

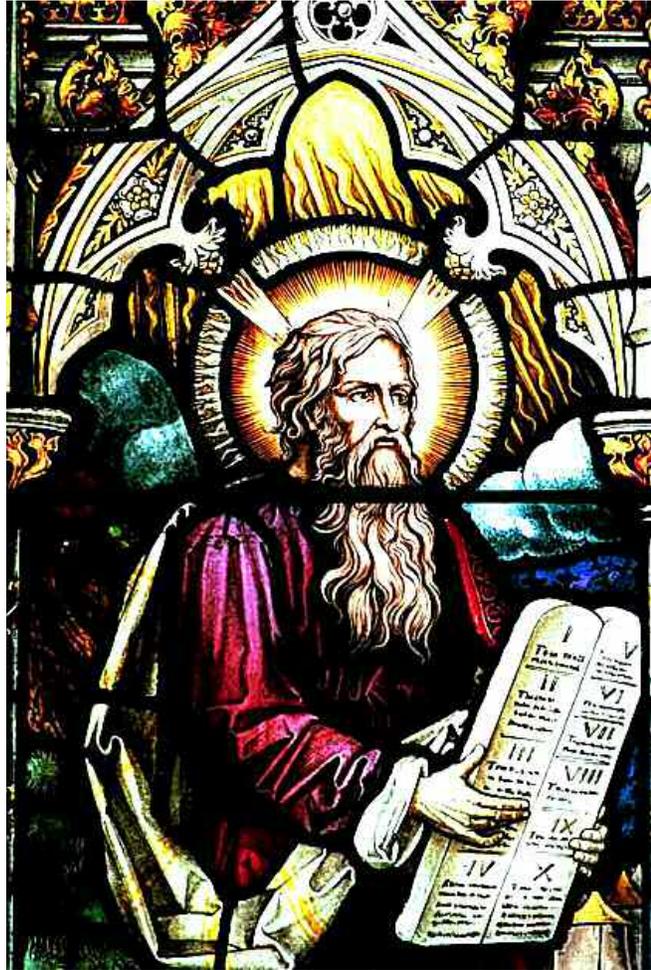
## *Commandments—Old and New*

**T**HESE DAYS the word *commandment* has a slightly archaic ring to it. Its primary context seems to be historical, dated, most commonly referring to biblical times when a set of moral injunctions became binding upon a people—literally, written in stone.

The Ten Commandments in contemporary Western society are definitely not in vogue. As moral imperatives mandating behavior they antagonize the individual sensibility that resents *any* command, any demand that seems to restrict its presumption of inviolable liberty.

In the military the terms “chain of command,” “command structure,” and “Commandant” (the CEO of the Marine Corps) are still viable. And that seems to be part of the problem: A prevalent view holds that our inherited religion is too demanding, too commanding, too authoritative. Historical Protestantism arose in part as a protest against the ecclesiastical chain of command which relayed the ultimatum, Do it (Don’t do it) or burn! If the believer was expected to follow directions, let them at least come directly from the heavenly Commander-in-Chief. Actually, the Greek word *decalogue* more correctly translates what the Israelites referred to as the “ten words” or “ten things,” from the Hebrew *ahseret ha-deebrot*. They also referred to these divinely transmitted precepts as the “Covenant” and the “Testimony.”

The appearance of mechanically produced vernacular Bibles, within a century after Luther publicly posted his differences with the religious practices of his day (Luther’s German Bible is still in



Stained glass. Church of the Incarnation, New York, N.Y.

### *Moses with the Ten Commandments*

*“And he gave unto Moses, when he had made an end of communing with him ...two tables of testimony, tables of stone, written with the finger of God.”*

use today), advanced the ability of the individual believer to interpret the word of God without the intervention of Latin specialists and the dogmatic authority of the Church.

Yet we are referring to a time when the Christian faith was overwhelmingly persuasive and pervasive in all the believer’s affairs. As we approach the cusp of the twenty-first century, recent surveys indicate that roughly ninety percent of Americans believe in God—an astonishing figure. But what these God believers espouse and do as a result of that belief is

another matter entirely. And what they do, in unprecedented numbers, includes: annually killing over one million lives before they are born; epidemic single-parent childrearing; regarding sex as a casual commodity, giving rise to promiscuity and the proliferation of sexually transmitted diseases, including the fatal AIDS; seeking to normalize deviant sexual behavior; and promoting the legalization of both suicide and doctor-assisted death.

From this partial list of social pathologies, it would seem that belief in God is for many a lightweight affair, for traditionally such belief conditioned one's life in every respect. Yet there is no discernible evidence of such influence in the lives of large numbers of today's nominal God-believers. Sanctity and holiness, which originally referred to the things of God and those whose lives were God-infused, is now demoted to the domain of the Godless personal self, for which all is permissible simply because the person desires and ordains it.

Author and teacher Thomas Reeves writes in *The Empty Church: The Suicide of Liberal Christianity* (Free Press, 1996), "Christianity in modern America is, in large part, innocuous. It tends to be easy, upbeat, convenient, and compatible. It does not require self-sacrifice, discipline, humility, an otherworldly outlook, a zeal for souls, a fear as well as a love for God..." What we now have might be called a consumer Christianity. It is characterized by the "divine right" of the consumer to choose as he or she pleases, to "buy as much of the full Christian faith as seems desirable. The cost is low and customer satisfaction seems guaranteed."

Self-serving popular psychology is enlisted to condone aberrant behavior in a misapplication of the motto, "to know all is to forgive all." Egoistic reasoning adduces biological, chemical, and environmental factors as the controlling cause of wrong behavior. According to this view predisposing genetics, childhood abuse, even "temporary" insanity are sufficient alibis for one's immoral or illegal behavior. Personal responsibility is no longer the central issue. Because, so the argument goes, the person is not free. Yet, ironically, pathetically, the same person insists on being free to do what he wants, but will not be held accountable to the consequences of his actions.

The desire nature of the typical contemporary



Fresco, Andrea Mantegna (1431-1506), Church of the Eremitani, Padua

#### *St. James Cures the Paralytic*

*Probably James the Greater, older brother of John, is pictured above. But it is James the Less, called Jesus' brother (actually cousin), who is the author of the Epistle of James and, according to Paul, one of the three pillars of the early Christian church (Gal. 2:9). The letter's main object is not to teach doctrine but to improve morality. St. James is the moral teacher of the New Testament. The "perfect liberty" to which he refers results from a purified, Christ-informed conscience.*

person may be no more disciplined than that of the biblical Semites—only, perhaps, subtler, less overt. To regulate that behavior the Jews were given the Ten Commandments. They were effective because they were believed to have come from God, and God for the ancient Jews was real and they feared Him, for he had power to give life and to take it away. And He did. He permitted suffering, cataclysm, and captivity of an entire people if they did not keep their covenant with Him. Therefore, as the Proverb (9:10) says, "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom."

Modern psychology tells us that fear is our enemy and largely a biological anachronism, that the less we have of it, the better we can function and the more liberated we become. In the past, God-based fear of the consequences of one's actions

acted as a deterrent to immoral conduct. Today the secular law has largely replaced the Lord as the arbiter and punisher of one's actions. Correspondingly, we have moved from a priest rule to a police rule. That is, with erosion of the belief in the transcendent origin of regulating laws, the power of civil regulations requires backup because they are less compelling, they carry less clout. More surveillance and stronger punitive measures are required to give the law teeth. Merely human laws are deemed somewhat arbitrary, cultural constructions, and therefore more negotiable.

In spite of the foregoing, our typical member of contemporary society may well think that the Ten Commandments have been around so long that he has them down pat. Basic stuff. He is on to Christ's new law—to love everyone. Also, he may have passing acquaintance with what St. Paul said, that those who are justified by the law are fallen from grace and are debtors to do the whole law. Our nominal believer doesn't want to get caught up in the minutia of the law, citing chapter and verse for every action. He wants to live by the "law of perfect liberty," as St. James expresses it. But whose liberty? This liberty must not be an occasion for the worldly self's indulgence. It is true that if we are led by the Spirit, we are not under the law (Gal. 5). But can we readily and continuously distinguish between the voice for self and the voice for God? As seekers of the indwelling Christ we would benefit from asking ourselves questions prior to contemplated action, such as: What do we intend by the action? What is our real motive? What will be the likely consequence(s) of words we propose to speak? Are we seeking to be truly helpful?

Persons who are earnestly committed to spiritual development know that the Ten Commandments have an inner or esoteric application whose requirements are far more rigorous and exacting than traditional exoteric readings suggest. They know that lukewarm do-goodism tailored to one's personal

agenda is nothing like the intensive, focused, wakeful attunement to the living Spirit as it counsels uncompromising honesty, intrepid soul-searching, strict accountability and invincible good will and resolute patience.

Let us briefly consider what a more thoroughgoing application of the Ten Commandments in our lives might involve.

The first, to have no other gods but God, is really also Christ's so-called *new* commandment, for God is to be our Be-All in thought, word, desire, and deed. All is for Him and to Him. In actuality we

break this commandment whenever we give something or someone other than God Himself first place in our thoughts and affections, when a person or object is so raised in our consciousness that it is of paramount importance to us. This particularly

refers to ourselves, when we exalt our own persons at the expense of God. This is pride, whose patron saint is Lucifer. Obviously very few souls consistently keep the First Commandment.

Only God is the rightful object of our worship, but God is not an object. For pre-Christian Jews the Second Commandment was a safeguard against the polytheism, nature worship, fetishism, and totemism rampant at that time. Clearly the intent of this commandment is to direct worship to God as Spirit. The term "graven image" refers to *how* we worship. We may go to a physical church, but where is our consciousness when we are in it? We may vocalize prayers, but what is being said (if anything) in our heart? Since God is a Spirit, we must worship Him in Spirit, and in truth.

The Third Commandment enjoins us not to take the name of the Lord our God in vain. God's name was once thought to be an extension of His Reality. Therefore His name was holy. So holy, in fact, that it was unpronounceable. The tetragrammaton, four nonvowels (JHVH), guarded God's sanctity from profanation. The Lord's Prayer affirms God's holiness at the outset, "hallowed be Thy name." To take

***To profess belief in God and then act counter to God's will is taking His name in vain. It is vain to call God our heavenly Father while simultaneously judging life and our lot unfair.***

God's name, which stands for His Being, in vain is not confined to His name as word, but also as living Idea and spiritual Fact. Therefore to profess belief in God and then act counter to God's will is taking His name in vain. It is vain to call God our heavenly Father while simultaneously judging life and our lot unfair. This is insincerity, hypocrisy—taking the Lord's name in vain.

Keeping the Sabbath or seventh weekday holy originally meant that this day in particular was designated exclusively for worship and nonworldly communion. Christ Jesus healed on Sabbaths; that is, he made people whole. Surely this is holy. He also said, in reference to David's plucking corn on the day of rest, that the Sabbath is made for man, and not man for the Sabbath. In other words, being about the Father's business may take many forms. Emphasis is on using this time for the Father's, not worldly, business. As much to the point for the spirit-directed soul is that as often as possible one directs the affairs of the day in light of the presence of the Spirit of the Sun, the Christ. Sunday becomes a state of mind, an inner orientation, an attitude of the soul that illumines all that one says and does.

To honor our father and mother (the Fifth Commandment) is to see them, firstly, as channels through whom God has chosen to initiate our earthly being. They are His representatives who manifest His will for our first worldly environment. As such, they are due our fullest respect and love. And if we couldn't manage that in our childhood, we can give them our filial due later, perhaps, among other things, by material support. It is clear that this commandment is not limited by biology. Jesus referred to those in (eso) the room where he was teaching about His heavenly Father as His spiritual family, while His genetic family, at that moment, were outside (exo) this teaching. Generally, we may give to each the charity and generous consideration the occasion and their inner person warrant, knowing that we are all brothers and sisters in Christ.

The Sixth Commandment, *Thou shalt not kill*, covers all killing—by thought, word, or action. We know that a lie in the desire world is both a murder and a suicide, a self-killing. Taking the life of a person has its origin in the thought and desire worlds as vindictiveness, anger, arrogance, and the cruelty that rationalizes violent behavior. Malicious gossip



Gustave Doré (1833-1883)

*Rebuked for gleaning corn on the Sabbath, Jesus counters the Pharisee's loveless legal literalism by observing that "The Sabbath was made for man, and not man for the sabbath."*

kills. The nursing of grievances kills. Neglect kills. We realize that he who hates his brother is a murderer. Whenever we wish ill for another, we engage in spiritual homicide. Few of us are not murderers.

Committing adultery also has its origin deep in the soul. Didn't Jesus say that he who looks at another lustfully has already committed adultery in his heart? Adultery is, first of all, an interior act. It may or may not be occasioned by sensation, notably by what St. John calls the lust of the eyes. It may be confined to the imagination as autoeroticism. In any event, adultery is committed whenever one responds engagingly to the presentation of a sensual image, be it interior or sensory. The saints were so tempted. What made them saints was that they refused to act on the provocation.

The Eighth Commandment, *Thou shalt not steal*, again has far broader and deeper applications than generally acknowledged. Hoarding may be a form of stealing. If the earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof, not sharing its provenance is stealing,

whether we own it by civil law or not. When we avoid paying taxes, we steal from the community that our taxes serve. Working unproductively or short hours steals from our employer and, ultimately, from ourself. Whenever we steal, we distance ourself from our soul's treasure, we rob ourselves of charity's riches. Stealing, taking what is not ours, is most egregious in the taking of life itself, be it our own, that of the unborn, or of another.

It should be evident that when we violate any of these commandments we violate our own person, we are the ultimate object or victim of our abuses and selfishness. Or, as the saying goes, we are our own worst enemy.

Bearing false witness against our neighbor, proscribed by the Ninth Commandment, is not confined to the overt lie or intentional misrepresentation. It includes slander, innuendo, exaggeration, rumor, ridicule, even silent smugness. In principle, not seeing the holy in another is bearing false witness. To see

another as strictly framed by their action, as shackled to their fallenness as a sinning mortal, is to bear false witness because we do not see Christ in them, we do not see them as spiritual children of our common Father God.

The Tenth Commandment, *Thou shall not covet*, is not punishable by civil law, nor may others even know it. Yet coveting is a form of stealing. It is the motive that prompts it. Covetousness is idolatry because it overvalues things. It is not the same as a legitimate desire for something. If I covet what another has, I want to take it from them and make it mine.

At heart covetousness evinces a miserly response to one's life, it denies God as the Giver of abundance. It ignores the spiritual and material riches that are showered upon us daily. Covetousness proceeds from an embittered heart and the crabbed sense of lack that no amount of things can satisfy, for it is a state of mind based on the delusion that one is poor.

While the first five commandments refer to our relation and duty to God, the second five commandments refer to our relations with others and the respect due them. As we honor God, so should we honor our fellow humans by respecting that which is most vital to them: their life itself (thou shalt not kill); their home and honor (thou shalt not commit adultery); their property (thou shalt not steal); their reputation (thou shalt not bear false witness); and all these precious assets collectively, which, when coveted, constitute psychological robbery.

Thus, what Christ called "new commandments" were really summations and octave expressions of the two parts of the Decalogue. The first new commandment, *Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy strength, and with all thy mind* (Luke 10:27, Mark 12:30), positively expresses and unifies in the transformative power of love, the mostly negative prohibitions

contained in the first five commandments. It was necessary to be explicit about what *not* to do before Christ could advance His commandment of love, which is somewhat of a misnomer, since love cannot be commanded like most forms of moral conduct.

The second new commandment summarizes the last five "old" commandments inasmuch as it instructs us to love our neighbor as ourself. Not only do we refrain from doing what is wrong, but we actively engage in doing what is good and right. Clearly, though, as this brief survey shows, we still need to be reminded what not to do even as we seek to respond to the high summons of love to which Christ calls us, a love He incarnated in the body of Jesus and, since Golgotha, radiates from the heart of Earth as its indwelling Spirit, gradually transforming it, with our help, into the planet of Love. □

—C.W

***To see another as strictly framed by their action, as shackled to their fallenness as a sinning mortal, is to bear false witness because we do not see Christ in them, we do not see them as children of our common Father God.***