

Everyone is familiar with Luther's formal definition of a god in his exposition of the First Commandment in the *Large Catechism*.

A god [he says] is that to which we look for all good and in which we find refuge in every time of need. To have a god is nothing else than to trust and believe him with our whole heart. As I have often said, the trust and faith of the heart alone make both God and an idol. If your faith and trust are right, then your God is the true God. On the other hand, if your trust is false and wrong, then you have not the true God. For these two belong together, faith and God. That to which your heart clings and entrusts itself is, I say, really your God.

It is therefore all the more interesting to note that Luther can, in his own way, take account of the other aspect of faith as loyalty, or fidelity, in formally defining "god." Philip Watson interprets him as follows:

All the children of Adam, Luther affirms, are idolaters, for they try by one means or another 'to take God captive,' as he puts it, or 'to bewitch God,' as if He should conform to their ideas or be subservient to their interests. Their wishful thinking prevents them from taking seriously all that is implied in the knowledge that God is Creator of heaven and earth. They should know that 'one cannot put God in one's pocket'; that 'God does not exist for man's sake, but man for God's'; and that 'we must adapt ourselves to Him, for He will not adapt Himself to us.' 'By the right of creation' He can and does require of us wholehearted obedience to His commandments, and He would owe us nothing even if we rendered it. Yet men offer to God their self-chosen works, as if they could put Him into their debt and obtain a reward from Him; and so doing they make reward their god, '*for that for which a man does anything, that is his god*' [WA VII.800.25 ff.; italics added]. The fact is, however, that we owe to the Creator all that we have and are, and can therefore never become His creditors. From this point of view, Luther can say that 'there is no other worship of God than thanksgiving' [WA XVII.1; 401.20 f.]. The offering of thanks gives God His divine honour, it allows Him to be and remain God, the Creator and Giver of all things; but the offering of works robs Him of His honour and does not allow Him to remain God, but makes Him into an idol (*Let God Be God!*: 90 f., 100).

To take the italicized clause seriously is to realize that Luther appreciates, in his way, as much as any of us does, that faith has an active aspect as loyalty as well as a passive aspect of trust, and that God, accordingly, can only be—in H. R. Niebuhr's terms—the *cause* we serve in all that we do as well as the *center of value* that makes us and everything else valuable. This means, of course, that he does full justice to Paul's confession that, "For us, there is one God the Father, from

whom are all things and for whom we exist, and one Lord Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist" (1 Cor 8:6).

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