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Myths about the Ten Commandments

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The Ten Commandments deserve a place of honor among the most celebrated documents of sacred history. For thousands of years the Jews have revered them as the words of the covenant made between God and their people at Mount Sinai. The Christian church has also recognized that the Decalogue contains a summary statement of the moral obligations resting upon all mankind. The Ten Commandments have been used as a catechism by the church since the time of Augustine. And this practice was reinforced after the Reformation.

From time to time voices have been raised within the church in favor of eliminating the Ten Commandments as inimical to Christian teaching. But just as the church catholic has retained the Old Testament as profitable for Christian instruction, it has likewise retained the Ten Commandments for the same reason (2 Tim. 3:16).

Such great teachers of the Christian church as Irenaeus, Augustine and Luther have recognized a qualified use of the Ten Commandments. They have understood that the covenantal document which God gave to the Hebrew nation must be interpreted christianly, and allowance made for the new situation which has emerged through the in-breaking of the new age of the Messiah. But just as the church's acceptance of the Jewish Scriptures has exposed it to the danger of misusing them, so its adoption of the Ten Commandments has incurred the risk of their misuse. A number of popular myths have developed around the Ten Commandments in some parts of the Christian church. These myths are not innocuous and should therefore be challenged, because they constitute a serious misunderstanding of the Christian gospel and its bearing on Christian ethics.

Myth 1: That the Ten Commandments Are a Divine Legislation Given to All Men for All Time

The Ten Commandments appear in the narrative regarding God's making a covenant with Israel. They are called "the words of the covenant" (Exod. 34:28), "his covenant" (Deut. 4:13) and "the Testimony" (Exod. 34:29). Research over the last thirty years has established that the Ten Commandments follow the form of a Hittite suzerainty treaty. 1 As Meredith Kline suggests, the Decalogue was the treaty which the great King made with the nation of Israel. In the preamble and historical prologue (typical of the Hittite treaty form) God addressed Israel, saying, "I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery" (Exod. 20:2). The actual commandments which follow constituted the stipulations of obligation which the covenant imposed on Israel.

Sampey is correct when he says, "It was to Israel that the Decalogue was primarily addressed, and not to all mankind." 2 Harrelson calls the Ten Commandments "the summary statement of the covenant requirements between Yahweh and Israel."3

We must retain the biblical terminology in this matter. The Decalogue is called "the covenant" (Exod. 34:28) – that is, the Sinaitic, Mosaic or old covenant. Strictly speaking, the Old Testament (covenant) is not the thirty-nine books which bear that title in our modern Bible. Those books are documents which grew out of the covenant. The covenant itself is the Ten Commandments (Deut. 4:13). Paul is therefore terminologically correct when he identifies the old covenant with that "which was engraved in letters on stone" (see 2 Cor. 3:6-11).

According to Deuteronomy 5:2-4 the Lord did not give this covenant (of the Ten Commandments) to the fathers of the Hebrew people. Paul certainly knew how to distinguish between the covenant given to Abraham and the one given 430 years later at Sinai (Gal. 3:16-19; 4:24-26). As a covenant, the Ten Commandments were addressed to the nation of Israel on its way to the Promised Land (Exod. 20:12). The Sabbath commandment was enjoined with reference to Israel's bondage in Egypt (Deut. 5:15). It should be clear that the Ten Commandments are historically conditioned and contain cultic elements adapted to the situation of the nation of Israel. Sampey is reasonable when he says:

It is possible, then, that even in the Ten Commandments there are elements peculiar to the Mosaic system and which Our Lord and His apostles may not make a part of faith and duty for Christians. 4

We know of no biblical statement which declares that the Ten Commandments are God's Law for all men for all time. The New Testament does at times cite several of the Ten Commandments from the so-called second table. But nowhere does it insist that Christians are duty-bound to take the entire Decalogue as their rule of life. The

question arises, therefore, why the Christian church has honored the Ten Commandments at all if they contain cultic elements which have reference to the nation of Israel alone. Aside from these cultic elements, it has been recognized that the Ten Commandments are largely concerned with moral principles which are self-evidently binding upon all mankind. We say "self-evidently" because it has been well attested that Israel's ancient neighbors (Egypt, Babylon and Assyria) had laws remarkably similar to the ethical stipulations of the Ten Commandments. Jewish tradition said that seven of the Ten Commandments were known to the sons of Noah and had always been binding on all mankind. 5

Because man's moral consciousness consents to the moral and ethical prohibitions contained in the Decalogue, theologians since Irenaeus have often called them "natural laws." And since the Ten Commandments provide such a concise and convenient summary of "natural law," the Christian church has always appreciated their significance. But such recognition of the value of the Ten Commandments differs from the more rigid and systematic mind-set which wishes to maintain the entire document in unaltered form. The New Testament nowhere says that Christians should relate to the Ten Commandments in this way. Nor was this the teaching of the fathers of the early church who followed the apostles. 6

Myth 2: That the Ten Commandments Constitute the Highest Expression of God's Will for Men

Some have regarded the Ten Commandments as though they were the ultimate biblical expression of God's will. But such a position is a fundamental denial of the claims of Christ. Every revelation of God which comes before Christ is preliminary, veiled and partial. Christ is the Full Expression of the Father's Will (Col. 2:9). He is God's Final Word to the human race (John 1:1, 2; Heb. 1:1-3). One of the main theses of the Gospel of John is to show that Jesus has removed the Law from the central position it occupied in Judaism. He has taken its place as the Word, the living Water, the Bread of life, the Light of the world, the guiding Shepherd, the Way, the Truth and the Life. 7

The Ten Commandments themselves share the inadequacies which characterize the entire Old Testament. As Paul says in 2 Corinthians 3, the revelation given in the old covenant was glorious, but its glory has been rendered obsolete by the surpassing glory of the greater revelation given in Christ. Rather than being a final statement of the will of God, the Ten Commandments are actually an inadequate expression of Christian morality. For example, in requiring masters to allow their slaves and slave girls to rest on the Sabbath, the fourth commandment implicitly condones the institution of slavery (Exod. 20: 8-11, NEB). The tenth commandment likewise condones this institution when it prohibits coveting the neighbor's slave and slave girl.

As we have already seen, the Ten Commandments were the words of the covenant which God addressed to Israel on their way to the Promised Land. God clearly accommodates his revelation to the needs of his people in their historical and cultural situation. The Old Testament, including the Ten Commandments, tolerated slavery, polygamy, 8 wars to exterminate national enemies, and other practices which fall short of God's final revelation in Christ. Furthermore, in such matters as exposing the sins of the spirit or commending the practice of positive virtues, the Ten Commandments fall far short of the spirituality of New Testament ethics. 9 Rather than imagining that the Ten Commandments forbid every failure to reflect God's glory and commend every virtue, we should realize that they express the minimal obligations for life within the old-covenant community. The unique feature of the Ten Commandments is not that they demand the highest moral and ethical ideals— for Israel's heathen neighbors had laws which expressed identical demands. The Ten Commandments were unique because they subsumed such ethical stipulations under a covenant of loving obedience to the personal Lord of the covenant, thereby achieving a unity of monotheistic religion and ethics unknown among other nations.

Jesus brings the Old Testament (including the Law) to completion. He is the Word, the Will of God incarnate, the living Torah. In his unveiled reality, he was all that the Law could only foreshadow.

As a Pharisee, Paul had understood the Torah to be the highest revelation of the will of God to man. But in his vision of the risen Jesus on the road to Damascus, Paul recognized in him a fuller, eschatological revelation of God. In other words, Christ, the bearer of the image of the invisible God, has superseded the Torah as the revelation of God and of his will for mankind (2 Cor 4:4-6) 10

For the Christian, the Decalogue is no longer the highest summary of human duty. He must ever read it with sincere respect as one of the great monuments of the love of God in the moral and religious education of mankind; but it has given place to the higher teaching of the Son of God, all that was permanently valuable in the Ten Commandments having been taken up into the teaching of Our Lord and His apostles. 11

For the Christian the greater reality on which his duty is founded is life in Christ. Christ has expressed this blessed reality in the form of the new law through His words and example, and above all through the Sermon on the Mount (cf. Matthew Ch. 5-7) and the farewell discourse (John Ch. 14-17). The Decalogue falls far short of this directive toward perfection. To attempt to represent it as a summa of Christian morality implies an inadmissible impoverishment. 12

Myth 3: That the Ten Commandments Are Central in New Testament Ethics

Robert Banks says:

It would appear..., that the central position given to the Decalogue in much Catholic and Protestant thinking is open to question. 13

On the evidence of the New Testament, Banks is justified in calling the centrality of the Ten Commandments into question. The great theme of the New Testament is the person and authority of Jesus Christ. He unquestionably forces the Law from its key position, and he occupies the central place both as a way of salvation and as a rule of life. All that the Law was to Judaism, Christ is to the New Testament community. It is not what Moses says or even what the Ten Commandments say which constitutes God's final word, but the person, work and teaching of Jesus. He is the living Torah, who supersedes the authority of Moses (Matt. 5; 12:1-12). In him the Old Testament prophecies concerning the going forth of God's law from Zion (as distinct from Sinai) are fulfilled (Isa. 2:1-5; Micah 4:1-5; Heb. 12:18-24). The New Testament has a new covenant, a new mountain, a new Teacher and a new law. In this all that is of permanent and enduring value in the old order is taken up in Christ and given greater force. In a penetrating comment on the significance of Christ's transfiguration, Hartmut Gese says:

The synoptic gospels contain another account which gives a basic answer to the question of Torah, the story of Jesus' Transfiguration (Mark 9:2-8; Matt. 17:1-8; Luke 9:28-36). It gains great importance through its position in the composition of the gospels and cannot be explained as a "misplaced Easter story." We should read this account too through the eyes of the Old Testament. Jesus ascends a mysterious "high mountain" that is not further identified. The text says "after six days" without giving any starting point for this period of time. But we know that after six days during which a cloud covered Mount Sinai Moses went up the mountain into the light of God's glory (Exod. 24:16). He was accompanied by Aaron the high priest and the original pair of brother priests, Nadab and Abihu (Exod. 24:1). Here Jesus is accompanied by Peter and the brothers James and John, sons of Zebedee. Just as Moses, entered the cloud and the divine light (Exod. 24:18) with the result that his face shone (Exod. 34:29-35), so Jesus was transformed by a light not of this world. Beside him appeared Moses and Elijah, the only ones in the Old Testament who received a revelation on the "mountain," and they converse with him. Peter naturally thought that this was the place where the tents should be erected for the three recipients of revelation, the tents which the Old Testament describes (Exod. 33:7-11) for use in the ritual observance of the Sinai event. But Peter did not know what he was saying. The Old Testament says, "Then the cloud covered the tent of meeting, and the glory of the Lord filled the tabernacle. And Moses was not able to enter the tent of meeting, because the cloud abode (*shakan*; Gk: *hoti epeskiazen ep auten he nephele*) and the glory of the Lord filled the tabernacle" (Exod. 40:34-35). Here they themselves were covered by the divine *doxa*, and they heard the revelation of the new covenant. In the ancient event at Sinai God revealed himself in the formula of self-introduction, "I am Yahweh," and then he gave the Decalogue. Here, however, God introduces his son, "This is my beloved Son," and then he continues, "Listen to him." Jesus himself has become the revealed Word. The gospel writers could not present it more powerfully: Jesus himself is the Torah. 14

Nowhere do Jesus and the apostles exhort us to study the Law except for the purpose of finding in it a testimony to Jesus Christ. In all his letters to the young Gentile churches, Paul has much to say on Christian ethics. But the apostle does not generally reason from the Ten Commandments to Christian duty. His reference point for ethics is not the Decalogue but Christ, his gospel and his Spirit. If Paul subscribed to the Puritan-Reformed idea that the Law (with special reference to the Ten Commandments) was the great rule of life for Christians, he missed many excellent opportunities to expound and illustrate this. It cannot be argued that he took this

matter for granted, for he was writing to newly-established Gentile churches which had no background in the Old Testament Law. Aside from two or three incidental references to the Law and the Ten Commandments, Paul reasons from Christ and his gospel to the content of the Christian life. The apostle made no synthesis of New Testament grace with Old Testament ethics as did the false teachers at Galatia. That which determines how a man stands with God— namely, Christ and his gospel— is that which also determines how a man ought to live. The heart of New Testament ethics is faith in Christ and submission to his authority as Lord.

Myth 4: That Because the New Testament Cites Some of the Ten Commandments, This Proves That the Entire Covenantal Document Is Binding

In several instances the New Testament cites some of the commandments from the so-called second table. This is sometimes used as evidence that the entire Decalogue is still binding for Christians. But such logic is fallacious. In 1 Corinthians 9:9 Paul cites the Law of Moses concerning muzzling the ox which treads out the corn. But would any Christian use this as evidence that the entire Law of Moses is still binding for Christians? The Australian constitution cites the words of the first amendment of the constitution of the United States of America. It has thereby incorporated features of American constitutional law in its own constitution. But this does not prove that Australians live under the American constitution.

The new covenant retained what was of universal application in the old covenant. These provisions, however, are not binding on Christians because they are found in the Ten Commandments but because they are self-evident "natural laws" which are not weakened but intensified by Christ and his apostles.

Those who advocate the inviolable claims of the Ten Commandments as a rule of life, yet fail to keep the Jewish Sabbath, are inconsistent. However much they may search for texts which indicate that the New Testament revised the fourth commandment, they are only indulging in a futile exercise to support a tradition that began centuries after the apostles. ¹⁵ But there is an even stronger argument against their inconsistency. The Ten Commandments constitute the words of the covenant which God gave at Sinai. Every word and letter of a covenant must be taken exactly as it is stated. It is not possible to revise a single clause of a covenant without rendering the whole document null and void. Either the Ten Commandment covenant is entirely binding as God gave it or the covenant is not binding at all. Thus, Seventh-day Sabbatarians are more consistent than their Puritan-Reformed friends from whom they have taken the concept of the Ten Commandments as the great rule of life for Christians.

Myth 5: That the Ten Commandments Are Wholly Devoted to Moral Law As Distinct from Ceremonial Law

The idea of making a sharp distinction between moral and ceremonial laws in the corpus of Mosaic legislation arose in post-biblical times. "The division between the strictly moral and the 'ceremonial' in our modern sense was entirely unknown to the Jews." ¹⁶ When the New Testament refers to "the Law," it generally means the entire Mosaic corpus of law. New Testament scholars seem to agree that Paul makes no distinction between one part of the Law and another.

This is not to deny that some contrast between moral-ethical principles and ritual-ceremonial ordinances is valid. But we should not read the distinctions of modern theological language back into scriptural texts where the writers had no burden to make such distinctions.

As far as the entire Mosaic legislation is concerned, there is such a profound mingling of ethical elements with the so-called ceremonial that it is impossible to clearly distinguish the two. One thing is obvious: the line dividing these two elements does not run between the Ten Commandments and the rest of the Mosaic legislation. Even casual reading of the laws in Leviticus 19 will quickly show that moral and ethical laws are mingled with laws for the Jewish cultus. In the same way, the Ten Commandments show the mingling of ethical and cultic elements. Luther, for example, argued that the commandments concerning both images and the Sabbath were ceremonial. Paul, who taught that idols were nothing, would have broken the second commandment according to accepted Jewish tradition. And the great apostle to the Gentiles certainly gave no heed to the Old Testament Sabbath prescriptions (Rom. 14:5; Gal. 4:10; Col. 2:16).

Leviticus 23 not only declares the Sabbath to be a festival, but links it to the entire system of Jewish festivals. A festival is a ceremony of remembrance and is not one of the "natural [moral] laws" which are written on the hearts of the Gentiles (Rom. 2:15).

While the Ten Commandments are chiefly concerned with common morality, they are a covenant between God and Israel. Therefore a festival or ceremony of covenant renewal— applicable to the Jewish religious cultus alone— is included among the moral stipulations.

Myth 6: That the New Testament Exhorts Christians to Keep the Commandments Is Proof That the Ten Commandments Are Binding upon Them

When the New Testament urges Christians to keep God's commandments, we cannot assume that it literally means keeping the entire Decalogue. By

"commandments" John generally means faith and love (John 13:34; 14:1, 15; 15:12-14, 17; 1 John 3:23). 17

John also refers to God's commandments in the book of Revelation (Rev. 12:17; 14:12). But while it is true that the revelator uses Jewish imagery throughout his book, such terms as twelve tribes of Israel, seal, Ark of the Covenant, testimony, tabernacle, Babylon and Euphrates do not have a literal Jewish meaning but are given a Christian meaning.

In 1 Corinthians 7:19 God's commandments are those mediated to the church in the apostolic teaching (1 Cor. 7:10; 14:37).

In Matthew 28:18-20 Jesus specifically refers to obeying "everything I have commanded you." 17

When the New Testament refers to "*the Law*," it generally means the Law of Moses (e.g., John 1:17; Acts 15:5; 1 Cor. 9:8, 9, 20). "The Law" is the equivalent of what the Jews called the Torah. The word "Law" is always in the singular and means the entire Law or even the entire five books of Moses (Matt. 5:17; Rom. 3:21). Scholars are agreed that when the New Testament refers to "the Law," no distinction is made between moral and so-called ceremonial laws.¹⁸ "The Law" (i.e., the Law of Moses) includes the Ten Commandments as well as regulations regarding uncleanness. According to the rabbis there were 613 commandments in the Law. The New Testament sometimes refers to the Ten Commandments as the Law of Moses (Mark 7:9, 10; John 7:19; Heb. 10:28; cf. Deut. 17:2-6).

In view of the foregoing, if texts such as Matthew 5:17 and Romans 3:31 are "proof" that Christians should keep the Ten Commandments, they are also "proof" that Christians should keep all 613 commandments of the Law. Obviously, that is not the meaning of such texts. They are telling us that the Law pointed to Christ and testified of him (John 5:39; Rom. 3:21). He therefore came to confirm all that Moses and the prophets had written. The true end of the Law is to lead us to place our faith in Christ and to obey the gospel. He who does this has fulfilled the Law according to its true intent.

Conclusions

1. Is it therefore legitimate for Christians to use the Ten Commandments? To this we answer yes, provided they are approached through Christ and interpreted christianly. Irenaeus, Augustine and Luther used the Ten Commandments legitimately. They interpreted them according to the new situation brought about by the new age of Christ. But many groups of Christians have not followed these great teachers of the church. They have adopted a more rigid and literal mind-set which

tries to apply even the religious and cultic details of the Ten Commandments as a rule of life.

Ridderbos points out "that with Christ's advent the law, also as far as its content is concerned, has been brought under a new norm of judgment and that failure to appreciate this new situation is a denial of Christ (Gal. 5:2)." 19 Haring makes this sensible comment on the Ten Commandments:

Whoever wishes to consider it, following Augustine, as the basis for a moral schema must present it in the light of the New Testament and New Testament law (Sermon on the Mount and the farewell discourse) and thus in the light of Christ and of life in Christ. 20

2. Yet having conceded this, we must say that using the Ten Commandments as a basis for a moral schema is not the New Testament approach. Here Jesus Christ replaces the Law, including the Ten Commandments, not only as a way to God but as a rule of life. All that the Law was to Judaism, Christ is to the New Testament community. In his Epistles Paul's great reference point for ethics is not what the Law stipulates but what Christ and his gospel demand. According to Paul, wrong behavior is that which is "not acting in line with the truth of the gospel" (Gal. 2:14) or whatever "is contrary to the sound doctrine that conforms to the glorious gospel of the blessed God" (1 Tim. 1:10, 11). Christian behavior is determined by Christ— his person, his work and his teaching. Paul's Epistles demonstrate conclusively that Christ is the great Guide, Shepherd, Teacher, Word and Rule of life for his people. As the apostolic fathers of the early church pointed out, Christ himself has become the living Law or Torah. This new revelation of God's law comes out of Zion rather than from Sinai in fulfillment of what the prophets declared would take place in the new age of the Messiah (Isa. 2:1-51).

Notes and References

1. Hittite suzerainty treaties were treaties or covenants imposed by Hittite kings or emperors on their vassal kings. See Robert D. Brinsmead, *Covenant* (Fallbrook, Calif: Verdict Publications, 1979), p. 10.
2. John Richard Sampey, art. "The Ten Commandments," *The International Standard Bible Encyclopaedia*, James Orr, gen. ed. (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co, 1939), 5:2944B.
3. W.J. Harrelson, art. "Ten Commandments," *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, ed. George Arthur Buttrick (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1962), p. 569.
4. Sampey, "The Ten Commandments" p. 2944B.
5. These were called Noachian commandments. See *The Jewish Encyclopedia*, ed. Isidore Singer (New York: KTAV Publishing House, n.d.), 7:648-50.
6. See the works of Ignatius, Justin Martyr, Irenaeus and Tertullian. Actually, Irenaeus (A.D. 120-202) seems to have been the first of the fathers to single out the Decalogue as an expression of moral obligations applicable to all mankind. The tradition of using the Ten Commandments for catechetical purposes gradually developed in the Catholic Church. Yet Irenaeus (and those following his tradition) did not consider the Sabbath

commandment binding on Christians in any literal sense. The Ten Commandments were interpreted Christianly. There is no evidence that the apostles singled out the Ten Commandments from the rest of Old Testament law and used them for catechetical purposes.

7. Judaism had invested the Law with all these titles of honor.

8. While the seventh commandment condemns adultery, it does not condemn polygamy. Many great Old Testament saints had more than one wife.

9. For an example of how the New Testament has an ethical maturity far beyond the Old Testament, compare Ephesians 4 and 5 with the Ten Commandments.

10. Brian Wintle, "Paul's Conception of the Law of Christ and Its Relation to the Law of Moses," *Reformed Theological Review* 38, no. 2 (May-Aug. 1979): 45.

11. Sampey, "The Ten Commandments," pp. 2946-47.

12. B. Häring, art. "Ten Commandments," *New Catholic Encyclopedia* (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Co., 1967), 4:8.

13. Robert Banks, *Jesus and the Law in the Synoptic Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975), p. 244.

14. Hartmut Gese, *Essays on Biblical Theology*, tr. Keith Crim (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1981), pp. 88-9.

15. See H. L. Ellison, art. "Sunday," *The New International Dictionary of the Christian Church*, J. D. Douglas, gen. ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1974), p. 940.

16. Jakob Jocz, *The Jewish People and Jesus Christ: The Relationship between Church and Synagogue*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1949), p. 68.

17. Matthew 19:17-19 is not an exception, because Jesus was addressing a Jew. In any case, Jesus only used the commandments as a springboard to press his own claims for total allegiance as the only way to become complete.

18. See Jocz, *Jewish People and Jesus Christ*, p. 68. See also W. Gutbrod, art. on the Law, in Gerhard Kittel, ed., *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*. tr. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1967), 4:1069, 1072.

19. Herman Ridderbos, *Paul: An Outline of His Theology* tr. John Richard de Witt (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1975), p. 284.

20. Häring, "Ten Commandments," p. 8.

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