

Christian Worship

Zacharias Ursinus (1534-1583)

QUESTION 96. What does God require in the second commandment?

Answer. That we in nowise represent God by images, nor worship him in any other way than he has commanded in his word.

EXPOSITION.

Two things are comprehended in this commandment: the commandment itself, and an exhortation to obedience. *The end, or design of this commandment* is, that the true God, who in the first precept commanded that he alone should be worshipped, be worshipped under a proper form, or with such worship as it is right and proper that intelligent creatures should pay unto him – such as is pleasing to him, and not with such worship as that which is according to the imagination and device of man: Or, we may say that the design of this commandment is, that the worship of God as prescribed be preserved pure and uncorrupted, and not be violated by any form of superstitious worship. The true worship of God is, therefore, here enjoyed, and a rule at the same time given, that we sacredly and conscientiously keep ourselves within the bounds which God has prescribed, and that we do not add anything to that worship which has been divinely instituted, or corrupt it in any part, even the most unimportant; which the Scriptures also expressly enjoin in many other places. The *true worship* of God now consists in every internal or external work commanded by God, done in faith, which rests fully assured that both the person and work please God, for the mediator's sake, and with the design that we may glorify God thereby. *To worship God truly*, is to worship him in the manner which he himself has prescribed in his word.

This commandment forbids, on the other hand, every form of will-worship, or such as is false, requiring that we neither regard or worship images and creatures for God, nor represent the true God by any image or figure, nor worship him at or by images, or with any other kind of worship which he himself has not prescribed. For when God condemns the principal, the grossest and most palpable form of false worship, which is that of worshipping him at or by images, it is plainly manifest that he also condemns at the same time all other forms of false worship, inasmuch as they all grow out of this. He forbids this most shocking kind of idolatry, not that he would overlook or exclude other forms of worship opposed to that which he has prescribed; but because this is the root, the foundation of all the rest. Hence all kinds of worship not instituted by God, but by men, as

well as those which contain the same reason why they should be prohibited, are forbidden in this precept of the Decalogue.

All those things, therefore, which are opposed to the true worship of God are contrary to this second commandment; such as

1. *Idolatry*, which consists in a false or superstitious worship of God. There are, as we have already remarked, two principal kinds of idolatry. *The one* is more gross and palpable, as when worship is paid to a false God, which is the case, when, instead of or beside the true God, such worship as that which is due to him alone, is given to some thing or object, whether imaginary or real. This form of idolatry is particularly forbidden in the first commandment, and also in the third. *The other species of idolatry* is more subtle and refined, as when the true God is supposed to be worshipped, whilst the kind of worship which is paid unto him is false, which is the case when any one imagines that he is worshipping or honoring God by the performance of any work not prescribed by the divine law. This species of idolatry is more properly condemned in the second commandment, and is termed superstition, because it adds to the commandments of God the inventions of men. Those are called *superstitious* who corrupt the worship of God by their own inventions. This will-worship or superstition is condemned in every part of the word of God. "This people draweth nigh unto me with their mouth, and honoureth me with their lips, but their heart is far from me. But in vain do they worship me, teaching for doctrines the commandments of men." "Beware lest any man spoil you through philosophy and vain deceit, after the tradition of men, after the rudiments of the world, and not after Christ." "Let no man judge you in meat or in drink, &c., which all are to perish with the using, after the commandments and doctrines of men; which things have indeed a show of wisdom in will-worship, and humility, and neglecting of the body; not in any honor to the satisfying of the flesh." (Matt. 15:8,9. Col. 2:16, 22, 23.)

We may now easily return an answer to the following objection: Idolatry is forbidden in the first commandment. In the second also. Therefore, they constitute only one commandment. Ans. The first commandment forbids one form of idolatry, as when another God is worshipped; the second forbids another species of idolatry, as when the true God is worshipped differently from what he ought to be. Reply. But still there is always idolatry, and another God is worshipped. Ans. There is, indeed, always an idol; but not always in the intention and profession of men. Hence, those who sin against the second commandment, sin also against the first; because, those who worship God otherwise than he will be worshipped, imagine another God, one differently affected from what the true God is; and in this way they do not worship God, but a figment of their own brain, which they persuade themselves is affected in this manner.

2. *Hypocrisy*, which consists in putting on the appearance of true piety, and the worship of God, doing such external works as God has commanded, whether moral or ceremonial, without true faith and conversion, or inward obedience. The prophet Isaiah describes and condemns this sin in these words: "Forasmuch as this people draw near me with their mouth, and with their lips do honor me, but have removed their hearts far from me, and their fear toward me is taught by the precept of men, therefore, behold, I will proceed to do a marvellous work among this people," &c. (Is. 29: 13, 14.)

3. *Profanity*. This includes a voluntary renunciation and contempt of all religion, and of the worship of God both internal and external, or of some portions of it, and is, therefore, not only in opposition to this commandment, but to the whole worship of God as prescribed in the first and second tables.

There are some who object to what we have here said, and affirm in support of will-worship, that those passages which we have cited as condemning it, speak only in reference to the ceremonies instituted by Moses, and of the unlawful commandments of men, such as constitute no part of the worship of God; and not of those precepts which have been sanctioned by the church and bishops, and which command nothing contrary to the word of God. But that this argument is false, may be proven by certain declarations connected with those passages of Scripture to which we have referred, which likewise reject those human laws, which, upon their own authority, prescribe anything in reference to divine worship which God has not commanded, although the thing itself is neither sinful nor forbidden by God. So Christ rejects the tradition which the Jews had in regard to washing their hands, because they associated it with the idea of divine worship, although it was not sinful in itself, saying, "Not that which goeth into the mouth defileth a man, but that which cometh out of the mouth, this defileth a man." "Woe unto you Scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites; for ye make clean the outside of the cup and platter, but within ye are full of extortion and excess" (Matt. 15:11; 23, 25.) The same thing may be said of celibacy and of the distinction of meats and days, of which the apostle Paul speaks, (Rom. 14:6. 1 Tim. 4:1-3,) and which he calls "doctrines of devils," although in themselves they are lawful to the godly, as he in other places teaches. Wherefore, those things also which are in themselves indifferent, that is neither commanded nor prohibited by God, if they are prescribed and done as the worship of God, or if it is supposed that God is honored by our performing them, and dishonored by neglecting them, it is plainly manifest that the Scriptures in these and similar places condemn them.

Such works, therefore, as are indifferent, must be carefully distinguished from those in which we worship God: 1. Because to imagine a different worship of God from that which he has prescribed, is to imagine another will of God, and so another God. And those who

do this, as Aaron and Jeroboam formerly did, are no less guilty of idolatry, than those who professedly worship another god, beside that Jehovah revealed in the church. 2. Because, by such a mingling of the true worship of God with that which is false, the true God is confounded with idols, which are honored in the forms of worship invented by men. 3. Because whatsoever is not of faith is sin. (Rom. 14:23.) But he who does any thing in order that he may worship God by it, his conscience not knowing or doubting, whether God will be worshipped in this way, or not, does it not of faith; because he is ignorant whether his work pleases, or displeases God, and so does not regard him, inasmuch as he presumes to do it, notwithstanding it is displeasing to him.

But since those who defend the forms of worship invented by men, also bring forward various declarations in which the Scriptures require us to yield obedience to the commandments of men, and maintain that they have the same force and authority which divine precepts have, and so have the nature of divine worship; it is, therefore, necessary that we should here say something in reference to human precepts and their differences.

Concerning human precepts and the authority of ecclesiastical traditions.

There are four classes of things concerning which men give commandment. These are, *first, divine precepts*, which God desires, that men should propose unto themselves for their observance, not, however, in their own name, but by the authority of God himself, as being the ministers and messengers, and not the authors of these precepts. It is in this way that the ministers of the gospel declare the doctrine revealed from heaven to the church, parents to their children, teachers to their pupils, and that magistrates make known to their subjects the precepts of the Decalogue. Obedience to these commandments is, and is called the *worship of God*, because they are not human, but divine precepts, to which it is necessary to yield obedience, even though the authority or command of no creature accede thereto; yea, even if all creatures should enjoin the contrary. The Scriptures speak of these commandments in the following places: "My son keep thy father's commandment, and forsake not the law of thy mother." "The man that will do presumptuously, and will not hearken unto the priest that standeth to minister there before the Lord thy God, or unto the judge, even that man shall [die]." "If he neglect to hear the church, let him be unto thee as a heathen man, and a publican." (Prov. 6:20. Deut. 17:12. Matt. 18:17. See, also, Luke 10:17. [1] Thes. 4: 2, 8. Ex. 16:8. Matt. 23: 2, 3. Heb. 13:17. 1 Cor. 4:21; 2 Cor. 13:10. 2 Thes. 3:14.) All these declarations teach that we ought to yield obedience to men, as the ministers of God, in those things which properly belong to the ministry; but they do not grant the power to any one to institute new forms of divine worship at their own pleasure, according as it is written: "Add thou not unto his words, lest he reprove thee, and thou be found a liar." "As I besought thee that thou mightest charge some that they teach no other

doctrine." (Prov. 30:6. 1 Tim. 1:3. See, also, 1 Tim. 6:2-5; 4:11. 2 Tim. 3:16,17.)

Secondly, there are civil ordinances prescribed by men, which include the arrangement, or fixing, of those circumstances which are necessary and useful for securing the observance of the moral precepts of the second table. Such are the positive laws of magistrates, parents, teachers, masters, and all those who are placed in positions of authority. Obedience is *the worship of God* in as far as it has respect to the general, which is moral and commanded by God, and includes obedience to the magistrate and others in authority; but not in as far as it pertains to that which is special in regard to the action, or to the circumstances connected with it -- in this respect it is not the worship of God, because only those works constitute divine worship, which it is necessary to do on account of the commandment of God, even though no creature had given any precept respecting them; but these, were it not that the magistrate commands them, might be done or omitted without any offence to God. But yet these civil ordinances prescribed by magistrates and others, bind the conscience; that is, they must necessarily be complied with, and cannot be disregarded without any offence to God, even though it might be done without being connected with any public scandal, if we would keep our obedience pure, and unsullied. So to bear, or not to bear arms, is not the worship of God; but when the magistrate commands, or prohibits it, the obedience which is then rendered constitutes divine worship; and he who acts contrary to this command, or prohibition, sins against God, even though he might so conceal it, as to offend no man; because the general, viz. obedience to the magistrate, which is the worship of God, is then violated. Yet these actions do not in themselves, constitute the worship of God; it is only by accident, on account of the command of the magistrate. If this were not to intervene, obedience would not be violated. The following passages of Scripture are here in point; "Let every soul be subject unto the higher powers." "Whosoever resisteth the power, resisteth the ordinances of God." "Wherefore ye must needs be subject not only for wrath, but also for conscience sake." "Put them in mind to be subject to principalities, and powers, to obey magistrates, &c." (Rom. 13:1, 3, 5. Tit. 3:1 Also Eph. 6:1. Col. 3:22,23.)

Thirdly, there are ecclesiastical or ceremonial ordinances, prescribed by men, which include the determinations of circumstances necessary or useful for the maintenance of the moral precepts of the first table; of which kind are the time, the place, the form and order of sermons, prayers, reading in the church, fasts, the manner of proceeding in the election of ministers, in collecting and distributing alms, and things of a similar nature, concerning which God has given no particular command. That which is general in regard to these laws is moral, as in the case of civil enactments, if they are only correctly and profitably made, and is, therefore, the *worship of God*. But, as to the ceremonies themselves which are here prescribed, they neither constitute the worship of God, nor bind men's consciences, nor is the observance of them necessary, except when a neglect of them would be the occasion of offence. So it is not the worship of God, but a thing indifferent, and not binding upon men's consciences, to use this, or that form of prayer, to pray at this, or at that time,

at this, or at that hour, in this, or in that place, standing or kneeling, to read and explain this or that text of Scripture in the church, to eat or not to eat flesh, &c. Nor does this power and authority to establish, abolish, or change these ordinances, belong merely to the church, as she may think it best for her edification; but the consciences of particular individuals also retain this liberty, so that they may either omit or do these things differently, without offending God, if no one take offence at it; that is, if they do it, neither from contempt or neglect of the ministry, nor from wantonness, or ambition, nor with a desire of contention or novelty, nor with an intention of offending the weak. And the reason is, *that laws are observed properly, when they are observed according to the intention and design of the lawgiver.* The church, however, ought to see to it that such ordinances as are established concerning things which are indifferent, be observed not out of regard to her authority, or command, but only for the sake of observing order, and avoiding offence. As long, therefore, as the order of the church is not violated, and offence is not given, the conscience of every one ought to be left free; for it is sometimes necessary, not on account of the command of the church, or of the ministry, but for just causes to do, or to omit things which are indifferent. We may here quote the language of Paul as in point; "If any of them that believe not, bid you to a feast, and ye be disposed to go, whatsoever is set before you, eat, asking no question, for conscience sake. But if any man say unto you, This is offered in sacrifice unto idols, eat not for his sake that shewed it, and for conscience sake; for the earth is the Lord's and the fulness thereof; conscience, I say, not thine own, but the other; for why is my liberty judged of another man's conscience. For if I by grace, be a partaker, why am I evil spoken of for that for which I give thanks?" Cor. 10:28-31. See also Acts 15: and 1 Cor. 11.)

Obj. But if the edicts of magistrates bind the consciences of men, why do not the traditions of the church also? Ans. The cases are not the same. God has given to the magistracy the authority to frame civil laws, and has threatened to pour out his wrath upon all those who violate these laws; but he has given no such authority to the church, or to her ministers, but requires merely that their laws and ordinances be observed according to the rule of charity: that is, with a desire of avoiding offence, and not as if there were any necessity in the case, as though the conscience were bound thereby. The Scriptures expressly teach this difference: "Ye know that the princes of the Gentiles exercise dominion over them, and they that are great exercise authority upon them; but it shall not be so among you." "Neither as being lords over God's heritage." "Let no man judge you in meat or in drink, or in respect of an holyday." "Stand fast in the liberty wherewith Christ has made us free." (Matt. 20:25. 1 Pet. 5:3. Col. 2:16. Gal. 5:1.) The reasons of this difference are evident: 1. Because there is a great difference between the civil magistrate, whose province it is to exercise authority over his subjects, and to compel such as are obstinate to yield obedience by corporal punishment, and the ministry of the church, to whom no such power is granted; but who are entrusted with the office of teaching men in reference to the will of God. 2. Because when ecclesiastical ordinances are violated without any offence being given thereby, there is no violation of the first table of the Decalogue, to which they ought to contribute; but when civil

enactments are violated, even though there may be no offence, there is a violation of the second table, inasmuch as this cannot occur without detracting something from the commonwealth, or giving some occasion of injury to it.

To this is replied: Obedience ought rather to be rendered to that office which is the greater and more honorable. Therefore those things which have been instituted by the ministers of the church, bind more strongly the consciences of men, than civil laws. We reply to the antecedent: That greater obedience is due to that office which is the more honorable, in those things which belong properly to the office itself. But it is the proper office of the civil magistrate to make laws, which are to be observed out of regard to the command itself; whilst it belongs properly to the ecclesiastical ministry to institute ceremonial precepts, which shall be observed, not on account of the command of men, but for the sake of avoiding offences.

Fourthly, there are human enactments which are in opposition to the commands of God. These God forbids us to comply with, whether they be enjoined by the civil magistrate, or by the church and her ministry, according as it is said: "We ought to obey God rather than men." "Why do ye transgress the commandment of God by your tradition." (Acts 5:20. Matt. 15:3.)

From what has now been said we may easily answer the following objections: 1. God commands us to yield obedience to the enactments of men. Ans. God require[s] us to comply with, 1. Such as are good and not opposed to his word. 2. Such as he himself has commanded by men, that worship may be thus paid unto him. 3. Such civil enactments as depend upon the authority of men, to which we render obedience not for the sake of divine worship, but for conscience sake. 4. Such ecclesiastical ordinances as those which we observe, not for the sake of worship, nor for conscience sake, but that we may avoid giving any offence.

Obj. 2. Those things which the church commands, under the influence of the Holy Spirit, are divine ordinances, having respect to the worship of God. But the church, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, institutes ordinances which are good and profitable. Therefore these ordinances bind the consciences of men, and have respect to the worship of God. Ans. That which is general in regard to the things which the church prescribes, under the influence of the Holy Spirit, pertains to the worship of God. This comprehends the divine laws which require a proper regard to charity, avoiding offences, with the preservation of order and propriety in the church. The ordinances or institutions which have respect to what is general, being prescribed by the church under the influence of the Holy Spirit, are also divine, inasmuch as they form a part of those laws, the care and keeping of which God has committed to us in his word. But the good prescriptions of the church are human, or they are the prescriptions of men, in as far as they designate what is declared, rather than what is expounded generally in these divine laws. Hence those ordinances do not constitute the worship of God, which the church by her own authority and in her own name advises, determines and commands, even though she be directed by the influence of the Holy

Spirit in choosing and determining them. For the Holy Spirit declares to the church both what is profitable for the purpose of avoiding offences, and also that these things which are enjoined for the sake of avoiding offences are neither the worship of God, nor necessary to be observed, except for the purpose of avoiding every occasion of offence, as appears from the following declarations of Holy Writ: "I speak this by permission, and not of commandment." "And this I speak for your own profit; not that I may cast a snare upon you, but for that which is comely, and that ye may attend upon the Lord without distraction." (1 Cor. 7: 6, 35.) So Paul also forbids to eat of things offered in sacrifice to idols, if by doing so we give offence to a weak brother; under other circumstances he leaves every one free to act as he chooses. So the Apostles also, when assembled in Jerusalem, commanded, under the influence of the Holy Spirit, abstinence from things strangled and from blood; and yet they granted liberty to the church to act with freedom in this matter, where no offence would follow.

Obj. 3. God is worshipped in those things which are done to his glory. Those things which the church decides upon, are done to the glory of God. Therefore they also constitute the worship of God. Ans. Those things are indeed the worship of God which are done to his glory, and which he has commanded to this end, that we may declare our obedience to him by these works; but not those which contribute to the glory of God by an accident: that is, which lead sometimes to the performance of the things commanded by God on account of accidental causes, which, if they do not concur, God may still be honored, as well by those who do these things as by those who omit them, if they only be done or omitted of faith.

Obj. 4. But certain of the saints have worshipped God with acceptance without any express commandment of his; so Samuel offered sacrifices in Ramah, Elijah in Mount Carmel, Manoah in Zorah, &c. (1 Sam. 7:17. 1 Kings 18:19. Judges 13:19.) Therefore there are certain works which constitute the worship of God, although not expressly commanded by him. Ans. These examples establish nothing conclusively in reference to will-worship; for, in the first place, as it respects these sacrifices, they were the worship of God, because they were works commanded by him. And then as it regards the place appointed for offering sacrifices, the saints of old were free before the erection of the temple. Samuel fixed upon the place where he lived as the one in which he would offer sacrifices, this being the most convenient. And the prophets knew very well that the worship of God did not consist in the circumstance of place, in respect to which the godly were left free, while as yet the ark of the covenant had no fixed place. And then, finally, as it respects the persons themselves who offered these sacrifices, they had extraordinary power conferred upon them, being prophets, as Samuel and Elijah were. And as it respects Manoah, the father of Sampson, he either did not sacrifice himself, but delivered the sacrifice over to the angel whom he supposed to be a prophet, to be offered up; or else he himself offered it, being commanded by the angel, so that nothing was done contrary to the law.

So we may also easily return an answer to the other examples which are adduced by our

opponents. Abel and Noah, say they, offered sacrifices; (Gen. 4 & 8) but they did not do it without a command from God; for they offered their sacrifices in faith as Paul affirms in Heb. 11. Faith now cannot be without the word of God. But the Rechabites, say they, of whom we have an account in the 35th chap. of Jeremiah, abstained from the use of wine, and from agriculture, according to the command of their father, Jonadab, and were commended by God. But Jonadab did not design to institute any new worship of God, but merely desired by this civil command to do away with drunkenness and such sins as accompany it. So it was not the kind of food and raiment which John the Baptist ate and wore, that commended him to the divine favor, but his sobriety and temperance, and worship of God. Nor was it the raiment, made of sheep and goat skins, nor their wandering in mountains, dens, and caves, that made the saints of old (Heb. 11) approved before God, but their faith and patience in enduring afflictions and trials.

Obj. 5. Whatever is done of faith, and is acceptable to God, constitutes divine worship. The works which men perform voluntarily, are done of faith and so please God. Therefore, they constitute his worship. Ans. The major proposition is particular. To say, moreover, that a thing pleases God is not a sufficient definition of divine worship, inasmuch as actions which are indifferent may also be done of faith and so please God, although in a different manner from what his worship properly so called pleases him; for this pleases God in such a way, that the opposite of it displeases him; for this pleases God in such a way, that the opposite of it displeases him, and so cannot be done of faith; whilst actions of indifference are approved of in such a way that their opposites may not be displeasing to God, and hence both may be done of faith, which rests assuredly that the work and the person both please God. Thus far we have spoken merely of the command itself. The exhortation contained in this second commandment remains to be explained. Before proceeding to this, however, we shall first give an explanation of the doctrine respecting images, which belongs properly to this commandment, and is contained in the two following Questions of the Catechism:

Question 97. Are images then not at all to be made?

Answer. God neither can nor may be represented by any means; but as to creatures, though they may be represented, yet God forbids us to make, or have an resemblance of them, either in order to worship them, or to serve God by them.

Question 98. But may not images be tolerated in the churches, as books to the laity?

Answer. No; for we must not pretend to be wiser than God, who will have his people taught not by dumb images, but by the lively preaching of his word.

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