

CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

717 North Stapley Drive, Mesa, AZ 85203 Phone: (480) 833-7500

Series:	The Heidelberg Catechism		Pastor/Teacher
Number:	64		Gary L.W. Johnson
Text:	Psalm 14:1-7; Isaiah 32:3-7		
Date:	January 10, 2016 a.m.		

God, Atheism and Idolatry

34. Lord's Day

Question 94. What does God enjoin in the first commandment?

Answer: That I, as sincerely as I desire the salvation of my own soul, avoid and flee from all idolatry, (a) sorcery, soothsaying, superstition, (b) invocation of saints, or any other creatures; (c) and learn rightly to know the only true God; (d) trust in him alone, (e) with humility (f) and patience submit to him; (g) expect all good things from him only; (h) love, (i) fear, (j) and glorify him with my whole heart; (k) so that I renounce and forsake all creatures, rather than commit even the least thing contrary to his will. (l)

(a) 1 John 5:21 Little children, keep yourselves from idols. Amen. 1 Cor.6:9 Know ye not that the unrighteous shall not inherit the kingdom of God? Be not deceived: neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor effeminate, nor abusers of themselves with mankind, 1 Cor.6:10 Nor thieves, nor covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor extortioners, shall inherit the kingdom of God. 1 Cor.10:7 Neither be ye idolaters, as were some of them; as it is written, The people sat down to eat and drink, and rose up to play. 1 Cor.10:14 Wherefore, my dearly beloved, flee from idolatry. (b) Lev.19:31 Regard not them that have familiar spirits, neither seek after wizards, to be defiled by them: I am the LORD your God. Deut.18:9 When thou art come into the land which the LORD thy God giveth thee, thou shalt not learn to do after the abominations of those nations. Deut.18:10 There shall not be found among you any one that maketh his son or his daughter to pass through the fire, or that useth divination, or an observer of times, or an enchanter, or a witch, Deut.18:11 Or a charmer, or a consulter with familiar spirits, or a wizard, or a necromancer. Deut.18:12 For all that do these things are an abomination unto the LORD: and because of these abominations the LORD thy God doth drive them out from before thee. (c) Matt.4:10 Then saith Jesus unto him, Get thee hence, Satan: for it is written, Thou shalt worship the Lord thy God, and him only shalt thou serve. Rev.19:10 And I fell at his feet to worship him. And he said unto me, See thou do it not: I am thy fellowservant, and of thy brethren that have the testimony of Jesus: worship God: for the testimony of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy. Rev.22:8 And I John saw these things, and heard them. And when I had heard and seen, I fell down to worship before the feet of the angel which shewed me these things. Rev.22:9 Then saith he unto me, See thou do it not: for I am thy fellowservant, and of thy brethren the prophets, and of them which keep the sayings of this book: worship God. (d) John 17:3 And this is life eternal, that they might know thee the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom thou hast sent. (e) Jer.17:5 Thus saith the LORD; Cursed be the man that trusteth in man, and maketh flesh his arm, and whose heart departeth from the LORD. Jer.17:7 Blessed is the man that trusteth in the LORD, and whose hope the LORD is. (f) 1 Pet.5:5 Likewise, ye younger, submit yourselves unto the elder. Yea, all of you be subject one to another, and be clothed with humility: for God resisteth the proud, and giveth grace to the humble. 1 Pet.5:6 Humble yourselves therefore under the mighty hand of God, that he may exalt you in due time: (g) Heb.10:36 For ye have need of patience, that, after ye have done the will of God, ye might receive the promise. Col.1:11 Strengthened with all might, according to his glorious power, unto all patience and longsuffering with joyfulness; Rom.5:3 And not only so, but we glory in tribulations also: knowing that tribulation worketh patience; Rom.5:4 And patience, experience; and experience, hope: 1 Cor.10:10 Neither murmur ye, as some of them also murmured, and were destroyed of the destroyer. Philip.2:14 Do

all things without murmurings and disputings: (h) Ps.104:27 These wait all upon thee; that thou mayest give them their meat in due season. Ps.104:28 That thou givest them they gather: thou openest thine hand, they are filled with good. Ps.104:29 Thou hidest thy face, they are troubled: thou takest away their breath, they die, and return to their dust. Ps.104:30 Thou sendest forth thy spirit, they are created: and thou renewest the face of the earth. Isa.45:7 I form the light, and create darkness: I make peace, and create evil: I the LORD do all these things. James 1:17 Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, and cometh down from the Father of lights, with whom is no variableness, neither shadow of turning. (i) Deut.6:5 And thou shalt love the LORD thy God with all thine heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy might. Matt.22:37 Jesus said unto him, Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind. (j) Deut.6:2 That thou mightest fear the LORD thy God, to keep all his statutes and his commandments, which I command thee, thou, and thy son, and thy son's son, all the days of thy life; and that thy days may be prolonged. Ps.111:10 The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom: a good understanding have all they that do his commandments: his praise endureth for ever. Prov.1:7 The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge: but fools despise wisdom and instruction. Prov.9:10 The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom: and the knowledge of the holy is understanding. Matt.10:28 And fear not them which kill the body, but are not able to kill the soul: but rather fear him which is able to destroy both soul and body in hell. (k) Matt.4:10 Then saith Jesus unto him, Get thee hence, Satan: for it is written, Thou shalt worship the Lord thy God, and him only shalt thou serve. Deut.10:20 Thou shalt fear the LORD thy God; him shalt thou serve, and to him shalt thou cleave, and swear by his name. Deut.10:21 He is thy praise, and he is thy God, that hath done for thee these great and terrible things, which thine eyes have seen. (l) Matt.5:29 And if thy right eye offend thee, pluck it out, and cast it from thee: for it is profitable for thee that one of thy members should perish, and not that thy whole body should be cast into hell. Matt.5:30 And if thy right hand offend thee, cut it off, and cast it from thee: for it is profitable for thee that one of thy members should perish, and not that thy whole body should be cast into hell. Matt.10:37 He that loveth father or mother more than me is not worthy of me: and he that loveth son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me. Acts 5:29 Then Peter and the other apostles answered and said, We ought to obey God rather than men.

Question 95. What is idolatry?

Answer: Idolatry is, instead of, or besides that one true God, who has manifested himself in his word, to contrive, or have any other object, in which men place their trust. (a)

(a) Eph.5:5 For this ye know, that no whoremonger, nor unclean person, nor covetous man, who is an idolater, hath any inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and of God. 1 Chron.16:26 For all the gods of the people are idols: but the LORD made the heavens. Philip.3:19 Whose end is destruction, whose God is their belly, and whose glory is in their shame, who mind earthly things.) Gal.4:8 Howbeit then, when ye knew not God, ye did service unto them which by nature are no gods. Eph.2:12 That at that time ye were without Christ, being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers from the covenants of promise, having no hope, and without God in the world: 1 John 2:23 Whosoever denieth the Son, the same hath not the Father: (but) he that acknowledgeth the Son hath the Father also. 2 John 1:9 Whosoever transgresseth, and abideth not in the doctrine of Christ, hath not God. He that abideth in the doctrine of Christ, he hath both the Father and the Son. John 5:23 That all men should honour the Son, even as they honour the Father. He that honoureth not the Son honoureth not the Father which hath sent him.

35. Lord's Day

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

Answer: That we in no wise represent God by images, (a) nor worship him in any other way than he has commanded in his word. (b)

(a) Deut.4:15 Take ye therefore good heed unto yourselves; for ye saw no manner of similitude on the day that the LORD spake unto you in Horeb out of the midst of the fire: Deut.4:16 Lest ye corrupt yourselves, and make you a graven image, the similitude of any figure, the likeness of male or female, Deut.4:17 The likeness of any beast that is on the earth, the likeness of any winged fowl that flieth in the air, Deut.4:18 The likeness of any thing that creepeth on the ground, the likeness of any fish that is in the waters beneath the earth: Deut.4:19 And lest thou lift up thine eyes unto heaven, and when thou seest the sun, and the moon, and the stars, even all the host of heaven, shouldest be driven to worship them, and serve them, which the LORD thy God hath divided unto all nations under the whole heaven. Isa.40:18 To whom then

will ye liken God? or what likeness will ye compare unto him? Isa.40:19 The workman melteth a graven image, and the goldsmith spreadeth it over with gold, and casteth silver chains. Isa.40:20 He that is so impoverished that he hath no oblation chooseth a tree that will not rot; he seeketh unto him a cunning workman to prepare a graven image, that shall not be moved. Isa.40:21 Have ye not known? have ye not heard? hath it not been told you from the beginning? have ye not understood from the foundations of the earth? Isa.40:22 It is he that sitteth upon the circle of the earth, and the inhabitants thereof are as grasshoppers; that stretcheth out the heavens as a curtain, and spreadeth them out as a tent to dwell in: Isa.40:23 That bringeth the princes to nothing; he maketh the judges of the earth as vanity. Isa.40:24 Yea, they shall not be planted; yea, they shall not be sown: yea, their stock shall not take root in the earth: and he shall also blow upon them, and they shall wither, and the whirlwind shall take them away as stubble. Isa.40:25 To whom then will ye liken me, or shall I be equal? saith the Holy One. Rom.1:23 And changed the glory of the uncorruptible God into an image made like to corruptible man, and to birds, and fourfooted beasts, and creeping things. Rom.1:24 Wherefore God also gave them up to uncleanness through the lusts of their own hearts, to dishonour their own bodies between themselves: Acts 17:29 Forasmuch then as we are the offspring of God, we ought not to think that the Godhead is like unto gold, or silver, or stone, graven by art and man's device. (b) 1 Sam.15:23 For rebellion is as the sin of witchcraft, and stubbornness is as iniquity and idolatry. Because thou hast rejected the word of the LORD, he hath also rejected thee from being king. Deut.12:30 Take heed to thyself that thou be not snared by following them, after that they be destroyed from before thee; and that thou enquire not after their gods, saying, How did these nations serve their gods? even so will I do likewise. Deut.12:31 Thou shalt not do so unto the LORD thy God: for every abomination to the LORD, which he hateth, have they done unto their gods; for even their sons and their daughters they have burnt in the fire to their gods. Deut.12:32 What thing soever I command you, observe to do it: thou shalt not add thereto, nor diminish from it. Matt.15:9 But in vain they do worship me, teaching for doctrines the commandments of men.

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

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

(a) Isa.40:25 To whom then will ye liken me, or shall I be equal? saith the Holy One. (b) Exod.23:24 Thou shalt not bow down to their gods, nor serve them, nor do after their works: but thou shalt utterly overthrow them, and quite break down their images. Exod.23:25 And ye shall serve the LORD your God, and he shall bless thy bread, and thy water; and I will take sickness away from the midst of thee. Exod.34:13 But ye shall destroy their altars, break their images, and cut down their groves: Exod.34:14 For thou shalt worship no other god: for the LORD, whose name is Jealous, is a jealous God: Exod.34:17 Thou shalt make thee no molten gods. Num.33:52 Then ye shall drive out all the inhabitants of the land from before you, and destroy all their pictures, and destroy all their molten images, and quite pluck down all their high places: Deut.7:5 But thus shall ye deal with them; ye shall destroy their altars, and break down their images, and cut down their groves, and burn their graven images with fire. Deut.12:3 And ye shall overthrow their altars, and break their pillars, and burn their groves with fire; and ye shall hew down the graven images of their gods, and destroy the names of them out of that place. Deut.16:21 Thou shalt not plant thee a grove of any trees near unto the altar of the LORD thy God, which thou shalt make thee. 2 Kin.18:3 And he did that which was right in the sight of the LORD, according to all that David his father did. 2 Kin.18:4 He removed the high places, and brake the images, and cut down the groves, and brake in pieces the brasen serpent that Moses had made: for unto those days the children of Israel did burn incense to it: and he called it Nehushtan.

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, (a) but by the lively preaching of his word. (b)

(a) Jer.10:8 But they are altogether brutish and foolish: the stock is a doctrine of vanities. Hab.2:18 What profiteth the graven image that the maker thereof hath graven it; the molten image, and a teacher of lies, that the maker of his work trusteth therein, to make dumb idols? Hab.2:19 Woe unto him that saith to the wood, Awake; to the dumb stone, Arise, it shall teach! Behold, it is laid over with gold and silver, and there is no breath at all in the midst of it. (b) Rom.10:14 How then shall they call on him in whom they have not

believed? and how shall they believe in him of whom they have not heard? and how shall they hear without a preacher? Rom.10:15 And how shall they preach, except they be sent? as it is written, How beautiful are the feet of them that preach the gospel of peace, and bring glad tidings of good things! Rom.10:17 So then faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the word of God. 2 Pet.1:19 We have also a more sure word of prophecy; whereunto ye do well that ye take heed, as unto a light that shineth in a dark place, until the day dawn, and the day star arise in your hearts: 2 Tim.3:16 All scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness: 2 Tim.3:17 That the man of God may be perfect, thoroughly furnished unto all good works.

The English word *God*, wrote Warfield, “is derived from a root meaning to call, and indicates simply the object of worship, one whom men call upon or invoke. The Greek word which it translates in the pages of the New Testament, however, describes this object of worship as Spirit; and the Old Testament Hebrew word, which this word in turn represents, conveys, as its primary meaning, the idea of Power.”¹ A generation ago the deservedly respected A.W. Tozer pointed out that “What comes into our minds when we think about God is the most important thing about us... For this reason the gravest question before the Church is always God Himself, and the most portentous fact about any man is not what he at a given time may say or do, but what he in his deep heart conceives God to be like.”² Voltaire, the famous French satirist is credited with saying that “God created man in His own image and man returned the favor.”³ This is not only true of unregenerated thinking, but is an error that God’s people are equally prone to make. In Psalm 50:21 the danger of idolatry is underscored by God Himself – “You thought that I was just like you.” We too must take to heart the warning of I John 5:21, “Dear children, keep yourselves from idols.” We fall into this snare when we think of God in our terms or entertain notions that are unworthy of Him. Idolatry, as John MacArthur has written, “is thinking anything about God that isn’t true or attempting to transform Him into something He isn’t.”⁴ Psalm 14 is almost exactly duplicated in Psalm 53. The Apostle Paul makes extensive use of these two Psalms in developing his argument for human depravity in Romans 3:11-18. The fact that this is repeated three times is significant. Dr. Boice said, “You would think we might begin to get the message at this point. If God says something once, we should listen to what he says very carefully. If he says the same thing twice, we should give him our most intense and rapt attention. What if he repeats himself a third time? Then surely we should stop all else, focus our minds, seize upon each individual word, memorize what is said, and ponder the meaning of the saying intensely, attempting to apply the truth of God’s revelation to our entire lives.”⁵

I. THE FOLLY OF ATHEISM

“The psalmist,” wrote Charnock, “first declares the corruption of the faculties of the soul: ‘The fool hath said in his heart.’ Secondly, the streams issuing from thence, ‘they are corrupt’... the first in atheistical principles, the other in unworthy practices; and lays all the evil, tyranny, lust, and persecutions by men, as if the world were only for their sake, upon the neglect of God, and the atheism cherished in their hearts.”⁶ This dismissive attitude towards God is the essence of atheism. It parades around with a great deal of intellectual arrogance, but the last word on atheism is said in Romans 1:22: “Claiming to be wise, they became fools;” a judgment vindicated in the sequence “What can be known about God is plain to them (19)... And... they did not see fit to acknowledge God” (28). The Hebrew for *fool* in this psalm is *nābāl* a word which implies an aggressive perversity, epitomized in the Nabal of I Samuel 25:25. The assertion, *There is no God*, is in fact treated in Scripture not as a sincere if misguided conviction, but as an irresponsible gesture of defiance. In the context of Psalm 10:4 it is expounded as a gamble against moral sanctions; in Job 21:7-15 as impatience of authority; in Romans 1:18ff, as intellectual and moral suicide. There are elements of all these in the present passage; already verse 1b shows the outcome of this attitude in relation to the self (corrupt; cf. Genesis 6:12), to God (*abominable* refers primarily to Godward offensiveness) and to fellow man (*none... does good*), which are the areas explored in Romans 1, Job 21 and Psalm 10, referred to above.⁷

II. THE FEATURES OF ATHEISM

The great Puritan divine Richard Gilpin made this observation, “Something of atheism is by most divines concluded to be in every sin, and according to the height of it in its various degrees, is reason and consideration overturned. There are, it may be, few that are professed atheists in opinion, and dogmatically no, but all wicked men are so in practice. Though they profess God, yet ‘the fool saith in his heart, There is no God,’ (Ps. 53:1), and in ‘their words

they deny him,' (Titus 1:16). This is a principle that directly strikes at the root: for if there be no God, no hell or punishment, who will be scared from taking his delight in sin by any such consideration? The devil, therefore, strives to instill this poison with his temptation. When he enticed Eve by secret insinuations, he first questions the truth of the threatening, and then proceeds to an open denial of it, 'ye shall not surely die;' and it is plain she was induced to the sin upon a secret disbelief of the danger. She reckons up the advantages, 'good for food, pleasant to the eye, to be desired to make one wise;' wherein it is evident she believed what Satan had affirmed, 'that they should be as God,' and then it was not to be feared that they should die. This kind of atheism is common. Men may not disbelieve a Godhead; nay, they may believe there is a God, and yet question the truth of his threatenings."⁸ Another well-known puritan, Thomas Brooks said that atheism denies God either (1) *In opinion*, saying there is no God; or (2) *In affection*, wishing there were no God; or (3) *In conversation*, living as if there were no God (cf. Rev. 22:12).⁹ Flavel declared, "Atheism stabs the soul to death at one stroke, and puts it quite out of the way of salvation; other sinners are worse than beasts, but Atheists are worse than devils, for they believe, and tremble; these banish God out of their thoughts, and, what they can, out of the world, living as *without God in the world*, Eph. 2:12. It is a sin that quencheth all religion in the soul. He that knows not his landlord cannot pay his rent: he that assents not to the being of a God, destroys the foundation of all religious worship; he cannot fear, love, or obey him, whose being he believes not: this sin strikes at the life of God, and destroys the life of the soul."¹⁰ Finally, listen to the words of John Howe, "Is not this the very height of enmity? What further proof would we seek of a disaffected and implacable heart? Yet to all this, we may cast in that fearful addition, their saying in their heart, "No God;" (Ps. 14) as if they should say, *O that there were none!* This is enmity, not only to the highest pitch of *wickedness*, (to wish their common Parent extinct, the Author of their being,) but even unto *madness* itself. For in the forgetful heat of this transport, it is not thought on that they wish the most absolute impossibility, and that, if it were possible, they wish, with this, the extinction of their own, and of all being; and that the sense of their hearts, put into words, would amount to no less than a direful and most horrid execration and curse upon God, and the whole creation of God at once! As if by the blasphemy of their poisonous breath, they would wither all nature, blast the whole universe of being, and make it fade, languish, and drop into nothing. This is to set their mouth against heaven and earth, themselves, and all things at once, as if they thought their feeble breath should overpower the omnipotent word, shake and shiver the adamantine pillars of heaven and earth, and the almighty *fiat* be defeated by their *nay*, striking at the root of all! So fitly is it said, The *fool* hath in his heart muttered thus! Nor are there few such fools: but this is plainly given us as the common character of apostate man, the whole revolted race; of whom it is said, in very general term, 'They are all gone back, there is none that doeth good.' This is their sense, one and all; that is, comparatively; and the true state of the case being laid before them, it is more their temper and sense to say 'no God,' then to repent, and turn to him. What mad enmity is this!"¹¹

CONCLUSION: Atheism, like idolatry, takes its cue from the heart. In both cases it produces corruption – and makes a fool of the person who embraces this folly. Abandoning belief in God, or turning to idolatry is in the eyes of God an abomination. It is described elsewhere in Scripture as "forgetting God" (Psalm 50:22; Isaiah 17:10; 51:13). God's judgment is certain. The condemnation extends to those who ignore, even if they do not deny, God's existence, or omnipotence. Jeremiah declares that the intellectual leaders of his day, who swear by the Name (5:2), "have denied the Lord and said he is not" (5:12; cf. Isa. 31:1; Jer. 2:13, 17, 18; 18:13, 15). The late John Lennon captured the essence of practical Atheism in the song *Imagine*. Many people who profess to believe in God (many sit weekly in our Evangelical churches) as they conceive of Him (which is often shaped more by sentimental notions derived from sources other than the Scriptures) but live in complete disregard to His Word. Over seventy years ago J. Gresham Machen pinpointed our tendency as fallen human beings to fall into practical atheism and idolatry. "We have not idolatry in the narrower sense, but of the making of gods there is no end. Turning from the living and true God, like Israel of old, we have preferred a god who will be content to serve our ends. We have built a fire and roasted roast, and we have promoted religion; and both operations are often on the same low utilitarian plane. Religion, men say, is a useful thing; it must be promoted in the interest of the state or in the interests of the community; God is the servant of man. Instead of seeking God first and testing our plans by His revealed will, we make our plans first and drag God in to help us carry them out. Religion ceases to be an end in itself and becomes a mere means to an end. Instead of the facts about God being the basis of religious

experience, religious experience is made the basis of the supposed facts.”¹² More recently Os Guinness has written, “Idolatry begins with the counterfeiting of God, because only with a counterfeit of God can people remain the center of their lives and loyalties, autonomous architects of their futures. Something within creation will then be idolatrously inflated to fill the God-shaped hole in the individual’s world. But a counterfeit is a lie, not the real thing. It must present itself through self-deception, often with images suggesting that the idol will fulfill promises for the good life.”¹³

¹ *The Selected Shorter Writings of B.B. Warfield I* (P & R, 1973), p. 69. A.A. Hodge made a similar observation, “The English word God is by some derived from ‘good.’ Since, however, its various forms in cognate languages could not have had that origin, others derive it from the Persic *Choda – dominus*, ‘possessor.’ The Latin *Deus*, and the Greek THEOS have been commonly derived from the Sanscrit *div* to give ‘light.’ But Curtius, Cremer, and other derive it from THES in THESSASTHAI ‘to implore.’ THEOS is ‘He to whom one prays.’” *Outlines of Theology* (rpt. The Banner of Truth, 1972), p. 29.

² A.W. Tozer, *The Knowledge of the Holy* (rpt. Harper Collins, 1961), p. 1.

³ To Voltaire God was only the result of a train of reasoning, and intellectual necessity – “if there were no God, we would have to invent him” is the way Voltaire frequently spoke. Cf. *Schaff-Herzog Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge IV* (Funk & Wagnalls, 1891), p. 2466.

⁴ J. MacArthur, Jr. *God: Coming Face to Face with His Majesty* (Victor Books, 1993), p. 9.

⁵ J.M. Boice, *Romans: An Expository Commentary I* (Baker, 1991), p. 306.

⁶ Stephen Charnock, *The Existence and Attributes of God* (rpt. Klock & Klock, 1977), p. 11.

⁷ Cf. the extended remarks by Derek Kidner, *Psalms 1-78 Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries* (IVP, 1973), p. 78.

⁸ Richard Gilpin, *A Treatise On Satan’s Temptations* (rpt. Soli Deo Gloria, 2000), p. 82.

⁹ *The Works of Thomas Brooks VI* (rpt. The Banner of Truth, 1980), p. 59.

¹⁰ *The Works of John Flavel III* (rpt. The Banner of Truth, 1968), p. 204.

¹¹ *The Works of John Howe I* (rpt. Soli Deo Gloria, 1990), p. 224.

¹² J.G. Machen, *God Transcendent* (rpt. Eerdmans, 1949), p. 25.

¹³ Os Guinness, *No God But God: Breaking with the Idols of Our Age* (Moody, 1992), p. 73.