

## "I Am The Lord Your God"

A Sermon by the Rev. Peter M. Buss, Jr.

**Life progresses.** I'd like you to think for a moment about what your life may be like a year from now. Countless things will happen to all of us between now and then. We will all experience another Easter, another Thanksgiving, another Christmas. Some of us may retire. Others may change jobs, or become grandparents for the first time, or move. Those of us who are married will celebrate an anniversary; it may be a third anniversary, or a thirtieth or fortieth anniversary. Those of us who are parents will notice that our children will develop substantially: they will become more independent and more competent. This might be the year for a child to move out of the house – even get married. We will all celebrate a birthday this year.

Whatever activities or landmarks fill our time, we can be assured that life will keep rolling by. Each day brings with it new experiences and challenges; some which give us joy, and others which test our endurance.

Through it all we will be developing as people. Our perspectives will change as we see more of life. We know that beyond the various things which fill up our day, we are supposed to be making spiritual progress. Each year we get closer to the time when our lives in this world will be over, and we will enter the spiritual world, which includes heaven and hell. Our primary goal in this world should be to prepare for that time – to be led by the Lord towards heaven. From time to time, then, it's useful to reflect on how religion will play a part in our lives. How will the Lord Himself help us to make some spiritual progress this year? What is He leading us towards? What does He want us to see about our choices and ways of acting, and consider changing? What is most important to Him?

**The First Commandment.** Today's focus is on the most central religious principle to keep in mind as we strive to make progress in our spiritual lives: dedication to the Lord our God. That is why we will look at the First Commandment today – the first thing, and in one sense the most important, which the Lord commanded from Mt. Sinai. He said:

"I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage. You shall have no other gods before My face. You shall not make for yourself a carved image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth; you shall not bow down to them nor serve them. For I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children to the third and fourth generations of those who hate Me, but showing mercy to thousands, to those who love Me and keep My commandments (*Exodus 20:2-6*).

**"That which reigns universally."** There is a teaching in the Writings for the New Church which says: "What is stated first must be held in mind and must be seen to reside universally in everything that follows" (*Arcana Coelestia* 8864:3). In one sense this means that the First Commandment must be held in mind when we look at the rest of the commandments, for it "reigns universally" in them. For example:

- The next two commandments teach us *how* to worship the Lord alone or have no other gods before His face: we are not to take His name in vain, which means that we honor and revere Him; and we are to remember the Sabbath day, or take time to focus on the Lord and make Him a priority.
- We are not to steal, because the God whom we worship forbids it.
- He commands us not to commit adultery because He is the God of marriage.
- We are not to murder, lie, or covet because in doing so we are not loving the Lord nor keeping His commandments, as the First Commandment requires.

In general, the First Commandment calls us to commit ourselves to the Lord to let Him reign in our lives. If we think about it, we need this command. For religion to make any sense, we have to know who the Lord is – He is the central focus, and the object of all our religious devotion. For us to see value in the Bible we have to know the Revelator – then it can be a Divinely authoritative guide for us. If we are to accept the path of regeneration or spiritual rebirth, we need to worship the Savior who makes it all happen.

One teaching in the Writings for the New Church says: "What reigns universally with a person is that which is present in every idea

of his thought and every desire of his will... *That which reigns universally within a person should be the Lord*" (emphasis added, *Arcana Caelestia* 8865). Another teaching says: "A person's whole character is determined by the nature of whatever dominates his life" (*Arcana Caelestia* 8858). The Lord asks us to let Him "dominate" our lives. He asks that we love Him above all things, that we make Him and His ways *the* priority in our lives, for He is the Source, the Beginning, the Lord our God.

**The Tone.** One of the things we notice about the First Commandment is that it is stated in the negative: "You shall have no other gods before My face," rather than "You shall worship the Lord your God alone." If we fail, He will "visit the iniquity of the fathers on the children to the third and fourth generations of those who hate [Him]." For He is a jealous God and one whom we should fear. We might wonder why this is the case. If worshiping the Lord alone is so important, why does He appear so foreboding, commanding, and manipulative – so distant? As you may suspect, there are several reasons for such a tone. First, the Israelites, to whom the Ten Commandments were first revealed, needed such an image. They would not have listened unless a powerful, jealous God was speaking. Such an image caused them to pay attention!

But another reason for the tone is that it teaches us *how* to make the Lord our central focus. "You shall have no other gods before My face," it says. How? By not carving any images, or making any likenesses of anything in heaven, on earth, or in the waters below. All these represent things which stand in the way of letting the Lord reign in us. "Gods" can mean selfishness – putting ourselves before the Lord, which is the root of all evil. They can also mean worldliness, or a lack of concern for anything beyond what we can see and experience, namely the Lord and heaven. A "likeness in the heavens above or the earth beneath" means pretending to be a good person. A person who acts like a spiritual and moral person externally, is making a likeness or putting on a façade (see *Arcana Caelestia* 8871:1). The Lord calls such people hypocrites.

When we get to "the waters under the earth" we come to the direct opposite to worshiping the Lord. The waters and the things they contain represent a bodily-oriented person, who cares only for

external pleasures (*Arcana Caelestia* 8872). Such a person is dominated by appetites for worldly things such things as food or possessions, or for physical, lustful pleasure. This is a far cry from what is orderly, with the Lord at the top, and these cravings much further down the list in their appropriate places (see *Arcana Caelestia* 911:3).

The purpose of stating the First Commandment in the negative is to warn us that we all have tendencies to love ourselves, to make ourselves appear like good people, to seek pleasure. If we focus on these things alone, the Lord cannot help us. Without Him, we live lives which are pictured by the Israelites in the land of Egypt-in bondage, controlled by negative influences which come to us by means of hell. Our lives will have qualities to them which don't bring us happiness, but instead make us feel miserable. We will act in selfish and manipulative ways, and cause harm to the people around us. But the Lord wants us to realize that it doesn't have to be that way. He can free us from these negative influences. If we put Him first, He delivers us from the influences of hell (see *Arcana Caelestia* 8866). He gives us a rationale for the way things should be, with Himself at the top governing and directing our lives, with charity to other people next, as He commands. Then we can take care of our own needs, and experience pleasures in their proper measure, with appropriate goals: eating to remain healthy, earning money to support a family or even to live comfortably.

Amen.