does the Bible Support or Countenance Political Polytheism?

Most professing Christians today have accepted open, public, government-sanctioned polytheism as the preferred norm for national life. They argue that the Jews had a special covenant relationship with Jehovah and as a theocracy had a responsibility to suppress open idolatry and the open propagation of false religions in their society. We, however, who live in the New Covenant era are only responsible to suppress idolatry within the visible church. Further, they will argue that the days when nations established Christianity as the official religion of the land were times of oppression and persecution.

Does the Bible teach that polytheism is *only* to be condemned within the Old Covenant nation of Israel? Is religious pluralism as practiced in the United States (where all religions are treated the same) acceptable to God? There are a number of reasons why Scripture emphatically condemns such thinking. In the Old Testament God repeatedly condemned the pagan nations for their idolatry. The severe judgments that God meted out on the heathen nations for idolatry presuppose that God expects *every* nation to obey the first commandment in civil, social and

¹¹³Francis A. Schaefer, *How Should We Then Live: The Rise and Decline of Western Thought and Culture* (Old Tappan, NJ: Revell, 1976), pp. 25-26.

¹¹⁴R. J. Rushdoony, *Institutes*, p. 679.

cultural affairs. The following examples should make this point obvious.

In Deuteronomy 18 we are told that God drove the heathen nations out of their lands because He hated their false religions. “When you come into the land which the LORD your God is giving you, you shall not learn to follow the abominations of those nations. There shall not be found among you anyone who makes his son or his daughter pass through the fire, or one who practices witchcraft, or a soothsayer, or one who interprets omens, or a sorcerer, or one who conjures spells, or a medium, or a spiritist, or one who calls up the dead. For all who do these things are an abomination to the LORD, *and because of these abominations the LORD your God drives them out from before you*” (Dt. 18:9-12). “These foreign offices and practices, which were an *abomination to the Lord*, were to be forbidden in Israel precisely because they were part of the reason for God's judgment of the Canaanites, which would be seen in their ejection from the land. If the Israelites adopted similar practices, they too would become liable to ejection from the land.”¹¹⁵ One could argue that the main concern of this passage is false forms of revelation. But, are not all false religions and cults founded upon false revelations?

In Isaiah 19 the prophet says that God will judge Egypt for its idolatry. “The burden against Egypt. Behold, the LORD rides on a swift cloud, and will come into Egypt; the idols of Egypt will totter at His presence, and the heart of Egypt will melt in its midst” (Is. 19:1). The prophet Jeremiah says that God will bring judgment upon Egypt, Pharaoh and their false gods. “The LORD of hosts, the God of Israel, says: ‘Behold, I will bring punishment on Amon [a sun god] of No [ancient Thebes], and Pharaoh and Egypt, with their gods and their kings—Pharaoh and those who trust in him” (Jer. 46:25; cf. Is. 46:1). God singles out Amon the Egyptian chief deity of Thebes (No). “Amon was later merged with Re to become Amon-Re, the king of the gods and peculiarly the god of the rulers of Egypt.”¹¹⁶ Pharaoh who lays claim to divinity is also singled out. Is it not clear that Jehovah punishes idolatry even in non-covenanted nations?

Jehovah, the only God, the Lord of the universe, hates religious pluralism. To Assyria God said, “Woe to Assyria, the rod of My anger and the staff in whose hand is My indignation....As my hand has found the kingdoms of the idols, whose carved image excelled those of Jerusalem and Samaria, as I have done to Samaria and her idols, shall I not do also to Jerusalem and her idols” (Is. 10:5, 10, 11)? God proclaimed judgment against Moab for idolatry. “‘Moreover,’ says the LORD, ‘I will cause to cease in Moab the one who offers sacrifices in the high places and burns incense to his gods’” (Jer. 48:35). Jehovah also crushed the idols of Babylon. “Declare among the nations, proclaim, and set up a standard; proclaim, and do not conceal it, say, ‘Babylon is taken, Bel is shamed. Merodach [or Marduk, a Babylonian god] is broken in pieces; her idols are humiliated, her images are broken in pieces....A drought is against her waters, and they will be dried up. For it is the land of carved images and they are insane with their idols’” (Jer. 50:1, 2, 38). “Everyone is dull-hearted, without knowledge, every metalsmith is put to shame by the carved image; for his molded image is falsehood, and there is no breath in them. They are futile, a work of errors; in the time of their punishment they shall perish.... ‘Therefore behold, the days are coming that I will bring judgment on the carved images of

¹¹⁵P. C. Craigie, *The Book of Deuteronomy* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1976), p. 261. Another passage which reveals God's attitude toward pagan religions is Deuteronomy 20:17-18: “But you shall utterly destroy them: the Hittite and the Amorite and the Canaanite and the Perizzite and the Hivite and the Jebusite, just as the LORD your God has commanded you, lest they teach you to do according to all their abominations which they have done for their gods, and you sin against the LORD your God.”

¹¹⁶A. Thompson, *The Book of Jeremiah* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1980), p. 694.

Babylon; her whole land shall be ashamed, and all her slain shall fall in her midst'....'Therefore, behold, the days are coming,' says the LORD, 'that I will bring judgment on her carved images, and throughout all her land the wounded shall groan'" (Jer. 51:17, 18, 47, 52). If God so hated the idolatry of the Assyrians, Moabites, Egyptians, Babylonians and the inhabitants of Canaan that He poured out His wrath upon them, why should He exempt the inhabitants of America, Canada, or Great Britain, etc., for their idolatries? Political polytheism was a common practice in ancient nations—a practice condemned by God. There is no evidence in the New Testament that God has had a change of mind regarding idolatry.

This point is supported by the fact that Deuteronomy 4:5-8 teaches that Israel was to be an example to the pagan nations around her. She was to showcase God's law to pagan cultures and societies through obedience so that heathen nations would abandon their idolatry and their pagan law order and turn to the one true God—Jehovah. The rejection of an explicit acknowledgment of Jesus Christ as Lord by Western nations and the acceptance of any public religious practice as lawful in these nations presupposes a realm that is outside of God's authority, that God's law word does not speak to every area of life.

The Great Commission teaches that the church is to disciple whole nations so that all nations will become explicitly Christian nations. "All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you" (Mt. 28:18-20). The Bible says that the divine-human mediator Jesus Christ has all authority in heaven and on *earth*. It is on the basis of this comprehensive authority that the disciples are to go. Note that the church's task is not simply evangelization and the saving of souls through gospel preaching. It has the task of baptizing nations; that is, bringing whole nations into covenant with Christ so that they can receive the covenant sign and submit to His kingship. The disciples are to teach the nations *all things* that Christ has commanded. This command rules out a vague theism. It rules out the acknowledgment of the false gods of Mohamedism, modern Judaism, Unitarianism and Mormonism. The Great Commission is not fully carried out until every nation covenants with Christ and implements a Christian social order based on God's law. When professing Christians deny the comprehensive nature of Jesus' authority and teach that civil magistrates should implement religious pluralism with its open practice of idolatry and blasphemy, they set themselves in opposition to our Lord's own marching orders.

The Old Testament prophets reveal a time when the goal of the Great Commission will become a reality; when kings or civil magistrates will serve Christ and aid His church. Isaiah prophesied, "Kings shall be your foster fathers, and their queens your nursing mothers; they shall bow down to you with their faces to the earth and lick the dust of your feet" (49:23). Does Jehovah promise a wonderful future of religious pluralism where the church has an equal status with Satanists, Buddhists, Hindus, etc.? No, not at all. God speaks of a time when kings and nations forsake their idolatry and serve Jesus Christ alone. M'Crie writes, "These promises [Is. 49:23, 60:10, 12, 16] secure unto the church the public countenance of kings and kingdoms as such. *Kings shall be her nursing-fathers; nations and kingdoms shall serve her.* The authority and means competent unto them as such shall be employed on the side of the church, and for the advancement of the true religion; whereas they had formerly been employed against her, and for the support of a false religion. To limit the sense of the words to that common protection which is given to all subjects, and to any society, is to explain away the promises of God....It is equally

unreasonable to confine the meaning to the private or personal conduct of rulers, and of their subjects. This would never suggest itself to any who, in reading the passage, had not formed the notion that the church cannot be benefitted by civil power. It offers violence to the plain meaning of the words. It does not accord with the context, which speaks of the public state of the church, and those means which tend to advance its interests in this view.”¹¹⁷ This passage clearly teaches that a time will come when biblical Christianity will be the established religion of nations. Kings will suppress idolatry and support Christianity. These promises cannot be squeezed into the pluralistic paradigm.

There are many prophetic passages which teach the establishment of Christianity among the nations. Psalm 72:11-12 says that “all kings shall fall down before Him; all nations shall serve Him.” In Isaiah 56:6 we are told that the Gentiles will keep the Sabbath. Isaiah says that Gentiles will embrace the Gospel. “Gentiles shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your rising” (Isa. 60:3). Kings shall minister to the church (v. 10) and the wealth of the Gentiles will flow into it (v. 11). Young writes: “Some have applied the fulfillment of the prophecy to the work of Cyrus, Darius, and Artaxerxes Longimanus, but their actions were only a prelude to the real fulfillment in Jesus Christ and the preaching of the Gospel unto the Gentiles (cf. Ac. 15:15ff., where the rebuilding of David’s booth is equated with the outcalling of the Gentiles). The prophecy is not speaking of the literal rebuilding of Jerusalem’s walls, but of the building up of God’s kingdom through the inclusion of Gentiles therein. Calvin well remarks that when kings serve Zion they do not lose their status as kings, but on the contrary are then enabled to carry out their proper function so as to glorify God and to manifest righteousness in their reigns. Happy is that nation whose ruler looks not to man for the solution of his problems but walks in the light of the Lord.”¹¹⁸ The Bible says that “the nation which will not serve you shall perish and those nations shall be utterly ruined” (Isa. 60:12). The church “shall drink the milk of the Gentiles, and shall milk the breast of kings” (v. 16). John Owen writes: “Kingdoms are said to serve the church: and how can a kingdom, *as* a kingdom, serve the church, but as putting forth *its* power and strength in *her* behalf? What God hath promised, kings, magistrates, rulers, nations shall do, that is their duty to do.”¹¹⁹ This (as noted above) does not mean a form of Christian socialism or welfare statism but that the state strictly follows the principles enunciated in *both* tables of the law and the moral case laws. Right after it says that the church will milk the breast of kings it says, “I will make your officers peace, and your magistrates righteousness. Violence shall no longer be heard in your land, neither wasting nor destruction in your borders” (Isa. 60:17-18).

In Psalm 2 the resurrected Christ is promised dominion over the nations. Kings and judges are to be instructed by Christ; they are to “serve the LORD with fear, and rejoice with trembling” (Ps. 2:11). If kings, civil magistrates and judges are to sit humbly at the feet of Christ and learn His laws, serve Him with fear and rejoice at His majesty; can one then conclude that serving Christ involves upholding arbitrary humanistic law? Does fearing the Lord involve permitting the open practice of idolatry and blasphemy? Do civil magistrates and judges tremble before the Son by allowing the open practice of homosexuality? “We cannot escape the clear

¹¹⁷Thomas M’Crie, *Statement of the Difference Between the Profession of the Reformed Church of Scotland, as Adopted by Seceders, and the Profession Contained in the New Testimony and Other Acts, Lately Adopted by the General Associate Synod, etc.* (Edinburgh: C. F. Lyon, 1871), pp. 137-138.

¹¹⁸E. J. Young, *Isaiah*, Vol. 3, p. 450.

¹¹⁹John Owen quoted in Thomas M’Crie, p. 139.

biblical truth that each and every earthly ruler stands under the divinely established moral obligation to ‘serve Jehovah with fear [and] kiss the Son’ (vv. 11-12). Serving the Lord with fear unquestionably means obeying His commandments (cf. Josh. 22:5; Ps. 119:124-126; Dt. 10:12-13). Doing homage to “the Son” in the form of a kiss was an ancient ritual by which the authority of a leader was acknowledged (e.g., 1 Sam. 10:1).¹²⁰ The idea common even in Reformed circles that the civil magistrate is only obligated to uphold the *second table* while ignoring the first is totally contradicted by Scripture. Magistrates do not honor the Son by committing or permitting polytheism.

The biblical teaching regarding the civil magistrate, the duty of nations and the goal of the Great Commission can only lead to one conclusion. All nations have a moral duty to obey the first commandment by bowing the knee to Jesus Christ, by legally recognizing, favoring and supporting biblical Christianity and by suppressing the open practice and propagation of the false religions, cults, and philosophies. Christians must reject the myth of neutrality that is foundational to their acceptance of polytheism. Believers in America must reject that part of the United States Constitution that mentions no final authority except the people. America like all nations is obligated to “kiss the Son.” “Righteousness exalts a nation, but sin is a reproach to any people” (Pr. 14:34).

The Broad Nature of Idolatry

When people consider the subject of idolatry they usually think of people bowing down before statues. Certainly, the gross shocking idolatry of the heathen and backslidden Israel is a predominant subject of consideration in the Bible. Idolatry, however, is much broader than simply bowing the knee to Baal, Ashtoreth or Krishna. There is an idolatry that takes place in secret in the heart of man. Indeed, anything that takes the first place in life before Jesus Christ whether houses, riches, status, leisure, or even parents is an idol. Jesus said, “He who loves father or mother more than Me is not worthy of Me. And he who loves son or daughter more than Me is not worthy of Me” (Mt. 10:37). Paul said, “Do you not know that to whom you present yourselves slaves to obey, you are that one’s slaves whom you obey” (Rom. 6:16). In another epistle the apostle says, that the covetous man, is an idolater (Eph. 5:5; Col. 3:5). The service of riches for riches’ sake or the supreme love of money and the status, things and power that come with it, is heinous in the sight of God, being a species of idolatry. It is idolatry precisely because the finite creaturely things of life are placed before God. Paul speaks of men and women who are “lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God” (2 Tim. 3:4); of gluttons “whose god is their belly” (Phil. 3:19); of wicked men who set their minds on earthly things (Phil. 3:19). The apostle teaches that many activities in life that are perfectly respectable and even looked up to by a multitude of people are considered to be great sins by God. Various activities which are perfectly lawful become wicked in God’s sight because they take the first place in a man’s life before Him. The Puritan Thomas Watson tells us of the folly of making money one’s god. He writes: “It is folly to trust in our riches; but how many do, and make money their god! ‘The rich man’s wealth is his strong city.’ Prov x 15. He makes the wedge of gold his hope. Job xxxi 24. God made man of the dust of the earth, and man makes a god of the

¹²⁰Greg Bahnsen, in Gary Scott Smith ed., *God and Politics* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1989), p. 30.

dust of the earth. Money is his creator, redeemer, comforter: his creator, for if he has money, he thinks he is made; his redeemer, for if he be in danger, he trusts to his money to redeem him; his comforter, for if he be sad, money is the golden harp to drive away the evil spirit. Thus by trusting to money, we make it a god.”¹²¹ The Bible’s teaching strikes particularly hard upon modern American culture wherein success, prosperity, financial gain, material possessions, an obsession with entertainment and the rich and famous take first place over the things of God.

The apostle John deals with idolatry in a broad manner when he warns believers not to set their hearts on the world or the things of the world. “Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world—the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life—is not of the Father but is of the world” (1 Jn. 2:15-16). John sets the love of the world (i.e., the world order that is in rebellion against God and the world view and lifestyle that accompanies that world order) against the love of God. These two loves are incompatible, mutually exclusive and thus, cannot exist together. A person either loves God or loves the world. Jesus said, “Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal; but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also. The lamp of the body is the eye. If therefore your eye is good, your whole body will be full of light. But if your eye is bad, your whole body will be full of darkness. If therefore the light that is in you is darkness, how great is that darkness! No one can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or else he will be loyal to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and mammon” (Mt. 6:19-24).

Matthew Henry writes: “Where your treasure is, on earth or in heaven, there will your heart be. We are therefore concerned to be right and wise in the choice of our treasure, because the temper of our minds, and consequently the tenor of our lives, will be accordingly either carnal or spiritual, earthly or heavenly. The heart follows the treasure, as the needle follows the loadstone, or the sunflower the sun. Where the treasure is there the value and esteem are, there the love and affection are (Col 3:2), that way the desires and pursuits go, thitherward the aims and intents are leveled, and all is done with that in view. Where the treasure is, there our cares and fears are, lest we come short of it; about that we are most solicitous; there our hope and trust are (Pr 18:10,11); there our joys and delights will be (Ps 119:111); and there our thoughts will be; there the inward thought will be, the first thought, the free thought, the fixed thought, the frequent, the familiar thought. The heart is God’s due (Pr 23:26), and that he may have it, our treasure must be laid up with him, and then our souls will be lifted up to him.”¹²²

For believers there must be a single eye to the service of God and His glory. Our whole lives, our very existence must be consecrated unto the Lord. We cannot compartmentalize our lives and say, “this part of life is given to God while this other part is to serve the world.” We must either serve this world or live for the next. Professing Christians who attempt to live equally for both are fooling themselves. Where God reigns, the lusts of the world must go. Spurgeon writes: “Oh, to be so decided, that we may pursue one thing only! We would *hate* evil and *love* God, despise falsehood and *hold to* truth! We need to know how we are affected both to righteousness and sin: and when this is ascertained to our comfort, we must stand to the right

¹²¹Thomas Watson, *The Ten Commandments*, p. 56.

¹²²Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible*, 5:79.

with uncompromising firmness. Mammon is the direct opposite of God as much today as in past ages, and we must loathed its greed, its selfishness, its oppression, its pride; or we do not love God.”¹²³

Idolatry in the broad sense of the term is particularly dangerous because it is subtle, insidious and fashionable. Professing Christians are often conquered by such idolatry because it is not easily perceived at first. Our Lord spoke of those who fall away from the faith because “the cares of this world grow and the deceitfulness of riches choke the word” rendering that person unfruitful (Mt. 13:22). Note, that there is a progression of worldly interests that over time choke the seed of God’s word. The things that pertain to this life whether money, possessions, persons, career, pleasures, etc. become so near and dear to a man’s heart that they crowd out or displace the affections one should have toward the things of God. A man’s time and strength are given over to plastic, wood, stone and paper instead of Christ’s kingdom. The deceitfulness of riches causes the professing Christian to cease to be salt and light to culture. Such a person is mired in the vanity of idolatry. Carnal influences that are not checked lead to dereliction of our Christian duty. When such worldly interests are not cut off and subdued but rather stimulated, fertilized or even just ignored, the end result is total apostasy. The idols of life are given the victory. This form of idolatry can conquer people who at one time were noted for their service of God. Paul probably wept as he wrote: “Demas has forsaken me, having loved this present world” (2 Tim. 4:10).

James warns believers against making riches, pleasure and luxury idols by describing the eternal consequences of such foolishness. He paints the horrifying picture of the idolater’s own possessions being used as fuel to feed the fires of hell. “Come now, you rich, weep and howl for your miseries that are coming upon you! Your riches are corrupted, and your garments are moth-eaten. Your gold and silver are corroded, and their corrosion will be a witness against you and will eat your flesh like fire. You have heaped up treasure in the last days. Indeed the wages of the laborers who mowed your fields, which you kept back by fraud, cry out; and the cries of the reapers have reached the ears of the Lord of Sabaoth. You have lived on the earth in pleasure and luxury; you have fattened your hearts as in a day of slaughter”(Ja. 5:1-5). Note, that idolatry is a fountain of sin. While the believer in Christ does good works in the service of his God and Savior, the idolater commits a multitude of sins in the service of his idol. Lying, fraud, sexual immorality, oppression of the poor and even murder are all employed in the service of false gods. Ahab had his heart set upon the property of Naboth the point of committing lies and murder. Wicked Jezebel did not rest until the dogs licked up Naboth’s innocent blood (cf. 1 Ki. 21).

A very common form of idolatry today involves a looking to the state as the source of salvation, prosperity and ultimate protection against calamity. For example, in America a president can be a habitual liar, and adulterer, and a whoremonger who has a total disregard for the laws of God and man; yet, if the economy is growing and the country is prosperous that man will be easily reelected to office. Such a nation is idolatrous and ripe for judgment. Jeremiah proclaimed: “Cursed is the man who trusts in man and makes flesh his strength, whose heart departs from the LORD. For he shall be like a shrub in the desert” (Jer. 17:5-6). Technology and military might is no substitute for the trust in God. “Some trust in chariots, and some in horses; but we will remember the name of the LORD our God. They have bowed down and fallen; but we have risen and stand upright (Ps. 20:7-8). The Syrians came against Israel’s small army with a

¹²³Charles Haddon Spurgeon, *The Gospel of Matthew*, p. 73.

great multitude, yet they were defeated and slaughtered because they placed their trust in a false god and offended the God of Israel (1 Ki. 20:23-29). Rushdoony writes, “The commandment, ‘Thou shalt have no other gods before me,’ requires that we recognize no power as true and ultimately legitimate if it be not grounded in God and His law-word. It requires that we see true law as righteousness, the righteousness of God, and as a ministry of justice....The powers which today more than ever present themselves as the other gods, are the antichristian states. The antichristian state makes itself god and therefore sees itself as the source of both law and power. Apart from a biblical perspective the state becomes another god, and, instead of law, legality prevails.”¹²⁴ The antichristian states in the west exist because the majority of the populace are idolaters who look to the state as savior. The general attitude of Americans toward the civil government reveals the inroads of theological liberalism and pietistic escapism in our culture.

The objects of practical idolatry are virtually infinite in number given the depravity and foolishness of man. The thread, however, that ties the manifold nature of idolatry together is the worship of self; one’s own human autonomy. The rank idolaters who fashioned gods of wood, stone and precious metals were worshiping the work of their own hands. Everyone who partakes of a false religion is worshiping a creation of the mind of man. Even the will worship of Arminianism is a form of idolatry. Such heretics assert that they are *not* saved by Christ’s sovereign choice and power but by a work of faith, the autonomous choice of man. By pronouncing the magic formula, “I accept Jesus Christ as my personal savior,” the will worshiper proclaims his sovereignty over the weak and helpless savior. By an act of the human will, salvation is procured. Such a view of Christianity has much in common with rank paganism in which the deity is bought off by a gift or offering. Any one who dares to put their own morality, or decision, or repentance, or ritual in the place of the infinite merits of the Son of God is an idolater.

May God enable us to walk according to His law, causing us to serve and worship Him as the only true God through His Son Jesus Christ. Most merciful Father, enable us by the power of Your Holy Spirit to mortify the sins of the flesh and mind so that we would not set up anything in our hearts before You. Continually cut off our wicked lusts and put to death our sinful members so that we would fear, honor and glorify You in all things. Forgive our sins and clothe us with the perfect righteousness of Christ. Amen.

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¹²⁴R. J. Rushdoony, *Institutes*, p. 61.