

**Rescuing the Bible from Fundamentalism:  
Rethinking the Top Ten  
Larry Reimer  
The United Church of Gainesville  
October 5, 2008**

Exodus 20, Deuteronomy 5:6-21

Rescuing the Bible from Fundamentalism is our bridge topic between themes this year. We're looking at some of the basic elements of scripture that have become battlegrounds rather than common ground. One of the saddest of these battles is over the Ten Commandments. Suddenly, rather than using the Ten Commandments as moral principles for our life together, fundamentalist Christians are placing copies of the commandments on courthouse lawns, town squares, and front yards as a club. I mean club in both meanings of the word - first a club as something to whack your opponents over the head with, as in "I'm moral you're not." Second, I mean in-group club as in "I have God you don't."

Just a footnote here. Jews, Protestants, liturgical Protestants and Catholics all have different versions of how to number the commandments.

There's a separate version of the commandments in the book of Deuteronomy noted in your bulletin, similar but not identical to the list in the book of Exodus. When Jesus speaks of the commandments in Mark 10, he only mentions six of them and not in the order we find them in Exodus.

The point here is that if we try to make the Ten Commandments the American Fight Song, we had better realize that even in such a seemingly common moral code, there is diversity. The problem, however, is that with religious zealots using the Commandments as their school colors, we get tired of the pettiness and once again tend to pick up our toys, leave the game, and go home.

The zealots, on the other hand, have a point about how we progressive types tend to see the commandments as the Ten Suggestions, as in, "Thank you for not stealing. Thank you for not swearing..." rather than "You shall not steal... You shall not make wrongful use of God's name..."

So let's see how we can recover this critical part of our heritage. After all, in the immortal words of Graham Nash, "You, who are on the road, must have a code, a code to live by."

There are two pictures to consider in terms of how we got the Ten Commandments. Here's the first.

The time is 800 BCE, give or take a hundred years either way. Israel is no longer a band of wandering tribes. They have settled in Jerusalem. The priests are organizing the stories and legends that have traveled with the people through the wilderness for centuries.

Among those stories is a tradition, remembered by all, of a simple set of commandments given by God to Moses at Mt. Sinai following Israel's escape from slavery in Egypt. The commandments are not given as ethical rules alone. Rather they are a gift, a window into God's heart.

The priests have to sort through all 632 biblical laws that have evolved over the years to decide which ten of these commandments most clearly reflect God's heart. Imagine that you are this editorial committee and you have one shot at presenting the top ten ways to glimpse God's blessing on earth.

You agree on the first five commandments pretty quickly. Worship and revere Yahweh the Lord as one God, first and foremost. Make no idols is second. Don't use God's name for selfish purposes is the third. Keep the Sabbath is fourth.

Then you shift to the commandments of relationship between human beings. Again, agreement is easy at first. Fifth is honor your father and mother. Not much controversy there. Sixth is do not kill. That stirs up a debate. There is after all the death penalty, war, and self-defense. The commandment, "You shall not kill" actually is compromised to read, "You shall not commit murder." This doesn't solve everything, but you add it without resolving its inherent conflicts.

The committee includes as seventh the commandment against adultery, which involves an interesting discussion, followed by number eight, not stealing, which doesn't. Now you have two slots left. You decide that if you are going to have a viable community, people must tell the truth in a court of law. So everyone agrees that the ninth commandment will warn people against bearing false witness against their neighbor.

How will you decide on the last commandment? Everybody has kept a couple of commandments in their pockets and wants to get at least one more of their own on the list. Lots of argument follows. Then, however, as if a cloud disappeared, you all look down at the last commandment: "You shall not covet your neighbor's house; you shall not covet your neighbor's wife, or male or female slave, or ox, or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbor."

You scratch your head. How exactly did that get on the list? It was no one's first choice. Why with all the golden gifts of God's words, did this thing about coveting get included? You realize that in some way, forbidding coveting, which means wanting for yourself what someone else rightly has for themselves, summarizes all the other commandments.

That's one way of understanding how the commandments came into being and their purpose.

I believe that is the way we need to understand the commandments from one side of the brain, the left side, which is the logical, thinking, critical part of our brains. It's a good side of our brain. God gave it to us to be used.

There's also the right side of our brain, the part that sings, remembers poetry, and registers feeling. It's not as academic or critical as the left side. We need to use the right as well as the left side of the brain in understanding the commandments.

My friend Rabbi Michael Joseph of the Reformed Temple Shir' Shalom here in Gainesville taught an introduction to the Old Testament course at Santa Fe College. And while he taught his students the left brain critical message, he also wanted to communicate to them what it was like for the early Jewish people to experience these messages as if Moses had indeed just walked down the mountain with them engraved in stone, directly from God.

You see the Ten Commandments are the core of the Torah, the law that holds all Jewish society together. And especially when the Jewish people were in exile, they lived these commandments, not just because they were good rules that would make for a good society, but also because the Commandments were the essence of who they were as humans created by God. Keeping the Sabbath wasn't just a good way to remember to rest and not burn out, it was also a sign of who they were as Jews modeling the rhythm of God's creation.

We also need to sense the Ten Commandments this way, as something powerful, personal, gripping us as a story. This Sunday our whole church school is experiencing the Exodus and the Ten Commandments. It's sometimes hard for us in UCG to expose our children to the roughness of the God of the Exodus. And we have, in good UCG fashion, made the story as age appropriate as possible. But Sanford Berg as Moses is leading our children out of slavery into freedom. They are crossing the Red Sea. Sanford/Moses is climbing a mountain and coming down to thunder out these commandments.

We need both sides of the brain to understand the Commandments and then experience them as part of who we are. I know we can hear the academics of the Commandments. I hope that we can keep this poetic experiential right brain open to remember, adults and children that these commandments are like the kiss of God to our lives. According to the rabbis, when you get one commandment right, God gives you the next.

So while we aware of the editing, sifting and sorting that winnowed the laws of the Torah down to ten, so simple that we could count them off on our fingers, let us also imagine Moses, a leader who finally leads us out of slavery, comes down the mountain with his hair practically on fire, and carries, carved in stone, words of life to hold us together.

I'm going to share each commandment with you. Repeat each after me. I will then offer share a brief sense of what it means to me.

*I am the Lord your God... You shall have no other gods before me.*

Start by putting first things first, how you understand God. Behind all the different voices that call us is one God beyond all other Gods, a God who appears when the gods of culture and traditional religion disappear, one God who holds us together.

*You shall not make for yourself an idol... You shall not bow before them and worship them.*

Not American Idol, not Tim Tebow, not an I Pod, not a Toyota Prius... oh you can make your own list. We must always ask where we are worshiping false gods in our lives. Think of how silly those Israelites looked bowing down to that golden calf.

*You shall not make wrongful use of the name of the Lord your God...*

Don't use God's name for a curse. Don't exploit God's name for your own benefit in a pompous, self-serving blessing. And don't forget that in Judaism God's name is imbedded in the human soul, so don't ignore or misuse the heavenly spark within you.

*Remember the Sabbath day and keep it holy...*

God says, "One day a week, you don't have to work." Isn't it amazing that this is the commandment we find so difficult? It's an offer not an order, that like God, after six days we can stop and say, "Good enough."

*Honor your father and your mother, so that your days may be long in the land that the Lord your God is giving you.*

Regardless of your parents' hang ups and screw ups, they are still your roots. "Lose them and you lose your place in the story." (Barbara Brown Taylor, Gospel Medicine, p. 47) Honoring those who gave us life is a good way to avoid what Walter Brueggemann calls, "One generation narcissism" that imagines nothing really important happened until we came along.

*You shall not kill (or commit murder).*

You can debate the fine points, but taking another person's life, now matter how undeserving that life seems to you, takes something precious from someone else, no less from God.

*You shall not commit adultery.*

No one has ever said to me, "I'm cheating on my partner, and it's worked out great for our relationship."

*You shall not steal.*

The house in the front of my neighborhood has a sign that says, "Vote Yes on Amendment 2". I want to steal that sign so much, but just because life is unfair doesn't mean I must be.

*You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.*

To lie about another is like stealing something of their lives, even killing a piece of them. Think of the pain of cyber bullying.

*You shall not covet... (You shall not covet your neighbor's house; you shall not covet your neighbor's wife, or male or female slave, or ox, or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbor.)*

Why would this be last? Perhaps it is the unfettered desire to have what is not ours that leads us to break all the other commandments. In its milder forms, wanting more is what keeps our economy going. But at its extreme, coveting is the greed behind the economic mess we're in today.

That's our new look at our Top Ten. There is no "or else" that follows these, no punishment or threat. They are insights into the heart and will of God, the heart that beats in our hearts, and the will that lives in our lives, if we wish to be whole.

Don't let anyone take this away by making an idol of the Ten Commandments on a front lawn or a courthouse. They are yours, left brain and right. Keep them, and keep them safe from generation to generation.