

No Other Gods
(Deut 5:1-6)
by Allan J. McNicol

Some years ago our eldest son was working in Missouri. He met a young lady who was a student in the university at Columbia and soon marriage was in the air. The bride and her family were insistent that the marriage take place there. As parents of the groom my wife and I had little leverage but we suggested that the couple look around for an interesting place to have the marriage. Finally it was settled. The marriage would take place at Westminster Chapel, Fulton, Missouri.

The chapel was a very interesting place. During the Second World War a chapel in London designed by Christopher Wren in 1677 had been badly bombed. As a gesture of goodwill for American help in the war, the authorities allowed the chapel to be entirely dismantled and transported to America. Here it was rebuilt in keeping with Wren's original specifications. For some reason it ended up in Missouri. Shortly afterwards it was the site where Winston Churchill gave his famous Iron Curtain speech.

What is relevant for our purposes today is a feature of its architecture. Directly behind the communion table was a mammoth wooden panel. On the panel, printed in large enough letters for anyone in the front half of the chapel to see, were the Ten Commandments. Couples coming to say their vows at the front of the chapel had only to look up and be confronted with what scripture calls the ten words. My appreciation of Christopher Wren as an architect was considerable; but even if placing a panel was a feature of churches at the time, I also came to see Wren was also a bit of a theologian.

Our text today states "you shall have no other gods before me." Various other translations are about the same. The translator of Walther Zimmerli has it, "There shall not be for you other gods over against me." Various traditions number the ten words differently; but in Hellenistic Jewish tradition and in the historic Reformed tradition this is the first of the ten words – no other gods.

What should strike us about this word? In Deuteronomy the exodus event was foundational. The previous verse tells us Yahweh is the one who brought the people out of Egypt – the house of bondage. On the basis of that great act of salvation, he established his *bona fides*. An act of salvation is the ground for His exclusive claim over them. Likewise it is for us.

Much is often made as to whether this word presupposes the existence of other gods or not. That debate may be interesting but, in the end, too theoretical. What is being claimed is that there are to be no rivals to Yahweh. Nothing else gets to this level.

I think it is interesting to note that after the statements on the Divine One the ten words take up the issue of holiness. We moderns think of holiness as a personal moral concept. But the ancients also invested it with a concept of space. Think of all the ritual obligations and actions the children of Israel had to undergo at Sinai to approach Yahweh! These were all built on the idea that certain places were dwelling places of the divine. To violate this arrangement would bring trouble. The sense of the Divine Presence which saved them was a living reality.

Contrast this with the recent feeding frenzy about the confusion over whether the name and presence of the God of Abraham and Jacob should be invoked in New York to commemorate the tenth anniversary of 9/11. As far as a public exercise the authorities said no! But think of it. What if the religious leaders of New York were invited? Who or what would be invoked? Isn't this a parable of the cacophony and confusion that we moderns have about God today? One says "He is the ground of our Being?" Another claims that we must hear the words of Muhammad because he is the true prophet of the Holy One. Wait, someone over here is saying "The divine is the sum of our consciousness." And so on it goes. This is what happens when we forget the first commandment.

We are a school of Theology. I think it is important that we not only study views about the holy but that we get the concept right. Yahweh is the Lord our God. He redeemed us from the bondage of sin. Before him no other gods stand. Speaking of these words, Jesus of Nazareth said, "I came not to abolish..." As far as Christians are concerned that word still stands.

Almost half a century has elapsed since I started off to study theology at Yale Divinity School. On the application form I was asked to state explicitly my call to ministry – when, how, and why. At first I was taken back by the bluntness of those questions. Seminaries are a little more circumspect about the way they ask these questions now. But I wonder? Who is your God? Isn't it a fair question to ask? Is He the one who brought you out of the bondage of sin? These are important questions. May we today have a confident answer – that He is the same One who has our absolute allegiance – as Abraham, Moses, and Jesus.