

I Am the Lord Your God

by the Rev. Peter M. Buss, Jr.

Life Progresses

I'd like you to think for a moment about what your may be like a year from now. Countless things will happen to all of us between now and then. We will all experience another Easter, another Thanksgiving, another Christmas. Some of us may retire. Others may change jobs, or become grandparents for the first time, or move. Those of us who are married will celebrate an anniversary; it may be a third anniversary, or a thirtieth or fortieth anniversary. Those of us who are parents will notice that our children will develop substantially; they will become more independent and more competent. This might be the year for a child to move out of the house—even get married. We will all celebrate a birthday this year.

Whatever activities or landmarks fill our time, we can be assured that life will keep rolling by. Each day brings with it new experiences and challenges—some which give us joy and others which test our endurance.

Through it all we will be developing as people. Our perspectives will change as we see more of life. We know that beyond the various things which fill up our day, we are supposed to be making spiritual progress. Each year we get closer to the time when our lives in this world will be over, and we will enter the spiritual world, which includes heaven and hell. Our primary goal in this world should be to prepare for that time—to be led by the Lord toward heaven. From time to time, then, its useful to reflect on how religion will play a part our lives. How will the Lord Himself help us to make some spiritual progress this year? What is He leading us toward? What does He want us to see about our choices and ways of acting, and to consider changing? What is most important to Him?

The First Commandment

Today's focus is on the most central religious principle to keep in mind as we strive to make progress in our spiritual lives: dedication to the Lord our God. That is why we will look at the First Commandment today. The first thing, and in one sense the most important, which the Lord commanded from Mt. Sinai. He said:

“I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage. You shall have no other gods before My face. You shall not make for yourself a carved image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth; you shall not bow down to them nor serve them. For I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children to the third and fourth generations of those who hate Me, but showing mercy to thousands, to those who love Me and keep My commandments. (Exodus 20:2-6)

“That Which Reigns Universally”

There is a teaching in the Heavenly Doctrines of the New Church which says: “What is stated first must be held in mind and must be seen to reside universally in everything that follows” (*Arcana Coelestia* 8864:3). In one sense this means that the First Commandment must be held in mind when we look at the rest of the commandments, for it “reigns universally” in them. For example:

- The next two commandments teach us *how* to worship the Lord alone or have no other gods before His face: we are not to take His name in vain, which means that we honor and revere Him; and we are to remember the Sabbath day, or take time to focus on the Lord and make Him a priority.
- We are not to steal, because the God whom we worship forbids it.
- He commands us not to commit adultery because He is the God of marriage.
- We are not to murder, lie, or covet because in doing so we are not loving the Lord nor keeping His commandments, as the First Commandment requires.

In general, the First Commandment calls us to commit ourselves to the Lord—to let Him reign in our lives. If we think about it, we need this command. For religion to make any sense, we have to know who the Lord is that He is the central focus all our religious devotion. For us to see value in the Bible we have to know the Revelator—then it can be a Divinely authoritative guide for us. If we are to accept the path of regeneration or spiritual rebirth, we need to worship the Savior who makes it all happen.

One teaching in the Heavenly Doctrines of the New Church says: “What reigns universally with a person is that which is present in every idea of his thought and every desire of his will.... *That which reigns universally within a person should be the Lord*” (emphasis added, *Arcana Coelestia* 8865). Another teaching says: “A person's whole character is determined by the nature of whatever dominates his life” (*Arcana Coelestia* 8858). The Lord asks us to let Him “dominate” our lives. He asks that we love Him above all things, that we make Him and His ways *the* priority in our lives, for He is the Source, the Beginning, the Lord our God.

The Tone

One of the things we notice about the First Commandment is that it is stated in the negative: “You shall no other gods before My face,” rather than “You shall worship the Lord your God alone.” If we fail, He will “visit the iniquity of the fathers on the children to the third and fourth generations of those who hate [Him].” For He is a jealous God—apparently one whom we should fear. We might wonder why this is the case. If worshipping the Lord alone is so important, why does He appear so foreboding, commanding, and manipulative—so distant?

As you may suspect, there are several reasons for such a tone. First, the Israelites, to whom the Ten Commandments were first revealed, needed such an image. They would not have listened unless a powerful, jealous God was speaking. Such an image caused them to pay attention!

But another reason for the tone is that it teaches us *how* to make the Lord our central focus. “You shall have no other gods before My face,” it says. How? By not carving any images, or making any likenesses of anything in heaven, on earth, or in the waters below. All these represent things which stand in the way of letting the Lord reign in us. “Gods” can mean selfishness—putting ourselves before the Lord, which is the root of all evil. They can also mean worldliness, or a lack of concern for anything beyond what we can see and experience, such as the Lord and heaven. A “likeness in the heavens above or the earth beneath” means pretending to be a good person. A person who acts like a spiritual and moral person externally, is making a likeness or putting on a facade (see *Arcana Coelestia* 8871:1). The Lord calls such people hypocrites.

When we get to “the waters under the earth” we come to the direct opposite of worshiping the Lord. The waters and the things they contain represent a bodily-oriented person, who cares only for external pleasures (*Arcana Coelestia* 8872). Such a person is dominated by appetites for worldly things such things as food or possessions, or for physical, lustful pleasure. This is far away from what is orderly, with the Lord at the top, and these cravings much further down, in their appropriate places (see *Arcana Coelestia* 911:3).

The purpose of stating the First Commandment in the negative is to warn us that we all have tendencies to love ourselves, to make ourselves appear like good people, to seek pleasure. If we focus on these things alone, the Lord cannot help us. Without Him, we live lives which are pictured by the Israelites in the land of Egypt—in bondage, controlled by negative influences which come to us by means of hell. Then our lives will have aspects which don't bring us happiness, but instead make us feel miserable. We will act in selfish and manipulative ways, and cause harm to the people around us. But the Lord wants us to realize that it doesn't have to be that way. He can free us from these negative influences. If we put Him first, He delivers us from the influences of hell (see *Arcana Coelestia* 8866). He gives us a rationale for the way things should be, with Himself at the top—governing and directing our lives—and with charity to other people next, as He commands. Then we can take care of our own needs, and experience pleasures in their proper measure, with appropriate goals: eating to remain healthy, earning money to support a family or even to live comfortably.

Gideon's Task

The story of Gideon cutting down his father's altar to Baal is a perfect example of what the Lord is talking about in the First Commandment. At the time of the Judges, Israel had strayed from the Lord. They had entered Canaan, and were trying to conquer the inhabitants so that they could inherit it as their own. But instead of staying loyal to the Lord, as the First Commandment said, they were seduced into the worship practices of the native people. As a result the Lord couldn't lead them to victory, and they were oppressed by their enemies.

It was during this unhappy time that the Lord appeared to Gideon. He came while Gideon was hiding from the Midianite overlords, and said, “The Lord is with you, you mighty man of valor!” (Judges 6:12). But Gideon wasn't heartened by these words. He replied: “If the Lord is with us, why then has all this happened to us?” (Judges 6:13). He asked why the Lord had apparently forsaken them.

Obviously, it was because the Israelites were not worshipping the Lord. So the Lord asked Gideon to carry out a very specific task. He was not to go and attack the Midianites—that would come later. First he was to tear down the altar of Baal that his father had, and cut down the wooden image next to it. Then he was to build an altar to the Lord, and use the wood of the image to offer a burnt sacrifice to the Lord (Judges 6:25-26). In other words, he was to return to the worship of the Lord—this is what would bring back prosperity for Israel. After Gideon obeyed this command he went on to lead the Israelites to victory over the Midianites.

Offering Happiness

By means of the First Commandment the Lord offers us happiness. Again, the appearance is otherwise. It sounds like He's demanding commitment, or else He will punish us and bring misery to our lives. But God would never do that. What He is really saying is that He can't help us if we don't worship Him. We are free to worship whomever, or do whatever, we want. We can prioritize our lives in any way we choose. If we reject the Lord's ways, we will feel consequences. One evil leads to another, for evil builds upon itself (see *Arcana Caelestia* 8876). Short term pleasure gives way to misery and an empty life. These are symbolized by the “third and fourth generations.”

But the negative message is turned into a positive one in the internal sense (the meaning within the words). The Lord's “jealousness” represents His ardent desire to save us, and to warn us so that we know of the dangers of evil (see *Arcana Caelestia* 8875). He really wants to “[show] mercy to thousands” (*Exodus* 20:6). He desires that we “love [Him] and keep [His] commandments” (*ibid.*), for then He is able to bless us with peace and happiness, and to inspire us to be good, worshipful people.

The Ideal

We are taught that the people who live in heaven love the Lord so much that they want Him to be a part of every aspect of their lives. When they wake up, when they eat a meal, when they are working or socializing, they want the Lord to be in their thoughts. As a result they constantly “have the Lord's life within them” (*Arcana Caelestia* 8865).

Such a state of mind is also reflected by an image of the Lord presented in the book of the Heavenly Doctrines called *The True Christian Religion*. It speaks of a man who saw a picture of “one Divine Person with rays of heavenly light around His head, with the label: This is our God, at once Creator, Redeemer and Regenerator, and so Savior” (*True Christian Religion* 296). It is a picture of an infinitely loving God who wants nothing more than our happiness. He is our

Creator, and the one who can bring new life to us by leading us to become better people. He does so by leading us through the process of regeneration, or spiritual rebirth, during which He is leading us closer and closer to heaven. In this passage, the man who found such a picture kisses it, takes it home in his pocket, and shows it to his wife and children, so that they can all delight in it.

This is our goal, and also the thrust of the First Commandment—to gain a concept of the Lord our God, to know what kind of God He is, and to keep Him in mind always. It is a high ideal, but it is attainable! Why else would the Lord command it? The purpose in talking about it today is so that we may all renew our commitment to the Lord and remind ourselves that He should be the most important aspect of our lives.

Life continues. One day leads to the next; weeks and months slip by in a never-ending progression of activity. The Lord asks that we strive to include Him in our thoughts, and to ask for His leadership during all these events and daily decisions. He longs to shower His mercy upon us, but that can only happen to the extent that we turn to Him and allow Him to guide us. May we all take delight in knowing the Lord our God, and in dedicating ourselves to Him, so that we may receive His blessing.

Amen.

Lessons: Exodus 20:2-6; Judges 6:12-14,25-28; *True Christian Religion* 291-296