

**THE TEN
COMMANDMENTS
AND ETHICS
TODAY**

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ACORN PRESS

Published by Acorn Press Ltd, ABN 50 008 549 540

Office and orders:

PO Box 282

Brunswick East

Victoria 3057

Australia

Tel/Fax (03) 9383 1266

International Tel/Fax 61 3 9383 1266

Website: www.acornpress.net.au

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National Library of Australia

Cataloguing-in-Publication Data

Cowdell, Scott.

The ten commandments and ethics today.

1st ed.

ISBN 9780908284702 (pbk.).

Ten commandments – Commentaries.

Christian life – Biblical teaching.

Ethics, Modern – 21st century.

241.52

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Cover Design: Andrew Moody, Blackburn South.

Text Layout: Communiqué Graphics, Lilydale.

Printed by: Openbook Howden, Adelaide.

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INTRODUCTION

I want us to look freshly at the Ten Commandments. What do they say to us today? Certainly they represent a set of expectations, but as they appear in the Bible those expectations are set in the wider context of God's blessing. They represent an invitation to know and enter into the life and love of God, so that our desires are transformed and we become people who can act lovingly, not harming others or ourselves. This is what the commandments (see page ix) require of us.

I remember an awkward moment with my churchgoing aunt and grandmother when I was in my early twenties and had started reading theology, before training for the priesthood. I shared with them my excitement over something I had read, and found liberating, but which turned out to clash profoundly with what they believed. I cannot remember the source, but it was a discussion about the meaning of Christianity, and the point was simply this: that Christianity was about gospel, not about law; that Christianity was about a great gift to us of love and acceptance and forgiveness from the God of Jesus Christ, and only subsequently was it a moral calling, a way of life with clear behavioural expectations.

What perplexed my churchgoing aunt and grandmother was my insistence that the Ten Commandments were not the chief substance of Christianity. Despite a lifetime of weekly attendance

at church, they had picked up a largely moralistic understanding of Christianity. Religion was primarily about how you lived your life, and the function of worship was to provide reinforcement for certain norms of behaviour. As I read more I talked more with my aunt and grandmother about my discovery that Christianity was first and foremost good news of grace for a struggling humanity – a gift that transformed us before becoming a demand upon us.

But for them, it simply did not make sense. These were faithful people, and I loved them dearly, but what became the energising heart of my own discipleship as a young adult proved incomprehensible to these older ladies, who had always believed that religion was a comfort in hardship but chiefly a set of norms and expectations ensuring respectability. Sadly, my grandmother died in fear of an angry God, with no apparent understanding of grace and salvation, despite 89 years of regular church attendance.

The unease of my aunt and grandmother was, I think, ultimately based on a widespread conviction that the demanding God of obedient religiousness was necessary for society to work. To them, my youthful fascination with the notions of grace and gospel was foolishness. They had grown up with the Anglican *Book of Common Prayer*, in which the Ten Commandments were extracted as a bare list of dos and don'ts from their fuller form in Exodus 20. And so they have remained in the memory of many Christians. However, within their original context in the Bible itself, the Commandments have a subtly different feel.

One motive in offering these reflections is the desire to resist the collapsing of Christian faith into morality. Equally important is questioning the separation of faith from morality that is a feature of the secular world today. For most people under the age of fifty, the term ‘The Ten Commandments’ means nothing and for many they have been confused with the Roman Catholic Church’s ‘Seven Deadly (or Mortal) Sins’. Their content is unknown. They are no longer the rule for living, the basis of morality for society. I remember an undergraduate philosophy exam and the question, ‘Does morality depend on religious belief?’ The expected answer was ‘No’! Many philosophers and ethicists now argue that another ethical compass is available for secular Westerners. This alternative does not rely on the traditional religious supports for the moral life – revealed truth, divinely authored natural law and the looming horizon of divine judgement, offering both rewards and punishments. Non-believers find moral conviction through sober reflection on the paths and obstacles to human thriving. They do this by working out the best course of action based on society’s evolving understanding about what works well in the world.

My concern is not to deny the possibility of an ethic that works well for non-believers, as if believers always have an advantage in knowing the right thing to do over non-believers. At every level, workable pragmatic moral convictions guide the decision making of modern Western individuals and societies. My concern is in areas lacking a clear consensus about right and wrong – for instance, the right to take life in certain circumstances, marriage and adultery

in our age of guilt-free divorce, and in the much disputed area of industrial relations, where one employee's opportunity is another employee's injustice. Where there is no solid pragmatic consensus to guide us, the biblical-theological vision of Christian orthodoxy offers a perspective on human life that can help to redefine and advance the debate for both Christians and non-Christians.

It is one thing to know what is right and another thing to find the means to do it. A secular ethic may help us make good moral decisions, but does a secular vision of life form us adequately as persons of character able to do what we know to be right? Can people find the staying power to persevere in doing good through a purely secular life, without the support and encouragement that shared belief, prayer, worship and accountable membership in a faith community can bring?

The non-religious Australian philosopher Raimond Gaita raises this question in his memoir of boyhood, *Romulus, My Father* (1998), which has been made into an acclaimed film. Romulus Gaita was a deeply moral man, though by no means an orthodox believer. He operated out of a vision of proper human dignity, which was reflected in a work and personal ethic that deeply impressed his son for life. However, young Raimond's father lost both his moral compass and his reason after a profound encounter with human malevolence, when he was misused and betrayed by Lydia, the woman he loved. Gaita muses that his father's moral realism – his belief in objectively real moral absolutes – did not mean that he

was able to sustain moral conviction in the face of evil. Elsewhere, in what seems like a contradiction, Gaita recalls his father praying, and his expressed conviction that only prayer could keep despair at bay. His father did indeed recover his senses, though never his earlier untroubled joy in life. If we are to sustain a life of moral engagement, especially when the going gets tough, perhaps some reliance on God is needed.

This possibility is what I am exploring in these reflections on the Ten Commandments. Their strength as an ethical code emerges not so much in their unrivalled moral insight, as if they contain a moral wisdom that no secular mindset is able to understand. Seen purely as moral teaching, the Ten Commandments make mostly good, plain sense. What makes them distinctive is the way the Ten Commandments place the moral instruction in a broader context of narrative, belief and community. In other words, and with the case of Romulus Gaita in mind, perhaps the context of believing, praying and abiding in a faith community is what ‘adds value’ to the ethical code, and to moral living more generally, leading to a more sustainable moral life.

In what follows, the Ten Commandments are set out to be ‘rediscovered’ in the context of the Bible’s whole story of faith. Such a rediscovery aims to help us resist the modern Western world’s reduction of the gospel to something two-dimensional, moralistic and fragile. This is a poor substitute for genuine Christian faith, however, which is three-dimensional, living and resilient. It may

also help us appreciate the difference a faith-perspective brings to ethical thinking and moral living. This difference is not primarily about the revealing of a moral code from ‘on high’ but about helping ordinary people to find their way to the ‘good life’, to acquire the spiritual resources needed to persevere in doing good.

Who is God?

The First Commandment

*I am the LORD your God, who brought you out
of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery;
you shall have no other gods before me.*

Exodus 20:2-3 (NRSV)

It may come as a surprise that the Ten Commandments, regularly presented to us as God's rules for living, begin not with rules for living at all, but with a call to think carefully about who God is, and about who we are. They begin with theology – 'God talk'. For many Australians, it is normal to think of theology and its critical analysis as irrelevant. Religion is meant to be a softer-edged affair, about comfort not confrontation and reassurance not reassessment. But surely theology – 'God talk' – cannot be solely an academic undertaking, remote from its sources in faith and discipleship. Someone once described theology as 'choosing your words carefully before God', which brings theology into line with good prayer and good pastoral care. So, right from the start, the commandments put us on guard about our 'God talk'.

The **first commandment** assumes that it is easy to misunderstand and incorrectly identify God, so that we end up putting some other

god before the real God. Hence the commandments place critical theological reflection at the beginning of faithful discipleship, because Christian life will only proceed as it should if we know who God is, and who God is not. This is why there is a purposeful argument, a mission of correction and liberation, in the Ten Commandments and in the Bible as a whole, for the sake of God's beloved children who keep holding onto unworthy and even diabolical images of God.

So what are the false gods, the idols, from which these commandments offer liberation? In the Old Testament period, the mission of the law and prophets was to purify the faith of Israel and rescue God's people from bad theology, which always accompanies bad religious and moral practice. God's people lived among nations whose gods included spirits of things and places. Through interaction and intermarriage, these nations constantly pressed their spiritual claim on Israel. What the Old Testament calls 'gods of the nations' included gods of nature that were spirits of things and places. Understood this way the world seemed like dangerous territory, concealing a variety of malevolent powers, which had to be 'kept nice' by rituals and sacrifices. Folk tales of trolls under bridges and haunted houses recall what life in that sort of world felt like.

However, the God of the Bible wanted God's people to live at peace in a world understood as God's good creation. The Genesis story of creation radically changed the worldview, so that instead

of a tense network of rival supernatural claims, the world became a uniform, welcoming and stable home fit for human beings. Genesis 1 lines up all the orders of nature thought to be ruled by divine beings and makes them God's creation: sun and moon, mountains and seas, plants and animals. Thus Israel exchanged a catalogue of the overwhelming, if you like, for a travelogue of the habitable.

Some of the false gods Israel had to deal with in the ancient Near East promised fertility, and this is what is behind the Old Testament references to sacred poles and temple prostitutes. Sacred poles, similar to standing stones, are really phallic symbols: couples concerned about their fertility would go there to copulate. Likewise, ritual sex with temple prostitutes re-enacted the fall of rain: the sky father impregnated the earth mother to ensure fertility of the soil. So when we read in the Old Testament about the God of Israel as Lord of the seasons who feeds the hungry, human and beast, we encounter what is primarily a religious claim – one that insists that Israel's God is the true God, not the nature deities of Canaan. When the Old Testament patriarchs are given children and descendents despite old age and barren wives, we are again reminded that it is God who ensures a future for the people of God, and not the false deities and dehumanising spiritual technologies of Israel's neighbouring cultures.

So it is the false gods of the Old Testament period that our first commandment has in mind. People, in need or fear or both, clung to these deities, many of which required human sacrifice. For

Israel's God, however, human sacrifice was the greatest sacrilege, for it destroyed human beings, who each bear the image of God that the Old Testament celebrates.

What are some false gods to which people cling today? While we love the outdoors and have deepened our environmental awareness, we no longer try to appease nature deities by sacrifice to ensure a good harvest. We have abandoned belief in fertility gods, yet we do place a lot of importance on planning, insurance and superannuation to protect our legacy, reflecting a longing in our modern Western world for rational control of our lives. This controlling spirit has made Westerners very uneasy with the irrational, the insane, the deviant and the racially different – with the ill-fitting in its many forms.

Also, various political and economic ideologies now have a quasi-divine status. For many, the free market is a god, for others the dictatorship of the proletariat. Both free market capitalism and communism are meant to secure the future for the people living under these regimes, but each system requires endless human sacrifices. The state, whenever it is given a near-divine mandate, also becomes a false god, requiring an evil empire to curse and define itself against. Hence false gods are regularly warlike gods.

Sociology shows that cultures create gods in their own image, projecting their social values and priorities outward and effectively worshipping them, in much the same way that an ancient person might carve an idol from a block of wood then bow down to it. So

while our world is more sophisticated, it remains the case that the human heart is an endless factory for idols.

If these are the false gods, the idols against which the first commandment warns us, what is the alternative? Who is the real God? The first commandment does not commend an idea or abstract definition of God to us; it does not offer the sort of metaphysical something-or-other that many Westerners mistake for the living God (indeed, this is another false god). Instead, the first commandment is unmistakably clear about its claim for who God is and what God is like. This is not some vague divinity. Rather, this is a particular God with a name and a story. This is a God of history, not an absentee creator. This is the God of Israel, who liberates a beloved people in the midst of historical events: ‘I am the LORD *your* God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery’ (Ex 20:1).

What is more, this is a God who chooses to be known in a particular way. This is a God revealed in a narrative, so that apart from knowing the story of Israel in the Bible we cannot properly know God. This is a God whose self-revelation is not limited to the private religious feelings or opinions of modern people. Rather, this is the God of a particular people, who is revealed to them through their scriptures.

This is a political God, too, in the sense that this God has a particular care for the downtrodden, for the victim, for the widow and fatherless, and for Israel under the heel of oppression. However,

‘political’ does not mean that our lives are to be narrowly tribal. This is a God who makes a covenant with Israel for Israel to be a sign for the nations. God calls Israel to a costly faithfulness for the sake of a world that needs a community giving witness to God’s transforming, healing life. This is not the sort of tribal deity that humans prefer, putting their own interests first and overshadowing the claims of their opponents. Nor is it a God of revolution, who cannot wait to destroy the oppressors, which is what the tribal god of an oppressed people would be like. Rather, this God dreams of a world at peace, where the anxious spirit that makes for oppression, inequity and injustice is put aside and the oppressed and the oppressors are liberated together. This is a truly radical politics aimed at setting the world free for friendship, beyond the entrenched oppositions that are found wherever tribal gods rule the roost.

To modern ears, despite every emphasis on good news, all this can sound unfamiliar, uncomfortable and intolerably exclusive. We are inheritors of the Enlightenment with its essentially moralistic, one-size-fits-all understanding of religion. According to this view, the knowledge of the God of history we meet in the Bible, and of Jesus who made this God uniquely present, is overtaken by a purposefully non-specific understanding of God arrived at purely by philosophical and ethical reflection on publicly accessible facts on which modern people are assumed to agree. The Enlightenment philosopher Gotthold Lessing argued that a ‘broad ugly ditch’ separated this ‘reasonable’ style of religion, suitable for enlightened

modern Europeans, from the tastelessly primitive God of history that the Bible gives us. However, where such modern sceptics perceived an intolerably narrow tribal religion in the claims of orthodox Christianity, today's believers can uncover another face – a universal mission starting in the particular loving embrace of one people by God.

So how are we, in this tolerant, pluralistic age, to understand best the exclusive nature of this first commandment: 'you shall have no other gods before me'? We rightly fear fanaticism nowadays. Belief in one God *can* become a totalitarian nightmare, as every idea and individual that does not fit through the filter such a god provides is erased. Consequently, many people today believe that a tolerant pluralism is more likely to ensure peacefulness in the world. The TV science fiction epic *Battlestar Galactica*, for instance, portrays humans as tolerant religious pluralists, who worship a number of 'gods', the Lords of Cobol, while the murderous robots and fanatical cyborgs that make up the Cylon race are monotheistic, wanting to coerce humans into believing like them in the one God, or otherwise to destroy them. However, religious pluralism offers no guaranteed protection against tribalism. While belief in one God *can* be narrow and tribalistic, the biblical God rejects any such narrow focus, with a global peacemaking mission called for as the proper witness of God's faithful people.

The Christian view of monotheism is Trinitarian not Unitarian. Christian faith understands the one God as closer to a relationship

of persons than a dominating individual will, so that respectful human community, rather than wilful human individualism, provides a truer model for the one God. The God of this first commandment, who tolerates no opposition, is not an oppressor but rather a liberator, acting for us against our self-made gods through whom we oppress one another.

It must be admitted, however, that the Christian God has regularly been allowed to turn into just such an oppressive, tribal deity, and in this god's name atrocities have been committed. Since the full emergence of individualism in the late Middle Ages, Westerners have tended to imagine God primarily as an individual like us, but bigger and stronger. God's greatness has ceased to be the greatness of love, to become instead the greatness of arbitrary power and self-will, in competition with our own human drive towards independence. This too is a false god – a god of power and might and not chiefly one of love and grace. Hence Christians ought to welcome, rather than resist, the currents of modern atheism that declare that this god, whose essence is arbitrary power, has died. This god is far from the God of Jesus Christ, who reveals God's truest nature as self-giving love for the life of the world.

The God who called and liberated Israel from slavery is the God who calls and liberates us today from the slavery of self-deception and its oppressive consequences. The God of the first commandment is exclusive, using Israel as a witness for the good of all the world, and enlisting you and me in the same adventure of freedom.



For reflection or discussion...

1. What image or understanding of God did you grow up with?
2. Has it changed, and if so when and how?
3. What energises or enables you to live the Christian life?