

# ON THE WALL OR IN OUR LIVES?

A North Park Seminary professor explores where the Ten Commandments really belong.

**T**he Ten Commandments just won't go away. Though Israel misplaced the tablets of stone long ago, the Jews never forgot their decisive encounter with the living God at the foot of Mount Sinai. Fresh from the slave camps, unruly and fickle, they stood at the foot of the mountain and heard God speak the words that were meant to forever shape their common life. They heard and trembled (Exodus 20:18), they remembered and recounted (Deuteronomy 6:6-7); finally they wrote it down twice—once in Exodus (20:2-17) and again in Deuteronomy (5:6-21). As Paul later told the church at Corinth, their story reminds us that *hearing* doesn't guarantee *doing*—that observing the commandments is not something we do with our eyes but with our *actions* (see 1 Corinthians 10).

The Ten Commandments continue to make the news. This past June, the U.S. Supreme Court rendered two decisions about the public display of the Decalogue, saying “yes” to a forty-year-

old display in Texas, and “no” to more recent ones in Kentucky. Some suggest that the verdict means old is O.K., new is not. The central claim, however, appears to be that a commandment display is acceptable if it intends a moral or historical message rather than a religious one. On the other hand, where a plaque or monument is meant as a message about a particular deity, it crosses the line. The Supreme Court's decision pleased neither side of the debate of the Ten Commandments.

Many Christians are divided on the issue of displaying the commandments or Decalogue, as they are known, in public places. Too often what we say in this debate tells us and the world far more about which political party we're affiliated with than it does about which God we serve. That's a shame, because the commandments were originally given to show the world that Israel served Yahweh.

To this point, I have believed and taught that the Ten Commandments are not intended to be displayed in replicas and monuments, but in the actions and the lives of faithful Christians. This

is based in part on Deuteronomy 10, where God ordered Israel to hide the two tablets in the ark of the covenant, effectively requiring that they be permanently hidden from view. God's point, I have argued, was that the visible display of the commandments was in Israel's obedience to them, not in Israel's architecture or statuary.

Here, I will plow in the opposite direction, trying to make the best case possible for publicly posting the text of the Decalogue. To do that, I'll enlist two sources: Judge Roy Moore, who was ordered by a federal judge to remove his two-ton granite replica of Moses's tablets from the rotunda of the Alabama Supreme Court, and Christopher Hedges, a former foreign correspondent for the *New York Times* and author of *Losing Moses on the Freeway: America's Broken Covenant with the 10 Commandments*.

## **The commandments are true**

The best argument for posting commandments is simply that they are true. In a society where truthfulness is a waning virtue and truth-telling a



forgotten practice, the public articulation of truth—without equivocation or qualification—is crucial. The commandments are true words about how we are meant to live. They show us the true shape of the good life.

The Ten Commandments aren't case law, the detailed "if-then" rules that envision proper conduct in every different circumstance. Rather, they are all-encompassing. They tell the truth about how we should organize the entirety of our common life—the way we worship, keep time, live in

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families, and protect life and property and justice. They plot the boundaries beyond which lie humiliation and pain, brokenness and destruction.

These ten words are true. But as every child knows, truth needs context. "My brother hit me" may be true, but lacks truthfulness in a context where I hit him first and often. Even the Dec-

alogue is truth that requires context. Much of the debate over displaying the Ten Commandments centers on this question of context: can these ten true words speak truthfully outside the context of the biblical story? *In Losing Moses on the Freeway*, Chris Hedges answers a powerful "yes." Hedges tells story after story of people whose lives were profoundly injured by breaking one of the commandments. For example, Beth

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## Let the Ten Commandments be engraved over the entrance to Wal-Mart, let them be read aloud at next year's Super Bowl halftime.

Senturia's devotion to the rock band Phish became an idolatry that nearly destroyed her; the adultery that conceived H. R. Vargas left him trapped in a web of alienation and anger. Hedges's stories become a truthful context for these ten true words.

"No one," he writes, "violated the commandments without tremendous anguish and no one suffered violations without great pain."

Hedges's stories suggest that life, carefully observed, provides an adequate context to render the truthfulness of the Ten Commandments. Their truth is displayed in lives broken by commandment breaking and blessed by commandment keeping. Most of us have seen that same correlation in our own lives, though we know it isn't always a perfect fit. So arguments for Decalogue displays can be taken as an effort to tell the truth about the consequences of human behavior. Not as graphic as the mangled cars that Mothers Against Drunk Driving places along the interstate, but a powerful warning nonetheless.

If we take truth telling about appropriate human behavior as a powerful reason for posting the Ten Commandments, then there are two further points that need to be made. First, common human experience is far better at showing the consequences of commandment breaking than it is at displaying the life of commandment keeping.

Readers of *Losing Moses on the Freeway* discover very quickly that Hedges has far more to say about the dire consequences of breaking commandments than he does about how we would go about keeping them. This problem isn't Hedges's fault. Rather, it is a problem that occurs whenever we assume that anybody and everybody who reads these commandments immediately knows what keeping them looks like.

God suggests, over and over in the book of Deuteronomy, that commandment keeping requires teaching and training and interpretation. Discovering the true shape of faithfully embody-

ing the commandments is hard work. It requires more than hearing, "Don't make idols." We need to see what non-idolatrous lives look like. It takes more than seeing that adultery causes problems; we need to observe people living chaste and faithful lives.

Second, if we argue for displaying the commandments because they are true, then we should think bigger than school walls and courthouse lawns. That's thinking too small. Adultery is far more likely to begin in the workplace than the courthouse; perhaps the real battle should be to display the Decalogue in every office in America. Coveting begins with television rather than kindergarten teachers; it flourishes at the mall more than the school. Let the Ten Commandments be engraved over the entrance to Wal-Mart, let them be read aloud at next year's Super Bowl halftime. If we put warning labels on cigarettes and beside microwaves, then why not require the Decalogue as a warning on the cover of *Cosmopolitan*, *Sports Illustrated*, and *Newsweek*?

### On public grounds

In central Illinois, there's a forty-foot-high concrete cross towering beside Interstate 57. You can't miss it. Though it's far more visible than most Decalogue displays, it seems less significant because it's on private property. The debate over the commandments centers around displays that appear on government property.

People are riled about the Supreme Court decisions because they are official, because they have the authority to say and shape who we are as a people. Here Judge Moore weighs in. He wants to connect politics with God publicly and prominently. This is not a bad idea, since God has made us for community, not only with each other, but also with God. Moore reminds us that every attempt to have politics apart from God is further hiding in the bushes (Genesis 3), more building of pretentious towers (Genesis 11).

The problem is how to acknowledge

the connection of politics to God without deifying our system of government or our nation. If we aren't careful, we all too easily violate the second commandment, slipping from patriotism into idolatry. Christians in the United States are particularly vulnerable to this kind of idolatry because we have a habit of thinking of our country as unique. Of course it is unique, as is every other country in human history. The problem comes when this claim to uniqueness articulates the idea of "American exceptionalism."

American exceptionalism claims that the United States has a special relationship with God, unlike that of any other nation. Some people claim that this exceptional relation is based on the country's origins, where founding fathers sought to create a "Christian nation." Others claim that the last two hundred years prove that God has called and claimed America for a special role in history.

As evangelical Christians, we have no biblical basis for these kinds of claims. Scripture reveals only one "exceptional nation," only one people called and claimed by God to be a light to the nations, and that is biblical Israel, and those of us who are now part of Israel by faith in her messiah Jesus. Israel and the church are given an exceptional calling as the people of God.

Because of this, we must be quite careful about public displays of the Decalogue. Judge Moore's granite tablets are a monument to the idea of American exceptionalism. As such, they are an invitation to idolatry rather than obedience. Christians cannot and must not advocate for the display of the Decalogue as an emblem of an exceptional identity for America in God's purposes. The church has such a role in the purposes of God, but the United States does not.

This doesn't have to mean that every display of the Decalogue is problematic, however. If the Ten Commandments could be posted as a public acknowl-

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edgement that the United States, like every other nation on earth, stands under the rule and the judgment of God, that would be a very good thing to do. If we could muster the humility to post the Ten Commandments as a sign that America is just like every other nation, as a way to say “we’re not special, God is,” then we should do it tomorrow.

Such postings would serve two purposes. First, as a warning against destructive living and at least to suggest how to live God’s way. This is wisdom. Second, as an acknowledgment that we Americans are not an exception to the rule of truth and justice, but stand shoulder to shoulder with every other nation under the command of our Creator. This is the way of humility.

## **A failed experiment**

So why do I remain resolutely opposed to governmental displays of the Ten Commandments? There are two reasons.

First, because treating the commandments as wise counsel about a well-lived life turns the Decalogue into a worldly wisdom that is disconnected from Jesus Christ, whose cross is both the power and the wisdom of God. Only God’s people—Israel and the church—are really capable of showing the world that observing these commandments is a matter of walking by faith rather than by sight, of living by forgiveness rather than by achievement.

Second, because I don’t think we Americans can post the Decalogue with an honest humility. Though we might give lip service to the universality of God’s law, these monuments continually become claims about the uniqueness of our country. They become symbols of the role of America in the world rather than the rule of God over the world. When that happens, they become self-referential and self-congratulatory, an endorsement of American exceptionalism rather than an invitation to be transformed by God. They become, in a word, idols—which the commandments themselves tell us are forbidden. □