

**PASTORAL AND SOCIAL ETHICS**  
**Lecture Outline, Part Three: Exposition of the Law of God:**  
**Introduction; First and Second Commandments**

**by John M. Frame**

Introduction

- A. At this point we return to the normative perspective, as is traditional in Reformed ethics, asking “What does God’s Word tell us to do?” Remember, however, that other approaches are also legitimate. I shall from time to time bring light from other perspectives to our study of the Law.
- B. The Decalogue in the Context of the History of Redemption.
  - 1. Limitations of the Decalogue as summary of the law.
    - a) It is not the only summary, nor the one most recent in the history of redemption. Cf. Eccl. 12:13, Micah 6:8; Deuteronomy 6:5 (Matthew 22:37ff., parallels); Matthew 5-7 esp. 7:12; I Corinthians 13; Galatians 5:22.
    - (b) Like the love-commandment, the Decalogue is not sufficient in itself to define biblical morality.
      - (1) Even within the Old Testament, the Decalogue is supplemented by the Book of the Covenant (Exodus 21-24), case law, and application through non-legal material.
      - (2) The New Testament provides necessary correlations between the law and the redemptive work of Christ.
      - (3) Therefore, to define murder and adultery, e.g., we must consult all of Scripture, not just the Decalogue.
      - (4) The Decalogue itself announces that it must be seen in a context of redemptive reality.
        - (a) It begins with the announcement of the divine name.
          - (i) The law, therefore, is not authoritative merely because it happens to be true, but because of its author.
          - (ii) We obey the law because of who God is [cf. Part Two, I.A. Leviticus 18:2, etc.].
          - (iii) In the law, God reveals himself, his own character, as Israel’s covenant Lord.
        - (b) It then summarizes the history of redemption.
          - (i) The ground of obedience is not simply that the law is a command, but that God has redeemed his people. Gratitude.
          - (ii) Note how grace precedes law. Obedience is done in the context of grace.
  - b) Some elements of the Decalogue are limited to its historical situation.

- (1) The historical prologue, Ex. 20:2.
  - (2) Reference to Palestine in the fifth commandment, verse 12.
2. Importance of the Decalogue as summary of the law.
- a) Church-historical importance: Reformed catechisms traditionally deal with ethics in a kind of exposition of the Decalogue. Reformed systematic theology has also followed this procedure. Thus, this form is convenient for capturing what reformed people have most wanted to say about ethics.
  - b) Uniqueness of the occasion on which it was promulgated [C.1., below].
    - (1) Fulfillment of the promise of deliverance.
    - (2) Holiness of the mountain, thunders, lightnings, cloud, trumpet.
    - (3) This is the only time that the people of God as a whole gathered together and heard directly the divine voice.
    - (4) This is the “day of the assembly” (Deuteronomy 9:10, 10:4, 18:16), the day when Israel was constituted as God’s covenant people. This is part of our own community memory, since the people of God is one in all ages. Compare Ex. 19:6, 1 Pet. 2:9, also Rom. 11.
    - (5) This is the occasion upon which Moses was chosen as the mediator of God’s law (Exodus 20:19ff.).
  - c) Uniqueness of its function in the covenant structure.
    - (1) The Decalogue is the first written “covenant document” (Kline), the seed out of which grew the biblical canon as a whole. As a seed, we expect it to contain the whole biblical message in significant summary.
    - (2) As the covenant document, it functions as the basic constitution of Israel.
  - d) Uniqueness of its publication: “written with the finger of God” (Exodus 31:18; Deuteronomy 9:10).
  - e) Though the Decalogue is supplemented, it is nevertheless singled out in the later history of redemption as having a distinctive function within the canon: Deuteronomy 4:13, 5:1-27, 10:1-5; Matthew 5-7 (much commentary on Decalogue here), Matthew 19:16ff., parallels; Romans 13:9.
  - f) The basic requirements of the Old Testament law are not abrogated by the New Covenant [Part Two, I.D.5.], and the Decalogue does embody, on the whole, the “basic requirements.”
  - g) Hermeneutical principle: Generally when we seek light on a biblical doctrine, we look first at the passages where that doctrine is most focally and clearly presented. The Old Testament, on the whole, is more concerned than the New with setting forth our law (ethics, law). The Torah is the heart of Old Testament law, and the Decalogue is the heart of the Torah. Redemptive-historical change, of course, presents an argument against such focus on the Old Testament [Part Two, I.], but

with due allowance for such change, considerations of hermeneutics do argue for it.

3. Conclusion: The limitations of this or any summary must be frankly acknowledged. Consideration of the Decalogue is not the only way to summarize biblical ethics, nor is it, in every sense, the best way. Yet, it is one useful way, and, in some respects, it is uniquely useful.

B. Decalogical Hermeneutics.

1. Breadth of the Commandments.

- a) The problem: *The Westminster Larger Catechism*, Question and Answer 99, presents some rules for “right understanding” of the Decalogue which seem rather strange in contrast with our normal concept of “grammatico-historical” exegesis.

(1) Rule 1 states that the Decalogue requires “the utmost perfection of every duty” and forbids “the least degree of every sin”. But it appears that the Decalogue deals only with ten areas of obligation and does not mention many others. Does the Decalogue really serve as a complete Christian ethic?

(2) Rule 4: “. . . where a duty is commanded, the contrary sin is forbidden; and, where a sin is forbidden, the contrary duty is commanded . . . .”

- (a) In normal logic and hermeneutics, we do not deduce commands from prohibitions and *vice-versa*. “Keep of the grass.” does not ordinarily imply that you ought to give some positive encouragement to the growth of the grass.
- (b) Often, it is not clear what “the contrary sin” or “the contrary duty” is. If I say, “Don’t write your name on the first line of the paper.”, what is the “contrary duty”? To write someone else’s name? To write your own name on the second line or some other line? To write nothing at all? The “contrary duty,” it would seem, must be mentioned specifically; we cannot simply deduce it from the prohibition.

(3) Question and Answer 108: The second commandment, we are told, requires such things as administration of the sacraments, religious fasting, vows. How are such duties to be found in the language of the commandment, granted the principles of “grammatico-historical” exegesis?

- b) Response: Present-day use of these principles, without explanation, is bound to cause confusion among those trained in “scientific exegesis”. The writers of the catechism did not anticipate the distinctions which we, today, would consider necessary. Yet, the point they were making was not only valid, but important, and still is today. The catechism is looking at the sins described in the light of the whole Bible, and finds that when the whole Bible is consulted, each sin referred to in the Decalogue includes all the others (cf. James 2:10).

- (1) The first commandment: “other gods” include Mammon (money, Matthew 6:24), or anything else which competes with God for our ultimate loyalty. Since any sin is disloyalty to God, violation of any commandment is also violation of the first. Thus, all sin is violation of the first commandment. The commandment forbids all sins.
- (2) The second commandment, similarly: the sin of worshipping a graven image is in worshipping anything (or worshipping by means of anything) of human devising. “Worship” can be a broad ethical concept in Scripture as well as a narrowly cultic one (cf. Romans 12:1f.). Any sin involves following our own purposes instead of God’s, false worship.
- (3) In the third commandment, the “name of the Lord” can refer to God’s entire self-revelation; and disobedience of any sort to that revelation can be described as “vanity”.
- (4) The Sabbath commandment demands godly use of our entire calendar—the six days is to do God’s will, any ungodly use of time may be seen as transgression of the fourth commandment.
- (5) “Father and mother” in the fifth commandment can be read broadly to refer to all authority [see later discussion] and even the authority of God himself (Malachi 1:6) so that all disobedience to God is violation of the fifth commandment.
- (6) Jesus interprets the sixth commandment to prohibit unrighteous anger (Matthew 5:22) because of its disrespect for life. Since all sin manifests such disrespect for life, all sin violates the sixth commandment. It would not be wrong either to include a respect for spiritual life within the scope of this commandment.
- (7) Adultery is frequently used in Scripture as a metaphor (indeed, more than a metaphor) for idolatry, Israel being Jehovah’s unfaithful wife. The marriage figure is a prominent biblical description of the covenant order. Breaking the covenant at any point is adultery.
- (8) Withholding tithes and offerings—God’s due—is stealing (Malachi 3:8). Thus, to withhold any honor due to God falls under the same condemnation.
- (9) “Witnessing” in Scripture is something you are, more than something you do [see later discussion]. It involves not only speech, but actions as well. It is comprehensive.
- (10) Coveting, like stealing, is involved in all sin. Sinful acts are the product of the selfish heart. There is, therefore, a unity to sin as there is a unity to righteousness (=love).

c. Some principles:

- 1) The Catechism seems to assume the principle that proper applications of the commandments are aspects of their meaning.
- 2) It understands the concepts of the Decalogue (adultery, murder, etc.) in their full biblical meaning, bringing in data from all Scripture.

- 3) It recognizes that each commandment is part of a broad system of commands, each of which takes the others into account.
  - 4) The system as a whole requires primarily heart-obedience (the law of love). If your *heart* hates murder, it will motivate you positively to seek your neighbor's health.
2. Narrowness of the Commandments: Even though each commandment includes all the others, the commandments are not all synonymous. Each looks at our total obligation from a different perspective, in different terms. Lying is not precisely the same thing as stealing.
- a) There is a dangerous tendency in some ethical writing to eliminate specific meaning in favor of general meaning.
    - (1) E.g., "Adultery is not mere abstinence from extra-marital sex, but is really whole-souled fidelity to God;" "The sixth commandment tells us to promote God's eternal life, and so has no bearing on abortion."
    - (2) That is unwarranted.
      - (a) The general has no meaning apart from the specific. What is "spiritual chastity" if it does not entail any specific behavior?
      - (b) Reducing the specifics to the general brings in all the problems associated with situation ethics—a general law of love with no specific meaning.
      - (c) You can never refute a proposed specific application of a commandment merely by referring to its general meaning. E.g., you can never refute an application of the eighth commandment to the property tax simply by saying that the commandment deals with our stewardship before God. To refute a specific application, you must argue specifically. It is simply not true that God is concerned only about broad redemptive realities and not about narrow "details." (Cf. John Murray's comments on this.)
  - b) Therefore, every commandment has both a broad and a narrow meaning: The eighth commandment does teach that we should not rob God of his honor; but it also teaches that we should not eat donuts without paying.
3. Summary.
- a) The commandments represent ten perspectives on the whole ethical life. (Cf. our earlier "triangle." These relations would be pictured as a decagon, if I could draw one.)
  - b) Each commandment teaches the whole of our obligation from one particular point of view.
  - c) Each commandment also teaches many specific obligations which follow from the whole ("equal ultimacy of the one and many").
  - d) The Larger Catechism can be defended, then, by saying that the commandments do encompass a great multitude of specifics, and that any specific commandment can be shown to be an application of any of the ten. However, I am not enthusiastic about the Catechism's method of

presentation. It seems to move between breadth and narrowness without a clearly persuasive principle of organization and derivation.

C. Summary of the Decalogue in Chart Form. (Don't take this too seriously—JF).

Although each commandment involves all the others, they do differ from one another in “perspective” as we have indicated. There is a progress from one commandment to the next that can be summarized in the following scheme. The rationale for the scheme will be explained in the discussions of the individual commandments. “I” refers to the first commandment, “II” to the second, etc.

1. Our Obligation to Love the Lord (I-III).

- a) **Father–heart** Worship only the true God (I)—Situational perspective:
- b) **Son–word** Worship him only on the basis of his word (II)—Normative perspective:
- c) **Spirit–deed** Worship him only through the right use of the word (III)—Existential Perspective: (The first three commandments manifest a trinitarian structure: God, the Word, our Spirit-induced response.)

2. Our Obligation to Keep God's Ordinances (IV-X).

- a) Situational perspective: obedience in deed.
  - (1) Positively.
    - (a) The creation ordinances of labor, rest, and worship (IV)
    - (b) The creation ordinance of the family (V).
  - (2) Negatively.
    - (a) Vs. contempt for man's life (VI) (creation ordinances of worship and family).
    - (b) Vs. contempt for marriage (VII) (creation ordinance of the family).
    - (c) Vs. contempt for property (VIII) (creation ordinance of labor).
- b) Normative perspective: obedience in word (IX).
- c) Existential perspective: obedience in the heart (X).

D. Biblical Prefaces to the Law.

1. The Presence of God (Exodus 19): At Mount Sinai, when the covenant was made and Israel was set apart as God's people, the whole people of God heard the voice of God directly, without the mediation of prophecy or writing. This event is unique in redemptive history. [Cf. above, A.2.b.]

- a) The phenomena.
  - (1) Thunder, lightning, Exodus 19:16, 20:18.
  - (2) Thick cloud, darkness, Exodus 19:16, 20:21; Deuteronomy 4:11.
  - (3) The trumpet, Exodus 19:16, 20:18: not the ram's horn (v. 13), but something else which grows in volume as God comes near.
  - (4) Smoke and fire, Exodus 19:18: “to the heart of heaven,” Deuteronomy 4:11. Apparently something enormous, unearthly. The fire is emphasized, Deuteronomy 4:33, 36, 5:4f.—perhaps

- reminiscent of Exodus 3:2, or even Genesis 15:17 (cf. Genesis 15:12).
- (5) The quake, Exodus 19:18.
  - (6) The voice itself, Exodus 19:9; Deuteronomy 4:12, 33, 36, 5:23ff.
- b) Their purpose (cf. general purposes of miracles, connotations of *dunamis*, *teras*, *semeion* parallel with Lordship attributes).
- (1) Exhibition of divine power: note emphasis on the greatness (Exodus 19:18), the loudness (19:20), the enormity of the fire (Deuteronomy 4:11), the uniqueness of the experience (Deuteronomy 4:32-36), the revelation of God's greatness and glory (Deuteronomy 5:24).
  - (2) Eliciting of fear.
    - (a) Terror of God's presence in judgment—Exodus 19:16, 20:18f.; Deuteronomy 5:5, 25; Hebrews 12:18-21. This is not presented as the purpose of God in giving the signs, but as the actual result. Doubtless God intended the result, but the emphasis in describing the divine intention is on other points; see below.
    - (b) Sanctifying reverence—Exodus 20:20; Deuteronomy 4:10, cf. Deuteronomy 4:24.
  - (3) Instruction, Deuteronomy 4:36, cf. 4:10—closely related to ii.b).
    - (a) Confirming the mediator, Exodus 19:9, 20:18f.; (cf. “signs of the apostles”).
    - (b) Confirming the content of the law, Exodus 20:22ff., Deuteronomy 4:10.
    - (c) Confirming the certainty of God's mercy and judgment, Deuteronomy 4:24 and 33 in context.
    - (d) Confirming the identity of God himself, Deuteronomy 4:36 in context of 35.
- c) Since the New Testament Church is one body with Old Testament Israel, the assembly at Sinai is part of our own community memory (cf. Exodus 19:6; I Peter 2:9), from which we also ought to take instruction. We have, however, an even greater memory, a greater vision of God in Christ (Hebrews 12:18-29), which has a greater, but parallel purpose. Hebrews reminds us also that “our God is a consuming fire,” 12:29.
2. The Name of the Lord (Exodus 20:1): As God had earlier identified himself to Moses as “I am” and “*Yahweh*” (Exodus 3:14f.), so now he identifies himself to all Israel as the Lord of the covenant.
- a) A Personal Revelation.
    - (1) “*Yahweh*” is first of all a proper name, the name of a person. The covenant law, therefore, is not based merely on abstract principles; ultimately, it is the will of a person. The law reveals him to us by telling us what pleases and displeases him.
    - (2) “The Lord thy God”: Israel itself is involved.

- (a) In effect, Israel is part of God's own name—God is thy God, God of Israel. Note the profundity, then, of God's covenant identification with this people. God identifies himself with them and *vice-versa*. Such love for sinners!
  - (b) Singular pronouns are used for Israel throughout the Decalogue. This gives a sense of unity to the people and intimacy to their relation with God.
  - (c) The covenant law, therefore, is not an abstract legal document, but a loving self-communication between the Lord and the people he has chosen for himself.
- b) A Meaningful Revelation: “*Yahweh*” is not only a proper name, but, like most near-eastern proper names, it says something about the person named. The meaning of “*Yahweh*” is rather difficult to ascertain, but a survey of the emphases found in contexts where the name is prominent suggests that the following ideas are important (“Lordship Attributes”):
- (1) Control: God rescued Israel from Egypt in such a way that displayed his control over all things in heaven and earth.
  - (2) Authority: He speaks in his law the word which must be obeyed without question, which transcends all other loyalties, which governs all areas of life.
  - (3) Presence: He identifies himself with his covenant people, primarily for blessing, but also for judgment. “I am with you.” [Cf. a., above].
3. The Rule of God (Relation of Blessing and Obedience) (Exodus 20:2, etc.).
- a) Blessing Precedes Obedience (priority of sovereign grace).
    - (1) Emphasis on the making of covenant following divine victory: Exodus 20:2; Deuteronomy 1:1-5, 4:44-49, 29:1.
    - (2) Emphasis upon grace as the source of victory: Deuteronomy 4:20, 6:10-12, 7:6-8, 8:17, 9:1-6.
    - (3) Emphasis on sovereign election: Deuteronomy 7:6-8, 10:14-17.
    - (4) Since we have been chosen as God's people, we must obey, Deuteronomy 27:9ff.
    - (5) Since God has delivered us and blessed us, we must obey, Deuteronomy 6:20-25, 10:21-11:7, 8:1-6, 11-18, 29:2-9; Leviticus 19:36f., 20:8, 22:31ff.
    - (6) God addresses Israel in the singular: emphasizing divine intimacy, individual responsibility.

Excursus: Does this mean that the law is given only to Israel, since it is based on Israel's distinctive election from among all the nations? No; it means that this particular covenantal formulation of the law is given only to Israel. The law itself is given to every man in nature an conscience (Romans 1-2), and the law given through nature and conscience is described as “the work of the law” (Romans 2:15), that is, ordinances agreeing in content with the law given through Moses. It is also clear that rulers in heathen nations were expected to rule justly, that is, in accord with God's law. See Bahnsen, *Theonomy*, 339-364. The Mosaic Law, then, is a formulation of that law that is known to all people and which binds all people. It is, however, a particular application of that law to a very “peculiar” people. It is not easy to sort out what is generally applicable from what applies

only to Israel specifically [cf. Part Two, I.D.5-6.]; but it would be wrong to assume that since the law is a redemptive revelation its demands may not be proclaimed to unbelievers. Quite the contrary.

b) Blessing Follows Obedience.

- (1) If you obey, then you are the people of God. Exodus 19:5.  
Interesting and paradoxical contrast with Deuteronomy 27:9ff. The point is that obedience and salvation are inseparable. You can't have either without the other.
- (2) Promise of prosperity, victory, to those who obey: Exodus 20:6, 12, 23:22-33; Deuteronomy 5:32f., 6:1-3, 17-19, 8:7-10, 11:10-12, 13:18, Psm. 1. Note NT parallels: Matt. 6:33, Mark 10:29, 1 Cor. 3:21, Eph. 6:1-3, 1 Tim. 4:8. Grace leads to works, which lead to more blessing.

I. The First Commandment: "Thou shalt have no other gods before me."

A. Theological Setting.

1. The Positive Focus.

a) WLC 104: What are the duties required in the first commandment?

A. The duties required in the first commandment are, the knowing and acknowledging of God to be the only true God, and our God; and to worship and glorify him accordingly, by thinking, meditating, remembering, highly esteeming, honouring, adoring, choosing, loving, desiring, fearing of him, believing him, trusting, hoping, delighting, rejoicing in him; being zealous for him; calling upon him, giving all praise and thanks, and yielding all obedience and submission to him with the whole man; being careful in all things to please him, and sorrowful when in any thing he is offended; and walking humbly with him.

b) Love.

- (1) Despite the negative formulation of the commandment, it actually commands that most positive of Christian virtues, love. [Cf. Part Two I.D.9; III.C.3.f.].
  - (a) It comes at the point where the suzerainty treaty would demand love by the vassal for the suzerain.
  - (b) Its meaning is synonymous with the covenantal sense of love: exclusive covenant loyalty.
- (2) Relations to context.
  - (a) Love, therefore, is the grateful response of the vassal to the saving mercies of the Lord described in the historical prologue: here, thankfulness for the redemption from Egypt.
  - (b) This love, in turn, becomes the motive for obeying all the rest of the law.
  - (c) It provides a summary of our obligation—cf. Deuteronomy 6:4ff.
- (3) New Testament realization: Matthew 10:34ff., 19:16-30, 16:24; Philippians 3:7f. One of the strongest proofs of the deity of Christ is that

he demanded the same absolute loyalty that Jehovah demanded in the first commandment.

- c) Worship: Exclusive loyalty to a god means exclusive worship.
- (1) Narrow focus: cultic purity. Sacrifice, prayer, etc., made exclusively to the Lord.
  - (2) Broad focus: ethical purity.
    - (a) Pure worship always involves coming before God with clean hands and pure heart (Psalm 24:4; cf. Luke 1:74; Acts 24:14; II Timothy 1:3, etc.).
    - (b) Cultic terminology (*'abad, latreuein, douleuein, leitourgein*) (especially outside the Bible, but inside it as well) for service in general, whether religious or secular. Thus, it is not inherently bound to cultic use.
    - (c) Thus, the language of worship [above; and also the language of priesthood, sacrifice, temple, holiness, cleansing] is used in Scripture for ethical purity in general: Matthew 6:24; Romans 12:1; James 1:27; Hebrews 12:28. Note also the use of these terms in connection with Paul's mission: Romans 1:9; Philippians 2:17. "Worship in the broad sense."
    - (d) The exclusiveness of our worship involves exclusive loyalty to God's law—this law and no other; cf. discussion of the sufficiency of Scripture for ethics. Deuteronomy 6:1-9, 10:12-16.
    - (e) Thus, the first commandment has both a narrow and a broad meaning [cf. Introduction, B.]. In one sense, all sins are violations of the first commandment, for all sins are defections from pure covenant loyalty.
- d) Consecration: Covenant loyalty means that God's people and all their possessions are to be set apart to him.
- (1) Note the many laws in the Pentateuch involving the sanctification of individuals and things:
    - (a) Redemption ("sanctification") of the firstborn, Exodus 13.
    - (b) Ransom of individuals, Exodus 30:1ff.
    - (c) Consecration of the Nazirite, Numbers 6.
    - (d) Consecration of first fruits, Deuteronomy 26.
  - (2) Note especially those institutions defining covenant membership:
    - (a) Circumcision, Genesis 17:9ff.; Leviticus 12:3.
    - (b) Passover, Exodus 12; Numbers 9; Deuteronomy 16.
    - (c) Sabbath [see below, IV.].
  - (3) Comments:
    - (a) Covenant loyalty (love, worship) must take concrete form. One must not only love God inwardly and seek to obey; rather, he must confess the Lord openly by identifying himself as belonging to God.

- (b) Since we are fallen, this consecration involves confession of our sins and reception of God's atoning grace.
- (c) In confessing the Lord, we also identify ourselves with his people. There is no such thing as a merely private allegiance to God.
- (d) Note also the importance of recognizing ourselves as stewards, recognizing that God owns all and we only hold in trust.
- (e) In the New Testament too, the elements of public confession, sacraments, identification with God's people, stewardship are emphasized.
- (f) More broadly, Scripture teaches that our chief end is to glorify God (see earlier lectures).

## 2. The Negative Focus.

### a) WLC 105: What are the sins forbidden in the first commandment?

A. The sins forbidden in the first commandment are, Atheism, in denying or not having a God; Idolatry, in having or worshipping more gods than one, or any with or instead of the true God; the not having and avouching him for God and our God; the omission or neglect of any thing due to him, required in this commandment; ignorance, forgetfulness, misapprehensions, false opinions, unworthy and wicked thoughts of him; bold and curious searching into his secrets; all profaneness, hatred of God; self-love, self-seeking, and all other inordinate and immoderate setting of our mind, will, or affections upon other things, and taking them off from him in whole or in part; vain credulity, unbelief, heresy, misbelief, distrust, despair, incorrigibleness, and insensibleness under judgments, hardness of heart, pride, presumption, carnal security, tempting of God; using unlawful means, and trusting in lawful means; carnal delights and joys; corrupt, blind, and indiscreet zeal; lukewarmness, and deadness in the things of God; estranging ourselves and apostatizing from God; praying, or giving any religious worship, to saints, angels, or any other creatures; all compacts and consulting with the devil, and hearkening to his suggestions; making men the lords of our faith and conscience; slighting and despising God and his commands; resisting and grieving of his Spirit, discontent and impatience at his dispensations, charging him foolishly for the evils he inflicts on us; and ascribing the praise of any good we either are, have, or can do, to fortune, idols, ourselves, or any other creature.

- b) Why is the law so negative? All the commandments except the fourth and fifth are framed as prohibitions. (Note, however, strong emphasis on love and obedience at the end of the second.)
  - (1) As we have seen, a negative formulation does not rule out positive applications. Positive or negative form is more a matter of phrasing than of meaning. But why all the negative phrasing?
  - (2) The negative focus reflects the reality of sin and temptation. Obedience to God always involves saying no—to Satan, to the world, to our own lusts. The negative formulations call our attention to the fact that this is

a fallen world, and, at every point, we must be prepared to do battle with sin.

- (3) The very notion of “exclusive” covenant loyalty requires negations for its exposition. To love God exclusively involves denying that special love to anyone else. As God’s electing love makes distinctions among men, so we must distinguish among the gods.
  - (4) Specifically: the negations call for:
    - (a) Repentance—turning away from sin to Christ.
    - (b) Self-denial—taking up our cross and following Christ.
    - (c) Separation—breaking away from all associations which compromise our loyalty to him.
  - (5) Remarkably enough, the New Testament is no less negative in its emphasis. Cf. the Sermon on the Mount. Even love, the most positive of Christian virtues, is expounded negatively in I Corinthians 13.
  - (6) You see how important it is to preach negatively. Many object to this, finding in any criticism or prohibition a lack of love. But truth must be proclaimed in contrast with error, good in contrast with evil if it is to be presented clearly and relevantly to the real needs of people.
- c) From what must we separate?
- (1) From false gods (“No other gods before [or besides] me”): Moloch, Baal, Asherah, etc. (Deuteronomy 6:14f., 12:29-32). Cf. the third temptation of Jesus, Matthew 4:9f.
  - (2) From giving ultimate devotion to something less than God: Mammon-money, (Matt. 6:24), possessions (Luke 12:16-21) [Col. 3:5 says greed is idolatry], politics (Dan. 2:21), pleasures-entertainment (2 Tim. 3:4), food (Phil. 3:19), self (Deut. 8:17, Dan. 4:30).
  - (3) From false ideas of God
    - (a) Limiting him to a narrowly religious sphere.
    - (b) Supposing that our works might gain his favor.
    - (c) Sentimentalist religion: a god who does not judge.
    - (d) Pluralism: God as one of many ways to heaven.
    - (e) Neo-paganism: mystical identity between God and the self.
    - (f) Extreme feminism: the creation of new, female images of God.
    - (g) Practical or theoretical deism.
    - (h) Process and open theisms.
  - (4) From false prophets and religious figures: Deuteronomy 13, 18; Exodus 22:18.
  - (5) From false religious practices: divination, human sacrifice, petty superstitions: Deuteronomy 18:9-14; Leviticus 18:21, 19:26, 31, 20:6, 27.
  - (6) From those who practice false worship, Exodus 12:15, 23:25-33; Leviticus 20:1-6; Deuteronomy 21, 13:6ff.; Ezra 4:1-3; Deuteronomy

7:16-26, 23:3-8, 25:17ff., 27:2-7; cf. Exodus 34, 23:31ff.;  
Deuteronomy 7:1-4.

- (7) From uncleanness: Numbers 19; Deuteronomy 23, etc.
  - (a) Ceremonial
  - (b) Ethical, II Corinthians 7:1; cf. metaphorical senses of “idolatry,”  
Colossians 3:5; Ephesians 5:5; I John 5:21; Mark 6:24; Luke 6:9ff.
- (8) From any compromise with false religion, II Kings 5:18; Joshua 23:7;  
Ezra 4:1-3; Exodus 23:24, 34:13; Numbers 23:52; Deuteronomy  
12:1ff., 16:21.

## B. Problem Areas.

### 1. The Occult.

- a) The problem.
  - (1) Contemporary devotion to the occult goes back to the pre-Christian period of western history. Shows the incompleteness of the evangelization of the west.
  - (2) Even professing Christians often dabble in the occult on the side, as a kind of supplement to an inadequate Christianity, or out of sinful dissatisfaction with the simplicity of the gospel.
  - (3) Petty superstitions: aversion to walking under ladders, etc.
  - (4) Then, there are those who investigate the occult in a quasi-scientific way—not out of any obvious religious commitment, but seeking to further their knowledge. E.g.: is there a connection between the positions of the stars and the events of human history?
- b) Biblical principles.
  - (1) Scripture forbids worship of anything other than the one true God [A., above]. This includes worship both in the narrowly cultic and in the more broadly ethical senses. False gods are not to be prayed to, bowed down to, or obeyed as ethical authorities.
  - (2) God forbids “turning to” or “hearkening to” wizards, diviners, Leviticus 19:31, 20:6, 27; Deuteronomy 18:9-14.
    - (a) The practices listed in Deuteronomy 18:9ff. are somewhat obscure, but are clearly manifestations of the false religions.
    - (b) The main contrast in Deuteronomy 18 is between “hearkening” (obedient hearing) to the false religions (verse 14) and “hearkening” to the words of the true prophet (15, 19).
    - (c) Thus, the authentic word of the Lord is the only, the sufficient ultimate authority for ethics. Cf. earlier discussion of the sufficiency of Scripture for ethics.
    - (d) The passages do not teach that we must ignore the wizards and diviners; indeed, it was necessary for God’s people to know what these people were saying in order to enact the proper judicial sentence.

- (e) Nor do these passages deny to the wizards all knowledge of truth. They know the truth in the same (paradoxical!) way that all unbelievers do (Romans 1), and it is therefore not impossible that we might occasionally learn from them. But we are not to hearken to them as to God. They must not be allowed, either in theory or in practice, to become our ultimate authority or to function as coordinate with or supplementary to Scripture.
  - (f) Petty superstitions: the problem is a religious fear, with no basis in divine revelation.
- (3) False religions have no power over the believer but by God's decree.
- (a) Cf. earlier discussion of I Corinthians 8-10. No idol is anything in this world. We may resist even the devil himself, and he will flee (James 4:7).
  - (b) God may permit Satan to afflict us (Job, etc.), but will not allow him to take us from the hand of Christ.
  - (c) Therefore, we need not fear that we will be hurt through mere association with the occult—e.g., through talking to a Satanist, reading a horoscope, studying the history of numerology, etc.
    - (i) There is nothing wrong with satisfying curiosity about such matters. Occult religions are no different, really, from other false religions, and we generally see no problem in reading the *Koran* or the *Book of Mormon*. [Cf. ii.d), above].
    - (ii) I am not recommending that anyone saturate his mind with false religious propaganda. Harm can be done in that way. In that respect, however, there is no difference between occult literature and mindless TV show.
- (4) There is no biblical objection against a Christian scientific study of occult claims, insofar as those claims do not conflict with Scripture.
- (a) Unbelievers do know truth in a sense and up to a point [Romans 1; ii.e) above]
  - (b) Unbelievers do make discoveries which a Christian scholar must take account of, though he must reject the religious presuppositions of the discoverers.
  - (c) Sometimes, these discoveries are deeply embedded in the context of a false religious practice.
    - (i) A witch doctor using an herb which turns out to have real medical value.
    - (ii) Acupuncture, techniques for relaxation and self-defense—often very difficult to separate from Eastern religious practice, but showing some insight.
    - (iii) Ancient Greek beliefs about the spherical shape of the earth, mainly stemming from mythological and philosophical speculation about the perfection of the spherical form.

- (iv) Astrology: we must reject astral determinism and the idea that life is to be governed by the stars. Yet, the hypothesis, e.g., that personality is influenced by the time of year at which one is born must not be dismissed simply because it is taught by a false religion.
  - (v) We may appreciate the music and art which comes out of false religious orientations, even while opposing the content expressed.
  - (vi) Clairvoyance? I have an open mind (as Geesink, Schilder), but would reject any religious teaching (as Edgar Cayce) based on that alone.
2. Religious Pluralism (Douma)
- a) Are there many ways to heaven? No. The issue is Christ.
    - (1) His unique nature, Matt. 16:13-17, 22:42, John 1:1, 3, 14, 10:30, Rom. 9:5.
    - (2) Unique in making the Father known, John 1:18.
    - (3) Unique as the way to the Father, John 14:6, Acts 4:12.
  - b) Otherwise, living without God, Acts 14:15-16, 1 Cor. 1:21, 2:10-16, Gal. 4:8, Eph. 2:12, 4:18, 20.
  - c) Does not require any aversion or disrespect to non-Christians. We call them to liberation from the angry gods of paganism, superstition, etc. The secularization of the world encourages the development of science and technology. But technology can become an idol too.
3. Secret Societies (Masons, Odd Fellows, Rosicrucians, etc.).
- a) The situation.
    - (1) Membership in such societies has been common among professing Christians, especially in American Presbyterianism. It is often very difficult to persuade people that there is anything wrong with them.
    - (2) Many reformed bodies, however, have sharply opposed membership in such organizations: the U.P. Church of North America; the R.P.N.A., the C.R.C., the O.P.C. The R.C.A. refused to take such a stand.
    - (3) Even those bodies which do oppose such organizations, however, have not been fully consistent with their positions. In the OPC, some ruling elders have been Masons in recent years.
  - b) The problems.
    - (1) The oath of secrecy: does Scripture permit us (as such organizations sometimes require) to pledge secrecy in advance of knowing what is to be kept secret?
    - (2) The bond of brotherhood: Masons are expected to help other Masons before anyone else; the brotherhood of Masonry takes precedence over other relationships. But Scripture calls Christians to give their most profound loyalty to the body of Christ. Galatians 6:10.

- (3) The religious rites of Masonry: may a Christian join in prayer, reading of Scripture, religious ceremonies which are not being carried on in the name of Christ, in which all worshippers are invited to pray to their own gods?
- (4) The non-Christian character of Masonic theology.
  - (a) Claim to have found the essence of all religion, of which Christianity, Judaism, Islam, etc. are only forms.
  - (b) God is father to all, apart from Christ.
  - (c) Scripture references distorted, taken out of context. “The stone which the builders rejected” referred to the Masonic order.
  - (d) Salvation available through all religions.
  - (e) Morality based on nature, not Scripture; Scriptural law not obligatory.
- c) The pro-Masonic response:
  - (1) A Christian may use Masonry to further God’s purposes in common grace. It is useful to encourage false religions and “natural morality” since God uses these to restrain sin in the world.
  - (2) Reply: God does use such religions and moralities; In fact, he uses evil itself to further his purposes. But he does not, thereby, give his approval to evil or to false worship. Further, Scripture never calls on believers to give any encouragement to false worship and doctrine; quite the contrary.
- 4. Secular Schools, Labor Unions, etc.
  - a) The problem.
    - (1) These organizations are not cultic or explicitly religious in the sense that those discussed earlier are. Yet, we have seen that the first commandment has a broad as well as a narrow focus.
    - (2) Many such organizations set forth ideologies (Marxism, secular humanism) inconsistent with Christianity, and they limit the freedom of their members to express and apply their Christian faith.
  - b) Response.
    - (1) As we noted in earlier discussions, mere association with false religions is not idolatry; else, we would have to withdraw from the world. The mere hearing of false doctrine through involvement with such organizations does not constitute sin. I Corinthians 5:9f.
    - (2) Nor does Scripture forbid all support to such organizations. Jesus advocated paying taxes to Caesar, even though the Roman government was idolatrous. Paul permitted Christians to purchase food from idolatrous vendors, even when that food had been offered to idols. Therefore, it could hardly be wrong to pay union dues to a Marxist union in return for various services, or to pay tuition at a humanist university.

- (3) It would be sinful for us to adopt non-Christian ideas or practices as part of our involvement with such organizations, either as a condition of membership or because we allow ourselves to be persuaded. That would be “hearkening” unto false teaching.
- (4) There is, of course, always a danger in exposing ourselves to temptation. Let him who stands take heed lest he fall. It is always dangerous to expose yourself to false teaching; unless you have a good reason for doing it, and are well grounded in the faith, don’t do it.
  - (a) Scripture tells us to focus our attentions on things that are pure, true, honorable, etc. (Philippians 4:8). This does not mean that we are to be ignorant of evil; Paul was not. But it does mean that we ought not to saturate our minds with spiritual poison.
  - (b) This consideration is a serious one when we consider the possibility of sending young children to public schools.
    - (i) In general, I recommend the use of Christian schools or home schools, especially for the youngest children.
    - (ii) However, there are places where Christian schools are either non-existent or inadequate educationally or foster seriously false notions of Christianity (such as the notion that Christians never associate with non-Christians). Here, then, there are problems on both sides, and the alternatives must be weighed carefully in each particular case. The parents will be responsible for the outcome. Ultimately, they are the educators of their children.
    - (iii) And it is important to prepare children to live in the real world, not in a Christian ghetto. For most of us that will mean at some time receiving education from unbelievers. That may occur in high school, college, grad school, vocational training, etc. Christian parents need to decide responsibly at what point and to what degree their children should be exposed to such education.

##### 5. Apostate Churches.

- a) Scripture does not directly address the question of the apostate church.
  - (1) It might be argued that Old Covenant Israel had become apostate by rejecting Christ. Still, Scripture does not assume that one could simply leave Israel at his own discretion. The Jews were bound to Israel by birth, circumcision, priesthood, temple; there was no alternative. Only the making of a New Covenant by divine initiative could warrant a separation of the Christian church from the Old Covenant people of God. No such divine provision exists to free us from contemporary church organizations.
  - (2) In the New Testament, the possibility of an apostate church is not considered. It is assumed, in fact, that apostates will demonstrate their

apostasy by leaving the church, I John 2:19, or else will be disciplined by the church (I Corinthians 5:9-13).

- b) However, Scripture does not guarantee that any particular church organization will remain faithful until the return of Christ, anymore than it guaranteed the perpetual faithfulness of Old Testament Israel.
- c) It cannot be argued that Christians are bound to visible church organizations in the same way that Israel was bound to the temple and the Aaronic priesthood. Christ is our temple, our one mediator.
- d) Further, it is doubtful that any modern denomination can even claim the title “church” on a New Testament basis. In the New Testament, “church” is applied to local assemblies, to city churches, to the church universal, but not to anything like a modern denomination. The “denomination” is an anomaly; we must treat it as a church for practical purposes, since it is the only recognized visible form of the church beyond the local unit; however, in a deeper sense, it is only a temporary makeshift, a tent in which we live while awaiting and working toward the completion of our house—the restoration of all Christians to one visible church. Thus, to leave one denomination and enter another is not the same thing as schism from the New Testament church.
- e) Still, division among brethren is not to be taken lightly, for division tends to produce hurt, lessening of fellowship, weakening of the whole body of Christ.
- f) Separation is warranted:
  - (1) When a particular organization loses any of the defining marks of the church (classically formulated as the preaching of the word, the right administration of the sacraments, discipline).
  - (2) When membership in such an organization requires commission of sin: in 1936, many left the Presbyterian Church USA on the ground that they were being required to support false teaching as a condition of membership.
- g) While separation is required only on the above grounds, we cannot argue that it is forbidden in every other instance. One might leave a church or denomination to join another for many reasons—e.g., to find greater opportunity for developing and using one’s gifts. It is important, however, that wherever enmity or strife play a role in such a division, that the division not be allowed to prevent reconciliation.
- h) Be careful of oversimplifying the questions involved here. There are many complications in particular cases. For instance, one might argue that it is sinful for a particular evangelical congregation to belong to a liberal denomination, but not for an individual evangelical to belong to that congregation. Apostasy of a denomination does not necessarily imply the apostasy of every congregation therein, even though it might imply some lesser sins in those congregations.

II. The Second Commandment: “Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image, or any likeness of any thing that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth: Thou shalt not bow down thyself to them, nor serve them: for I the Lord thy God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children unto the third and fourth generation of them that hate me; And showing mercy unto thousands of them that love me, and keep my commandments.

WLC, 108: What are the duties required in the second commandment?

The duties required in the second commandment are, the receiving, observing, and keeping pure and entire, all such religious worship and ordinances as God hath instituted in his word; particularly prayer and thanksgiving in the name of Christ; the reading, preaching, and hearing of the word; the administration and receiving of the sacraments; church government and discipline; the ministry and maintenance thereof; religious fasting; swearing by the name of God, and vowing unto him; as also the disapproving, detesting, opposing, all false worship; and, according to each one’s place and calling, removing it, and all monuments of idolatry.

109: What are the sins forbidden in the second commandment?

The sins forbidden in the second commandment are, all devising, counselling, commanding, using, and any wise approving, any religious worship not instituted by God himself; the making any representation of God, of all or of any of the three persons, either inwardly in our mind, or outwardly in any kind of image or likeness of any creature whatsoever; all worshipping of it, or God in it or by it; the making of any representation of feigned deities, and all worship of them, or service belonging to them; all superstitious devices, corrupting the worship of God, adding to it, or taking from it, whether invented and taken up of ourselves, or received by tradition from others, though under the title of antiquity, custom, devotion, good intent, or any other pretense whatsoever; simony; sacrilege; all neglect, contempt, hindering, and opposing the worship and ordinances which God has appointed.

A. Main Thrust (narrow focus):

Forbids making images for the purpose of bowing to them—i.e., doing homage to them as representations of deity, and / or as media through which God draws near.

1. Context of worship.

- a) The formulations in Exodus and Deuteronomy seem at first reading to forbid all image-making, i.e., all art.
- b) Other considerations, however, counteract this first impression:
  - (1) Scripture never suggests that there is anything wrong with art in itself, except possibly in these passages.
  - (2) Scripture not only permits, but warrants the use of ornamentation and in particular the making of pictures—of cherubim, bells, pomegranates, Exodus 25-28; note especially 25:18ff., 28:33ff., chapters 35-39; cf. I Kings 6:14-36, 10:19ff. Cf. also Numbers 21:8, Ezekiel 41:17-20.
  - (3) The brass serpent was ordained by God to heal the people as they looked toward it (Num. 21:6-9), This was not idolatry. But the people

later made idolatrous *use* of it (2 Kings 18:4), and God was then pleased with its destruction.

- (4) Use of the Hebrew terms allows for both idolatrous and non-idolatrous use of the same item *matz-tze-bah*, pillar, designates idols in some contexts (Exodus 23:24, 34:13; Leviticus 26:1; Deuteronomy 7:5, etc.) but is elsewhere used in a good sense (Genesis 28:18, 22, 31:13, 45ff., 35:14, 20). The resultant meaning is that a pillar can have either an idolatrous or non-idolatrous function—that the erection of the pillar is neither right nor wrong in itself. It is the use, not the object itself, with which the commandment is concerned.
  - (5) *Pesel*, graven image, is always used in a bad sense, as an object used for idolatrous purposes. As I see it, it denotes objects used in idolatry, not art objects as such.
  - (6) *Temunah*, likeness, is always used in a bad sense when referring to likenesses of created things, thus similar to *pesel*. Interestingly, however, it can also be used to refer to a likeness of God, Numbers 12:8, Psalm 17:15, not at all unfavorably.
- c) Positively, the context is one of religious worship (not only public, but private, Deuteronomy 27:15).
2. Representations of deity.
    - a) The commandment does not forbid all religious use of images, for such images were used in the tabernacle and temple worship. [Cf. passages under 1.b.ii., above].
    - b) Specifically, it forbids the use of images as representations of deity.
      - (1) It forbids “molten gods,” Exodus 20:22f., 24:17; Leviticus 19:4.
      - (2) It forbids erecting images, pillars, etc., for the purpose of bowing down to them, Leviticus 26:1. In effect, the second sentence of the commandment in Exodus 20 and Deuteronomy 5 gives the purpose for which the making of images is forbidden.
  3. Representations of the true God.
    - a) Obviously, the second commandment forbids making images of false gods. In that respect, however, it is redundant, since all worship of false gods is condemned already in the first commandment.
    - b) At crucial points, the language of the commandment is invoked specifically against the worship of Jehovah by images.
      - (1) Deuteronomy 4:15ff.: The commandment is warranted by the fact that Israel saw no form at Sinai, where the true God was manifested.
      - (2) Exodus 32:1-6: The golden calf was intended to be an image of Jehovah.
        - (a) Verse 4: “These are thy gods (*elohim*),” with plural pronoun and verb. But there is one calf. The verse as a whole is a paraphrase of Exodus 20:2.

- (b) Verse 5: Following the making of the calf and the altar, Aaron announces a feast of Jehovah, which would make no sense if he and Israel had determined to worship other gods.
- (c) Verse 6: The next day they offered burnt-offerings and peace-offerings, best understood as those required by the true God.
- (3) I Kings 12:28ff.: The calves made by Jeroboam were intended to represent Jehovah.
  - (a) Note verse 28, like Exodus 32:4, a reference to Exodus 20:2.
  - (b) The people are condemned initially, not for worshipping a false god, but for worshipping in a way not ordained by God. But in 1 Kings 14:9, Jeroboam's calves are called "other gods," indicating the unity between the second commandment and the first. To worship Yahweh by an image is to worship another god.
  - (c) Ahab (1 Kings 16:31) went from violating the second commandment to violating the first, worshipping Baal.
  - (4) Compare Micah, Judg. 17:2, 18:30, who also worshipped Yahweh by an image.

#### 4. Pagan Sacramentalism.

- a) "Bowing down to wood and stone" does not necessarily mean that the wood and stone are considered divine. Image-worship, even within paganism, is generally more sophisticated than that. The wood and stone may receive homage, not because they are themselves divine, but because they are media through which the god draws near to the people and the people to him.
- b) Especially, the image represents a conduit of *power* from the god to the worshipper (victory, fertility, etc.).
- c) Thus, the commandment proscribes, not only the crude belief in the deity of material objects, but also the more refined sacramentalism described above.

#### B. Relationship to the First Commandment.

1. In general, it can be said that the first commandment deals with the object of worship, while the second deals with the way in which worship is to be carried on. Cf. the two meanings of "idolatry"—either worshipping a false god or worshipping by means of an image. Cf. Deut. 12:4-5, 31.
2. The first commandment focuses on the heart-attitude, therefore, and the second focuses on the external fruit of that attitude. Cf. the general biblical relation between faith and works or between love and obedience, both of course, products of redemption.
3. The two involve one another. To worship God contrary to his will is in effect to worship a false god—our own imagination. And to worship a false god is to respond disobediently to the revelation of the true God. 1 Kings 14:9.
4. The first commandment, objectively, focuses on the uniqueness of the true God; the second focuses on the Son of God, as the exclusive revelation of the Father—[see C.3.c., below].

5. The curse and blessing pertains to both the first two commandments, [cf. C.4.a., below]
6. The number-problem.
  - a) Augustine regarded our first two commandments as one commandment and divided our tenth commandment into two. In this, he is followed by the Roman Catholic and Lutheran traditions.
    - (1) Division of the tenth into two commandments is implausible.
    - (2) Union of the first two commandments makes some sense: both commandments dealing with worship, and the second concludes with a reference to God's jealousy and a curse-blessing formula which on any numbering system may be seen as sanctioning both of our first two commandments. Other evidence, however, points in the other direction. Historically, the uniting of these commandments has been linked with a lax attitude toward the use of images, the prohibition of images being in effect "buried" in the middle of one commandment. That is a danger, though the problem is more basically one of human sin than of the proper numbering system.
  - b) The Jews from an early period regarded the historical prologue (Exodus 20:2) as the first commandment, and then united our first two commandments as the second. The prologue, however, cannot be plausibly regarded as a commandment, especially in the light of our current knowledge of the covenant structure. One could argue that the prologue could be seen as *dabar*, word. (The ten are grouped together as *debarim* in Ex. 34:28 and elsewhere.) But in such contexts, *dabar* seems virtually equivalent to *mitzvah*—cf. especially the references in Esther.

### C. Grounds for the Commandment.

1. God's sovereign invisibility, Deuteronomy 4:12, 15ff.
  - a) The invisibility of God is a somewhat paradoxical doctrine in Scripture.
    - (1) On the one hand, it is stated plainly and often, Ex. 33:20, 23, Romans 1:20; John 1:18; Colossians 1:15; I Timothy 1:17, 6:16.
    - (2) On the other hand, God does make himself seen. Theophany plays an important role in the history of redemption. Cf. Genesis 32:24ff.; Exodus 33:18-23; Numbers 12:8 (*temunah*, used in second commandment); Isaiah 6. Cf. man and Christ as "image" [below, 2.], Kline on the "glory cloud".
    - (3) We should distinguish between
      - (a) God's *essential* invisibility, John 1:18, Rom. 1:20, Col. 1:15, 1 Tim. 1:17, 6:16.
      - (b) God hiding himself because of man's sin, lest divine judgment break out against man, Ex. 19:24, 33:20, 23. In these passages God *can* be seen, by theophany. But God restricts man's access to the theophany. This is what I call below God's "redemptive-historical invisibility."

- (4) Note paradoxical formulations, II Corinthians 4:18; Hebrews 11:27; John 14:7ff.
- (5) Much of the difficulty in applying the second commandment arises because of this paradox: how do we do justice to God's invisibility without compromising what Scripture teaches about his visibility?
- b) Coordination of the biblical teaching, especially as applied to the second commandment:
- (1) Theophanies typically increase our awareness of God's incomprehensibility and transcendence.
    - (a) Isaiah, who saw the Lord, presents some of the strongest teaching against idolatry. He saw the Lord "high and lifted up" (6:1), from whom even the seraphim covered their faces (6:2). Through him, God says, "to whom will you liken me?", 40:25.
    - (b) Ezekiel (1:28) and John (Revelation 1:17) fell on their faces in response to the visions. Isaiah was overcome by his sin (6:5).
    - (c) The mentality of idolatry is quite opposite to this. The idolater produces an image to reduce the distinction between creator and creature, between Lord and sinner. He wants to have a more direct link to God on his own terms, more immediate access to use God's power.
  - (2) Theophanies are given by God—the result of God's sovereign initiative. The "essential invisibility" of God means that God is not limited to any visible form or to any particular visible form. God himself decides whether and when and how he will manifest himself visibly. Invisibility is a function of sovereignty.
  - (3) Deuteronomy 4 is not, however, primarily concerned with God's "essential" invisibility, but with his "redemptive-historical" invisibility.
    - (a) Idols are prohibited, not because God is invisible in a general sense, but because there was no *temunah* (form) seen at Mount Sinai at the giving of the law (f:12, 15).
    - (b) God's *temunah* is seen on other occasions—Numbers 12:8; Psalm 17:15; however at this particular point in redemptive history, it was concealed from the nation as a whole.
    - (c) Thus, the point is not only that God is sovereign over his visible manifestations [above, ii.], but also that, in fact, God sovereignly determined not to make himself visible in the Sinai revelation.
    - (d) The significance of this can be seen from a broader redemptive-historical perspective. The "seeing" of God is primarily an eschatological concept in Scripture. It is at the last day that "every eye shall see him" and that, in a particular way, the "pure in heart" will "see God" (Matthew 5:8). The eschaton, however, has its anticipations in history: in theophany, in Christ. The present kingdom of Christ is "semi-eschatological"—the kingdom already and not-yet.

- (i) The Old Covenant was primarily a time, therefore, of divine invisibility. God willed to be invisible in a special way to indicate the futurity of the kingdom in unequivocal terms. The theophanies underscored this emphasis by presenting the people with a contrast between their present kingdom and the kingdom to come.
  - (ii) The New Covenant is a time of paradox. The Father has been seen in the Son—touched, handled, etc. Yet, now, Christ has ascended. Though fully visible, he is not on earth as he was and as he will be. Thus, the more paradoxical assertions (found even in the Old Testament) are stressed especially in the New Testament—II Corinthians 4:18; Hebrews 11:27. Until the parousia, we walk by faith, not by sight: Hebrews 11:1, 13, II Corinthians 5:7; Romans 8:24. But the fact that Jesus has been seen makes all the difference. That “has been” can even be put in the present tense, Hebrews 2:9.
- (4) During this redemptive-historical period, revelation is normally by word rather than by vision, theophany, image.
- (a) In Exodus 20:22-23, the prohibition of images is connected with the fact that God spoke with Israel from heaven. (Interestingly, *ra`ah* is used: Israel saw that God spoke from heaven.) The point seems to be that use of images would hinder Israel’s memory of and / or obedience to the divine voice which defined the covenant terms.
  - (b) In Deuteronomy 4:12, “form” is repeatedly and emphatically contrasted with “voice”. At Sinai, Israel saw no form, but did hear the voice—the statutes and ordinances.
  - (c) In general, theophanies are given for the sake of hearing rather than contemplation. The focus is on the words spoken, rather than on the shapes perceived. The latter only reinforce the former. The prophet, typically, does not describe the vision in great detail, but records the words given him to speak. Even in Ezekiel, where visions are described in greater detail than usual, note the emphatic transition from vision to word in 1:28-2:1f. The prophet does not gaze contemplatively at the vision; rather he falls down as though dead. Then, he hears the voice. Cf. Revelation 1:17-2:1.
  - (d) When Philip asks to see God, Jesus points to himself (John 14:9), specifically, his words (10). (His works are introduced also; I take it, however, that, in this context, they are introduced primarily as attestations to Jesus’ words.)
  - (e) The image of the cherubim in the temple is clearly subordinate to the presence of the law in the ark.
  - (f) This principle, of course, is not absolute. As we have seen, there are theophanies, and there are images (Christ and man) during the

time before the *parousia*. There is also the visible revelation of God in the creation. However, the following points are beyond question:

- (i) Between the fall and the *parousia*, visions and theophanies are given to few; but the word of God is available to all. Even the Gentiles have the work of the law written on their heart.
  - (ii) God calls us to obey his word, not to expect theophany. Scripture is sufficient, as we argued in Part II.
  - (iii) Our time is predominantly a time of walking by faith rather than by sight, II Corinthians 5:7; Romans 8:24; Hebrews 11:1, 13.
- (5) In expositions of the second commandment, it is sometimes said that since God is infinite, invisible, and immaterial, he cannot be pictured, and, thus, that any image is in effect a lie. This point contains some truth, but requires modification.
- (a) Although the Scriptures do refer to God's invisibility in this connection, they also do justice to the ways in which God makes himself visible, and the sense in which his current invisibility is redemptively-historically conditioned [above].
  - (b) Even if God never took on visible form, even if he chose always to remain invisible, it could not be said, for that reason, that God cannot be pictured.
    - (i) Christ and man are God's "images," pictures of God, even in their physical characteristics. (Cf. Course in Doctrine of Man, Kline's articles.)
    - (ii) A picture is never identical with the thing pictured; nor does it claim to reproduce exhaustively the characteristics of the thing pictured (which would be the same). Your daughter does not feel like Kodak paper! "Picturing" is possible even when there are great differences between the picture and the thing pictured.
    - (iii) It is possible to "picture" something invisible—by producing something visible which corresponds to it and reminds us of it: pictures of atoms, man's arm as picture of God's strength, etc.
    - (iv) In one sense, anything can be a picture of anything if we are trained to interpret the picture in a way which leads us to the thing pictured. "Picturing" is based not only in the characteristics of the picture and the thing pictured, but also in the social conventions which set the rules for "representing" and the abilities of individuals to see the applications of those rules. Cf. discussion of "seeing as" in Part Two.
  - (c) But isn't God incomprehensible and therefore, incomparable (Isaiah 40:18-26, 46:5)? And doesn't incomparability preclude picturing?
    - (i) Incomparability is a paradoxical notion, like invisibility. God is incomparable, but Scripture is constantly comparing him with creation—negatively, of course (God is not like . . . .) but also positively (God is a rock, a lion, a king, etc.). In one sense,

everything Scripture (and we) say about God is based on comparison.

- (ii) The point in Isaiah 40, etc., is that alongside all the comparabilities between God and creation, there is a fundamental incomparability, namely, the creator / creature distinction itself. It is as important to note how God is unlike the world as to note how he is like it (even if, paradoxically, even our language of unlikeness presupposes likeness). Isaiah teaches that idolatry obscures the creator / creature distinction. The idolater ignores the obvious (and comical!) differences between his weak, beggarly idols and the eternal God.
- (iii) Bowing down before an idol necessarily involves such confusion. One bows before an idol because he thinks the idol, as opposed to the ordinary creation, represents the distinctive character of God. To him, it represents, not so much the likeness between creator and creature, as the distinction between creator and creature. But, of course, he is deluded. The idol is wholly inadequate to represent that distinction.
- (d) Conclusion: God can be pictured, though of course not exhaustively. However, idols are never adequate pictures of God, since their makers seek to minimize the creator / creature distinction. They are lies. The deception, however, has little to do with God's invisibility as such. There is no deception in representing the invisible by the visible, as long as necessary distinctions are made. The deceptiveness of idolatry, then, is better considered under the following heading:

## 2. God as the living God.

- a) Idols cannot see, hear, smell, or [especially in the light of 1.b.iv. above] speak: Deuteronomy 4:28; Psalm 115:5-8; 135:15-18; Habakkuk 2:18f.; Isaiah 46:7; Jeremiah 10:5; I Corinthians 12:2; Isaiah 40-48.
- b) Idols are made of wood, stone, gold, silver: Deuteronomy 4:28, 28:36, 64, 29:17, Exodus 20:23; Isaiah 40:18ff., etc.
- c) Idols, therefore, mislead us about the most distinctive characteristics of God, as opposed to those of the false gods—his absoluteness [cf. 1. above] and his personality. It is not that a person cannot be pictured by an inanimate medium; rather, the point is that the use of idols distracts us from those characteristics of God which we should especially be concentrating on. Worse, people make idols to avoid being confronted with the absolute personality of the true and living God.

## 3. Respect for the structure of creation.

- a) Note in Exodus 20 that all of creation is described: images are prohibited of anything in heaven, earth, or sea. This three-layer description is a common Scriptural way of describing the whole creation, hearkening back to Genesis 1:26. The point, therefore, is that worship is to be focused on the creator, as opposed to anything in creation.

- (1) Recall the statement of Romans 1:25 that idolatry involves “worshipping and serving the creature rather than the creator.”
  - (2) Recall 2.b. above, which reproaches idols for the base materials of which they are made.
- b) The dignity of man himself is at stake, also.
- (1) In Genesis 1:26f., to which allusion is made in the second commandment, man himself is the image of God. For man to bow down to an idol is not only to dishonor God, but also to dishonor his image in us. How can God’s image bow before something less than himself, something over which he has dominion? Even angels refuse human worship.
  - (2) Idols, far from conveying divine power, are far weaker even than men. Note the satire on idolatry in Isaiah 40-48 focusing on the weakness of the idols. Cf. Galatians 4:9.
  - (3) Over and over again, idols are described as human creations, the work of men’s hands, Exodus 20:4; Deuteronomy 4:28; Acts 7:41. Note emphasis on the ingenuity of the human idol-maker, finding ways to keep his god from falling over, etc.: Isaiah 40:18ff., 44:12ff. Idols are not only subject to us in the creation order [i., ii.], they are our products. Our very creativity, reflecting God’s ultimate creativity, is being prostituted.
  - (4) Those who make idols destroy themselves. The makers of idols shall be “like unto them” (Psalm 115:7, 135:18), i.e., dead.
  - (5) In redemption, we are renewed in the image of Christ. If it is blasphemy for God’s image to bow before an idol, it is surely blasphemous for one renewed in the image of Christ to do it.
- c) Christ himself is the image of God in a distinctive sense. In redemption, he is the image through whom our relation to God is mediated. But the idolater claims precisely that his creation performs the function of mediation. Thus, he denies the exclusiveness of Christ’s redemptive work. It may be said that the second commandment refers to Christ—that it summons us to worship exclusively in his name. [Note 1.b.iv. above on the redemptive-historical thrust of this commandment.]
4. God’s covenant jealousy, Exodus 20:5ff., Deuteronomy 4:24, 5:9f. Cf. Hebrews 12:29 which invokes the language of Deuteronomy 4:24 in the context of New Covenant worship.
- a) The reference to jealousy and covenant sanctions probably refers to both of the first two commandments, rather than just the second. Jealousy is frequently invoked as a basis for the prohibition of the first commandment: Exodus 34:14; Deuteronomy 6:13-15.
  - b) Jealousy is a covenantal concept: God will not tolerate any deviation from the exclusiveness of our covenant loyalty to him. Deuteronomy 4:23f.
    - (1) God’s name is jealous, Exodus 34:14. His covenant name binds him to his people and thus the people to him.

- (2) In our discussion of the seventh commandment, we shall note the frequent parallels drawn between idolatry and adultery. Idolatry is essentially violation of our marriage vow, our covenant with God. God's jealousy is the jealousy of a husband toward an unfaithful wife. The divine jealousy, therefore, begins with his covenant love. His anger burns against those who have offended that love.
  - (3) In Exodus 34:14, God's jealousy forbids the making of covenants with the inhabitants of the land.
  - (4) Note the covenantal language of II Kings 21:7f.; Ezekiel 8 describing idolatry in the place where God chose to set his name. Ezekiel 8:3 describes "the image" "which provokes to jealousy," i.e., the image in the temple itself.
- c) The covenant jealousy is symbolized by "consuming fire."
- (1) Though Israel did not see the "form" of God at Mount Sinai, they did see a remarkable visual display: lightnings, a thick cloud, smoke. The picture is one of a great fire.
  - (2) The fire is threatening. The people may not go up the mountain (Exodus 19:22) "lest Jehovah break forth upon them." The wrath of God is like a flame which reaches out to consume.
  - (3) Significantly, both man and beast are kept from the mountain, 19:13; Hebrews 12:20. Violators will be stoned. The distinction between creator and fallen creation is strictly maintained. [Cf. above, 3.]
  - (4) Scripture reminds us of the fire when we are tempted to covenant unfaithfulness, Deuteronomy 4:24; Hebrews 12:29.
- d) Relations among the various grounds: God's jealousy guards the structure of creation—his own sovereign authority and distinctive nature as well as that of Christ and man, his created image. Since creation itself is structured covenantally, this is to be expected. His jealousy maintains that structure against all apparent threats. Hence:

#### D. Sanctions.

1. The curse: "visiting the iniquities of the fathers upon the children and upon the third and fourth generation of them that hate me."
  - a) Does this mean that children are punished for their fathers' sins, contrary to Ezekiel 18:14-17?
    - (1) The passage presupposes that the children are as guilty as the fathers. *L<sup>e</sup>son'ay* = in relation to those who hate me. By its position, the word refers both to the fathers and to the children.
    - (2) The children do, therefore, suffer for their own sins. In a sense, however, they also suffer for their fathers' sins. Not that they bear the penalty deserved by their fathers; certainly not that the fathers go free. But the iniquity of the fathers begins a process whereby the wrath of God is stored up, to be released perhaps generations later in terrible fury. Cf. Leviticus 26:39; 2 Kings 17:7-23, Isaiah 65:7; Amos 7:17; Jeremiah 16:11ff.; Daniel 9:16; Romans 1:24ff. (on the increase of sin

from one generation to the next). In this sense, the punishment of the children for the fathers' sins is not denied by Ezekiel 18:14-17. Cf. also Matthew 23:29-33. The sins of the fathers corrupt the environment, the family and social life of the people, setting the scene for judgment.

- (3) Scripture teaches that there is a remnant that escapes the judgment upon the wicked generation. Therefore, there is nothing fatalistic here. The converts at Pentecost heeded the apostolic injunction to "save yourselves from this crooked generation" (Acts 2:40), and they were saved. By God's grace, we can, amazingly enough, leave one generation and join another, the family of God! It is possible, however, even for members of the elect remnant to lose their earthly lives in God's historical judgments.
  - (4) Our solidarity with Adam is a special case. As he is our representative, we are directly guilty of his sin (Romans 5, cf. course in *Doctrine of Man*) in a way in which we are not responsible for the sins of our more recent ancestors.
- b) Civil sanctions.
- (1) The practice of idolatry (public enough to be witnessed) is a capital crime, Deuteronomy 17:2-7.
  - (2) The idols of Canaan are to be utterly destroyed; not even the silver and gold in them may be kept, Deuteronomy 7:25f., 12:3.
- c) Note the emphasis upon God's justice, and upon the seriousness of sin, particularly idolatry. The idolater hates God, treasures up wrath for himself, and brings enormous spiritual damage on later generations. Recall the effects of secular humanism upon education, the media, etc., in our own time.
2. The blessing: "and showing lovingkindness unto a thousand generations of them that love me and keep my commandments."
- a) Mercy is greater than wrath. Cf. Romans 5, "much more."
    - (1) *Dor*, generation, is not found in the Hebrew text of Exodus 20:5f. or Deuteronomy 5:9f. It is understood as that to which "third" and "fourth" apply, and, thus, should also be understood as following "thousand."
    - (2) <sup>a</sup>*lafim*, thousands, is, to be sure, a cardinal number, but there is no special ordinal form of *elef*.
    - (3) Cf. Deuteronomy 7:9, where *dor* is used, and God's *hesed* is extended to a thousand generations.
  - b) Note the implicit connection between covenant jealousy and mercy. Jealousy is not only negative; it guards the blessings of the faithful.
  - c) Note the promise also of material prosperity, Leviticus 26:1-13. The connection is not mechanical (Job, etc.), but God promises blessing to the whole person.
  - d) Ultimately, the promise is fulfilled in Christ, the one righteous man from the wicked generations of Adam. His generations are the ones who love

God and keep his commandments. He refused idolatry (Matthew 4:8-10) even to gain all the kingdoms of the world. Now all the kingdoms are his, and ours in him—blessings unmeasured.

- e) The lack of symmetry between judgment and mercy testifies to the greatness of the grace of God. The wicked get what they deserve; the righteous partake of utterly inexhaustible goodness in Christ. The blessing does come to those who obey; but it is out of all proportion to anything deserved by the obedient.

E. Broader Implications: The Positive Biblical Doctrine of Worship [Cf. I.A.1.b.]

1. Distinctively monotheistic: the strong prohibitions against worshipping other gods are positively reinforced by the central altar, Deuteronomy 12:1-4. One God, one altar, one law, one nation, one way of salvation. Ultimately, the cross is the one altar.
2. Redemptive: Biblical worship is focused on sin, forgiveness and rejoicing in redemption. There is nothing in it of magic or manipulation, our trying to gain God's favor or even to control God. Rather, we confess our sins and plead God's mercy on the basis of his sacrifice.
3. Imitative of God: Cf. Kline in *WTJ*, Spring and Fall, '77, Spring, '78. He argues that the tabernacle, the temple, the priests' garments and the human worshippers themselves are presented in Scripture as images of the "glory cloud" of God's presence. [Cf. C.1., above: images are not forbidden because images are impossible. Rather, images are forbidden because of the very richness of imagery supplied by God himself at his covenantal initiative.
4. By Divine Command: the "regulative principle."
  - a) Formulation: "But the acceptable way of worshipping the true God is instituted by himself, and so limited by his own revealed will, that he may not be worshipped according to the imaginations and devices of men, or the suggestions of Satan, under any visible representation, or any other way not prescribed in the holy Scripture." (*Westminster Confession of Faith* XXI:i).
    - (1) Cf. XX:ii: "God alone is Lord of the conscience, and hath left it free from the doctrines and commandments of men which are in anything contrary to his word; or beside it, in matters of faith or worship." Note position of the semicolon, distinguishing faith and worship from other matters.
    - (2) Note also two important qualifications in I:vi:
      - (a) "The whole counsel of God, concerning all things necessary for his won glory, man's salvation, faith, and life, is either expressly set down in Scripture, or by good and necessary consequence may be deduced from Scripture . . . ." Worship is not limited to "express" teachings of Scripture, but is based also on legitimate inferences from Scripture. That is, applications. The Confession makes no sharp distinction between the meaning of Scripture and its

application, and no distinction at all between these as to their authority.

- (b) “. . . and that there are some circumstances concerning the worship of God, and government of the Church, common to human actions and societies, which are to be ordered by the light of nature and Christian prudence, according to the general rules of the word, which are always to be observed.” Whenever a question arises as to whether or not a practice is justified by the regulative principle, we must ask whether that practice is an “element” of worship or a mere “circumstance”. Such questions are often difficult to answer. Yet, the Confession sees rightly that to apply Scripture to a situation always involves some Christian prudence, some knowledge of the situation, some extra-Scriptural premises. That cannot be avoided in worship or in life in general.

(3) Summary.

- (a) What we do in worship must be prescribed by Scripture. “Whatever is not commanded is forbidden.” In Lutheranism, a different principle prevails—“Whatsoever is not forbidden is permitted.” Roman Catholicism is even further from the Reformed principle, claiming the right to command what Scripture neither commands nor forbids. Modernism is even worse, permitting and, at times, commanding what Scripture forbids.
- (b) The regulative principle does not require that everything we do in worship be the response to a specific divine command. Acts performed as response to inferences from Scripture, approved examples in Scripture, or as circumstances of worship are permitted.

b) Scriptural Basis.

- (1) Recall earlier discussions of the sufficiency of Scripture for ethics—for human life in general.
- (2) Scripture is particularly jealous to guard this principle in the area of worship. [Cf. Exodus 25:40; Hebrews 8:5; Numbers 16:1-40, 20:10-13; I Samuel 13:8-14; I Chronicles 13, 15:1-15 (especially 15:13).] These passages set forth the principle that the commands of God concerning worship are not to be violated.
- (3) Beyond this, there are also passages condemning idolatry on the ground that an idol is a product of human initiative, a human creation. [Cf. C.3.b.iii., above.] Not only are we not to violate God’s commands, but, more specifically, we are not to devise means of worship beyond what God has commanded. Cf. also C.1. on God’s sovereignty in revelation.
- (4) Scripture teaches explicitly that God is not to be worshipped according to human devices.

- (a) God condemns certain forms of worship simply on the ground that they were not commanded, Leviticus 10:1f., Jeremiah 8:31.
  - (b) Colossians 2:22f. condemns “will-worship”—worship arising from human initiative.
- (5) In the New Covenant, the principle is fulfilled and confirmed in the finished sacrifice of Christ, to which no one may add. Ultimately, Christ is our priest, and we come before God in his name alone. (Hebrews 8-10).
- (a) Even in the Old Covenant, there were “ordinances” (Hebrews 9:1). Christ performed the antitypical ordinances (9:11-28). The whole pattern of worship, then, is subject to God’s ordination—the regulative principle.
  - (b) Our regular worship is part of the pattern. We also enter the holy place (10:19), imitating the prior entering of Christ. This language pertains not only to salvation in general, but also to the worshipping assembly (verses 24-25). Cf. Shepherd’s argument, *Biblical Doctrine of Worship*, 52-55.
- (6) As a matter of fact, when we assemble for worship, we are assembled to obey certain divine commands. Anything else we do while assembled cannot fairly be called “worship”.
- c) Life and Worship: The point about the semicolon [a.i., above] raises the question of the relation between acts of worship and other kinds of acts. Cf. the treatment of this question from another angle in I.A.1.b.
- (1) In creation in general, all things happen by God’s command. There is no permission without command.
  - (2) Human life in general is subject to God’s law alone as the ultimate standard: Deuteronomy 4:1f., 12:32, Proverbs 30:6, Acts 5:29.
    - (a) In a sense, all that we do is response to divine command. Some divine commands are so broad as to cover all of life, so that everything we do either obeys or disobeys them: Genesis 1:28; I Corinthians 10:31; Romans 14:23, etc. Cf. previous discussions of *sola scriptura*.
    - (b) Thus, there is no gray area of things which God neither approves nor disapproves. Everything we do ought to be approved by God. Cf. discussion of *adiaphora*.
    - (c) At the same time, there are many ways of fulfilling God’s commands, many ways of applying them to life situations. These applications require, as we have said, human prudence working within the general teaching of Scripture. And often, there is more than one way of obediently fulfilling a particular command—e.g., buying apples or oranges to feed your family.
    - (d) The pattern, then, is that all that we do should be the fulfillment of God’s commands, but that the application of these commands to situations involves godly human wisdom. So far, there is no clear

difference between this general “regulative principle” and the more specific principle which is applied to worship.

- (e) In our non-cultic life, there are subordinate authorities of various sorts—parents, rulers, teachers, landlords, etc., to whom we owe obedience, except when their word conflicts with God’s (cf. discussion of the Fifth Commandment). Is this different in principle from the cultic situation? Read on.

d) Elements and Circumstances

- (1) I can accept the Confession’s distinction in a general sense. The basic things we do in worship (“elements”) must be commanded in Scripture; but in applying those commands, we may need to incorporate some things not mentioned in Scripture (“circumstances”). This is true of any divine command. God commands us to honor our parents, but to carry out that command, we must do some things that Scripture does not mention explicitly.
- (2) However, in the extra-confessional writings of the Puritan and old Scots divines, they tried to define the elements/circumstances distinction with greater precision. I am not convinced that those precise definitions are scriptural.
- (a) Elements
- (i) the “essential” or “substantial” parts of worship.
  - (ii) Everything that has “religious significance.”
  - (iii) Specific to a particular kind of worship (tabernacle, temple, synagogue, NT church).
  - (iv) Each element has an independent Scriptural warrant. The warrant for prayer cannot be stretched to include song, even though many biblical songs are prayers.
- (b) Circumstances: The “accidents,” as opposed to the “substance” of worship. These are of three kinds:
- (i) Events “common to human actions and societies” (WCF 1.6). Like the time and place of worship.
  - (ii) Specific ways of carrying out elements (words of prayers, etc.), sometimes called “forms” or “expressions.” With spiritual meaning.
  - (iii) Actions that “have no connection at all with worship *per se*” (Bushell). As the color of clothing worshippers wear. Unlike (i), these are “separable” from worship.
- (c) Objections
- (i) None of these distinctions is warranted by Scripture: a great irony, in a system that is supposed to make worship more Scriptural.
  - (ii) Distinction between substance and accident is Aristotelian, not biblical.

- (iii) “Independence” of elements is atomistic. Elements of worship in Scripture are not separate in this way. In song we pray and receive instruction. We receive the preached Word with praise and awe.
  - (iv) Distinction between “religious” and “non-religious” actions questionable.
    - (A) Time of worship, clothing of worshipers can affect the religious aspects of the service.
    - (B) All of life is religious in some senses (Kuyper).
  - (v) God has not provided a complete and specific list of elements for every form of worship.
    - (A) Even the temple worship lacks a precise *liturgy*, though much is said about the details of making sacrifice.
    - (B) Nothing on the synagogue, except that a “sacred assembly” is appropriate (Lev. 23:3).
    - (C) Nothing on baptism as an element of NT worship services.
    - (D) Nothing on a sermon as an element of NT worship.
    - (E) Nothing on private worship, family worship, etc., or “worship in the broad sense.”
  - (vi) Scripture fails to distinguish “circumstance” in any of its three meanings, or to determine precisely which circumstances are within the discretion of the church.
  - (vii) Hard to apply the element/circumstance distinction.
    - (A) Is song an element, or a circumstance?
    - (B) Is instrumental music an element, or a circumstance?
    - (C) Is marriage a proper element of worship?
- e) Contra Traditionalism
- (1) Notice how the catechism forbids additions to and subtractions from biblical worship “whether invented and taken up by ourselves, or received by tradition from others, though under the title of antiquity, custom...”
  - (2) This is in line with the general Reformation emphasis of reforming tradition according to the Word of God: sola Scriptura.
  - (3) By this principle, the Reformers rejected large bodies of church tradition.
  - (4) It also made worship more contemporary, in the sense of emphasizing the use of the vernacular. Thus they applied Paul’s emphasis in 1 Cor. 14 on the need for intelligibility in worship so that all (even unbelievers!) might be edified.
  - (5) One should not, therefore, use the Regulative Principle to enforce past modes of worship, unless Scripture itself requires them.
    - (a) The cult of plainness.
    - (b) The cult of ceremony.

F. Problem Areas.

1. Pedagogical Use of Images.

- a) Advocates of images in the church have often claimed that while images should not be worshipped, they may be venerated (*douloo*), and may serve an important educational function, especially among the illiterate.
- b) Protestants generally deny the distinction between worship and veneration (but see later discussion on fifth commandment). Yet, they have sometimes defended the use of images as an educational tool. Such was Luther's argument: these are "books for the laity." Compare quotes from him in Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, III, 303f. Hodge does not himself contest Luther's point, though he opposes the introduction of images into places of public worship because of the possibility of abuse.
- c) The Heidelberg Catechism, however, unambiguously opposes the pedagogical use of images (Questions 97, 98): God, it says, "has willed that his church be instructed, not by dumb images, but by the preaching of his word."
- d) Comments.
  - (1) As we have seen, the second commandment is not dealing, at least directly, with the use of images to instruct, but rather with the use of images as mediators between God and man in worship. Does instruction through images, then, involve "bowing down" before them? That is the basic question.
  - (2) The question cannot be answered by saying that images are inaccurate representations of their objects. Cf. previous discussion, C.1.b.v. No picture is exhaustive in its correspondence with the thing pictured; but that does not imply any inaccuracy. Inaccuracy is found, often, not in pictures themselves, but in our interpretations of them; and of course, that sort of inaccuracy is found in verbal teaching also.
  - (3) Similarly, it is not adequate to say that since God cannot be pictured any image of him is a lie. As we have seen, there are images of God in the world. Further, there are ways of representing God which, rightly understood, do not mislead people about God's invisibility, etc. It would be ridiculous to say that the upper circle of Van Til's two circle diagram is a graven image in the sense of the second commandment. But short of ruling out such markers, where do we draw the line? And, even if we grant the substance of this objection, it does not apply to pictures that do not claim to represent God.
  - (4) As we have seen, it is true that between the fall and the *parousia* God instructs his people primarily by word rather than by image. However, that is not an absolute principle. There have been theophanies, and these have played an important role. Further, consider Jesus' use of illustrations of spiritual truths from the natural world, the use of vivid metaphors and "imagery" in the Bible, the temple ornaments, sacraments, etc.

- (a) This sort of teaching assumes that created objects are in some measure fitted to illustrate (and thus to “image”) spiritual truth.
  - (b) This sort of teaching, but not only this sort, inevitably produces vivid mental images in us. If the instructional use of images is to be rejected, then, it would seem that even mental images must be avoided. Indeed, the Catechism opposes representations of God even “inwardly in our mind.” However, I must take exception here to the Catechism. It seems almost impossible to think without some mental imagery. (Think, “The Lord is my shepherd.”) This consideration doesn’t, of course, destroy the objection to images. If images as such are wrong, then mental images are too, and we must get rid of them no matter how hard it is. However, when the objection requires such an extreme asceticism, we ought to think hard about it.
- (5) It seems to me that to deny the pedagogical use of images one would have to show that being instructed by an image amounts to bowing down to it. It is true that instruction is part of worship, and that we are called to respond to instruction in awe, reverence, obedience. That reverence, however, is not directed toward the medium of instruction in any sense parallel to that of the idolater. We do not worship our preacher as a representative of God. Thus, I am not convinced that an adequate case has been made against the pedagogical use of images.
  - (6) Still, we must be aware of the human tendency to worship the creature above the creator. The presence of pictures in the church is a very serious temptation for many people, especially when they become a permanent part of the church architecture.

## 2. Images of the Incarnate Christ.

- a) Many have objected to the use of any pictures of the incarnate Christ on the ground of the second commandment. WLC opposes “the making of any representation of God, of all or of any of the three persons.”  
Arguments:
  - (1) Since God may not be pictured, and Jesus is God, Jesus may not be pictured either.
  - (2) Iconoclasts in the Eastern Church argued that those who venerated images of Christ were circumscribing Jesus’ divine nature. To worship the picture would involve the assumption that his divine nature is limited, circumscribed by the human nature and is therefore picturable. Or it would imply that the human nature alone is pictured and thus is separable from the divine nature.
  - (3) Some have argued that since we don’t know what Jesus looked like, any picture will be a lie.
  - (4) Some take the second commandment to exclude any representations of deity.

- (5) The danger of idolatry, at least, is always present when pictures of Jesus are used for any purpose.
- b) Comments. Compare Jeffrey J. Myers, “*Vere Homo: The Case for Pictures of the Lord Jesus Christ*” (Niceville, FL: Biblical Horizons, 1993).
- (1) I disagree with a.(1) on two grounds:
- (a) As we have seen, Scripture does not teach purely and simply that God cannot be pictured.
  - (b) But even if God in himself were in every sense unpicturable, it is clear that Christ, God incarnate, was picturable. He could be seen, felt, touched, as well as heard. His face could be held in memory (and there is surely no suggestion in Scripture that such mental images were sinful! On the contrary, recall the emphasis upon the eyewitness character of the apostolic testimony.) To deny this is docetism, pure and simple. In this respect, clearly, the Old and New Covenants are sharply different. At the establishment of the Old Covenant, there was emphatically no form (Deuteronomy 4:15). At the establishment of the New, there emphatically was (I John 1:1ff., etc.).
- (2) Reply to a.(2): The relation between the two natures of Christ is, of course, a difficult matter at any point in theology. I would argue, however, that Jesus himself is, in both natures, in his person, image of God. In him, deity was in one sense “circumscribed,” for all its fullness dwelt in him; though in another sense, God was active beyond the body of Jesus. To picture Jesus is to picture a divine person, not one “nature” or other. To venerate such a picture, I believe, would be wrong for reasons already adduced. I do not, however, think that an adequate argument has been given against pedagogical use of such pictures.
- (3) Reply to a.(3): As we’ve said earlier, a picture does not become a “lie” simply by being non-exhaustive. And, in fact, we do know something about Jesus’ looks: He was male, Semitic, in middle life, was known to wear a robe, etc. And if the shroud of Turin turns out to be authentic...
- (4) Reply to a (4): As we have seen, the second commandment doesn’t forbid all images of God, only those intended for use in worship, as we earlier discussed it.
- (5) Reply to a.(5): True.
3. Exclusive Psalmody: Many have argued for the exclusive use of Psalms in worship on the ground of the regulative principle. They argue that there is no command in Scripture to sing anything other than Psalms; thus, all other songs are excluded.
- a) The logical status of song: What is song? Is it an “element” of worship [cf. above]? A “circumstance”? An aspect of some other element?

- (1) We must not simply assume that it is an independent element, as, e.g., John Murray does in his minority report to the OPC General Assembly. Some argument is needed.
  - (2) I maintain that song is not an independent “element” of worship, but a form by which other elements are carried on. It is a form of prayer, praise, teaching (Colossians 3:16), etc.
    - (a) There is no sharp distinction between sung and spoken words. Consider the continuum: speech, poetry, chanting, song. At each point, there are gray areas (even more in tonal languages!).
    - (b) Scripture regularly presents song as having the same functions in worship as spoken words. Song has no functions that cannot also be performed by spoken words.
  - (3) If song is really a form of prayer, teaching, etc., then, when we apply the regulative principle, we must ask, not what Scripture commands us to sing, but rather what Scripture commands us to pray, teach, etc. But all Christians agree that extra-Scriptural words may be used in prayer, praise, and teaching.
- b) Scripture does command that, not only the Psalms, but also the statutes of God (Psalm 119:54) and the deeds of God throughout Redemptive History (Psalm 107:22) be sung in worship. I agree with the argument of Vern Poythress (*WTJ*, Fall, `74; Winter, `75) that the “singing of Christ among his people” applies the whole history of redemption to all his people (application involving, as we’ve seen, extra-Scriptural content). This is unavoidable in any case. Even the translation of Scripture involves application in this sense.
- c) Colossians 3:16; Ephesians 5:19.
- (1) It has been argued that “psalms, hymns, and odes” in these passages all refer to Psalms. I don’t think that point can be established either way.
  - (2) It has been argued that *pneumatikos* means “inspired,” meaning that the Church is to sing inspired songs. However, *pneumatikos* is not *theopneustos*. One may be “spiritual” without being “inspired,” I Corinthians 3:1, Colossians 1:9.
  - (3) Even if these passages refer exclusively to Psalms, they do not limit the church to the exclusive use of Psalms if, as we argued above, there are other Scriptural justifications for singing uninspired hymns.
  - (4) “Teaching” and “admonishing” suggest not verbatim repetitions of Scripture, but the application of Scriptural content. Cf. Poythress, *op. cit.*
- d) There is no clear biblical command to sing the entire Book of Psalms.
- (1) *Psalms* in Col. 3:16 and elsewhere is not a technical term for the biblical Book of Psalms. It simply refers to songs of praise.
  - (2) We should not assume, as many do, that the Book of Psalms was given to us as an inspired “hymnal.” There is evidence (see my WST) that the

book is given, essentially, for meditation and instruction, as Psm. 1 suggests.

- e) Those who worship using Psalms exclusively are never able to sing the name of Jesus. Nor are they able to praise God for the *completion* of his redemptive work in Christ.
  - f) My conclusion: God commands us to sing as part of worship, but there is no evident restriction on the words we sing, except, of course, that they be scriptural and appropriate to the purposes of worship.
4. The Use of Instruments in Worship.
- a) Many of the same people who hold to exclusive psalmody also refuse the use of instruments in worship. Students, therefore, often ask questions about that issue at this point in the course. It is, however, a rather different sort of issue from the others—not nearly so closely focused on the regulative principle. After all, there are as many explicit commands to use instruments as anyone could wish in the Psalms themselves! Here, paradoxically, some of the strongest advocates of the regulative principle seek to show that those commands are not currently applicable.
  - b) The argument, essentially, is that instrumental music in Scripture is part of the temple worship, specifically the sacrificial ritual, and passes away with the temple. New Covenant worship on this view is patterned on the synagogue, where there were no instruments.
  - c) Comments:
    - (1) A very strong argument is needed to overcome the explicit commands in the Psalms to use instruments. The argument under consideration is dubious at best.
    - (2) No adequate argument is given to show that instruments are necessarily connected with those aspects of temple worship which pass away. (Obviously, many elements of temple worship do not pass away—praise, singing, prayer, etc.) It is true that the instruments accompanied the burnt offering (I Chronicles 29:27f.), but that was not their only use. Cf. Numbers 10:2ff.; Ex. 15: 20-21, II Kings 11:14; I Chronicles 13:3, 15:24, 28; II Chronicles 5:5, 11-14; Ezra 3:10; I Samuel 18:6f. It is impossible for all these and other references to pertain only to the offerings. Instruments are routinely mentioned in the Psalms as accompaniment to praise.
    - (3) No exegetical argument can be given to show that the “synagogue pattern” as such is in any sense normative for the Christian church. Gerhard Delling, *Worship in the NT*, points out that the earliest references to Christian worship (as 1 Cor. 14) present a very informal, Spirit-driven worship; the quasi-synagogue liturgy is a later development.
    - (4) No adequate argument is given to show that the exclusion of instruments from the synagogue was based on principles binding within the New Covenant. Some have suggested that this exclusion is based

on the *mourning* of the Jews in exile, over the loss of the temple and the promised land.

- (5) Even if it were proven that instruments have no independent role in New Covenant worship, they cannot be ruled out. As a “circumstance”, they provide the important function of coordinating pitch and rhythm in the singing. Many Covenanter churches use pitch-instruments. If we can give the congregation pitch on the first note of a song, why not on the second, etc.? And if we can help with pitch of melody, why not pitch of harmony? rhythm? volume? tone quality? Why shouldn't they be used to teach the tunes before they are actually sung, etc.? Preludes, offertory music, etc., are harder to defend on this basis. However, it could be argued that some “background sound” in worship is unavoidable, and that such music is at least preferable to bus noises, screaming children or chattering women.
- (6) The last point, plus the earlier Scripture references, suggests that instrumental music is basically a form of song, just as song is a form of speech [3.a., above]. Instruments are an extension of the human voice. By them, we praise, rejoice, etc. If this analysis is correct, then the use of instruments does not require any independent Scriptural justification. To find out what Scripture allows us to play, we ask what Scripture allows us to sing, and ultimately, to speak. From this perspective, the prohibition of instruments begins to look like prohibition of microphones, hearing aids, etc. The idea that we can blow air across our vocal cords, or into electronic devices, but not through a mouthpiece, seems highly arbitrary.