***A COVENANT IN TEN WORDS***

John C. Peterson

Covenant Presbyterian Church, Staunton, VA

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Texts: Deuteronomy 4:9-20 and John 13:33-35

In Hebrew they are called “The Ten Words.” We refer to them as “The Ten Commandments,” as Charlton Heston did in the classic movie by that name. In practice, many Christians seem to regard them as “The Ten Suggestions.” But as the writer in Deuteronomy describes them, they are God’s covenant with God’s people, handed down by God at the foot of Mt. Horeb (which is elsewhere called Mt. Sinai) and memorialized on stone tablets carried down from the mountain by Moses. It is a covenant that Moses wanted the people to recall, cherish, and observe as they prepared to enter the Promised Land toward which they had been journeying with Moses for a long, long time.

Their journey began with God delivering them from Egyptian bondage. They walked on dry ground through the Red Sea while their Egyptian pursuers drowned behind them. In the desert wilderness they were fed with manna and quail, and their thirst was quenched with water from a rock at Meribah. Year after year they made their way across the desert toward an unknown destination – a Promised Land flowing with milk and honey. As they arrived at the foot of Mt. Horeb, they were little more than a ragtag bunch of refugees looking for a home. They had a leader in Moses, but little else, except a quivering belief in the God who had delivered them. They were nomads more than a nation.

At the foot of that holy mountain God consecrated the people, claimed them as God’s own and gave them an identity with these words:

*If you obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession out of all the peoples. Indeed, the whole earth is mine, but you shall be for me a priestly kingdom and a holy nation.*

No longer were these refugees “no people;” they were now “God’s people,” a treasured possession, and their identity as a people now derived from their relationship with the Lord who had claimed them. This community was defined, not by ethnicity or race or the rules by which they lived, but by the Lord who was their God. At the foot of that holy mountain, the Lord began to shape them into a holy nation.

That shaping began with these Ten Commandments. They were not just rules imposed upon them by a Presbyterian God intent on doing things decently and in order; the Ten Words were fence posts defining the parameters of the community in which the people would live as God’s people. By obeying them they would differentiate themselves from other people who worshiped other gods. There were commandments that defined the relationship with God:

I am the Lord your God! You shall have no other gods before me.

You shall make no graven images, that is, no idols!

You shall not take the Lord’s name in vain, that is, make wrongful use of it.

Remember the Sabbath day and keep it holy.

And there were commandments that were intended to define their conduct toward one another:

Honor your parents.

You shall not kill.

You shall not commit adultery.

You shall not steal.

You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.

You shall not covet.

These were commands spoken by God directly to the people. All the other laws – and there were lots of them – were spoken by God through Moses. These Ten Words alone are described as coming to the people directly from God as a covenant with God. As such, they are given special significance in the life of the new community of people who were the treasured possession of the Lord. That significance has endured across the generations. At the time of the Reformation, both Martin Luther and John Calvin contended that these Ten Words serve “*as a kind of universal, eternal law to provide instruction for the life of faith*.”[[1]](#endnote-1)

These days there are efforts in some states to mandate posting the Ten Commandments on school walls or other public places, as if that alone would remedy the ills of our nation. But the covenant represented by those Ten Words is not a covenant with the United States, with any particular state, or with any other political entity, for that matter. They are a covenant between God and God’s people, and despite the claim of Christian Nationalists, Americans are not that chosen people! The commandments speak to a relationship between the God of Abraham, Sarah, and Moses, and the people God chose to be God’s people. As heirs to that covenant through Jesus Christ, they speak to our relationship with that God as well – as Christians, not Americans.

Jesus made clear to the zealots and those who wanted to crown him king and follow him to political power by evicting the Romans, that his kingdom has nothing to do with that kind of power. “*My kingdom is not of this world*,” he said repeatedly; yet two thousand years later there are still those who are determined to ride his coattails to political power. We in the church, above all people, should be leery of all those attempts to politicize those Ten Words and the God from whom they were handed down. Our calling is not to take over the government or the nation or the world for Jesus’ sake; we may advocate for just policies and work for justice and encourage practices consistent with what we understand to be God’s will, but our calling is to be faithful where we are, among those people with whom we live day to day. Faithfulness on that count looks a lot like the Great Commandment to love God with all that we are and to love our neighbors as ourselves and a lot less like taping commandments to the walls of schools. Those Ten Words etched on the tablets of stone are rooted, not in political power or state-sponsored compulsion, but in love – our love for God, God’s love for us, and our love for one another.

For the Israelites standing on the verge of Jordan and preparing to cross into the Promised Land, a new reality and temptation were about to confront them: strangers who worshiped strange gods might encourage them to worship those gods too. Moses lifts up these commandments to remind the people of the God who had delivered them, the God who had claimed them, the God who had given them the commandments to obey regardless of what the practices of natives in this Promised Land might be. At the top of that list of concerns was idolatry – the temptation to embrace the false gods of these new neighbors and reject the Lord, or simply to accept those idols alongside the Lord in a syncretic hedging of bets. But as the preamble and first commandment assert, the Lord is a jealous God who insists on being the one and only god in our lives, the only God meriting our wholehearted love. Anything less is idolatry – the worship of a false god who is no god at all!

Moses emphatically drives home this point for the people in reminding them that while they received those Ten Words directly from God, they never saw the Lord. Thus, any idol representing God would be mere conjecture or worse, abject reductionism! The commandment for the people, and for you and me, makes no room for such idols or other gods: You shall have no other Gods before ME, says the Lord! That is the commandment!

Do you follow that commandment? Are there any other gods that you worship or to which you devote yourself? Such false gods come in various shapes and sizes, some with bold claims to your attention and others with subtle, insidious ways of charming your heart. What they hold in common is this – they would compete with or claim equality with the Lord in your life. Who is first in your heart, in your commitments, in your love and loyalty?

In his recent book *The Kingdom, the Power, and the Glory*, evangelical author Tim Alberta quotes columnist Cal Thomas, saying:

*There’s more than one way to be an idol worshipper in the Old Testament, you had Moloch and child sacrifices and all this stuff. But Satan is subtle. We don’t have statues now; we have political parties and presidential candidates*.[[2]](#endnote-2)

Has any political party or political candidate, any pop star or athlete, gained for you the kind of devotion and support that are reserved for the Lord alone? For, if you are to have no other gods before the Lord, then the Lord must be first in your life. In the words of the Heidelberg Catechism:

*I ought properly to acknowledge the only true God, trust in him alone, in humility and patience expect all good from God only, and love, fear and honor the Lord with my whole heart. In short, I should rather turn my back on all creatures than do the least thing against the Lord’s will.*

That is a tall order. It is not always easy to make the Lord first in your life – first in your ***intent***, yes! But making the Lord first in your ***life*** demands more than just good intentions. It demands responsible choices and faithful determination. It demands turning a deaf ear to a culture that would tempt you with other gods, with lesser gods,

with gods of wealth, power, and prestige,

with gods that fly a national flag and ask your first loyalty,

with gods created in your image,

with gods who offer to adapt themselves to your desires rather than asking

of you any change of heart,

with gods who expect you to reject the teachings of Jesus for the sake of

their cause.

They are gods that will bid for your time, energy and attention, gods that will offer you everything except those things that only the Lord can offer – real hope, forgiveness, love, and eternal life.

Theologian William Barclay suggests that we inevitably become like the god we worship.[[3]](#endnote-3) If you worship a god of vanity, you will become vain. If you worship a god of wealth, you will become materialistic. If you worship a god of political power, you will become divisive. If you worship a god of country, you will become xenophobic. But if you worship the God of Abraham, Sarah, and Moses, the God who came to us in love in Jesus Christ, then you will become with time more like Christ – full of love and compassion, forgiveness and peace, reconciled with God and holding the promise of eternal life. Which God will you choose to be first in your life, to shape your identity? The one you choose is not necessarily the one you SAY you choose; it is the one you make first in your life, day to day, every day. Choose the Lord – the one who gave you the Ten Words and longs for you to embrace that covenant – to be your God and for you - all of you – to be God’s people! Amen

1. Patrick D. Miller, *Interpretation: The Ten Commandments*, Westminster John Knox Press:2009, p.2 [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Cal Thomas quoted by Tim Alberta in *The Kingdom, the Power, and the Glory: American Evangelicals in an Age of Extremism*, HarperCollins:2023, p. 211 [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. William Barclay, *The Ten Commandments for Today*, p.18 [↑](#endnote-ref-3)