

October: The First Table of the Commandments

(*The Book of Concord*, Kolb & Wengert, pp. 386-400)

You might notice, straight off, that Luther dispensed with the Prologue to the Decalogue, “I am the LORD your God, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage...” This is not a slight edit. The prologue provides the *ergo*, the grounding, of the injunction following: “Have no other gods,” that is, gods who will bring you back again to bondage. Because this God is the liberator, what follows are directives for life of the liberated people of God, “that it may be well with you and that you live long in the land that the LORD your God is giving you.”

What has Luther done by removing this Prologue that has proven so important for modern scholarship’s assessment of the Ten Commandments? Have we here, one might fear, an instance of Luther’s anti-Judaism over-riding the plain sense of the text? Or of his social conservatism blunting the force of the Bible’s message of God’s solidarity with the poor and the oppressed? It has been alleged, for example, that in his Small Catechism,

Luther dropped the politically concrete preamble of the Decalogue... [and] extended the command to honor one’s parents to authorities as such. These two symptomatic changes of the scriptural basis of Luther’s most influential catechism are indicative of how Lutheranism became prone to obedience and subservience toward any established order, including severely unjust ones, instead of being faithful to the God of liberation (*sola fide*) and standing in solidarity with the downtrodden” (#72 of *Radicalizing Reformation – Provoked by the Bible and Today’s Crises: 94 Theses*).

Is it so? What hath Luther wrought?

There are truths contained in this critique, particularly if we fail to make any distinctions between what Luther taught and how he lived in or what he taught and what historical Lutheranism after him made of what Luther taught under the exigencies of the Counter-Reformation and the Wars of Religion. But the idea of “radicalizing the Reformation,” as the aforementioned critics would have it, as much as argues that it was Carlstadt and/or Müntzer and/or Menno Simmons who got the Reformation right, while the so-called “magisterial” Reformation held onto, and wanted to renew by reformation, the ideal of Christendom. But before we are in a position to make a judgment about whether reforming Christendom is a contemporary possibility, let us try to understand Luther in his own right. Why, according to his own lights, did Luther drop the biblical Prologue to the Decalogue?

In the years prior to the Catechisms, attempts in the name of reformation to establish and enforce biblical law in place of local traditions of law had been undertaken by Luther’s former disciples Carlstadt and then Müntzer. Carlstadt saw in Luther’s distinction of law and gospel a false differentiation which reformed the church but left the state and society immune from the criticism of biblical law. So Carlstadt wanted to impose biblical law on Saxon Germany,

beginning with the iconoclastic destruction of “graven images,” i.e., the statues and paintings in the churches.

Müntzer took things a “radical” step further than Carlstadt when he realized that Carlstadt’s Biblicism mistook the letter for the spirit of the law, which he proclaimed was “revolutionary,” just as the Prologue to the Decalogue might sanction violence against the established order. The spirit of the law, Müntzer maintained, was revolutionary violence against the oppressive powers that be. In a notorious sermon on the Book of Daniel delivered to the princes, Müntzer proclaimed the chilling words, “The godless have no right to exist,” to which Luther in a tract that became notorious replied that neither do insurrectionists. After fomenting the Peasants’ Revolt with promises of armies of angels coming from heaven to the aid of untrained farmers and herders against the trained armies of the princes, Müntzer himself suffered the sword that he had taken up. (Luther’s half-apologetic pamphlet on the aftermath of the Peasants War ridiculed the victorious princes for sexually harassing Müntzer’s pregnant widow). In Zurich just a few years later, Luther’s rival in reformation, Zwingli, suffered a similar fate. Surveying the Christian carnage of attempting to enforce biblical law on unbelievers, Menno Simmons recoiled from these violent appropriations of holy war from ancient Israel and led the Anabaptist movement into a principled life of separation from the powers that be (as well as the powers that would be), where in a disciplined sub-culture true Christians could live according to biblical law.

Such were the options, played out in dramatic contemporary history, that Luther had before him when he undertook his explanation of *how and in what ways biblical law binds the Christian* (not a little in dispute along precisely the same lines, let me note, in recent sexuality controversies). It was in this nexus of concerns that Luther omitted the Prologue to the Decalogue. After all, he reasoned, it is not us Gentiles whom the LORD rescued from the land of Egypt; not was the consequent positive law which Moses provided the liberated Israelites addressed to other peoples. What we have in biblical law is the record of the civil code for that time and place in ancient Israel. It is, Luther wrote, the Jewish *Sachsenspiegel*, the legal code and case history of the Saxons. It is as such *not* addressed to us Gentile and does *not* bind us.

Sometimes theologians try to distinguish the categorical prohibitions of the Decalogue from the conditional case laws of the legal code, arguing that the former “moral” law remains binding as opposed to the ceremonial and civil law of ancient Israel. Not so fast, Luther replies. Not even the Ten Commandments bind us so far as they are ancient Israelite law, Luther replies. Thus he not only edits out the Prologue from the Catechism, but for the identical reason he also drops the prohibition of images, deliteralizes the Sabbath commandment in light of Jesus’ controversies of healing on the Sabbath, and sharply critiques the commandments against coveting for regarding wives and domestic servants as property. Luther can only appropriate the Ten Commandments for us today by way of such revisionism! Moreover, he interprets the biblical Ten Commandments in the light of Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount, which both radicalizes the negative prohibitions into positive commands to love and focuses a divine spotlight on the motives for obedience in the heart which the heavenly Father sees in secret and knows in secret.

We Gentile Christians, Luther argues, appropriate the Decalogue of Moses (and indeed all the rest of OT law in the same way), then, as read them through the lenses of the Sermon on the Mount, which makes motivation before God crucial to true obedience, and through Paul’s

teaching in Romans 12-14, which makes the love made known in Christ, who fulfilled the law for those unworthy, the key to all the commandments. We Gentile Christians may receive the revised Decalogue of Moses, then, as a much clearer statement of the natural law indelibly written on the human heart, now made even more clear in the light of Christ, who fulfills the law by loving God above all in selflessly loving the unworthy even to death, death upon a cross.

What takes the place of the historical Prologue? As the root and source of all the other commandments, Luther holds, the First Commandment has us not only eschew idols but positively to cling to the “one, true God.” In place of the liberating act of the Exodus for ancient Israel, Luther grounds or justifies the commandments on the “natural law” that requires reasonable creatures to put all their fear, love and trust in the “one, true God.”

This notion of the “one, true God” might easily be misunderstood today as an assertion of religious superiority, as if our tribal deity were the true one and all the others false. It requires careful examination to understand that Luther has something else entirely in mind, indeed, he is trying with the notion of the “one, true God” to get past the tribal wars of the gods. Just as the prophets of Israel matured to the teaching that God can judge His own people when they turn God into a national idol (cf. Amos 3:2), Luther pits the “one, true God” against the idols manufactured in the religion business for chauvinistic purposes. As he will say later, if we believed the “one, true God” it would hardly confirm us in our sense of religiously sanctioned nationalistic superiority to others. It would rather “terrify us.”

What has happened in deleting the Prologue is this. The *henotheistic* first commandment of Israel—not to set up the idols of other gods before the empty throne of the Ark of the Covenant, the seat of the invisible LORD Yahweh in the Tabernacle—becomes in Luther’s Christian re-reading (but also in Jewish re-readings as, for example, in the second Isaiah) the command of radical *monotheism*¹ to not fear, not love nor trust anyone or anything less than the one and only true God, that is, the *One who creator of all that is other than God*, unique and incomparable. That is not a Jewish tribal God nor a Christian tribal God, but rather the One who is the creator of all else, of everything that is not God. Only such a Creator of all things “out of nothing” qualifies as the one, true God. This is the God who is the eternal fountain of generosity, who gives without any need of return. This God is the “the one, eternal good,” whose gifts may only be received and blessed with thanksgivings that do not separate the gifts from the Giver, but in all things, *solī Deo gloria*, give the glory to God alone.

This notion of the “one, true God” grounds Luther’s remarkable exploration into what it means “to have a God,” namely, as something more like “being had,” or captivated. Whatever captures desire as its seat in the human heart is one’s operational deity. To “have” a God, then, is like all kinds of other “having” in that something becomes my own, my very own, in an act of personal appropriation, as in, “He or she becomes my beloved.”² But to have “God” is not like any other kind of possession in the world of creatures that one could come to dispose over, since God

1[1] See further on this, Paul R. Hinlicky, *Divine Complexity: The Rise of Creedal Christianity* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2011) pp. 167-73.

2[2] Arthur H. Drevlow, “The History, Significance, and Application of Luther’s Catechisms,” *Concordia Journal* 5/5 (September 1979) p.174.

is not a creature alongside others but the one, true Giver of all creatures. This in turn makes all creatures, including the self, gifts of God to be received with joy and thanksgiving and the kinds of love that variously befit these various gifts.

To have God “the Giver,” then, is to fear only God’s disapproval, to value or esteem God’s approval above all, to trust that God’s approval is generous and merciful. To have God is the kind of having that the “heart” has, which can never possess its beloved like a thing to be used, but rather can “have” God in fear, love and trust above all others. Having God in this way of being had by the One who truly gives all, then, entails loving all creatures in and under God as also gifts from God, just as the Second Table of the Commandments goes on to elaborate. By contrast, then, not having One who is truly God entails making gods of one’s possessions, greedily hoarding them, and justifying one’s greed in the name of rational self-interest. A merely negative civil righteousness, then, which does not visibly trespass the prohibitions can conceal a self that is greed personified. Or, as in Jesus’ parable, a “fool” who puts an infinite burden of desire on a finite treasure that cannot but fail.

Three final “apocalyptic” notes on the First Table of the law. First, Luther acknowledges the apparent contradiction in experience to all that he has taught in the preceding about having only the one, true God with the bitter observation that the righteous suffer and the wicked prosper. Faith, having God, having the one true God as one’s only eternal good is often, he observes, in contradiction to experience of the world where the innocent suffer and the wicked prosper. So the mature witness of Israel’s wisdom tradition in the Book of Job, like that of the second Isaiah comes to bear on Luther’s Christian revision of the Decalogue. Faith in the one, true God necessarily points from the bitter experience of actual evil which contradicts God’s revealed will forward to a future still invisible in the present, groaning under structures of malice and injustice. The just live by faith in the one, true God, as Habakkuk (whom Paul the Apostle cites in Romans 1:17) teaches -- in *hope*, then, of the coming of God’s reign.

Second, present appearances, as if the whole of the story, of the prosperity of the wicked and the suffering of the righteous are correspondingly exposed in truth as the lies that the devil spins to deceive, going all the way back to the seduction, “You shall not die! But you will be like God, knowing good and evil!” That is why, if we, unwitting but willing pawns of the Serpent, came to believe in the one true God, it would “terrify us,” so deeply is this faith in God in contradiction to the actual way we live, quite settled down and at home within structures of malice and injustice that usurp the reign of the One who is truly God.

Third, we began this study by asking if we need to “radicalize” the Reformation. Indeed, we do, though not in the way suggested by the 94 Theses project. Luther in his age tried to reform Christendom. That project is over, but Luther’s theology of holy secularity abides. In place of Christendom, we need to think today of the coming of the Beloved Community of God.^{3[3]}

Paul R. Hinlicky

Tise Professor of Lutheran Studies, Roanoke College & Docent, Evanjelicka Bohoslovecka Fakulta, Univerzita Komenskeho, Bratislava, Slovakia.

3[3] See further, Paul R. Hinlicky, *Beloved Community: Critical Dogmatics after Christendom* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2015).

The First Part: The Ten Commandments by Martin Luther

(*The Book of Concord*, Kolb & Wengert, pp. 386-400)

The First Commandment

“You are to have no other gods.”

That is, you are to regard me alone as your God. What does this mean, and how is it to be understood? What does “to have a god” mean, or what is God?

Answer: A “god” is the term for that to which we are to look for all good and in which we are to find refuge in all need. Therefore, to have a god is nothing else than to trust and believe in that one with your whole heart. 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. For these two belong together, faith and God. Anything on which your heart relies and depends, I say, that is really your God.

The intention of this commandment, therefore, is to require true faith and confidence of the heart, which fly straight to the one true God and cling to him alone. What this means is: “See to it that you let me alone be your God, and never search for another.” In other words: “Whatever good thing you lack, look to me for it and seek it from me, and whenever you suffer misfortune and distress, crawl to me and cling to me. I, I myself, will give you what you need and help you out of every danger. Only do not let your heart cling to or rest in anyone else.”

So that it may be understood and remembered, I must explain this a little more plainly by citing some everyday examples of the opposite. There are some who think that they have God and everything they need when they have money and property; they trust in them and boast in them so stubbornly and securely that they care for no one else. They, too, have a god—mammon by name, that is, money and property—on which they set their whole heart. This is the most common idol on earth. Those who have money and property feel secure, happy, and fearless, as if they were sitting in the midst of paradise. On the other hand, those who have nothing doubt and despair as if they knew of no god at all. We will find very few who are cheerful, who do not fret and complain, if they do not have mammon. This desire for wealth clings and sticks to our nature all the way to the grave.

So, too, those who boast of great learning, wisdom, power, prestige, family, and honor and who trust in them have a god also, but not the one, true God. Notice again, how presumptuous, secure, and proud people are when they have such possessions, and how despondent they are when they lack them or when they are taken away. Therefore, I repeat, the correct interpretation of this commandment is that to have a god is to have something in which the heart trusts completely.

Again, look at what we used to do in our blindness under the papacy. Anyone who had a toothache fasted and called on St. Apollonia; those who worried about their house burning down appealed to St. Laurence as their patron; if they were afraid of the plague, they made a vow to St. Sebastian or Roch. There were countless other such abominations, and everyone selected his own saint and worshiped him and invoked his help in time of need. In this category also belong those who go so far as to make a pact with the devil so that he may give them plenty of money,

help them in love affairs, protect their cattle, recover lost property, etc., as magicians and sorcerers do. All of them place their heart and trust elsewhere than in the true God, from whom they neither expect nor seek any good thing.

Thus you can easily understand what and how much this commandment requires, namely, that one's whole heart and confidence be placed in God alone, and in no one else. To have a God, as you can well imagine, does not mean to grasp him with your fingers, or to put him into a purse, or to shut him up in a box. Rather, you lay hold of God when your heart grasps him and clings to him. To cling to him with your heart is nothing else than to entrust yourself to him completely. He wishes to turn us away from everything else apart from him, and to draw us to himself, because he is the one, eternal good. It is as if he said: "What you formerly sought from the saints, or what you hoped to receive from mammon or from anything else, turn to me for all of this; look on me as the one who will help you and lavish all good things upon you richly."

Look, here you have the true honor and worship that please God, which God also commands under penalty of eternal wrath, namely, that the heart should know no other consolation or confidence than in him, nor let itself be torn from him, but for his sake should risk everything and disregard everything else on earth. On the other hand, you will easily see and judge how the world practices nothing but false worship and idolatry. There has never been a nation so wicked that it did not establish and maintain some sort of worship. All people have set up their own god, to whom they looked for blessings, help, and comfort.

For example, the pagans, who put their trust in power and dominion, exalted Jupiter as their supreme god. Others, who strove for riches, happiness, pleasure, and the good life, venerated Hercules, Mercury, Venus, or others, while pregnant women worshiped Diana or Lucina, and so forth. They all made a god out of what their heart most desired. Even in the mind of all the pagan, therefore, to have a god means to trust and believe. The trouble is that their trust is false and wrong, for it is not placed in the one God, apart from whom there truly is no god in heaven or on earth. Accordingly the pagans actually fashion their own fancies and dreams about God into an idol and rely on an empty nothing. So it is with all idolatry. Idolatry does not consist merely of erecting an image and praying to it, but it is primarily a matter of the heart, which fixes its gaze upon other things and seeks help and consolation from creatures, saints, or devils. It neither cares for God nor expects good things from him sufficiently to trust that he wants to help, nor does it believe that whatever good it encounters comes from God.

There is, moreover, another false worship. This is the greatest idolatry that we have practiced up until now, and it is still rampant in the world. All the religious orders are founded upon it. It involves only that conscience that seeks help, comfort, and salvation in its own works and presumes to wrest heaven from God. It keeps track of how often it has made endowments, fasted, celebrated Mass, etc. It relies on such things and boasts of them, unwilling to receive anything as a gift of God, but desiring to earn everything by itself or to merit everything by works of supererogation, just as if God were in our service or debt and we were his liege lords.³⁹ What is this but to have made God into an idol—indeed, an "apple-god"—and to have set ourselves up as God? But this reasoning is a little too subtle and is not suitable for young pupils.

This much, however, should be said to the common people, so that they may mark well and remember the sense of this commandment: We are to trust in God alone, to look to him alone, and to expect him to give us only good things; for it is he who gives us body, life, food, drink, nourishment, health, protection, peace, and all necessary temporal and eternal blessings. In addition, God protects us from misfortune and rescues and delivers us when any evil befalls us. It is God alone (as I have repeated often enough) from whom we receive everything good and by

whom we are delivered from all evil. This, I think, is why we Germans from ancient times have called God by a name more elegant and worthy than found in any other language, a name derived from the word “good,” because he is an eternal fountain who overflows with pure goodness and from whom pours forth all that is truly good.

Although much that is good comes to us from human beings, nevertheless, anything received according to his command and ordinance in fact comes from God. Our parents and all authorities—as well as everyone who is a neighbor—have received the command to do us all kinds of good. So we receive our blessings not from them, but from God through them. Creatures are only the hands, channels, and means through which God bestows all blessings. For example, he gives to the mother breasts and milk for her infant or gives grain and all sorts of fruits from the earth for sustenance—things that no creature could produce by itself. No one, therefore, should presume to take or give anything unless God has commanded it. This forces us to recognize God’s gifts and give him thanks, as this commandment requires. Therefore, we should not spurn even this way of receiving such things through God’s creatures, nor are we through arrogance to seek other methods and ways than those God has commanded. For that would not be receiving them from God, but seeking them from ourselves.

Let each and everyone, then, see to it that you esteem this commandment above all things and not make light of it. Search and examine your own heart thoroughly, and you will discover whether or not it clings to God alone. If you have the sort of heart that expects from him nothing but good, especially in distress and need, and renounces and forsakes all that is not God, then you have the one, true God. On the contrary, if your heart clings to something else and expects to receive from it more good and help than from God and does not run to God but flees from him when things go wrong, then you have another god, an idol.

Consequently, in order to show that God will not have this commandment taken lightly but will strictly watch over it, he has attached to it, first, a terrible threat, and, then, a beautiful, comforting promise. Both of these should be thoroughly emphasized and impressed upon the young people so that they may take them to heart and remember them.

[Explanation of the Appendix to the First Commandment]

“For I am the LORD your God, the strong, jealous one, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me, and showing mercy to many thousands who love me and keep my commandments.”⁴⁴

Although these words apply to all the commandments (as we shall hear later), yet they are attached precisely to this commandment at the head of the list, because it is most important that a person have the right head. For where one’s head is right, one’s whole life must also be right, and vice versa. Learn from these words, then, how angry God is with those who rely on anything but him, and again, how kind and gracious he is to those who trust and believe him alone with their whole heart. His wrath does not subside until the fourth generation, but, in contrast, his kindness and goodness extend to many thousands. Therefore, people should not live in false security and trust in luck, like brutes who think that it makes no great difference how they live. He is the sort of God who does not let the wickedness of those who turn away from him go unpunished, and his anger does not cease until the fourth generation, until they are utterly exterminated. Therefore he wants to be feared and not despised.

He has also proved this in all the records of history, as Scripture abundantly shows and as daily experience can certainly still teach us. From the beginning he has completely rooted out all

idolatry, and on that account he overthrew both heathens and Jews; just so in our day he overthrows all false worship, so that all who persist in it must ultimately perish. Even now there are proud, powerful, and rich potbellies who, not caring whether God frowns or smiles, boast defiantly of their mammon and believe that they can withstand his wrath. But they will not succeed. Before they know it they will be ruined, along with all they have trusted in, just as all others have perished who doubtless thought themselves so secure and mighty.

Just because such blockheads imagine, when God looks on and refrains from disturbing their security, that he is ignorant of or unconcerned about such matters, he must strike and punish them so severely that he just cannot forget his anger down to their children's children. God does this so that everyone will be impressed and see that this is no joke with him. These are also the ones he has in mind when he says, "who hate me," that is, those who persist in their stubbornness and pride. They refuse to hear what is preached or said to them. When someone rebukes them, in order to bring them to their senses and cause them to mend their ways before the real punishment comes, they become so wild and crazy that they justly deserve the wrath they receive. We experience this every day in the case of bishops and princes.

But as terrible as these threats are, much more powerful is the comfort in the promise that assures all those clinging to God alone of his mercy, that is, his sheer goodness and blessing, not only for themselves but also for their children to a thousand and even many thousands of generations. Certainly, if we desire all good things in time and eternity, this promise ought to move and urge us to fix our hearts upon God with perfect confidence, since the divine Majesty approaches us so graciously, invites so warmly, and promises so richly.

Therefore let everyone take this to heart and thus be careful not to regard this as if a mere human being were speaking. For it brings you either eternal blessing, happiness, and salvation, or eternal wrath, distress, and heartache. What more could you want or desire than God's gracious promise that he wants to be yours with every blessing, to protect you, and to help you in every need? Unfortunately, the world neither believes this nor regards it as God's Word. For the world sees that those who trust in God and not in mammon suffer grief and want and are opposed and attacked by the devil. They have neither money, prestige, nor honor, and can hardly stay alive. Conversely, those who serve mammon have power, prestige, honor, possessions, and all sorts of security in the world's eyes. Therefore, we must hold fast to these words, even in the face of this apparent contradiction, and be certain that they do not lie or deceive but will yet prove true.

Think back yourself, or ask around, and tell me: When people have devoted all their care and effort to scraping together possessions and great wealth, what have they accomplished in the end? You will find that they have wasted their effort and toil. Even if they have piled up great riches, these have turned to dust and blown away. They themselves never found happiness in their wealth, nor did it ever last to the third generation. You will find examples enough in all the histories and from old and experienced people. Just examine and pay close attention to them. Saul was a great king, chosen by God, and an upright man; but once he was in office and let his heart turn from God, placing his confidence in his crown and power, he inevitably perished along with everything he had; not one of his children survived.⁴⁷ David, on the other hand, was a poor, despised man, hunted down and always on the run, never certain of his life, yet inevitably he remained safe from Saul and became king. These words must stand and prove true, because God cannot lie or deceive. Just leave it to the devil and the world⁴⁹ to deceive you with their appearance; it may last for a while, but in the end it is nothing at all.

Therefore, let us learn the First Commandment well, so that we see that God will tolerate no presumption or trust in anything else; he makes no greater demand on us than a heartfelt trust in

him for every good thing, so that we walk straight ahead on the right path, using all of God's gifts exactly as a shoemaker uses a needle, awl, and thread for his work and afterward puts them aside, or as a traveler makes use of an inn, food, and lodging, but only for his physical needs. Let each person do the same in his or her walk of life according to God's order, allowing none of these things to be a lord or an idol.

Let this be enough for the First Commandment. We have had to explain it at great length, for it is the most important. As I said before, if the heart is right with God and we keep this commandment, all the rest will follow on their own.

The Second Commandment

"You are not to take the name of God in vain."

Just as the First Commandment instructs the heart and teaches faith, so this commandment leads us outward and directs the lips and tongue into a right relationship with God. For the first things that burst forth and emerge from the heart are words. As I have taught above how to answer the question of what it means to have a god, so you must learn to understand simply the meaning of this and all the other commandments and apply it to yourself.

If you are asked, "What does the Second Commandment mean?" or, "What does it mean to take the name of God in vain or to misuse it?" you should answer briefly: "It is a misuse of God's name if we call upon the LORD God in any way whatsoever to support falsehood or wrong of any kind." What this commandment forbids, therefore, is appealing to God's name falsely or taking his name upon our lips when our heart knows or should know that the facts are otherwise—for example, when taking oaths in court and one party lies about the other. God's name cannot be abused more flagrantly than when it is used to lie and deceive. Let this be the simplest and clearest explanation of this commandment.

From this all people can figure out for themselves when and in how many ways God's name is abused, although it is impossible to enumerate all its misuses. To discuss it briefly, however, misuse of the divine name occurs first of all in business affairs and in matters involving money, property, and honor, whether publicly in court or in the marketplace or wherever someone commits perjury and swears a false oath in God's name or by his own soul. This is especially common in marriage matters when two people secretly betroth themselves to each other and afterward deny it with an oath. The greatest abuse, however, is in spiritual matters, which affect the conscience, when false preachers arise and present their lying nonsense as God's Word.

See, all of this is an attempt to deck yourself out with God's name or to put up a good front and justify yourself with his name, whether in ordinary worldly affairs or in sophisticated and difficult matters of faith and doctrine. Also to be numbered among the liars are the blasphemers, not only the very crass ones who are known to everyone and disgrace God's name flagrantly—they should take lessons from the hangman, not from us—but also those who publicly slander the truth and God's Word and consign it to the devil. There is no need to say anything more about this now.

Let us learn and take to heart how much is at stake in this commandment and diligently guard against and avoid every misuse of the holy name as the greatest sin that can be committed outwardly. Lying and deceiving are themselves great sins, but they become much more serious when we try to justify and confirm them by invoking God's name and thus make it into a cloak to hide our shame. Thus one lie becomes two—indeed, a whole pack of lies.

Therefore God has added a solemn threat to this commandment: “For the LORD will not acquit anyone who misuses his name.” This means that no one will be let off or go unpunished. As little as God will permit the heart that turns away from him to go unpunished, just as little will he permit his name to be used to disguise a lie. Unfortunately it is now a common affliction throughout the world that there are just as few who do not use God’s name for lies and all kinds of wickedness as there are few who trust in God with their whole heart.

By nature we all have this lovely virtue that whenever we commit a wrong we like to cover it and gloss over our disgrace so that no one may see or know it. No one is so audacious as to boast of the wickedness he or she has committed. We prefer to act in secret without anyone knowing about it. When someone is caught, then God and his name must be dragged into it, so that the dirty business may be made honorable and the disgrace noble. That is the common way things go in the world, and, like a great flood, it has inundated all lands. Therefore we get what we deserve: plague, war, famine, fire, flood, wayward spouses and children and servants, and troubles of every kind. Where else could so much misery come from? It is a great mercy that the earth keeps on supporting and feeding us.

Above all else, therefore, our young people should be strictly required and trained to hold this as well as the other commandments in high regard. Whenever they violate them, we must be after them at once with the rod, confront them with the commandment, and continually impress it upon them, so that they may be brought up not merely with punishment but with reverence and fear of God.

Now you understand what it means to take God’s name in vain. To repeat it briefly, it is either simply to lie and assert under his name something that is not true, or it is to curse, swear, practice magic, and, in short, to do evil of any sort.

In addition, you must also know how to use the name of God properly. With the words, “You are not to take the name of God in vain,” God at the same time gives us to understand that we are to use his name properly, for it has been revealed and given to us precisely for our use and benefit. Therefore, since we are forbidden here to use his holy name in support of falsehood and wickedness, it follows, conversely, that we are commanded to use it in the service of truth and of all that is good—for example, when we swear properly where it is necessary and required, or also when we teach properly, or, again, when we call on God’s name in time of need, or thank and praise him in time of prosperity, etc. All of this is summarized in the command in Psalm 50[:15*]: “Call on me in the day of trouble; I will deliver you, and you shall glorify me.” All of this is what it means to call upon God’s name to support the truth and to use it devoutly. In this way his name is hallowed, as we pray in the Lord’s Prayer.

Here you have the substance of the entire commandment explained. When it is understood in this way, you have easily solved the question that has troubled many teachers: why swearing is forbidden in the gospel, yet Christ, St. Paul, and other saints often took oaths. The explanation is briefly this: We are not to swear in support of evil (that is, to a falsehood) or unnecessarily; but in support of the good and for the advantage of our neighbor we are to swear. This is a truly good work by which God is praised, truth and justice are confirmed, falsehood is refuted, people are reconciled, obedience is rendered, and quarrels are settled. For here God himself intervenes and separates right from wrong, good from evil. If one party swears falsely, there follows judgment: that person will not escape punishment. Although it may take a long time, nothing such people do will succeed in the end; everything gained by the false oath will slip through their fingers and will never be enjoyed. I have seen this in the case of many who broke their promise of marriage

under oath; they never enjoyed a happy hour or a healthful day thereafter, and thus they came to a miserable end with their body, soul, and possessions.

Therefore I advise and urge, as I have done before, that by means of warning and threat, restraint and punishment, children be trained in due time to beware of lying and especially to avoid calling upon God's name in support of it. Where they are allowed to act in this way, no good will come of it. It is evident that the world is more wicked than it has ever been. There is no government, no obedience, no fidelity, no faith—only perverse, unbridled people whom no teaching or punishment can help. All of this is God's wrath and punishment upon such willful contempt of this commandment.

On the other hand, one must urge and encourage children again and again to honor God's name and to keep it constantly upon their lips in all circumstances and experiences, for the proper way to honor God's name is to look to it for all consolation and therefore to call upon it. Thus, as we have heard above, first the heart honors God by faith and then the lips by confession.

This is also a blessed and useful habit, and very effective against the devil, who is always around us, lying in wait to lure us into sin and shame, calamity and trouble. He hates to hear God's name and cannot long remain when it is uttered and invoked from the heart. Many a terrible and shocking calamity would befall us if God did not preserve us through our calling upon his name. I have tried it myself and have indeed experienced that often a sudden, great calamity was averted and vanished in the very moment I called upon God. To defy the devil, I say, we should always keep the holy name upon our lips so that he may not be able to harm us as he would like to do.

For this purpose it also helps to form the habit of commending ourselves each day to God—our soul and body, spouse, children, servants, and all that we have—for his protection against every conceivable need. This is why the *Benedicite*, the *Gratias*, and other evening and morning blessings were also introduced and have continued among us. From the same source comes the custom learned in childhood of making the sign of the cross when something dreadful or frightening is seen or heard, and saying, "LORD God, save me!" or, "Help, dear Lord Christ!" and the like. Likewise, if someone unexpectedly experiences good fortune—no matter how insignificant—he or she may say, "God be praised and thanked!" "God has bestowed this upon me!" etc.—just as children used to be taught to fast and pray to St. Nicholas and other saints. But these practices would be more pleasing and acceptable to God than life in a monastery or Carthusian holiness.⁵⁹

See, with simple and playful methods like this we should bring up young people in the fear and honor of God so that the First and Second Commandments may become familiar and constantly be practiced. Then some good may take root, spring up, and bear fruit, and people may grow to adulthood who may give joy and pleasure to an entire country. That would also be the right way to bring up children, while they may be trained with kind and agreeable methods. For what a person enforces by means of beatings and blows will come to no good end. At best, the children will remain good only as long as the rod is on their backs.

But this kind of training takes root in their hearts so that they fear God more than they do rods and clubs. This I say plainly for the sake of the young people, so that it may sink into their minds, for when we preach to children we must talk baby talk. We have prevented the misuse of the divine name and taught its proper use, not only by how we speak but also by the way we act and live, so that everyone may know that God is well pleased with the right use of his name and will just as richly reward it as he will terribly punish its misuse.

The Third Commandment

“You are to hallow the day of rest.”

Our word “holy day” or “holiday” is so called from the Hebrew word “Sabbath,” which properly means to rest, that is, to cease from work; hence our common expression for “stopping work” literally means “taking a holiday.”⁶¹ In the Old Testament, God set apart the seventh day, appointed it for rest, and commanded it to be kept holy above all other days. As far as outward observance is concerned, the commandment was given to the Jews alone. They were to refrain from hard work and to rest, so that both human beings and animals might be refreshed and not be exhausted by constant labor. In time, however, the Jews interpreted this commandment too narrowly and grossly misused it. They slandered Christ and would not permit him to do the very same things they themselves did on that day, as we read in the gospel—as if the commandment could be fulfilled by refraining from work of any kind. This was not its intention, but rather, as we shall hear, it meant that we should sanctify the holy day or day of rest.

Therefore, according to its outward meaning, this commandment does not concern us Christians. It is an entirely external matter, like the other regulations of the Old Testament associated with particular customs, persons, times, and places, from all of which we are now set free through Christ.⁶⁵ But to give a Christian interpretation to the simple people of what God requires of us in this commandment, note that we do not observe holy days for the sake of intelligent and well-informed Christians, for they have no need of them. We observe them, first, because our bodies need them. Nature teaches and demands that the common people—menservants and maidservants who have gone about their work or trade all week long—should also retire for a day to rest and be refreshed. Second and most important, we observe them so that people will have time and opportunity on such days of rest, which otherwise would not be available, to attend worship services, that is, so that they may assemble to hear and discuss God’s Word and then to offer praise, song, and prayer to God.

But this, I say, is not restricted, as it was among the Jews, to a particular time so that it must be precisely this day or that, for in itself no one day is better than another. Actually, worship ought to take place daily. However, because this is more than the common people can do, at least one day a week ought to be set apart for it. Because Sunday has been appointed for this purpose from ancient times, it should not be changed, so that things may be done in an orderly fashion and no one create disorder by unnecessary innovation.

This, then, is the simple meaning of this commandment: Because we observe holidays anyhow, we should use them to learn God’s Word. The real business of this day should be preaching for the benefit of young people and the poor common folk. However, the observance of rest should not be so restrictive as to forbid incidental and unavoidable work.

Accordingly, when you are asked what “You are to hallow the day of rest” means, answer: “Hallowing the day of rest means to keep it holy.” What is meant by “keeping it holy”? Nothing else than devoting it to holy words, holy works, and holy living. The day itself does not need to be made holy, for it was created holy. But God wants it to be holy for you. So it becomes holy or unholy on your account, depending on whether you spend it doing something holy or unholy. How does such sanctifying take place? Not when we sit behind the stove and refrain from hard work, or place a garland on our head and dress up in our best clothes, but, as has been said, when we make use of God’s Word and exercise ourselves in it.

Truly, we Christians ought to make every day such a holy day and devote ourselves only to holy things, that is, to occupy ourselves daily with God’s Word and carry it in our hearts and on our lips. However, as we have said, because we all do not have the time and leisure, we must set

aside several hours a week for the young people, or at least a day for the whole community, when we can concentrate only on these matters and deal especially with the Ten Commandments, the Creed, and the Lord's Prayer, and thus regulate our entire life and being in accordance with God's Word. Whenever this practice is in force, a holy day is truly kept. When it is not, it ought not be called a Christian holy day. For non-Christians can spend a day in rest and idleness, too, and so can the whole swarm of clerics in our time who stand day after day in the church, singing and ringing bells, but without keeping a single day holy, because they neither preach nor practice God's Word, but rather teach and live contrary to it.

For the Word of God is the true holy object above all holy objects. Indeed, it is the only one we Christians know and have. Even if we had the bones of all the saints or all the holy and consecrated vestments gathered together in one pile, they would not help us in the least, for they are all dead things that cannot make anyone holy. But God's Word is the treasure that makes everything holy. By it all the saints have themselves been made holy. At whatever time God's Word is taught, preached, heard, read, or pondered, there the person, the day, and the work is hallowed, not on account of the external work but on account of the Word that makes us all saints. Accordingly, I constantly repeat that all our life and work must be based on God's Word if they are to be God-pleasing or holy. Where that happens the commandment is in force and is fulfilled. Conversely, any conduct or work apart from God's Word is unholy in the sight of God, no matter how splendid and brilliant it may appear, or even if it is altogether covered with holy relics, as are the so-called spiritual walks of life, which do not know God's Word but seek holiness in their own works.

Note, then, that the power and force of this commandment consists not in the resting but in the hallowing, so that this day may have its special holy function. Other work and business are really not designated holy activities unless the person doing them is first holy. In this case, however, a work must take place through which a person becomes holy. This work, as we have heard, takes place through God's Word. Places, times, persons, and the entire outward order of worship have therefore been instituted and appointed in order that God's Word may exert its power publicly.

Because so much depends on God's Word that no holy day is sanctified without it, we must realize that God wants this commandment to be kept strictly and will punish all who despise his Word and refuse to hear and learn it, especially at the times appointed. Therefore this commandment is violated not only by those who grossly misuse and desecrate the holy day, like those who in their greed or frivolity neglect the hearing of God's Word or lie around in taverns dead drunk like swine. It is also violated by that other crowd who listen to God's Word as they would to any other entertainment, who only from force of habit go to hear the sermon and leave again with as little knowledge at the end of the year as at the beginning. It used to be thought that Sunday had been properly observed if one went to Mass or listened to the Gospel being read; however, no one asked about God's Word, and no one taught it either. Now that we have God's Word, we still fail to eliminate this abuse, for we permit ourselves to be preached to and admonished, but we listen without serious concern.

Remember, then, that you must be concerned not only about hearing the Word, but also about learning it and retaining it. Do not think that it is up to your discretion or that it is an unimportant matter. It is the commandment of God, who will require of you an accounting of how you have heard, learned, and honored his Word.

In the same way those conceited spirits should also be punished who, after they have heard a sermon or two, become sick and tired of it and feel that they know it all and need no more

instructors. This is precisely the sin that used to be numbered among the mortal sins and was called *acidia*—that is, laziness or weariness—a malignant, pernicious plague with which the devil bewitches and deceives many hearts so that he may take us by surprise and stealthily take the Word of God away again.

Let me tell you this. Even though you know the Word perfectly and have already mastered everything, you are daily under the dominion of the devil, and he does not rest day or night in seeking to take you unawares and to kindle in your heart unbelief and wicked thoughts against these three and all the other commandments. Therefore you must constantly keep God's Word in your heart, on your lips, and in your ears. For where the heart stands idle and the Word is not heard, the devil breaks in and does his damage before we realize it. On the other hand, when we seriously ponder the Word, hear it, and put it to use, such is its power that it never departs without fruit. It always awakens new understanding, pleasure, and devotion, and it constantly creates clean hearts and minds. For this Word is not idle or dead, but effective and living. Even if no other benefit or need drove us to the Word, yet everyone should be motivated by the realization that through the Word the devil is cast out and put to flight, this commandment is fulfilled, and God is more pleased than by any hypocrisy, no matter how brilliant.