

Preaching the First Commandment in a Pluralistic World

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The decision to preach on the first commandment comes immediately on the question: What is the first commandment? That would seem to be self evident, and to a large degree it is. Nearly all numerations of the Commandments understand the first commandment to include and center in the prohibition: “You shall have no other gods before me” (Exod 20:3; Deut 5:7), and that is what most people think of when they hear reference to “the first commandment.” The matter, however, is more complicated than that, and there are numerations of the Commandments that give a different interpretation of what is the first commandment. In the Jewish tradition, the first commandment is what others call the prologue, that is, the opening verse, “I am the Lord your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery” (Exod 20:2; Deut 5:6). The prohibition of other gods is then joined with the prohibition of making and worshipping images as the second commandment of the Decalogue. Yet another tradition, represented in the Catholic and Lutheran churches, understands the first commandment to begin with the prohibition of other gods but, like the Jewish numeration, includes the prohibition of the images as part of that commandment and not distinct from it, as in the Reformed numeration.

The differences here are not simply matters of arbitrary choice about how to distinguish and number the different commandments. There are aspects of the text that allow one to read them in different relationships and including different numerations. Even the Jewish interpretation of the Prologue as the “first commandment,” which would seem to have little justification in light of its character as a divine self-presentation rather than an injunction or command, can be justified when one remembers that the Bible itself speaks of this group of ten instructions as “the ten words” (Exod 34:28; Deut 4:13; 10:4) not “ten commandments.” The first of the “words” is the divine address, “I am the Lord your God...” The Reformed differentiation between having other gods and making and worshipping images is fully justified by the recognition that one may have many gods but not images or representations of them and also that one may have only one god but worship that god via physical representations. There are two issues here. At the same time, any interpreter of the text must acknowledge the syntactical point that the plural “them” of “you shall not bow down to them or worship them” has no plural antecedent in the text other than “other gods” in the preceding verse and that elsewhere the object of “bow down and worship” is most often “other gods,” not images.

All of this is to say that preaching the first commandment should pay attention to the tradition of the preacher and the congregation while also being aware that the other numerations suggest there are important relationships here as well as distinctions that may need to be taken account of in the preaching. Interpretation and communication both may wish to take these other perspectives into account. For example, this writer interprets and preaches out of the Reformed tradition and so thinks of the first commandment as the prohibition of other gods. But that is not to be done without awareness of what grounds that prohibition. There may be some natural law that can be brought forward to insist on the oneness of God and of human worship of God, but that is not what comes forth from the Decalogue. There the call to the worship of “the Lord your God” alone and the rejection of all other gods is thoroughly rooted in the preceding verse and the story it encapsulates. That is, the rejection of other gods is because you have been redeemed and delivered by this God and so are under the rule and claim of “the Lord your other God.” The point is logical but it is not the logic of “God can only be one” and so since there are not other gods, one may not worship other gods or turn things into other gods. The logic here is “This is the God who has delivered you and now claims your obedience exclusively and fully.” The Decalogue assumes a pluralistic religious world and a plurality of the gods. The exclusive worship that is commanded is of “the Lord your God.” Who is that? To answer that question, see the first verse and read the story out of which it comes, beginning with Exodus 3 and carrying on to Exodus 15. Then go on reading further in your Scriptures and learn more about this one who has delivered you and claimed your full and exclusive devotion.

There are at least three implications of these observations about the connection to the first verse of the Decalogue for the preaching of the first commandment:

First, the Jewish insistence on calling the Prologue the first of the commandments/words is a reminder that all that follows, and especially the prohibition of other gods “before me,” is totally grounded in the story of God’s deliverance and redemption. The Jewish reading of the commandments in effect inserts a “therefore” between verses 1 and 2 in Exodus 20. It thus grounds all the claims of the commandments in this declaration “I am the Lord your God,” but that is especially true of what others of us call the “first” commandment, the insistence that you may not have other gods. The one we worship is the God who is known by the words and deeds recounted in Scripture, Old Testament and New, and experienced in our own life in the community of faith. In an odd sort of way the modern world has brought us back to the pluralistic cultural reality that was the setting of Scripture, where there were many claims on worship, many religious systems and not some vague generality of deity. To encounter that modern reality through the Commandments, however, is to be highly

conscious of the fact that the prohibition of other gods implies the worship of one who is known and revealed in specific character and mode and is not an abstraction whose definition is given in some philosophical or logically derived definition of deity.

The second implication is already present in the first. It is simply that preaching the first commandment is not to be done by way of the preaching of monotheism. Going about it that way is to argue “There is only one God, so we must worship that one God.” The commandment is turned into a logical premise and no longer places any weight upon those addressed, any claim upon them, any sense of genuine danger in its disobedience. Monotheism is largely a modern construct and belongs more to the language of philosophy and history of religions than to preaching. There is much contemporary discussion about the dangers of monotheism and its tendency to violence. As Rodney Stark has shown recently, the picture is mixed in regard to the effects of “monotheistic religions,” but whether or not, that is not the avenue of preaching.¹ The beginning of the preaching of the first commandment is not “There is only one God” but “I am the Lord your God who..., therefore you shall have no other gods before me.” It is the logic of redemption, not the logic of abstraction. We worship the Lord our God not because it is the rational thing to do but because we are both grateful and commanded.

Third, the preaching of the first commandment on the basis of the claim that precedes it is to preach the commandment as gospel. That does not mean it is not law. It is indeed torah, instruction about how those who have been delivered are to live in this world. But it is about life under grace, and the preaching of the commandment in reference to the divine declaration means that one hears the instruction only as a response to the goodness of God. That is why the story is told again and again, as a reminder of why we live this way.

The first commandment is both gospel and law also in that it not only arises out of being freed but it, in turn, is a freeing word. That is, one is released from obligation, loyalty, and obedience to any other ultimate frame of reference. All other demands and loyalties are penultimate, secondary to the one claim that undergirds all that we do. Such freedom and its sense may result in martyrdom when others seek to make ultimate claims. But that is not the only outcome. If one has no other gods, then all the conflicts and tensions that beset human existence – and they really do – are in some way “relegated.” They are not finally in control of our lives. We cannot get rid of such tensions and claims on our lives, but we hear that we are free to love and not to bow before other powers.

It is at this point, of course, that one’s preaching of the commandment to have no other gods takes some account of the God you have. Obedience is rendered to the one who is this way, that is, whose character is reflected in the story, in the tradition of God’s ways and deeds among us. Once more, what frees us is not an

abstract absolute but the God who hears the cries of the oppressed, who seeks shalom for all, who calls for both justice and holiness among those who serve the Lord. The commitment required by the first commandment is a commitment to One who shows a particular way in the world. To have no other gods is at least to reject any other way than the one identified in the words and acts and instructions of the Lord your God.

If the preaching of the first commandment attends to its connection to what precedes, it also is accountable to what follows. The separation of making and worshipping images from the having of other gods, as is done in the Reformed tradition, serves to lift up the particular problem or danger of images as a part of one's worship. Subsuming that under the having of other gods may serve to play down the danger, but it does draw the image issue into the fundamental claim of the first commandment. That is, the images we make may become other gods, even if they are images of the God we have. The iconic is always in danger of becoming the idol. Images and physical representations per se are not a problem. What happens is that the visual and visible and thus tangible may claim our attention so fully that it stands in the place of the Lord your God. It is quite likely that the first target of the commandment against images was the image of the Lord. Deuteronomy 4 is a powerful sermon itself on this commandment, warning against assuming that the one who speaks from heaven, who speaks but is not seen, whose voice comes out of flaming fire that cannot be made, controlled, handled, or touched, is not to be contained in, revealed in, or captured in any physical form that might become an object of devotion. It is important to remember that the commandment is not simply against images. It is against the divinizing of images by not only making them but worshipping them. The other gods you may not have include those forms in which you seek to depict and portray the God you have. The propensity for such representation is large. The giving of the commandments is followed very shortly by the story of the Golden Calf, and the eager need of the people to have something they can see and touch, something tangible to which they can look for guidance. Biblical emphasis on the "word" is precisely a safeguard against turning the relative into the absolute. Even the word, however, may be absolutized. Theological images may become so fixed that they serve to represent God for us. The second commandment is a form of the Protestant principle that nothing can stand in the place of the God who has freed us and now requires our full obedience – no images, pictures, theological systems, languages, or whatever.

The discussion to this point has been an effort to say that preaching the first commandment takes account of its context, not because it is a principle of interpretation that we take account of literary context but because in this instance what precedes and follows the command to have no other gods is an important part of what that command is about. Now one may go on to make some more

specific suggestions about the preaching of the commandment against having other gods:

1. Do not try to solve the problem of the world's different religions and what Christianity should do about them via the first commandment. Take a clue from Deuteronomy. There are other things God is doing, but that is not your business according to Moses' instruction of the people. Deuteronomy may be the book of the Bible that is most insistent on the first commandment. Chapters 4-11 are a virtual Mosaic sermon on the first commandment (including the claim of the Prologue and the prohibition of making and worshipping images). Deuteronomy is also the one book that most explicitly suggests that the Lord may have other stories with other peoples. "You," however, you who are addressed by this commandment, are accountable only to the Lord your God and may not involve yourself in anything other than the true and full worship of the Lord your God. There are several acknowledgements of the "other gods" in Deuteronomy. Perhaps indicative of its perspective is Deut 4:19-20:

And when you look up to the sky and behold the sun and the moon and the stars, the whole heavenly host, you must not be lured into bowing down to them or serving them. These the Lord your God allotted to other peoples everywhere under heaven; but you the Lord took and brought out of Egypt, that iron blast furnace, to be His very own people, as is now the case. (NJPS translation)

Here there is an unelaborated acknowledgement of the presence of other gods in the world, other potential objects of one's worship.² Two things are said about them: a) These are allotted by the Lord your God to other peoples; and b) You are to have nothing to do with them because you are the people of the Lord your God. The book of the Bible with the strongest exposition of the first commandment is the clearest place where the other religions are recognized but placed under the domain of the Lord your God. That recognition, however, takes place in the midst of the strongest exposition of the claim of the first commandment that you are to have nothing to do with other gods. There is an acknowledgement of the religious world; indeed, it is a part of what God is about in the universe. But that world is not open to you. Preaching of the first commandment has to live in this tension, both open and closed.³

2. Preach the first commandment in both its negative and its positive form. The commandment has a double function. It points away from those objects of desire and those claims within culture and experience that we might tend to set as centers of meaning and control in our lives. It warns us against thinking there is any aspect of our life, in the small sense of our individual existence and in the

larger context of our communal and public life, that can exercise final claim on us. The very existence of the negative form is a constant reminder that it is possible to serve other gods. In simple form Jesus warns about this in his declaration, “You cannot serve God and Mammon” (Matt. 6:24; Luke 16:13). The negative reminds us of the existence of genuine alternatives, of things in this world that may claim – and receive – our final commitment and trust. Preaching the commandment will seek out, in the life of the congregation, those powers that are both threatening and enticing, those attractions that lure the Christian’s turn from the Lord your God to commitments of other sorts. The plural “other gods” reminds us that there may be a lot of candidates out there. They start with the economic and political gods – and they may not go any farther than that.

If the prohibitive form of the commandment is a guard against drifting toward the claim of other powers upon us, the positive form of the commandment takes up the “me” of “before me” and points us toward the proper commitment to the Lord our God. There are many positive expressions of the first commandment. The one that stands to the fore and in some sense embodies all the rest is the Shema: “Hear, O Israel, the Lord is your God, the Lord alone. So you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might” (Deut 6:4-5). In this manifestation, the positive form of the first commandment underscores two things that belong to its preaching. One is the *character of the relationship*. It is called love, that is, care, affection, and commitment of a sort that can only be described with the human language of love.⁴ Giving over of oneself in full devotion to the other is what love is; and that is what the first commandment is all about – a deep commitment of oneself to the God who has redeemed us. Thus preaching of the first commandment will seek to explore the nature of this love and its analogies on the human plane as a way into perceiving the depth of devotion to the Lord our God that is commanded in the first commandment.

The other dimension of the Shema that belongs to its preaching is the *totality* of this commitment, as reflected in the three phrases at the end: “with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might.” The heaping up of these phrases and the threefold use of the word “all” signal the full and unstinting degree of love, commitment, and obedience. In Jewish and Christian tradition, the different phrases have served both to emphasize the totality and also to point to the spheres of existence in which the commitment is manifest; for example, “with all your soul” (*nephesh*) equals the commitment of one’s life even unto death, while “with all your might” equals all that you have and own.⁵

Preaching the positive meaning of the first commandment will not confine itself to the Shema or its language. It will explore the nature and meaning of reverence and obedience, the fear of the Lord and what is meant by that notion. Especially central to the meaning of the first commandment is the matter of

trust. When Martin Luther wrote his exposition of the first commandment in his Larger Catechism, this was the focus of attention:

As I have often said, it is the trust and faith of the heart alone that make both God and an idol. If your faith and trust are right, then your God is the true one. Conversely, where your trust is false and wrong, there you do not have the true God.⁶

The critical issue of the commandment is the question wherein lies one's ultimate trust. It is the issue Jesus addresses in his words about serving God or Mammon. An exploration of that theme both in its development in Scripture and in its elaboration in relation to possible grounds of trust in human existence will help to open up the force and meaning of the first commandment.

3. Preach the first commandment out of the whole of the biblical story and out of texts that tell the story of the commandment. In other words, the whole of Scripture is before you on this theme. Indeed, one cannot really get at the force of the commandment without going into other texts. There are many stories of the first commandment, its obedience and its disobedience (more the latter than the former!), from the report of the making and worship of the golden calf in Exodus to the account of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego in the fiery furnace (Daniel 3). There is hardly any book of the Bible that does have something to say about how we live by this commandment. The Psalms are a rich resource, especially for interpreting the positive meaning of the commandment. For the matter of trust in God is central to the psalms of lament, thanksgiving, and trust. The image of God as refuge, expressed in various metaphors, is fundamental to the whole of the Psalter.⁷

The stories of the first commandment do not stop with Scripture. One will want to mine the history of both church and synagogue, from Cyprian and Rabbi Akiba to Dietrich Bonhoeffer and the Barmen Declaration of the Confessing Church, from the martyrs of the early church to the conscientious objectors of the American wars, to learn what it means to have "no other gods before me" and to love God with all that one is and all that one has.⁸

Notes

1. *For the Glory of God: How Monotheism Led to Reformations, Science, Witch-Hunts, and the End of Slavery* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003).

2. Cf. Deut 29:24-27 [Heb. 23-26]) and 32:7-9.

3. For more extensive elaboration of this point, see P. D. Miller, "God's Other Stories: On the Margins of Deuteronomistic Theology," in Miller, *Israelite Religion and Biblical Theol-*

ogy: *Collected Essays* (JSOT Suppl. Series, 267; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000), 593-602.

4. On loving God, especially as characterized in Deuteronomy, see now Jacqueline Lapsley, "Feeling Our Way: Love for God in Deuteronomy," *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly*, 65 (2003), 350-69.

5. On these phrases and the interpretation of the Shema in general, see especially S. Dean McBride, "The Yoke of the Kingdom: An Exposition of Deuteronomy 6:4-5," *Interpretation* 27 (1973), 273-306. Cf. John Calvin, *The Sermons of John Calvin Upon the Fifth Book of Moses Called Deuteronomy* (London: Henry Middleton, 1583). For Calvin's comments on these phrases and for a more extensive treatment of the Shema, see Patrick D. Miller, *Deuteronomy* (Interpretation Commentary; Louisville: John Knox Press, 1990), 97-104.

6. Martin Luther, "The Large Catechism," in *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, edited by Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000), 386.

7. See in this regard, Jerome F. D. Creach, *Yahweh as Refuge and the Editing of the Hebrew Psalter* (JSOT Suppl. Series, 217 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1996).

8. For a more extended discussion of the first commandment, see the author's *The God You Have: Politics and the First Commandment* (Facet Books; Minneapolis: Fortress, 2004).