

No Other Gods By David Feddes

You shall have no other gods before me. (Exodus 20:3)

"If everyone was taught one basic spiritual law, your world would be a happier, healthier place. And that law is this: everyone is God. Everyone." Thus spoke Shirley MacLaine after a trip to the Andes Mountains.

"I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery. You shall have no other gods before me." Thus spoke the Lord at Mount Sinai.

"Be still and know that you are God." Thus says Maharisha Mahesh Yogi, who founded Transcendental Meditation.

"Be still, and know that I am God" (Psalm 46:10). Thus says the Lord, who founded the heavens and the earth.

"To put it plainly, our unconscious is God. God within us. We were part of God all the time... Since the unconscious is God all along, we may further define the goal of spiritual growth to be the attainment of godhood by the conscious self... We are born that we might become, as a conscious individual, a new life form of God." That's what psychiatrist M. Scott Peck says in his best-selling book, *The Road Less Travelled*.

But the Lord God Almighty, in his best-selling book, the Bible, has this to say: "Remember this, fix it in mind, take it to heart, you rebels... I am God, and there is no other; I am God, and there is none like me" (Isaiah 46:8-9).

A sports psychologist who gets paid to motivate athletes and also to conduct seminars for the U.S. military, for AT&T, and for other major corporations, describes his work this way:

Much of this work is about spiritual stuff, but we don't ever say that because people start getting nervous when you talk about that... Our stance is that people are unlimited in their individual abilities, that as humans all of us are infinitely able to do anything we want.

This man gets rich selling the notion that each of us has the unlimited power of a god.

But a carpenter from Nazareth, who never made any money motivating athletes or soldiers or corporate personnel, didn't agree that "all of us are infinitely able to do anything we want." The carpenter said, "Apart from me, you can do nothing" (John 15:5). When someone asked Jesus, "Show us the Father," Jesus didn't say, "Look inside yourself." He said, "Anyone who has seen *me* has seen the Father" (John 14:1-9). There is only one God, and it's not you or me.

The voices which urge us to think of ourselves as God aren't anything new. Way back in the garden of Eden, a certain snake, whose breath smelled like hell, whispered to Eve, "You will be like God" (Genesis 3:5). That sounded pretty good to Eve and Adam—but then the real God showed up. The guilty couple tried to hide from him. They were afraid. Doing their own thing hadn't made them gods, after all. They weren't even fit to be God's friends any more.

Today, the demonic voice of the serpent still hisses, "You will be like God." Psychiatrists like Scott Peck claim that the human unconscious is God. Gurus of Eastern religions claim that everybody and everything is God (and that God is nothingness). New Age writers, like Shirley MacLaine, Matthew Fox, John Bradshaw

and Marianne Williamson, stir all this pantheism and self-worship together in a brew and serve it up, seasoned with words such as "Christ" and "Holy Spirit" to suit the tastes of those with a Christian background. For those who prefer more exotic flavors, the myth of yourself as God is spiced up with crystals, shamans, channeling, extraterrestrial masters, ancestor worship, nature worship, occult rituals, and whatever else can be borrowed from ancient tribes or modern science fiction.

For those who like to think this way, it's a rude interruption to hear a voice thundering from Sinai, "I am the Lord your God. You shall have no other gods before me." But like it or not, that is what the living God says. When he gave the Ten Commandments, this command was first.

Idolatry

We're living in a time when the first commandment, "You shall have no other gods before me," isn't in fashion. Some people say everything is God, others say there is no God, still others declare themselves to be God. Some pray to their own infinite potential, some pray to trees and stars and earth, others pray to their dead ancestors. We're surrounded by the buzz of many different voices, promoting a wide assortment of gods and goddesses and all sorts of different ways to enjoy their favor.

Who would dare to say only one of them is right, that there is only one God, and only one way to receive his favor? For many people, it is strangely comforting to be surrounded by a hodgepodge of religions. With so many different ideas, religion seems to be a matter of personal opinion and private taste. Whatever I happen to believe is true for me, right?

How disturbing, then, to hear a voice booming from Mount Sinai, "You shall have no other gods before me." How troubling to hear that same voice declare with terrifying simplicity: "And there is no God apart from me, a righteous God and Savior; there is none but me. Turn to me and be saved, all you ends of the earth; for I am God, and there is no other" (Isaiah 45:21-22).

For many people today, it sounds narrow-minded and almost rude for the Lord to insist that he alone is God and that he alone can save us. We feel more comfortable with the notion that all religious opinions are equally true, and that all roads eventually lead to God.

But the quiet voice of the carpenter says, "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me" (John 14:6). The apostle Peter said bluntly, "Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved" (Acts 4:12). There is just one God and one way to be right with him. Whether we like it or not, that's the way it is.

The first commandment requires worship of the one true God and prohibits idolatry. "What is idolatry? Idolatry is having or inventing something in which one trusts in place of or alongside of the only true God, who has revealed himself in his Word" (Heidelberg Catechism Q&A 95). Much of what passes these days for high ideals or deep spirituality is in fact idolatry. A number of years ago, a Hindu chaplain to the United Nations said:

The United Nations ... is the way, the way of oneness, that leads us to the Supreme Oneness. It is like a river flowing toward the source, the Ultimate Source. The UN becomes for us the answer to world suffering, world darkness

and world ignorance. The inner vision of the United Nations is the gift supreme. This vision the world can deny for 10, 20, 30, 40, 100 years. But a day will dawn when the vision of the United Nations will save the world. And when the reality of the United Nations starts bearing fruit, then the breath of immortality will be a living reality on Earth.

Apparently, if God wants to remain the Supreme Being and the only Savior, he'll have to get himself elected Secretary General of the UN.

It is idolatry to pin our hopes for world peace on a political organization. But fans of the United Nations aren't the only ones to worship a political entity. What about those who thought socialist revolution would create a workers' paradise? And what about those who speak of the United States as "the last, best hope for mankind"? No nation or political movement is the "last, best hope for mankind." Anyone who thinks so is an idolater. There may be a proper sort of patriotism or a right concern for political ideals and world peace, but it's idol worship to pin our hopes on any earthly government rather than the kingdom of God.

According to the Bible, "This is what the Lord says: 'Cursed is the one who trusts in man, who depends on flesh for his strength and whose heart turns away from the Lord'" (Jeremiah 17:5). "Do not put your trust in princes, in mortal men, who cannot save" (Psalm 146:3). I'd rather trust my future and the future of the world to Jesus Christ than to Bill Clinton or Boutros Boutros Gali or any other political leader.

Another movement which more and more people idolize is the environmental movement. The Creator calls us to care for his creation, but some prominent organizations are pushing nothing less than nature worship. For example, the Sierra Club's Environmental Health Sourcebook, *Well Body, Well Earth*, gives instructions on how to have spiritual communion with the earth, and then it says,

When you are done with your conversation with the spirit of the living Earth, say goodbye to it, just as you would say goodbye upon parting from a friend... The more you contact the voice of the living Earth, and evaluate what it says, the easier it will become for you to contact it and trust what it provides.

This praying to the earth and trusting it is idolatry. It fits the pattern the Bible describes in Romans 1:25. "They exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshipped and served created things rather than the Creator." It's right and good to care for the creation, but it's terribly wrong to worship it.

The first commandment calls us to acknowledge the basic fact that there is just one true God. We can't pretend the earth is God; God doesn't say, "I am the living earth." We can't pretend our political agenda is God. God doesn't say, "I am whoever you want me to be." And we can't pretend we are God; God doesn't say, "I am who you are." God says, "I am who I am" (Exodus 3:14). "I am God, and there is no other."

Trustworthy God

When God says, "You shall have no other gods before me," he is saying that he is the only divine being who exists, and he is also saying something more. He wants us not only to know about his existence but also to put our trust in him. He wants us to have confidence in him. Why should we trust him? Well, God doesn't command us to trust him blindly. He's earned our trust. He has acted on our behalf in such a way that we can be sure of his deep desire to help us and confident of his power to do so.

When God gave the Ten Commandments in the fire and smoke atop Mount Sinai, he didn't start right out with the first commandment. He began by saying who he was and what he had done: "I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery." Before giving any orders or commandments, the Lord wanted his people to realize that he was their God. He rescued them before they even knew his laws. He saved them from slavery, not because they had done anything to earn his favor, but because of his mercy and his promises to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. He chose them as his people, not because they were so impressive and upright, but just because he decided to love them.

God is someone we can trust. He isn't just the God who exists, but the God who loves and saves. He showed that to the people of Israel in their exodus from slavery, and he showed it supremely in the life and work of Jesus Christ. When we were totally unable to save ourselves from our sin, when we had no claim at all on God's kindness, the Lord came to earth in the person of his Son. Jesus fulfilled God's law perfectly by his holy life. He took our sins upon himself and suffered the penalty we deserve when he died on the cross. He broke death's power over humanity through his resurrection, and then he sent his Holy Spirit to draw people to himself. If anyone ever earned our trust, Jesus has.

Our Lord did all this for us before we did anything for him. That's why the Ten Commandments are preceded by a reminder that God rescues from slavery. And that's why in the letters of the New Testament God's instructions on Christian living are so often preceded by a declaration of God's salvation in Christ. God tells what he did for us before telling us what we must do for him. We must trust him before we can begin to obey him.

Technolatriy

The first commandment calls us to acknowledge that the Lord is God, and no one else. It calls us to base our eternal destiny on Jesus Christ and on nothing else. And it also calls us to look to God as the one who supplies our everyday needs.

All too often, when it comes to the various problems of day-to-day life, many of us fall into what I call technolatriy. We tend to look to technical know-how as god and savior. We trust medical techniques to cure our diseases, agricultural techniques to supply our food, psychological techniques to deal with our hangups, sociological techniques to make our families solid and our cities safe, business techniques to make our finances secure, and so forth. In technolatriy, you may still go to church on Sunday mornings—and even there the worship may be shaped by church-growth techniques—you may still go to church on Sundays, but for all practical purposes, in day to day life you look to technology to get what you need. That is technolatriy.

Now, the first commandment is not opposed to science and technology as such. In fact, genuine science historically became possible only when people were convinced that there is just one God. As long as people believed in many gods, real science was next to impossible. Ancient creation myths taught that the world sprang up out of conflict between different gods and goddesses, and idol worshippers believed that different events in nature and history were caused by a variety of different gods with different agendas. Science arose among those who believed that behind all of creation lay the working of a single great Intelligence. Only with that belief could there be any concept of

regular patterns in creation. Only then was there any confidence that people as the crown of creation could discover at least some of the Creator's designs.

So belief in one God was the very foundation for the scientific enterprise and the technology it produced. But a strange thing happened along the way. More and more scientists stopped believing in God at all and made science their god. They ignored the Designer and made the design their ultimate reality. Meanwhile, more and more ordinary people, even if they still believed in God's existence, stopped looking to him as the source of all good things and started looking at technology as the one to supply their needs. Technology was no longer seen as one of the ways God provides for our needs. Technology came to be seen as the great provider.

But when we fall into technolatriy, joy and beauty and purpose begin leaking out of our lives. We're left with a dead, gray world of technique for the sake of technique, where we sometimes feel ourselves reduced to parts in a machine, and where our technology threatens to turn our cities into mushroom clouds and our planet into a garbage dump.

The increase in New Age spirituality and nature worship and self worship we looked at earlier is in large part a reaction to the horrible emptiness and deadness of technolatriy. Cars and computers and cable TV may be nice, but they don't fill the emptiness in our souls. When people can't bear the thought of living in a world empty of the supernatural, they fall for almost any religious guru or New Age idea that promises to breathe some spiritual significance and awe and mystery back into their lives.

But it's foolish to bounce from technolatriy to some other form of idolatry, to rebound from scientism into superstition, to go from relying on no God to approving every idol under the sun, to go from denying the Creator to worshipping the creation, to go from seeing ourselves as meaningless machines to seeing ourselves as gods. In order to recover our sanity and our spiritual health, we must embrace the truth that there is one God—not zero, not many, but one. We must believe in one God, and look to him and pray to him as the one who is the ultimate Provider of our every need, who numbers the very hairs of our heads. Technology is a gift from him, not a substitute for him. Technology is one more expression of his Fatherly care, not a replacement for his care.

Loving God

The Lord says, "You shall have no other gods before me." He wants to be acknowledged as the only God who exists, the one we trust with our eternal destiny, the one we look to for our daily needs. And in all this, God claims the right to our highest love, our deepest reverence, our fullest honor, our complete obedience.

God demands that we love him more than we love anything else. There is no other God, and so there is no one else who deserves to be the object of our highest love. The heart of true religion, stated in the Old Testament and repeated by Jesus in the New Testament, is this: "The Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength" (Deuteronomy 6:4).

God insists on being our highest love. The Lord is a jealous God. This jealousy is not a flaw in God's character, but one of his perfections. What sort of husband thinks it's okay for his wife to love other men more than she loves him? Only a husband who doesn't really love his wife. God loves his people so intensely that he won't allow us to

love anyone or anything more than we love him. Jesus said, "Anyone who loves his father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; anyone who loves his son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me" (Matthew 10:37). We keep the first commandment when we love God above all.

Along with this love, God calls for the reverential fear and worshipful honor that is his due as the God of the universe and the Savior of his people. He says in the Bible, "I am the Lord; that is my name! I will not give my glory to another or my praise to idols" (Isaiah 42:8). We keep the first commandment when we bow before God's majesty, when we tremble at his power, when we praise his character, when we thank him for his goodness.

Jesus says in one of his great prayers, "Now this is eternal life: that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent" (John 17:3). The first commandment shows us our idolatry and drives us back to the source of eternal life, to the only one who can save us. And once we know his salvation, the first commandment calls us to put this great God and Savior first in our lives.

To put it all in a nutshell: "What does the Lord require in the first commandment? That I, not wanting to endanger my very salvation, avoid and shun all idolatry, magic, superstitious rites, and prayer to saints or other creatures. That I sincerely acknowledge the only true God, trust him alone, look to him for every good thing humbly and patiently, love him, fear him, and honor him with all my heart. In short, that I give up anything rather than go against his will in any way" (Heidelberg Catechism, Q&A 94).

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