



# Whitefield BRIEFING

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## Written in Stone? The Ten Commandments Then and Now

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### Ten Commandments, Two Tablets

We begin with the Old Testament, where the 'Ten Commandments'<sup>1</sup> are recorded twice in slightly different forms. In Exodus 20 God speaks directly to the people of Israel at Mount Sinai, after their exodus from Egypt. In Deuteronomy 5 the commandments are repeated as part of Moses' speech to Israel on the plains of Moab, before they enter the promised land.

The biblical text tells us that the Ten Commandments were written on two stone tablets (Exod. 31:18; 34:1, 4, 29; Deut. 4:13; 5:22; 9:10-11), inscribed on both sides (Exod. 32:15), which were kept in the ark of the covenant (Exod. 25:16, 21; 40:20; Deut. 10:1-5). It is not stated how the material was divided between the two tablets, or whether the two tablets were identical copies of the whole document as suggested by Kline (1960). However, a closer look at the form and content shows that the commandments fall into two groups, and it may be that they were divided between the tablets on this basis.

On the basis of form there are two groups of five commandments: in the first group, each commandment has one or more explanatory clauses, always including the phrase 'The LORD your God'; in the second group the commandments are simple prohibitions and much briefer (though the last is somewhat extended). There is also a distinction in content between the two groups: the first is mainly concerned with love for God, while the second concerns love for other human beings. The first is distinctively Israelite, whereas the second reflects a social morality common to all mankind (Weinfeld 1991). According to Jewish tradition, each tablet contained five commandments, which would accord with this division of the Ten Commandments (cf. Philo, *Decalogue* 50; Josephus, *Antiquities* 3:101).<sup>2</sup>

#### Loving God

1. '...You shall have no other gods before me'
2. 'You shall not make for yourself an idol ...'
3. 'You shall not misuse the name of the LORD'
4. 'Remember the Sabbath day.....'
5. 'Honour your father and your mother ...'

#### Loving Others

6. 'You shall not kill'
7. 'You shall not commit adultery'
8. 'You shall not steal'
9. 'You shall not bear false witness.....'
10. 'You shall not covet ...'

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1 Hebrew 'aséret haddevarim' (Exod. 34:28; Deut. 4:13; 10:4), lit. 'the ten words', also translated 'Decalogue'.

2 Alternatively, the commandments may be divided into two groups of four and six, dealing respectively with relationships to God and relationships to neighbours (cf. Nielsen 1965: 33-34). This was suggested by Augustine and has been the traditional division in the Catholic and Lutheran churches (though they also have a different enumeration of the commandments, so the division actually falls between the first three and last seven commandments).

‘At first sight the fifth commandment does not seem to fit this division well, because it apparently deals with love for other people rather than for God. However, Philo (*Decalogue* 106-07) believes that it was placed on the borderline between the two kinds of commandments because parents stand on the borderline between the mortal (in their kinship with other human beings) and the immortal (since in the act of generation they are like God). It may be argued that in Old Testament times the honouring of parents was not merely a matter of social relationships, but part of respect for God. Filial piety was not simply a matter of refraining from harming one’s parents, comparable to the vices expressed in the last five commandments. Rather it was a fundamental virtue, expressed positively, which followed naturally from honouring God, his Name and his Day. Of course this did mean that to harm a parent was a particularly serious crime, and often led to capital punishment (e.g. Exod. 21:15, 17), but the emphasis in the Ten Commandments themselves is on the positive aspect. In Leviticus 19:2-4, honouring parents is closely integrated with honouring God and keeping the Sabbath. Ephesians 6:2-3 distinguishes this as the ‘first commandment with a promise’, while the Jewish sages consider it to be the weightiest commandment (Weinfeld 1991).

The order of the commandments within the two groups accords with the seriousness of the offence. To break *any* of those in the first group leads to capital punishment (Exod. 21:15, 17; 22:20; 31:14; Lev. 24:16) while in the second group only the sixth and seventh are capital offences (Exod. 21:12; Lev. 20:10). For the eighth and ninth lesser punishments are decreed (Exod. 22:1-4; Deut. 19:16-19). The tenth is different in nature, for people could hardly be taken to court for breaking it, but the fact that it is included here is significant since it shows that people could be morally guilty before God without having committed any visible offence at all (Wright 2004: 291).

### **The Ten Commandments for Israel**

Before considering the significance of the Ten Commandments today, we should look at them in their original context. Clearly they were addressed first of all to Israel, both as a nation and as individuals, though scholars differ about their exact role for the Old Testament people of God. There are four main views.

#### **Hebrew Catechism**

Scholars in the early part of the last century often considered the Ten Commandments to be a catechism used by the Hebrews in the time of Moses.

They contained a summary of the essential points of Israelite religion, itemised so that they could be counted on the fingers and easily memorised. According to this view they were intended primarily for teaching, within the community of the people of God.

It is true that the form and content of the Ten Commandments lend themselves to instruction, and they have often been part of the curriculum for those learning the Jewish and Christian faiths. However this is neither their original purpose nor their essential nature. Buber (1946) points out that they are not instruction for a person who has to demonstrate their readiness for membership of a religious community, which is the usual meaning of catechism. If this was their purpose, they would be formulated as statements (third person) and articles of personal faith (first person). Rather their ‘soul’ is in the word ‘Thou’: nothing is stated or confessed, but commands are given.

#### **Criminal Law**

Phillips (1970) starts with the premise that – from the divine point of view – the Ten Commandments were Israel’s constitution, so any breach of this amounted to apostasy. It follows that a broken commandment could lead to punishment for both the individual offender and the whole community, and might even result in repudiation of Israel as the people of God. As a result, if an individual broke a commandment this was treated as an offence against the community. So Phillips believes the Ten Commandments constituted ancient Israel’s criminal law. He argues that crimes in biblical law, unlike other ancient Near Eastern law, concerned injury to God or a person (never property) and the penalty was always death (whereas this was not the case for offences against property). The Ten Commandments as traditionally understood do not fit this exactly, but Phillips makes them fit by reinterpreting the eighth commandment as ‘manstealing’ (i.e. kidnapping, e.g. Exod. 21:16), the ninth as ‘judicial murder’ (i.e. false witness which led to the death penalty, e.g. 1 Kgs 21) and the tenth as ‘depriving an elder of his status’.

So should we understand the Ten Commandments as criminal law? The first seven offences listed are understood in the Old Testament to be crimes against God and society, and when referred to in more detailed law-codes the penalty is death. However this is not true of the last three commandments, except by a rather forced interpretation. Moreover it is questionable whether the commandments are strictly law at all.

## Israelite Constitution

A more helpful way of looking at the Ten Commandments is as the constitution of Israel, since they were a key part of the process by which the people came into being. The introduction makes this clear: 'I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt ...'. Note that the commandments were given by God to the people he had *already* freed from slavery (grace preceded law), not as conditions for obtaining that freedom (cf. Deut. 6:20-25). They laid a foundation for the life of the redeemed community, which continued to be the standard for God's people as they lived together and ordered their lives (cf. Miller 1989). So the commandments are comparable with a constitution, determining foundations which do not change. It is a great joy to have such foundations, as younger nations often appreciate more than those who have long been free, and the people of Israel were no exception (Ps. 19:7-13; 119).

For Weinfeld (1991) the Ten Commandments are basic conditions for inclusion in the people of God. They are 'categorical imperatives of universal validity' (p. 248), independent of time and circumstances, with no punishment prescribed and no definitions given. For example, it is clear that killing is forbidden, but we are not told what action should be taken if someone does kill, nor is the precise meaning of 'kill' defined (does it include murder, manslaughter, execution, war, abortion, euthanasia?). The commandments do not satisfy the needs of legislator or court but simply state the conditions for membership of the community. However they are not abstract moral rules (like 'love your neighbour as yourself'), but concrete commands applicable to every Israelite, concerning his or her relationships to God and other human beings.

Should we understand the Ten Commandments as the Israelite constitution? They begin by stating the basis of Israel's special relationship with God, and continue by listing the primary obligations laid upon her for maintenance of that relationship, including responsibilities toward both God and mankind. While we should be wary of drawing too close a parallel with modern constitutions, in their biblical context the Ten Commandments are clearly foundational for the national life of the Israel.

## Ethical Essentials

Mendenhall (1954) notes a distinction in ancient Near Eastern law between what he terms 'policy' and 'technique'. The former was the sense of justice in a community, which was determined and enforced by the deity, accepted by the community as

binding and functioned as the source for law. The latter stipulated how community policy was translated into specific actions. So also in the Bible, the Ten Commandments state the essentials of Old Testament ethics (= policy), while detailed laws in the Book of the Covenant, Holiness Code and Deuteronomic Laws explain how these principles are to be put into practice (= technique).

The laws in the Pentateuch are many and varied, but the Ten Commandments provide the essentials for maintaining the relationship between God and his people (cf. Houtman 1996). While all the laws express God's will, these are the most important principles which are directly revealed by God and not to be diverged from in any circumstances. So the Ten Commandments themselves are not primarily law, but basic moral and ethical principles that deal with issues which remained central to Israel's national life throughout her history. Unlike collections of laws such as those found in Exodus 34 and Leviticus 19, the Ten Commandments are complete: 'he added no more' (Deut. 5:22).

## The Ten Commandments for Today

The fact that the Ten Commandments were originally addressed to Israel, the Old Testament people of God, raises the question of how far the ethical principles they contain also apply to Christians, and non-Christians, in today's world. For centuries it was taken for granted in much of the Western world that they were relevant for all times and in all places. But in recent years churches in Britain have been largely unsuccessful in opposing liberalisation of the Sunday trading laws, and even Christians take Sabbath observance much less seriously than in the past. In the United States there has been vigorous debate about whether the Ten Commandments should be displayed in schools and public places, and recently a judge in Minneapolis ruled that a two-metre-tall stone inscribed with Ten Commandments on the Duluth City Hall lawn must be removed. So are the Ten Commandments still written in stone, or are they the ethics of a bygone age?

Jesus' words in Matthew 5:17-20 make it quite clear that the commandments were intended to be of lasting value. Of course he did not interpret them legalistically, but neither did he abrogate them. There were debates in New Testament times about circumcision and clean/unclean foods, but not about the Ten Commandments. When Jesus felt Jewish tradition was taking priority over the fifth commandment, he affirmed the authority of the commandment rather than the tradition (Matt. 15:1-9). However Jesus encouraged his followers not to simply

keep the letter of the law, but also to follow its spirit and aim for perfection (Matt. 5:21-48). We may feel that we have kept the Ten Commandments without fault (cf. Mark 10:20), but Christians should be satisfied with nothing less than a wholehearted love for God and for other people, because this is the real goal of the law (Mark 12:28-31, quoting Deut. 6:4-5 and Lev. 19:18; cf. Rom. 13:8-10; Jas 2:8).

Just as the Ten Commandments were the basis for Old Testament ethics, supplemented by the legal codes, wisdom teaching and prophetic preaching, so now they should still be the starting-point for Christian ethics. We have no authority to annul or alter them, even though new laws, wisdom and prophecy may be required to apply them in the new situations we face in the twenty-first century.

So the Ten Commandments, together with Jesus' summary of the law, are the basis of Christian ethics. But what about national and international ethics? In a nation with a Christian basis such as Britain, it is arguable that the Ten Commandments should be the basis for law-making and ethical teaching. In taking the coronation oath, the sovereign promises among other things to 'maintain the Laws of God'. However it seems today that most British people are not even aware of the oath and governments are unconcerned to put it into practice. Ironically the Ten Commandments may have a bigger influence in a nation such as the United States where church and state are separated (which is the issue in the Duluth incident mentioned above) but where Christians form a large enough proportion of the population to have a major influence on legal processes and decision-making. Obviously in nations which are predominantly secular, or where the law is based on a non-Christian religion, it is unrealistic to expect governments to acknowledge the authority of the Ten Commandments, though in fact many of the principles they contain are accepted by civilised peoples throughout the world.

The bottom line is that the Ten Commandments have been 'written in stone' by God as essential principles for life, and that is as true today as in Old Testament times. Christians should ensure that their own lives are consistent with these principles, and if they have the opportunity to be involved in politics and government then the same principles are relevant there too.

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