



The Second Commandment

Exodus 20:4 " 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;

5 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,

6 but showing mercy to thousands, to those who love Me and keep My commandments.

Who should decide how we are to go about worshipping the Lord? You know what elements we employ, what things we do when we gather together to worship Christ?

Should it be the Pastor? I mean he's been to seminary, and he gets paid to think about these things on a full time basis. He could probably come up with some really interesting and significant symbolism, some really deep rituals with all sorts of connections to scripture.

Or maybe it should be the culture? I mean we want to attract members of our society don't we so we will continue to grow, and certainly we want people to come and hear the Gospel, so why not design a worship that reflects the broadest aspects of the pop culture, particularly so that the transition from outside the church to inside the church won't be too difficult. After all, if the church is a baptized reflection of the culture then we won't have to worry about culture shock will we?

How about the youth? They are after all the next generation, if we fail to attract them, then the church will gradually die out won't it? So why not let them design worship that is hip and intelligible to them and their peers. Ok, old mother Jones may be driven out of the church by the hip-hop praise band, but hey if we can get 10 shiny new high school kids attending, then isn't it worth it?

Well what about traditions? Why not let the preferences of our ancestors be the arbiter, that way we can say we are following in flow of established tradition. This was the way my Great-Grandmother worshipped in the 1930s, or as is more common today; this is the way we worshipped way back in the 1980s when we let the culture decide how we should worship.

Or maybe we should try to blend it all together? We can have a bunch of different worship services from high church liturgy to rave worship and just keep adding stuff as it occurs to us, and essentially offer people a smorgasboard so they can choose the worship they prefer – let them do what is right in their own eyes.

Those are just a few of the potential answers that people have come up with throughout the years, and of late in many denominations the differing answers and preferences have lead to what have been called "The Worship Wars." Worship wars are what break out when your "preferences" in worship clash with my "preferences" in worship. Usually they are fought on the basis of arguments appealing to "aesthetics" (i.e. what is most artistic, tasteful, and beautiful) or arguments appealing to "relevance" (i.e. what is most

appealing and intelligible to our culture). Ultimately these usually break down broadly into "CONTEMPORARY" versus "TRADITIONAL" and they are usually settled by me going off and joining a new church so I don't have to put up with your awful preferences any more.

But is that the way its supposed to be? All of us church shopping to we find a church that best caters to our tastes or amuses us the most? Is that the biblical answer?

Well let me ask, who is the object of our worship? Is it us? Ok, admittedly we are the ones who benefit from worship. But do we gather together as a church to entertain and amuse ourselves? Isn't it our Almighty God whom we are supposed to worship? Therefore, who should decide, *how* we worship? God. This may seem like a stupid question, but *isn't God best qualified to tell us how He wants us to worship Him?*

Well in the Second Commandment, that is exactly what God is telling us. Just as in the first commandment, God told us who we should worship, in the Second Commandment he now tells – *how we should worship*.

That should be a tremendous relief to us, that it isn't a case of worship being decided by the preferences of the largest number of sinners (because that, brothers and sisters is who makes up the church, sinners like you and me) but rather it is a perfect God who tells his people how to go about worshipping in His word, the Bible.

The idea that bible should be the only arbiter of how worship is a radical idea these days, but it really shouldn't be. Because as Christians we are supposed to believe that not only is God's word *true*, but that it is also *sufficient*. The Apostle Paul said it this way:

**2 Tim. 3:16 All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness,
17 that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work.**

In other words, the bible was given to you as your guidebook for life, it is a complete and trustworthy guide for all of your faith, your life, and your practice.

And that is a good thing, because we all are born with a sinful tendency towards *idolatry*. To paraphrase Paul in Romans 1:22-23 we think we are very wise and become puffed up and then we "change the glory of the incorruptible God into an image made like corruptible man." Our tendency is to take our Holy God and recast him into something he isn't – an image made like us and then we worship this image saying *This is What God is Like – he is like us*. That keeps him safe and manageable the way we like him rather than the way he really is – *not safe but good* to borrow from C.S. Lewis.

That is why in the second commandment God specifically tells the Israelites not to worship Him, the true God, the way the other nations worship their false Gods, by using an image either made to look like man or some other creature. They had of course just left Egypt where all the god's were worshipped with images made to look like combinations of men and animals.

God knew their hearts only too well didn't he? They have only just received the Ten Commandments on Mt. Sinai when they react to the frightening disappearance of Moses into the cloud at the top of the mountain by demanding that Moses brother Aaron make them an image. So he takes their gold jewelry and produces the Golden Calf.

Now this was not an image of a false God, but a false image of the true God, which is why Aaron declares in Exodus 32:4 "This is your god, O Israel, that brought you out of the land of Egypt!" That phrase was carefully chosen. By it he is saying, this calf which looks like the kinds of idols that the cultures they lived amongst produced, is an image of Yahweh who delivered you and who declared in the introduction to the Ten Commandments: "I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage" (Ex. 20:2)

Then he goes further and declares the first uncommanded Holy Day saying "Tomorrow is a feast to the LORD."

Now let me ask you, if it was ok for the people to determine how they were going to worship the Lord, what would God's response have been to all this? *Hey, the important thing is that they are worshipping me and enjoying themselves in a culturally relevant fashion that seems to really appeal to all kinds of Israelites.* Instead God is furious, and it is only the intercession of Moses on their behalf that saves them from being utterly destroyed.

Now is it just making images that God, was concerned about? Not at all. He was concerned that they not adopt any worship practices that he had not commanded, especially by borrowing from the surrounding cultures.

He says to them in Leviticus 26:1 'You shall not make idols for yourselves; neither a carved image nor a sacred pillar shall you rear up for yourselves; nor shall you set up an engraved stone in your land, to bow down to it; for I am the LORD your God.

2 You shall keep My Sabbaths and reverence My sanctuary: I am the LORD.

In fact throughout the first five books of the Bible God strives again and again to tell his people, the nation of Israel, the church in the Old Testament that they are a *peculiar people*. Yes, that made the people of Israel really weird and different from the surrounding people, but God knew all too well what the practice of adopting their worship practices – which is a process we call syncretism – leads to:

Deut. 12:28 "Observe and obey all these words which I command you, that it may go well with you and your children after you forever, when you do what is good and right in the sight of the LORD your God.

29 " When the LORD your God cuts off from before you the nations which you go to dispossess, and you displace them and dwell in their land,

30 "take heed to yourself that you are not ensnared to follow them, after they are destroyed from before you, and that you do not inquire after their gods, saying, 'How did these nations serve their gods? I also will do likewise.'

31 "You shall not worship the LORD your God in that way; for every abomination to the LORD which He hates they have done to their gods; for they burn even their sons and daughters in the fire to their gods.

32 "Whatever I command you, be careful to observe it; you shall not add to it nor take away from it.

He knew that what they would do is start by adding a little here and a little there. "O look what they do in Moab on March 12th, isn't this a cool ritual, wouldn't our God be pleased by it?" And gradually you run

with your preferences, your imaginations and inventions, and then after a while you don't hesitate to add even abominations like temple prostitution or child sacrifice *that go directly counter to God's moral law.*

So God says, don't even start down that road, I will show you how I desire to be worshipped in my word, by commandment and example so just **be careful to observe it; you don't need to add to it nor take away from it. *This is what pleases me.***

Ok that was the church in the Old Testament, but what about the church in the New Testament? Well when the Son of God, Jesus Christ came to dwell with men, they were at it again. O not with anything as crass as idols, but our Savior could barely move without offending the Pharisees by violating one of their made up worship traditions. Gradually over hundreds of years a body of uncommanded Rabbinic worship practices had developed and the Pharisees and Scribes taught that men must obey them.

So Jesus said to them - Matt. 15:8 'These people draw near to Me with their mouth, And honor Me with their lips, But their heart is far from Me.

9 And in vain they worship Me, Teaching as doctrines the commandments of men.' "

Ok well Jesus taught that our made-up worship traditions are vain, no matter how old they are, if they aren't God's commandments, God is not pleased by them. Paul calls them *will-worship or self-imposed religion* in Col. 2:23 and says they have no value.

So from that time on, the church never got it wrong again, right? From that point on the worship of the church was simple and biblical and we said "If the Apostles didn't do it, we don't need to either." I wish that had been the case, but almost as soon as the Apostolic age was over we started borrowing from the culture, adding rituals, garments, feast days, even images of Saints and the three persons of the Trinity. By the time of the Protestant Reformation, it had gotten to the point where the simple worship commanded in scripture had been entirely jettisoned in favor of a highly stylized melange of cultural worship. So at the heart of the Reformation was the desire to get rid of all these unbiblical traditions getting back to the commands and teaching of the Bible. To get back to the Great Commission Jesus gave the church in all things:

Matthew 28:18 And Jesus came and spoke to them, saying, "All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth.

19 "Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,

20 "teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you; (not what you have made up or what seems like a good idea) and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age." Amen.

So what applications do we have for this commandment today?

- 1) Well first, we don't really take the subject of worship very seriously in this day and age, but if you take the bible seriously the warnings in Exodus 20:4-6 should be really sobering to you. This is the longest of the commandments and the only one that includes curses going down for three generations of your children. Apparently, God takes worship very seriously indeed. We should too considering it is what we hope to be doing in heaven for all eternity.

Now what is with the curses given unto the third generation? Well that is what Paul warned us of in Romans 1:18-32. When we engage in false worship, we gradually sink into idolatry, and from there God

gives us up to a debased mind, and vile passions, and to all sorts of things leading to death. We tend to start the process of introducing false worship, and our children imitating us continue it, and it gets worse generation by generation, until they reap a bitter harvest. We are seeing that it what is happening in the mainline churches, the parents started with innovations in worship, and now the children are in a wholesale free fall into all sorts of self-destructive activity.

Secondly, we need to remember that while there are curses for going into false worship there are blessings attached to this commandment too. God in these very verses promises his mercy to those who will simply strive to obey his commandments. So when people push their worship preferences, or try to say are you for traditional or contemporary worship, say:

"Neither, I'm not for men's traditions or preferences be they new or old. I'm for simple biblical worship and not because I'm stodgy, but because they are what my Savior Jesus Christ commanded me to do, and I love him and I remember that He said " If you love Me, keep My commandments." So I sacrifice all my pride and my vain preferences, and I observe the elements that he commanded: "Prayer, The reading of the Scriptures, the sound preaching of the Word, the singing of psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs, the administration and worthy receiving of the sacraments instituted by Christ, and I do all of these things with Love in my heart towards Him, knowing that He Saved Me, and designed all of these things to be a benefit to me and my fragile faith.