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## THE FIRST COMMANDMENT

### I. The First Commandment and the Shema Israel

The prologue to the Ten Commandments introduces not only the law as a whole but leads directly to the first commandment.

And God spake all these words, saying,  
I am the LORD thy God, which have brought thee out of the land  
of Egypt, out of the house of bondage.  
Thou shalt have no other gods before me (Ex. 20:1-3).

In this declaration, God identifies Himself, *first*, as the LORD, the self-existent and absolute One. *Second*, He reminds Israel that He is their Savior, and that their relationship to Him ("thy God") is therefore one of grace. God chose Israel, not Israel God. *Third*, the law is given to the people of grace. All men are already judged, fallen, and lost; all men are under the wrath of the law, a fact which the quaking mountain and the fact of death for unhallowed approach underscored (Ex. 19:16-25). The law is given to the people saved by grace as their way of grace, to set forth the privilege and blessing of the covenant. *Fourth*, it follows then that the first response of grace, as well as the first principle of the law, is this, "Thou shalt have no other gods before me."

In analyzing this commandment, we must examine the implications of it cited by Moses:

Now these are the commandments, the statutes, and the judgments, which the LORD your God commanded to teach you, that ye might do them in the land whither ye go to possess it:  
That thou mightest fear the LORD thy God, to keep all his statutes and his commandments, which I command thee, thou, and thy son, and thy son's son, all the days of thy life; and that thy days may be prolonged.  
Hear therefore, O Israel and observe to do it: that it may be well with thee, and that ye may increase mightily, as the Lord God of thy fathers hath promised thee, in the land that floweth with milk and honey (Deut. 6:1-3).

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But this is a mythical and unbiblical definition of antichrist, who, according to St. John, is simply anyone, present from the beginning, who denies the Father and the Son (I John 2:22; 4:3; II John 7). To ascribe such deniers the role of final dominion and power is without any Biblical warrant.

First, the 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 lord 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 sense of reality. Second, "The maintenance of the fear of God would bring prosperity, and the increase of the nation promised to the fathers. . . . The increase of the nation had been promised to the patriarchs from the very first (Gen. xii. 1; . . . cf. Lev. xxvi. 9)."<sup>1</sup> It is therefore necessary to maintain this fear and obedience from generation to generation.

In Deuteronomy 6:4-9, we come to a central and basic declaration of the first principle of the law:

Hear, O Israel: the LORD our God is one LORD.  
 And thou shalt love the LORD thy God with all thine heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy might.  
 And these words, which I command thee this day, shall be in thine heart:  
 And thou shalt teach them diligently unto thy children, and shall talk of them when thou sittest in thine house, and when thou walkest by the way, and when thou liest down and when thou risest up.  
 And thou shalt bind them for a sign upon thine hand, and they shall be as frontlets between thine eyes.  
 And thou shalt write them upon the posts of thy house, and on thy gates.

The first two verses (6:4, 5) are the *Shema Israel*, recited as the morning and evening prayer of Israel, and "considered by the Rabbis to contain the principles of the Decalogue."<sup>2</sup> The second portion of the *Shema*, v. 5, is echoed in Deuteronomy 10:12, 13:

And now, Israel, what doth the LORD thy God require of thee, but to fear the LORD thy God, to walk in all His ways, and to love Him, and to serve the LORD thy God with all thy heart and with all thy soul; to keep for thy good the commandments of the LORD, and His statutes, which I command thee this day?<sup>3</sup>

Deuteronomy 6:5 is cited by Christ as "the first and great commandment" (Matt. 22:37; Mark 12:30; Luke 10:27), i.e., as the essential and basic principle of the law. The premise of this commandment is, however, Deuteronomy 6:4: "Hear, O Israel, the LORD our God is one LORD." The Christian affirmation of this is the declaration, "We worship one God in Trinity, and Trinity in Unity." It is the faith in the

1. C. F. Keil and Delitzsch, *Biblical Commentary on the Old Testament*, vol. III, *The Pentateuch* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1949), p. 322.

2. Rabbi Dr. I. Epstein, ed., *The Babylonian Talmud, Seder Nazikin*, vol. IV, *Aboth* (London: The Soncino Press, 1935), p. 22, n. 8.

3. *The Holy Scriptures According to the Masoretic Text* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1917, 1961).

unity of the Godhead as opposed to the belief in "gods many and lords many."<sup>4</sup>

The consequences for law of this fact are total: it means *one God, one law*. The premise of polytheism is that we live in a multiverse, not a universe, that a variety of law-orders and hence lords exist, and that man cannot therefore be under one law *except* by virtue of imperialism. Modern legal positivism denies the existence of any absolute; it is hostile, because of its relativism, to the concept of a universe and of a universe of law. Instead, societies of men exist, each with its order of positive law, and each order of law lacks any absolute or universal validity. The law of Buddhist states is seen as valid for Buddhist nations, the law of Islam for Moslem states, the laws of pragmatism for humanistic states, and the laws of Scripture for Christian states, but none, it is held, have the right to claim that their law represents truth in any absolute sense. This, of course, militates against the Biblical declaration that God's order is absolute and absolutely binding on men and nations.

Even more, because an absolute law is denied, it means that the only universal law possible is an *imperialistic law*, a law imposed by force and having no validity other than the coercive imposition. Any one world order on such a premise is of necessity imperialistic. Having denied absolute law, it cannot appeal to men to return to the true order from whence man has fallen. A relativistic, pragmatic law has no premise for missionary activity: the "truth" it proclaims is no more valid than the "truth" held by the people it seeks to unite to itself. If it holds, "we are better off one," it cannot justify this statement except by saying, "I hold it to be so," to which the resister can reply, "I hold that we are better off many." Under pragmatic law, it is held that every man is his own law-system, because there is no absolute over-arching law-order. But this means anarchy. Thus, while pragmatism or relativism (or existentialism, positivism, or any other form of this faith) holds to the absolute immunity of the individual implicitly or explicitly, in effect its only argument is the coercion of the individual, because it has no other bridge between man and man. It can speak of love, but there is no ground calling love more valid than hate. Indeed, the Marquis de Sade logically saw no crime in murder; on nominalistic, relativistic grounds, what could be wrong with murder?<sup>5</sup> If there is no absolute law, then every man is his own law. As the writer of Judges

4. C. H. Walter, "Deuteronomy," in Charles John Ellicott, ed., *Ellicott's Commentary on the Whole Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan), II, 25.

5. Richard Seaver and Austryn Wainhouse, eds., *The Marquis de Sade: The Complete Justine, Philosophy in the Bedroom, and other writings* (New York: Grove Press, 1965), pp. 326-337.

declared, "In those days there was no king in Israel (i.e., the people had rejected God as King); every man did that which was right in his own eyes" (Judges 21:25; cf. 17:6; 18:1; 19:1). The law forbids man's self-law: "Ye shall not do after all the things that we do here this day, every man whatsoever is right in his own eyes" (Deut. 12:8), and this applies to worship as well as to moral order. The first principle of the *Shema Israel* is thus *one God, one law*. It is the declaration of an absolute moral order to which man must conform. If Israel cannot admit another god and another law-order, it cannot recognize any other religion or law-order as valid either for itself or for anyone else. *Because God is one, truth is one*. Other people will perish in their way, lest they turn and be converted (Ps. 2:12). The basic coercion is reserved to God.

Because God is one, and truth is one, the one law has an inner coherence. The unity of the Godhead appears in the unity and coherence of the law. Instead of being strata of diverse origins and utility, the law of God is essentially one word, a unified whole.

Modern political orders are polytheistic imperial states, but the churches are not much better. To hold, as the churches do, Roman Catholic, Greek Orthodox, Lutheran, Calvinist, and all others virtually, that the law was good for Israel, but that Christians and the church are under grace and without law, or under some higher, newer law, is implicit polytheism. The Joachimite heresy has deeply infected the church. According to this heresy, the first age of man was the age of the Father, the age of justice and the law. The second age was the age of the Son, of Christianity, of the church, and of grace. The third age is the age of the Spirit, when men become gods and their own law.

Dispensationalism is also either evolutionary or polytheistic or both. God changes or alters His ways with man, so that law is administered in one age, and not in another. One age sees salvation by works, another by grace, and so on. But Scripture gives us a contrary assertion: "I am the LORD, I change not" (Mal. 3:6). To attempt to pit law against grace is polytheistic or at least Manichaean: it assumes two ultimate ways and powers in contradiction to one another. But the word of God is one word, and the law of God is one law, because God is one. The word of God is a law-word, and it is a grace-word: the difference is in men, by virtue of God's election, not in God. The word blesses and it condemns in terms of our response to it. To pray for grace is also to pray for judgment, and it is to affirm the truth and the validity of the law and the justice of the law. The whole doctrine of Christ's atonement upholds the unity of law, judgment, and grace.

Every form of antinomianism has elements of polytheism in it. Of antinomians Fairbairn wrote: