

## **THE TEN COMMANDMENTS AND THE MORAL LIFE**

### **Session III**

#### **The Second Commandment**

**“You shall not make for yourself a carved image...” (Exodus 20:4-5=Deuteronomy 5:8-10)**

### **I. The Old Testament Meaning**

1. The key to interpreting this commandment is the phrase “make for yourself” (Exodus 20:4). Deuteronomy 4:15-19 forbids “making a carved image for yourselves” in the form of a human, an animal or a heavenly body (thought to be gods in the ancient near east). The reason for this prohibition is given in Deuteronomy 4:12 where it is recalled that when Moses went up on Mt. Sinai “you heard the sound of words, but saw no form” (cf. Ezekiel 1 and Revelation 4).

2. Because of the close association between a god and the god's image in ancient near eastern thinking, in Israel such images were thought to constrict God's freedom. Carved images were always exercises in control. Carved images were static and lifeless and, thus, thought unfitting to represent God who was the *living God* (Psalm 42:2). The same is true of divine names (cf. Exodus 3).

3. Carved images also presented a problem for Israel because God had already created an image of himself by himself—human beings (Genesis 1:26).

### **II. Calvin**

1. This commandment is a restraint on the imagination since “our stupid minds, crassly conceiving of God” are inclined to devise all sorts of erroneous representations (*Institutes*, II.viii.17). But erroneous representations are not limited to physical images since we can have improper mental images of God as well. This commandment safeguards God's incomprehensibility from being subjected to sense impressions, however low (animal images) or high (heavenly bodies).

2. The commandment is connected with the fact that God is the *living God* (Psalm 42:2): “...since the people of Israel know the living God, it almost seems unnecessary for him to prohibit them from making any images for themselves, but due to our wretched inclination, it was necessary for the prohibition to be added” (*Sermons on the Ten Commandments*, Sermon Three).

3. Idolatry “is rooted in the depths of our bones...there is no one among us who does not invent idols in infinite number” (*Sermons on the Ten Commandments*, Sermon Three).

4. This commandment means that God wishes to be known for who he truly is and not in terms of who we would like him to be or how we might be willing to think of him. To know God truly is to desire to accommodate ourselves to him. This principle is at the foundation of Calvin's conception of Christian theology: “Nearly all the wisdom we possess, that is to say, true and sound wisdom, consists of two parts: the knowledge of God and of ourselves” (*Institutes*, I.i.1).

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*Fr. Michael Petty*

5. We are reminded that the capacity to worship God is a gift of grace; our natural inclination (guided by sin) is toward idolatrous worship which is finally a worship of ourselves.

### **III. St. Thomas Aquinas and Martin Luther**

1. Both Aquinas and Luther consider the prohibition of carved images to be part of the First Commandment and so treat Exodus 20:2-6 as the First Commandment and see Exodus 20:7, the prohibition of the misuse of God's name, as the Second Commandment.

### **IV. *The Catechism of the Catholic Church* (Paragraphs 2129-2132)**

1. The Catechism explains the prohibition of *manufactured images* of God with reference to Deuteronomy 4:15-16. However, it also notes that in Israel the prohibition of images was not absolute as can be seen in the case of the cherubim on the ark of the covenant (Exodus 37:1-9). The difference between the cherubim (who together probably served as an earthly representation of God heavenly throne) and the golden calf (Exodus 32) is that the former were made at God's command while the latter was made at the people's wish.

2. The Catechism cites the decisions of the Second Council of Nicea (787) which defended the *veneration* of holy images since "how much more frequently through the imaginal formation they are seen, so much more quickly are those who contemplate these, raised to the memory and desire of the originals of these, to kiss and to render honorable adoration to them, not however, to grant them true *latria* according to our faith, which is proper to the divine nature alone."

### **V. Reflection**

1. For a good part of Israel's history, the First Commandment was taken to mean that while other gods did exist Israel was to worship YHWH alone (Hosea 9:10). This means that the prohibition of other gods and the prohibition of carved images are not the same thing. The Second Commandment means that the God of Israel is to be worshiped *aniconically*—without images.

2. The only actual explanation offered for this is given in Deuteronomy 4:15-16—God can not be represented because his form has not been seen by Israel.

3. In the latter part of Israel's history, the gods and idols are linked such that the gods of the nations *are idols* which is to say that they have no actual existence (Isaiah 40)

4. It is this development which leads to our notion of idolatry as the worship of human creations in the place of the living God (Isaiah 44:9-20; 41:6-7).

5. This commandment has to be seen in the light of the New Covenant which is centered on an *incarnate revelation* (Colossians 1:15; Hebrews 1:3). In Christ, God *provides an image of himself*. Christ is not an image of God which we have manufactured but he is God image of himself.

6. The Seventh Ecumenical Council (Nicea II, 787) dealt with the iconoclastic controversy. Iconoclasm was condemned on the grounds that an assertion of God's formlessness would be a denial of the incarnation—we do see the form of God in the humanity of Christ and in the sanctified humanity of the saints the glory of the Son shines through. The Council also made a distinction between the

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*reverence* given to images and the *worship* rendered to God alone. An epistemological point: the purpose of an image is to provide a window to its prototype. In this sense images, *ikons*, are not decorative art but a physical sign which points to its prototype.

7. We might want to begin with Calvin's insight that this commandment deals with the imagination and ask some important questions:

- (a) What images shape our understanding of God?
- (b) What images shape our understanding of the good life?

8. In what ways does our culture subvert or pervert our imagination with respect to God?