
Loving God in the Midst of Pluralism



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Let me paint two pictures for you. You might see yourself in one of them if you are a parent.

Imagine you have a young child who has recently started school in the neighborhood. You have walked them to school for some weeks, teaching them where and how to cross the road, always watch for the **WALK** light, reminding them again and again not to talk to strangers. Then one day they announce to you that they are now big enough to go by themselves. As you see them head off down the road, you hope and pray that they remember everything you told them, cross at the lights, watch for cars, wait for the **WALK** signal, and don't talk to strangers.

Or perhaps you have experienced this. Your 19-20 year old son or daughter has finished high school. They worked hard for a year to save up enough money to go to Europe or perhaps they are off to university, and so you took them to the airport here in Vancouver. You hugged them and kissed them goodbye and now you are on your way home. As you drive home you are hoping and praying that they remember everything you have tried to teach them for the past 19 years, about personal safety, personal morality, watch out for

strangers. They are no longer under your eye. They are heading out on their own and as you see the plane rise up in the sky above you, your prayer every day for the next year will be that they will remember everything you have tried to teach them.

So for little kids heading off to school on their own for the first time or for young adults heading into Europe or university, the world is full of new experiences, confusing voices, new pressures, and strangers for whom you have to be on your guard.

This was the scene some 3500 years ago. The nation which was to become known as Israel had been slaves in Egypt. Then in a series of powerful miraculous events God has set them free. On a mountain top called Sinai God had forged them into a nation – **HIS** nation!

The Lord reminds them of what He has done.

4 'You yourselves have seen what I did to Egypt, and how I carried you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself.'

5 Now if you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession. Although the whole earth is

mine,

6 you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.'

Ahead of them is the promise of a new land, a land flowing with milk and honey, water from wells that they would not have to dig, fruit from trees that they would not have to plant. If you know the story, it is a promise that is going to be delayed for 40 years as they wander around in the wilderness but that's another story.

In this new land whenever they get there, in addition to all its benefits, they will also hear the voices of strange gods that will seek to seduce them away from the one true God.

They will feel the pressure to be conformed and shaped by its strange customs. They will face the pressure for their sons and daughters to intermarry. The question is, how will they maintain their unique identity? How will they live out the distinctive characteristics of being God's holy nation? They are going to be aliens in a foreign land. How will they maintain their uniqueness? How will they stay safe?

So God has to have talk with them, a kind of “facts of life” talk.

We call this “facts of life talk” The Ten Commandments. It is vital that we understand this context.

God gives these commands to a people that he has just redeemed. The Decalogue (which means the ten words) is not a list of rules to make daily life awkward or old-fashioned, rather at its heart it is a statement about who God is and what He is like. In this way, the spiritual uniqueness of Israel, her ethical life as a nation, her separateness vis-à-vis the surrounding nations will be broadcast loud and clear. Israel is going from one polytheistic culture (Egypt) to another polytheistic culture (Canaan). So they need to learn what a redeemed life looks like. They receive these rules for holy living so that they can live like the people of God in an ungodly land.

While we might agree that most societies would be much better off if they followed the moral direction and social thrust of the Ten Commandments, they were not originally given to make us just good citizens and generally nice people who don't shop on Sundays or who don't lie and steal or who don't commit adultery.

Rather in the life of the people of God they bring divine cosmos and social order together, they are to demonstrate the reality that there can be cosmos (order) in the midst of social chaos.

The Ten Commandments connect the God's will to social order as it is to be demonstrated and lived out by His unique people. They are the demonstration of His saving grace in his people. They are the transcript of his holiness which is to be reflected in the life of the nation. 1st Peter echoes the very same words and applies them to the church.

9 But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light.

10 Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.

11 Dear friends, I urge you, as aliens and strangers in the world, to abstain from sinful desires, which war against your soul.

12 Live good lives among the pagans

You get the picture. We are now the aliens and strangers in the world, how will we live?

How did this happen? We need to go back into history.

For many centuries, often traced back to the conversion of Constantine in the 3rd century, Christianity had a favored and special status in world history. We call this period **CHRISTENDOM**. Certainly there were ups and downs. There were dark periods on the historical stage. Christians did not do everything right, but Christianity was for the most part seen to be the dominant force. In fact the only force, certainly in the West. It was perhaps the greatest force in shaping western civilization. It launched social change and geographic exploration. It was the catalyst for hospitals and education. In word and in deed Christianity made a difference in the world.

Many of us can remember back through some of the years of the 20th century.

There was prayer and religious education in schools.

There was general respect for law enforcement.

The Bible was generally accepted as true without question, even by people with no personal faith.

The judicial system was established on a Judeo-Christian basis.

We did not shop on Sundays. All stores were closed.

The founder of the city of Glasgow was a monk. If you visited Glasgow today you would see its motto on souvenirs, LET GLASGOW FLOURISH. However the full motto of the city of Glasgow is LET GLASGOW FLOURISH BY THE PREACHING OF THE WORD AND THE PRAISING OF HIS NAME.

That's Christendom.

I am not trying to say that all of society was Christian. Not at all, but there was a moral imprint, a spiritual familiarity that came from the ethos and the tradition of the Christian faith.

Then starting in Europe about 1890 and in North America from 1930 or so, a quiet but powerful shift started. It was a shift in truth. The teutonic plates that were underneath the social order of society began to shift. Initially these movements seemed slight and inconsequential. They moved at first with glacier speed whereas today we are experiencing social change and moral disruption at an enormous pace.

Six broad headings just to help us see where these changes are rooted. I usually call these broad brush strokes. This is Philosophy 101 and it is vital to help us understand where we are today and how we got there. They describe for us what is often called the Death of Christendom.

FROM PRINCIPLES TO PRAGMATISM

We have moved from being people whose lives are based on principles to being people who are shaped by pragmatism. Pragmatism simply means whatever works, whatever is expedient. Truth is whatever works, whatever brings the desired results. You do what you have to do.

In pragmatism truth is essentially relativised. The real conflict between Christianity and pragmatism is the conflict between what is right and what is expedient.

We find this idea of pragmatism in John as Jesus is brought before Caiaphas. He says: It is expedient that one man should die for the people. Truth is not the issue.

When we give up principle, we move from being people who have a moral compass to people who will simply go whichever way the wind blows. The result is that the focus of much of

today's ethical discussions is on prevention ethics rather than principled ethics. We see this in much of the ethical debate around the AIDS issue.

FROM ABSOLUTES TO RELATIVISM

We have moved from the idea of absolutes (where things are held to be true) to relativism. This leads us into the quicksand of situation ethics, the idea that things are only right and wrong depending on the situation.

FROM COMMUNITY TO INDIVIDUALISM

The thread of community that wove cities and groups has largely been broken as we move into greater individualism. We stand apart and we stand alone. People no longer know their neighbors, especially in apartments. The front porch has vanished. This echoes the dark shadow we find in the Book of Judges and every person did that which was right in his own sight.

FROM SERVICE TO SELFISHNESS

The idea of service is being eroded as the consumerism of selfishness takes over. Before we get involved we want to know, what's in it for me? What do I get out of this?

This spirit has had an enormous impact of organizations such as

churches who depend heavily on volunteers.

FROM SACRIFICE TO HEDONISM

It was with a spirit of sacrifice and adventure that people would dare to go on brave undertakings, to explore new lands, to give their lives to a cause greater than themselves.

For many people now, especially in North America, the cause is now the gospel of Hedonism, which is the word for pleasure and especially self-pleasure. Paul encountered this spirit in Acts 17, in those days they were called Epicureans.

Advertisers tell us, you owe it to yourself. We believe that and so many have as their personal maxim, I owe it to myself, combining both selfishness and hedonism. We are the first society with so much to live with and so little to live for.

FROM MONOTHEISM TO PLURALISM

We have moved from a general belief in one God to the Siamese twins of polytheism and pluralism.

As a nation, Canada is functionally pluralistic. Although it does face something of an oxymoron in its national personality. We sing in the national anthem, God keep our land...

The Introduction to the Charter of Rights says:

Whereas Canada is founded upon principles that recognize the supremacy of God ...

The problem is that there is no practical way to define what this really means.

The Charter then goes on to say.

Everyone has the following fundamental freedoms:

- a) freedom of conscience and religion;*
- b) freedom of thought, belief, opinion and expression*

The result is that this makes Canada functionally polytheistic in religion and pluralistic in ethics. What this has meant is that for many years other world religions (such as Buddhism, Hinduism) as well as philosophical truths (such as New Age, Kabalarianism,) were at the fringe of our society. Now they have moved from the fringe to the centre, from looking through the doorway to being at the table to the extent that you have to wonder if Christianity even has a seat at the table.

The cumulative effect of these shifts is that we are now entering a land which is filled with the strange voices of other gods. We are walking in a land

which is dangerous and seductive.

We are living in a land as Christians in which we are no longer the titled landowners and the spiritual residents. We have become the aliens and the strangers. So how should we now live?

If you asked most people what they think of the Ten Commandments they would say, irrelevant, out dated, old-fashioned.

This kind of response especially coming from Christians is to seriously misunderstand their purpose.

The Ten Commandments are the practical expression of how God's people are to live, especially in a land filled with strange gods and ungodly practices, such as Canaan or Canada.

Exodus 20

1 And God spoke all these words:

2 "I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery.

3 "You shall have no other gods before me.

So as God speaks to His people heading into a land filled with strange voices, bizarre ideas and false gods, his expectation, his

starting point is based on what he has done for them. They are a transcript of the holiness of God, to be copied and duplicated in daily life by a people called into being by holy grace.

God is saying, you have been called by my holy grace. This is how people who are called by holy grace live. This is what people whose lives have been touched by grace look like. Grace demands of us what duty would not dare to ask.

Who and what we worship controls us

There is no such thing as absolute freedom. If we think that there is we are deluding ourselves. We are always being controlled, consciously and unconsciously by what we worship or as Jesus put it, by where we place our treasure.

19 "Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal.

20 But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moth and rust do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal.

21 For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

If we worship power, it will control us.

If we worship success, it will control us

If we worship money, it will control us.

Who and what we worship shapes us

If you want to know what you really believe, carefully examine what you do, how you live. If you want to get really specific, look at how you spend your time and your money. The reason is the gods we really believe in, shape how we live and also justify what we do.

As Israel moved into this new land, this holy nation would soon meet false gods. These false gods were seen to be sexually promiscuous and so this shaped the sexual practices of the nations. It justified sexual immorality. If the gods could do be immoral, why can't we? We are shaped by who and what we worship.

It is the acceptance of pluralism that made it really impossible for the government of Canada not to agree to same sex marriages. Once you have gone that far down the road, there was almost no logical alternative.

You see, strange gods create strange ethics, false gods lead to false ethics. We become what we believe.

But as we worship this one and only God, this gracious God, this holy God, He seeks to write the transcript of his character upon our lives. We are shaped by his righteousness to be righteous, called by his holiness to be holy, challenged by his justice to be just, drawn into his mercy to be merciful, and captured by his love to be loving.

I believe that the darkening stage we find ourselves on today may actually become the greatest opportunity we will have to demonstrate and to display in the best way possible what real and radical Christianity is, what it truly means to be God's holy nation, a kingdom of priests.

Who and what we worship identifies us

This single-minded devotion, this divine priority is to identify us more than anything else as the people of God. We are to broadcast loud and clear that we are God's people.

But what we invite people to find and follow is not our Christian lifestyle, but rather nothing less than the deep life-changing grace that stimulates and creates that radical lifestyle. It is not enough to ask people to

follow the rules of the Ten Commandments, rather we are asking people to find and follow God who is the one and only.

I believe that one of the grave mistakes a past generation like mine may have made towards its young people was that it often asked them merely to follow a Christian lifestyle, to look like Christians, to act like Christians, to do what Christians do, to sit in church.

Without really asking them to follow Christ, we entertained you when we should have been equipping you. We lowered the bar when we should have raised the bar. We were afraid to ask for more so we accepted less.

If that is the case I apologize to you, and in doing so I challenge you to raise the bar in your own life, to seek and follow God as the one and only, to seek and follow Christ and his transforming grace. Do not settle for anything less.

So the Ten Commandments call us to a radical counter-cultural lifestyle as the people of God. The more that the moral stage of our culture darkens and becomes distorted, the more important it will be for God's people to stand in grace, to let grace shine, and live out of His grace as His people.

We live in changing and challenging times. They are not times for the faint-hearted or the fearful. We are again like Israel living in a land filled with strange voices and seductive sounds.

But there is another voice that calls to us. He speaks out of the fire on the mountain. His voice rises above all the clamor and din of our culture. He says, I and I alone am the Lord who brought you out of Egypt, out of slavery, out of darkness, out of sin, out of death. I am the God who stooped down and met you in grace at the cross. Worship no other gods before me.

The God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ calls to us. He and he alone is the one and only! We are to live in such a way that the land, our land, is filled with His glory.