

**TEN WORDS
THAT WILL
CHANGE A NATION**

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TEN WORDS

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Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture citations are from the author's translation of the Scriptures, the King James Version, the James Moffatt Translation, or the New International Version.

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INTRODUCTION

MORE THAN JUST WORDS

On a hot day in June, Faith and Action, the organization of which I am president, received a notice from the government of the District of Columbia. It threatened us with fines of \$300 a day and the possible forced sale of our property. What could warrant such a severe penalty? The Ten Commandments.

The notice came one day before Faith and Action's scheduled unveiling of a sculpture of the Ten Commandments, already in place in the front garden of our office on Capitol Hill. District officials had gotten word of the unveiling and gave us until the end of June to remove it.

The District based its order on a law against "obstruction to travel." As the Ten Commandments sculpture sat in our elevated front garden, we had presumed the law did not apply to us. The only traveling in our garden is done by squirrels! Also, we knew full well that other property owners on Capitol Hill are allowed to have whatever they like in their gardens—and they are not asked to apply and pay for permits. The only conclusion we logically could draw was that we were being singled out because of the nature of our garden ornament. This is what the U.S. Supreme Court calls "content-based discrimination," and it's patently unconstitutional.

We proceeded to unveil our monument the next day as originally planned. We immediately secured a first-class legal team headed by Alabama attorney Phil Jauregui, president of the Judicial Action Group. We were further backed by the Alliance Defense Fund, a religious liberty law firm founded by public figures such as Dr. James Dobson and the late Reverend D. James Kennedy. The American Center for Law and Justice also did some background work for us.

We launched a "Preserve the Commandments on Capitol Hill" petition drive with a goal of reaching 20,000 signatures by the District's arbitrary deadline.

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Then, at last, three days before the deadline, another letter was hand-delivered to our door:

“In view of the First Amendment interests in the installation of the Ten Commandments sculpture . . . and upon further consideration of the applicable law, the District Department of Transportation (DDOT) has concluded you need not seek a permit for the sculpture.”

Hallelujah!

In the days after the decision, many reporters called to ask my opinion on the District’s reversal. I found it difficult to articulate exactly how I felt.

To begin with, demanding that we get a permit for our lawn ornament, when no one else is required to do so, is an unjust application of the law. Anytime someone bows to that kind of injustice, it reinforces it. We knew from the beginning that it was wrong and unconstitutional. It amazes me that it took District lawyers almost a month to figure that out.

Second, while I’m grateful the Ten Commandments will remain on display, it’s almost like being grateful that the pickpocket gave you your wallet back. He never should have taken it in the first place!

It’s disturbing to think that had we not had petitions, a national network of good people, the interest of the media, and the specter of Supreme Court scrutiny, we could be racking up draconian fines by now.

No one knows how the District will treat others in the future should they wish to display a different part of the Bible. In fact, no one knows how the District will treat our next-door neighbors should they decide to display the Ten Commandments. The hand-delivered letter announcing the rescinding of the order states that the decision is limited to “the

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specific facts in this case at this time.” Tomorrow may be a different story.

Indeed, attacks are being made continuously on our Ten Commandments sculpture. While we are thankful to have won the first round, we realize the battle is far from over.

In the original Hebrew, the Ten Commandments are called *Aseret Dev'rote*, “Ten Words.” These are not just any ten words. They are THE TEN WORDS, and there are no ten words like them. Eclipsing all other ancient legal codes, the Ten Commandments transcend time and space, as well as language, culture, and religion. Jews, Christians, and Muslims agree that they were given by God. In fact, virtually all religious belief systems regard the Ten Commandments as being good for the human race.

Of course, these Ten Words are more than just words. They are as powerful as the divine force which first cut them into stone. They have changed the course of history. Yet they are surprisingly simple and to the point. They do not leave room for varying interpretations. They were not given to be venerated as a mystery beyond human comprehension.

Today when people think of Moses carrying the Ten Commandments down the mountain, they often envision Charlton Heston with a giant stone slab tucked under each arm. While this is an impressive image, Biblical archeologists and scholars believe the Commandments first appeared on stones slightly larger than the palm of a human hand.¹ We also know from Scripture that they were written on both sides (see Exodus 32:1-5). This indicates each stone was an exact replica of the other with a complete listing of the Commandments on either side. This would be in keeping with the Ten Words as a covenant, or agreement, between God and the people. “And the LORD said unto Moses, Write thou these words: for after the tenor of these words I have made a covenant with thee and with Israel.” (Exodus 34:27).

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Additionally, the Israelites would have recognized the tablets as a treaty between conqueror and conquered. In ancient times, it was normal to record the terms of a treaty on one tablet for the conquering party with an exact replica made for the conquered. In this case, however, God has conquered His people not for evil, but for good. God is like a lover pursuing the object of His affection. He wins over the people so they will receive and honor Him. In the old Hebrew, He calls His people *segulah*, a term of intense endearment that we translate as a “peculiar treasure” (see Exodus 19:5).

Today the Ten Commandments are usually divided onto two tablets. This practice was introduced by the rabbis in Jesus’ day. They did this in order to simplify their memorization. The first table contains what I call the “Vertical Commandments,” that is, our duties and obligations to God.

The second table contains the “Horizontal Commandments” which detail our duties and obligations to our fellow human beings. In some instances the first tablet contains Commandments I through IV, in others Commandments I through V. This depends upon whether the commandment to honor parents is seen as a responsibility to God or to man. I believe it fits into both categories, and therefore forms a bridge between the two tables.

It was to the Commandments, divided onto two tablets, that Jesus alluded when He was asked by a religious lawyer, “Teacher, which is the great commandment in the law?” Jesus responded, “‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul and with all your mind.’ This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ On these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets” (Matthew 22:36-40). See also Mark 12:28-31.

The Ten Commandments are not a double-edged sword. They are an ideal code of human behavior that

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demonstrates the importance and sanctity of our obligations to God, to ourselves, and to others. Like the bar for a pole vault, God sets the standard high. He will not lower it simply because we don't make it on the first jump. His mercy is always there for us when we fail, but His expectations remain the same. He does not compromise to accommodate our shortcomings.

God refers to the Ten Commandments as the “law and the commandments” in the book of Exodus (see Exodus 24:12). They form part of the *Torah*, a Hebrew word that means “instruction” or “command.” Written by Moses, the Torah comprises not just the Ten Commandments but also the first five books of the Old Testament. In theology, the Ten Commandments are known as the *Decalogue*. This name is derived from the Greek for “Ten Words.”²

The brevity and clarity of the Ten Commandments epitomize God's Law. The literal translations of their Hebrew name show them to be “words” or “instructions” and “deeds” or “acts.” So, the Commandments are not meant to be merely theoretical. They should directly affect the way we behave.

When studying God's Law, it is important to differentiate among its three dimensions: the moral law, the ceremonial law, and the civil law. The moral law, which includes the Ten Words, is different from the other legal aspects of the Old Testament. It is universal - it applies to all people at all times in all places. There are no exceptions to the moral law. It's preposterous to think there would be a time when murder or stealing would be allowed, or a group of people would be exempt from any such prohibition. The moral law never expires.

The same rule does not apply to the other aspects of the Old Testament law that is to the ceremonial and the civil dimensions. The ceremonial law had to do mostly with the Temple in Jerusalem and the sacrificial system, as well as the particular religious rituals of the Hebrew people. The civil law governed the affairs of the Israelite nation itself. The civil law

was an extension of the moral law. It was theological in nature, yet secular in application.

The civil law applied to commercial, social, and domestic affairs. It was most concerned with the order and protection of ancient Israelite society. We no longer live in the ancient Israelite state, and thus, while we may do so voluntarily, we are not compelled to abide by these laws any longer.

Our discussion of the Ten Commandments will be restricted to the moral law, more specifically the moral law as expressed in the Ten Commandments. This book is not meant to be an exhaustive exploration of God's Law, nor will it be the last word on the Commandments.

It is, however, a careful examination of what the Ten Commandments mean, how they apply to our individual lives, and especially how they apply to our American way of life.

A CRY FOR CHANGE

Our nation is starving for moral renewal. An astonishing 80 percent of Americans feel the United States is in moral crisis and want politicians of both parties to address spiritual concerns. Poll after poll has shown the vast majority of Americans agree our nation's moral and religious well-being is of paramount importance.

These are not idle concerns. Over the years, polls have shown Americans are concerned about the crisis. One solution they suggest is the return of voluntary prayer to the public schools and the public display of the Ten Commandments.³ Such sentiments are vigorously opposed by powerful, well-funded minority interest groups like the ACLU.

Years ago, I was present at a national political convention. I stood outside the convention hall in my customary clerical collar, but this time I held two large stone tablets of the Ten Commandments in my arms. Nearly every

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one of the moral absolutes embodied in the Ten Commandments was at issue at this convention.

While thousands of delegates prepared to choose their party's candidates for President and Vice President, the homosexual political lobby was playing a decisive role in the process. They pressed for recognition of their sexual practices and for the social engineering needed to get the public to approve of them. Abortion was also a major issue that year. Sadly, all pro-life voices were shut out of the convention.

The day the party's presidential candidate made his acceptance speech, I was outside standing vigil, communicating my message. "Ladies and gentlemen, these are a reminder that there are moral absolutes," I said politely with a smile to the delegates on their way into the arena, directing their attention to the Commandments. I was stunned by what happened. Many of the delegates raised their middle fingers at me or openly cursed me. Here are just a few of the remarks I can remember:

"F*** your religion!"

"Shove it up your a**!"

"Take your commandments and go to hell!"

The vitriol came at me steadily for the several hours I stood there. At one point, two men holding hands and sporting delegates' credentials around their necks came up to me and sarcastically read the tablets out loud. Then one laid his middle finger along the length of my nose and said, "Go f*** the Pope."

I could not remember ever being treated with such vulgar contempt. But I'm convinced it wasn't me, rather it was the words on those stone tablets that provoked such an angry response.

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There is something about the Ten Commandments that demands a response from us. They hold us accountable. They confront us with ourselves. Wherever these words are read and understood, they cause conflict. In the infamous 1980 Supreme Court decision *Stone v. Graham*, six justices ruled that posters of the Ten Commandments had to be removed from the classrooms of Kentucky public schools. This happened despite the fact that they were clearly identified as historical displays and paid for by private contributions.

The majority opinion argued the display of the Commandments was unconstitutional because if they were “to have any effect at all, it would be to induce the schoolchildren to read, meditate upon, perhaps to venerate and obey, the Commandments.”⁴

This is the crux of the matter. When the Commandments are ignored and kept invisible, when they are treated as nothing more than a quaint relic of the past, they trouble no one. It is when they are taken seriously, held up as an immutable standard and, perchance, actually obeyed, that they bring instant conflict.

Why? Because God’s Ten Words challenge our culture’s belief in moral autonomy.

“Don’t try to impose your morality on me!” goes the popular chant.

“I’ll decide for myself what is right and wrong!”

“Live and let live!”

What would a society look like in which all people decided for themselves what is right and wrong? It would be like living in a city where obeying a stop sign was a personal decision for each driver. What if murdering your neighbor were a matter of choice? What if stealing was considered a bad thing for some people, but not for others? Is this the kind of

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community any of us would want to live in? On paper at least, this is the kind of community the “Don’t impose your morality on me!” group would develop.

Moral absolutes surround us. A stop sign is a moral statement: It tells us that it is wrong to endanger your life and the lives of others by sailing through an intersection without stopping. A four way stop is governed by the rules of right-of-way. If you violate these rules, chances are you will be punished by law enforcement or, at the very least, receive the reproach of other drivers.

So, the current debate is not really about whether there are absolute rights and wrongs, but about whose standard of right and wrong is better for society. An examination of the results of a culture’s forsaking God’s absolutes shows that the Judeo-Christian standard, epitomized in the Commandments, is best for our society. It is also the standard our Founders had in mind.

In the 30 to 40 years since our nation caved in to the “live and let live - anything that turns you on” attitude of cultural liberalism, nearly every indicator of social well-being has plummeted. Racial integration is the only area where good progress has been made. The overall decline, though, has had an enormously negative impact on the physical and psychological state of Americans.

Out-of-wedlock births, abortion, substance-abuse treatment, and psychiatric problems have caused health insurance premiums and taxes to skyrocket. The government now spends more on AIDS than it does on the number one health problem for Americans: heart disease. Divorce-on-demand has reduced a disproportionate number of women to poverty. It has also placed the welfare of millions of children at risk. Cohabitation, once rare in the U.S., now puts kids in serious jeopardy as boyfriends beat to death more and more of their girlfriends’ children. (We will discuss this crisis at length in Chapter Seven.)

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Many businesses spend more today on security than they do on the research and development of new products. Losses due to theft and fraud are higher than ever. Someone has to pick up the tab for all of this. Usually, it is the consumer who pays higher prices. Yet the cure for our problems is still resisted.

A friend of mine named David called me one day to discuss a conflict caused by his displaying the Ten Commandments. He told me he brought a small stone artwork set of the Ten Commandments to the bank branch he manages and placed it on the wall near his desk. The next day he was indignantly confronted by a young woman whom he had recently hired.

“I want you to take those down,” she told him. “I don’t have to be exposed to that stuff in the workplace.” David explained that the woman did not “have” to look at “that stuff.” She remained unsatisfied and threatened to call the corporate personnel office. She wished to file a formal complaint of religious harassment because she was an atheist.

When David called me, he was concerned that he might lose his job if he didn’t comply with her demands and that his bank could be sued. I reassured him that these things could not legally happen, and that our legal team would help him if need be. While she did file a complaint, the disgruntled employee quit that same week. So, once the issue was moot, the company didn’t pursue it further.

Nevertheless, I advised David to explain to his boss why he placed the Ten Commandments on the wall. David was the top producing manager in the bank. He had built its most profitable branch operation. I suggested he meet with his boss to explain the reason for his success was his adherence to these principles personally and the fact that he looked for employees who did likewise. A person who takes the Ten Commandments seriously will work hard, avoid wasting time and resources, give the business an honest day’s labor, and be much less distracted

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by harmful personal behaviors. Not to mention the fact that they will be mindful of the God to Whom we must all make account, Who looks over our shoulders every hour of every day - even when the boss can't! David set up the meeting, but, sad to say, his boss remained unconvinced.

Nonetheless, the fact remains that the Ten Commandments are good for individuals, good for families, good for businesses, and good for society. They make us happier, healthier, safer, and more productive. The prophet Isaiah echoed the voice of God when he wrote, "So shall My word be that goes forth from My mouth; it shall not return to Me void, but it shall accomplish what I please" (Isaiah 55:11). These words are tools God has used for nearly four millennia to shape individuals and cultures. They will not get us into heaven because they are essentially rules for living here on earth. They will, however, change us both individually and collectively as a people. As you apply them in your life you will be changed - permanently. And, as you change, the people and things around you will change, too.

Those who embrace the lifestyle of the Ten Commandments will align themselves with the integrity America so desperately needs. This is why God is bringing these timeless truths to the forefront today. We ignore them at our own peril.

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NOTE ON THE NUMBERING OF THE TEN COMMANDMENTS

There is only one Ten Commandments. It is found in the Bible. The specific phrases in the Commandments, however, are not numbered. Humans have developed systems of numbering the Ten Commandments as an organizational tool. Protestant and Catholics have traditionally numbered the Ten Commandments differently.

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To most Protestants, the First Commandment is, “You shall have no other Gods before Me.”

Therefore, to Protestants the Second Commandment is, “You shall not make for yourself a carved image”

Catholics, however, unite these two into one Commandment. To them, the First Commandment reads, “I am the Lord Your God who brought you out of the Land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage. You shall have no other Gods before Me. You shall not make for yourself a carved image”

This initial difference between the two systems leads to different numbering throughout the rest of the Commandments. Catholics divide the final phrases of the Ten Commandments into two, “You shall not covet your neighbor’s wife,” is the Ninth Commandment. “You shall not covet your neighbor’s house” is the Tenth Commandment. The Protestant tradition unites these two phrases into one final Commandment.

I will make references to the Catholic Catechism’s teaching on the Commandments in Chapters Four, Five, and Seven. This book, however, adheres at all times to the Protestant system of numbering the Ten Commandments. The Jewish numbering of the Commandments generally aligns with the Protestant order (which is also used by the Eastern Orthodox churches), but includes the prologue to the Commandments, “I am the Lord your God who brought you up out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage.”

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COME UP!

“Now all of the people were seeing the thunder-sounds, the flashing-torches, the shofar sound, and the mountain smoking; when the people saw, they faltered and stood far off.” (Exodus 20:18).⁵

THE FIVE BOOKS OF MOSES

The old man carefully places a bony hand on his knee, pressing downward to heave himself over the rocky crag. With his other hand he grips a walking stick carved from a knotty olive tree. At this altitude much of the sagebrush has given way to crumbled rock. His chest heaves, straining for oxygen. A cool wind suddenly stirs, giving momentary reprieve from the hot desert air. As the morning haze dissipates, the sun shines down on the golden-brown peak of Sinai.

Fixed intently on his destination, the old man climbs higher, undaunted by the increasingly difficult terrain. The straps of his sandals cut into his feet but his objective is far too important to allow his discomfort to slow his ascent. Finally, after he lifts himself for the last time to a rocky shelf, he crouches down, exhausted in body but invigorated in spirit.

A sudden peal of thunder breaks the silence. He lifts his face toward the summit, which is shrouded in blue-and-orange-tinted clouds.

Animated by lightning, their color flashes red. Then suddenly the clouds begin to coalesce around an invisible core. The air is charged with energy, causing the old man's heavy robe to cling tightly around his body. Thick smoke and fire swirl out of the clouds. As the air boils around him, he gazes, petrified by dread and reverence.

Then the sky fills with words.

Instinctively, the old man attempts to speak back. He tries in vain to penetrate the seemingly solid air with his voice.

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His utterance is barely audible above the piercing wind. Suddenly, the command comes to descend the mountain and warn the people not to come near lest they die. Attempting to reason with the Divine Presence, he explains that the people already know not to approach, but his plea is ignored and he finds himself descending the mountain.

A short time later the old man again makes the arduous ascent. Upon reaching the mountain top, he lifts an arm across his face to shield himself from that blazing light and overwhelming presence. Again, the sky fills with words and the mountain trembles:

“I am *yahweh* your God, who led you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery. You will place no other Gods in front of my face!” (Author’s Translation)

The voice continues, uttering pronouncements that pierce the listener’s heart. He feels them more than he hears them. Each phrase cuts deeply and lodges in a place only God can touch. These are not idle words. They will mold the souls of men and women. They are permanent and lasting, words etched in stone by the finger of God himself:

“You shall not make for yourself a graven image, or any likeness of anything that is in the heaven above, or in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth: You shall not bow down to them, nor serve them: For I the Lord your God am a jealous God, punishing the iniquity of the fathers upon the children unto the third and the fourth generation of those who hate me; but showing mercy to thousands of generations of those that love me and keep my commandments.” (Author’s Translation)

The wind presses against the old man with constant force. His face burns and his eyes tear. He steadies himself against the rock.

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“You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain; for the Lord will not hold him guiltless who takes his name in vain.”

“Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy. Six days you shall labor, and do all your work: but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the Lord your God: In it you shall not do any work, you, nor your son, nor your daughter, your manservant, or your maidservant, nor your cattle, nor the stranger that is within your gates: For in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, and rested on the seventh day: therefore the Lord blessed the seventh day, and hallowed it.” (Author’s Translation)

Squinting through his tears, he can discern vaguely a hand writing, effortlessly carving each eternal word into a stone.

“Honor your father and your mother, that your days may be long in the land which the Lord your God gives you.

“You shall not take the life of the innocent.

“You shall not commit adultery.

“You shall not steal.

“You shall not make a false accusation against your neighbor.

“You shall not covet your neighbor’s house, you shall not covet your neighbor’s wife, nor his manservant, nor his maidservant, nor his ox, nor his donkey, nor anything that is your neighbor’s.” (Author’s translation)

Then, in an instant, the wind flees into the stillness of the desert. The silence lies heavily on the old man’s ears. He raises his shaken body to its full stature and slowly moves toward the tablets. He stoops to pick them up and feels the

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weight of their purpose. He cradles them close to his heart and makes his way down the mountain.

The careless people at the foot of the mountain will not hear the words until their idolatrous frolic has been judged and peace restored. Even then, it will not be long before they forget. Their rebellious fists will shake again, divine wisdom will be lost, and conflict will rage within the human race yet again.

NOTES

1 “Re-creating the Tablets of the Law,” by Alan R. Millard, *Bible Review*, February 1994, pp. 49-53.

2 From the Middle English *decaloge*, derived from the Latin *decalogus* and Greek *dekalogos*, or Ten Words.

3 “Survey Dispels Conservative Evangelical Stereotypes,” by Nathan Black, *Christian Post*, October 30 2006. “Poll Finds Americans Want More Religion in Public Life; Want Politicians to Address Moral Concerns,” report on results of Luntz Research Corporations Poll, *Christian Coalition News*, April 21, 1997.

4 *Stone et al. v. Graham, Superintendent of Public Instruction of Kentucky*, United States Supreme Court, Decided November 17, 1980 from record of October term, 1980, p. 42.

5 *The Five Books of Moses, A New Translation with Introductions, Commentary and Notes* by Everett Fox (New York: Schocken Books, Inc., 1995), p. 372.

THE ONE AND ONLY

CHAPTER ONE

WORD ONE

“I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt out of the house of bondage. You shall have no other Gods before me.” (Exodus 20:2-3)

The echo of Oxford shoes on the glazed stone floor in the United States Capitol makes an impressive sound. What might be a nuisance anywhere else seems to be an audible reminder that whatever takes place within these walls will be recorded in the annals of time. A noisy walk through these stately corridors is, in itself, a signal act of citizenship.

That day the clicking of shoe heels took on an even more potent sound because they belonged to Judge Roy S. Moore. At the time of the controversy, Judge Moore was a circuit court judge in rural Etowah County, Alabama, northeast of Birmingham. He would eventually rise to chief justice of his state. But he would almost as quickly be removed from the Supreme Court because he consistently refused to take down displays of the Commandments from his courtrooms.

Judge Moore’s visit to the Capitol that day was due to the House of Representatives’ passing a resolution affirming the Ten Commandments as the foundation of a moral and just society. The resolution also approved posting the Ten Commandments on all government buildings, including courthouses.

Additionally, the House commended Judge Moore for his brave stand in defending the display of the Ten Commandments in his first courtroom in rural Gadsden, Alabama. From the reactions of its many detractors, one would

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think that this resolution had sparked a new American revolution.

I was among the speakers at a press conference held that day in a meeting room of the Capitol. I told the assembled media, “The Ten Commandments embody the highest of human ethics, and, starting today, they will be back in view, where they belong.”

A few years later, the Reverend Phil Fulton of Peebles, Ohio, also walked the halls of the Capitol. He had been invited by Rep. Jean Schmidt (R-OH) to serve as guest chaplain to the United States House of Representatives.

Mr. Fulton was the first pastor in America arrested for defending a public display of the Ten Commandments. He and other church and civic leaders knelt to pray alongside one of several stone monuments of the Ten Commandments in front of local public schools in economically depressed Adams County. Federal courts ordered the removal of the monument. Police took Mr. Fulton into custody after they ordered him to stop praying so that a crane could be lowered to pull the monument from its foundation.

Mr. Fulton was on hand in 2006 when one of the monuments that had been removed in Ohio was unveiled in the front garden of Faith and Action’s office in Washington, D.C. As I related in the introduction, the government of the District of Columbia at first ordered that we take the monument down. They threatened steep fines and possible forced sale of the property. The District relented three weeks later, determining Faith and Action had a First Amendment right to maintain the display.

Mr. Fulton was introduced by the Speaker of the House. Congresswoman Schmidt followed Mr. Fulton’s prayer by reading his biography into the Congressional Record and commending him for his extensive ministry work, including his

efforts to promote the public display of the Ten Commandments.

What began as a tiny spark in Judge Moore’s courtroom has burned its way to the steps of the world’s greatest political and cultural superpower. A new revolution is indeed underway, but it is not a revolution in the political sense. It is a revolution of the human heart.

THE NAME OF GOD

God has a name. It is a deeply personal one. We are introduced to it in the very first of His Commandments, along with an address where we can always find Him. God invites human beings to call Him by this name and seek for Him.

God’s name is not found in most translations of the Bible because our English versions follow a time-honored tradition to protect His name from abuse. The method that the ancient Jewish rabbis used for this was to substitute the Hebrew word *Adonai*, or “Lord,” for each instance in which God’s actual name appears in Holy Scripture. This custom continues today. The intention behind it is laudable. Unfortunately, the use of the generic title “Lord” makes it harder for an uninitiated reader to understand who exactly the text is talking about. After all, many deities are called “Lord” – for example, the Hindu God Krishna is known as “Lord Krishna.” Like a theological game of mad libs, the generic names “god” and “lord” act as blank spaces to be filled in with whatever image or idea the reader associates with them. This fits in perfectly with the trendy religious pluralism that dominates modern American culture.

“Pick a god, any god at all,” say the proponents of this philosophy. “You may call God one thing and I may call God another. It doesn’t matter who or what it is, so long as you sincerely believe in it.” But this is diametrically opposed to the teaching of the First Commandment. In the original Hebrew, this commandment says, “I am *Yahweh*, who led you out from

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slavery in Egypt. You are to place no other gods in front of Me.”

The use of this specific name clearly indicates that there is only one true God. And He makes it equally clear that we are not to claim any other besides Him. We are not left chasing after an elusive and unknowable being. The Scripture tells us exactly Who this one God is and how we can connect with Him. *Yahweh* is a personal being whose name reveals to us what He is like and how we are to relate to Him.

THE TETRAGRAMATAN

***Yahweh* is a deeply personal and virtually unique name. It probably looked like this when God wrote it on the tablets of stone: YHWH.**

The original four Hebrew letters *yod, hey, vav, hey* spell out His name. They are often referred to collectively as the “tetragramatan,” or the “four letters,” like the “Ten Words,” because there are no four letters like them. No one really knows how this name was originally pronounced because the ancient Hebrew alphabet was made up only of consonants. Without vowels, each generation had to learn how to pronounce words by listening to their elders. Because God’s name was so rarely heard, the memory of its sound faded with time. At one point, a Jewish philosopher named Maimonides¹ added long and short sounds to the four consonant letters by interspersing the vowels belonging to the alternate name, Adonai, between them. This became “Jehovah.” Though it is not actually God’s name, the word “Jehovah” helped to preserve God’s unique identity in our memory.

Knowing God’s real name helps us to understand Him. In the ancient Near East, names were not only a means of identification; they also recorded family histories, major events associated with a person’s life, and even their character traits. Sometimes names were changed because the character or

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circumstances of a person's life had changed. Often a person had more than one name through which more information could be known about him or her. Jacob of the Old Testament is a good example of this. God gave Jacob the new name "Israel." After they wrestled together (see Genesis 35:9-10) Jacob is referred to by both of his names throughout the Bible.

God, too, has multiple names to reveal His character. His principal name, *Yahweh*, is often called the *name par excellence*. It is the most comprehensive of any of God's names. It is likely derived from an old Semitic idiom meaning "I will be all that is necessary as the occasion arises."² Reflecting the breadth of God's nature and authority, His other highly descriptive names fill in the details of how God can be all that is necessary in any situation. A sampling of these names include *El Shaddai* (God Almighty), *El Eyon* (Most High God), *Cur* (Rock), *Avhir* (The Strong One), *Eloheem Shawboth* (God of Hosts), *Yahweh-Shalom* (God our Peace), *Yahweh-Rophe* (God our Healer), *Yahweh-Tzidskenu* (God our Righteousness), and *Yahweh-Yireh* (God our Provider).

God's description of Himself is complete in His names. They give every facet of His character, thinking, will and behavior. If I were to be as thorough, I would introduce myself with, "I am Rob Schenck. I own a house in Northern Virginia. My home is a sanctuary, where love binds together the people who live there. I am a minister, and I work in Washington, D.C. I write books and articles and bring the Word of God to officials on Capitol Hill." Using such a comprehensive introduction would tell you a lot about me - most likely more than you would want to know!

For a more superficial introduction I could say, "Hello, I am a man and I live in Virginia." This would get a very different reaction. Generally, people will want to know more about me than this. As they learn more about me, they grow more comfortable with me. Missing facts leave room for suspicion and error. What do you think would happen if a man

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attempted to send an intimate note to his wife by addressing it, “To the woman I love on First Street”? Chances are it would be returned or delivered to the wrong person – possibly causing more serious problems!

The same principle applies to God’s names. For this reason, the First Commandment is precise. It tells us exactly who we are to worship and obey: *Yahweh*, God Almighty. He alone can be all things to all people. He is the God of Israel. The Israelite nation was surrounded by tribes that worshiped all kinds of Gods. *Yahweh*, however, insisted His people worship Him alone (see Deuteronomy 4:35). We will see in the next chapter that the Second Commandment describes *Yahweh* as a “jealous God,” demonstrating that He will not share His status with anyone or anything else (see Exodus 20:5).

Today such claims of exclusivity make some people angry and others nervous. “Inclusiveness” is very popular in modern American culture. How audacious that we should think that our God is the only God! This is only to be expected in a time when the notion of fidelity isn’t in vogue. Sex has gone from being a sacred act of lifelong commitment to a weekend sport. Our new divorce-on-demand generation has introduced “serial monogamy” which is fast becoming indistinguishable from the ancient practice of polygamy. Promises are routinely violated and oaths disregarded. In a culture of promiscuous relationships and meaningless words, why should we be devoted exclusively to anything, including God?

By contrast, the covenant *Yahweh* made with Israel was unbreakable and exclusive (see 1 Chronicles 16:17). He pledged His love and care to only one people. He is the faithful God (see Psalm 18:25), married forever to His people. “Return, faithless people,” declares the Lord, “for I am your husband” (Jeremiah 3:14 NIV).

Therefore, this First Commandment is as much about the virtue of fidelity as it is about God’s identity. The Canaanites, who inhabited the land God gave the Israelites to

conquer and occupy, had a promiscuous worldview. Their Gods were immoral and unfaithful. Consequently, so were the people who worshiped them. They did not think twice about transferring their loyalty to a new divinity each time they moved to a new city. In contrast, a follower of *Yahweh* is to be forever monotheistic.

Most Americans do not consider themselves polytheists. They would grant you that there is only one God. For all practical purposes, though, they serve multiple Gods. The German reformer, Martin Luther, once said, “Whatever you set your heart on and rely on, that is really your God.”³ So whenever we devote ourselves to things that take precedence over God’s will - whether friends, lovers, jobs, careers, sports, education, or ambitions - we violate the First Commandment.⁴

Yahweh is to be number one in our lives, not merely in the sense of being “the only,” but also in terms of supremacy. He is to be the highest in rank, our Chief, our Boss. As such, our relationship to Him should order our lives.

FINDING GOD

It used to be that in America there were only two places to look for God: church or synagogue. This is no longer true. Several recent surveys have shown that non-Christian religions are continuing to grow. The greatest increases have been in Islam and Buddhism. In the last 10 years, the number of those who don’t identify with a religion - such as atheists and agnostics - more than doubled.⁵ Add to this the smaller influences of native North American, South American, African, and Oceanic religions. New Age spirituality, paganism, and witchcraft are growing in popularity. Growing numbers of New Age seminars, bookstores, and websites, along with the increased visibility of neo-pagan personalities and events, are testimony to a modern fascination with “alternative” religious belief. The cacophony of spiritual claims in contemporary America is staggering.

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Immigration has enriched American culture, but the accompanying influx of new religions has resulted in spiritual confusion.

Although the vast majority of Americans still claim affiliation with a Christian denomination,⁶ in general such claims don't translate into vigorous faith. The reality of their lives is practical atheism (the disavowal of God altogether) or agnosticism (the confessed "ignorance" of religious belief, which makes no demands on its adherents).

How then can we cut through this modern-day pluralism to find the one true God? We can discover who God is by working our way through the Bible. We learn that He is alive (see Jeremiah 10:10). He is personal (see Exodus 3:14 and Psalm 139:1-4). And we can know Him (see John 17:3). We also learn that God needs nothing outside Himself in order to exist (see Exodus 3:14, 6:3). God is unchanging (see Psalm 102:27; Malachi 3:6; and James 1:17). He embodies truth (see Deuteronomy 32:4; John 17:3; and 1 John 5:20), love (see Deuteronomy 7:13; John 3:16, 17:24; Romans 15:30; and 1 John 3:16, 4:8), moral excellence, and holiness (see Exodus 15:11, 19:10-16; Isaiah 6:3; and Hebrews 12:10). God is merciful (see Deuteronomy 13:17; 2 Samuel 24:14; 1 Chronicles 21:13; Nehemiah 9:31; and Psalm 25:6), faithful (see Psalm 84:11, 91:4; Matthew 6:33; and 1 Corinthians 2:9), and just (see Genesis 18:25-26; Deuteronomy 32:4; Psalm 5:5, 7:9-12, 18:24-26; and Matthew 5:48).

In terms of age, God is eternal, without beginning or end (see Genesis 21:33; Deuteronomy 32:40; Psalm 90:2, 102:27; Romans 1:20; and 1 Timothy 1:17). He is everywhere at once. In theology, this is called "omnipresent" (see Psalm 139:7-10; Jeremiah 23:23-24; and Acts 17:27-28). He is omniscient, knowing everything - past, present, and future - at the same time (see Genesis 16:13; 2 Chronicles 16:9; Proverbs 15:13).

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We can also locate Him through the “address” He gives for Himself in the second clause of the First Commandment: “I am the Lord your God, Who brought you out of the land of Egypt.” To find *Yahweh*, we must go back to that awesome moment sometime around 1300 B.C. when God rescued His people from Pharaoh’s cruel domination (see Exodus 1-12).

When God delivered Israel from Egypt, He also established one of the most important Jewish holidays, the Passover. Derived from the Hebrew word *Pesach*, Passover means “to pass, spring over, or spare.” It refers to the events recorded in Exodus 12-13, when the angel of death was sent by God to destroy the firstborn of Egypt. It passed by the houses of the Hebrews, which had been marked by lamb’s blood on the lintels and doorposts.

Even today, this holiday is so significant that each spring many religious Jewish mothers zealously purge their houses of any leavened bread and even sweep, vacuum, and pick up the crumbs. They may have the carpets professionally cleaned, the basement and garage tidied. They even paint, wallpaper, or build an addition, all in preparation for the sacred, week-long festival.

The *seder*, or program, that surrounds the Passover meal eaten on the eve of the holiday is an elaborate banquet presided over by the father of the family. He stands at the dinner table wrapped in a special white robe called a *kittle*, which represents the garment of the ancient high priest. The evening will feature symbolic foods, prayers, readings, songs, and tableware that reveal God’s nature through His behavior towards His people and His enemies.⁷ The entire story of the Exodus - the enslavement of the Hebrew people by Pharaoh, the brave leadership of Moses, the miraculous signs of God’s power, and the successful emancipation of the Hebrew nation—is told in one sitting.

The recounting of the Exodus story at the Passover Seder demonstrates that *Yahweh* is a saving God. He saved the

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Israelites from slavery. In the New Testament, the sinful state of humanity is often compared to slavery (see Romans 6:19; Galatians 4:3). This saving *Yahweh* is embodied in Jesus (see John 1:18). His real birth name is Yeshua, which means “*Yahweh* Saves.” The *Jewish New Testament* translation of Matthew 1:20b-21 by David Stern makes this very clear: “Yosef, son of David, do not be afraid to take Miriyam home with you as your wife; for what has been conceived in her is from the Ruach-HaKodesh. She will give birth to a son, and you are to name him Yeshua, [which means ‘Adonai saves,] because he will save his people from their sins.” It is Jesus who saves His people from their sins.

Passover should be celebrated by Jews and Christians alike because it instructs us, in a dramatic and entertaining way, about the One True God and His redemptive nature. The Passover ritual also teaches that God is a moral being. He is the God of right and wrong. Pharaoh’s enslavement and abuse of the Israelites was wrong. God intervened to stop their suffering and punished Pharaoh severely. This demonstrates that He is righteous and just. *Yahweh* is the standard by which we are to measure all things. As such, He imposes certain claims on human behavior.

Until we accept God’s supreme moral authority, we are doomed to live in an insecure world of moral relativism. This has far-reaching implications. Associate Professor of Philosophy Christina Hoff Sommers of Clark University tells the story of a teacher in Newton, Massachusetts, who had attended numerous “values clarification workshops.” This is a method of moral education in which the teacher never directly tells her students what is right and wrong. Rather, she applies techniques that help students come to their own conclusions.

The teacher was assiduously applying what she had been taught in these seminars when her sixth graders announced that they valued cheating and wanted to be free to do it on their upcoming test. The teacher was uncomfortable with her dilemma. She told the students that since she was opposed to

cheating, they couldn't do it in her class. "In my class you must be honest. In other areas of your life you may be free to cheat," she said.⁸

This story explains the moral dilemma in America. Without a moral standard, we are free to do whatever we please and are powerless to correct bad behavior. Over 60 percent of high school students admit to having cheated on tests and lied to teachers.⁹ An entire generation of youth in the inner cities embraces music and lifestyles that glorify murder, assault, rape, and robbery. Younger and younger offenders are being arrested for gruesome crimes.

Kids put two and two together. If the adults in their lives are telling them that there is no such thing as a moral authority, the only thing preventing them from acting the way they please is the threat of punishment. If they can get around that, or learn to live with their actions, they can literally get away with murder.

RECOGNIZING GOD'S AUTHORITY

For anything to be orderly, someone must be in charge and have the final say. This is especially true when it comes to morality. America's Founders crafted our theory of self-government on this principle. In the eighteenth century, most civic leaders were well-versed in both the Bible and general religious teaching. Most were active churchgoers. Some were even clergy. For example, John Witherspoon, a signer of the Declaration of Independence was a minister and John Jay was extremely active in his church and carried his beliefs into his political life which included being the first Chief Supreme Court Justice. They knew exactly which God they must acknowledge. They also believed that without him their new democratic republic would become a nightmare of moral anarchy.

In his famous address to the Delaware Chiefs on May 12, 1797, George Washington said, "You do well to wish to learn our arts and ways of life, and above all, the religion of

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Jesus Christ.”¹⁰ Other Founders were equally clear. Benjamin Rush, a signer of the Declaration of Independence and a philosopher of the Revolution, wrote, “The only means of establishing and perpetuating our republican forms of government [is] the universal education of our youth in the principles of Christianity by the means of the Bible.”¹¹

Jedediah Morse, a patriot sometimes called the “Father of American Geography,” said in a sermon delivered at Charleston, Massachusetts, in 1799, “Whenever the pillars of Christianity shall be overthrown, our present republican forms of government, and all blessings which flow from them, must fall with them.”¹²

James McHenry, who signed the Constitution, said, “The Holy Scriptures. . . can alone secure to society order and peace, and to our courts of justice and constitutions of government, purity, stability, and usefulness.”¹³

George Washington and his contemporaries had a New Testament understanding of God. This necessarily incorporated Old Testament moral law. Historian T. Rees states, “Jesus Christ and His disciples inherited the idea of God revealed in the Old Testament, as it survived in the purer strata of Jewish religion.”¹⁴ Jesus himself quoted from the keystone of the Jewish Torah when He was asked about the greatest of the commandments: “Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one” (Mark 12:29). In referring to “the religion of Jesus Christ,” Washington meant the God of the Bible and the Ten Commandments. His was the same God of whom Moses and Jesus spoke.

John Quincy Adams best summarized the critical role the recognition of God and His laws plays in our national life when he said, “Human legislators can undertake only to prescribe the actions of men; they acknowledge their inability to govern and direct sentiments of the heart It is one of the greatest marks of Divine favor bestowed upon the children of

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Israel that the legislator gave them rules not only of action, but for the government of the heart.”¹⁵

This “government of the heart” is crucial in today’s controversy over the posting of the Ten Commandments.

Our dependence on God is axiomatic, or self-evident, because there would never have been a break with England if the colonists had not asserted their God-given rights of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. These rights are not given by any human agency. They are given by God Who is the supreme moral authority. Therefore, no man has the right to abridge them or take them away.

If, however, a nation and its people turn away from acknowledging the One True God and His moral laws, then these freedoms can and will be taken away. Liberty will be taken away from those who reject liberty’s Giver. In a society where I am not bound to respect my neighbor’s God-given rights, I cannot expect my neighbor to respect mine.

In 1852, Robert Winthrop, Speaker of the House for the Thirtieth Congress, said, “Men, in a word, must necessarily be controlled either by a power within them or by a power without them; either by the Word of God or the strong arm of man; either by the Bible or by the bayonet.”¹⁶

NO OTHERS ALLOWED

The last clause of the First Commandment, “You shall have no other Gods before me,” is anything but politically correct. God tells us emphatically that He requires an exclusive relationship. To the original listeners, this part of the commandment would have seemed quite forceful. It said curtly, “Don’t put any Gods in front of my face!” The phrase here literally reads in Hebrew, “*Lo yeyeh leach elohim acherim al panai!*—No Gods to be in my face!” This was a pretty effective way for God to get His point across. Quite accidentally, my children once did something to illustrate this point.

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When my children were small, I served as a minister in a large church. They often complained of having to stand around, bored and hungry, because so many people wanted to talk with me after the service. One day they came up with what they thought was an ingenious plan. My daughter begged to be lifted up on my shoulders while someone was asking me a question. Then my son, who was the younger and smaller, passed her a drawing from a Sunday school lesson. Voilà! The paper was suddenly in front of my face, cutting off my conversation. This is a perfect illustration of what happens when we place other Gods in front of *Yahweh*. Once the drawing was between me and the person talking to me, it effectively cut off our communication. In the same way anything which we deem more important than God cuts off our communication with Him.

If we are to return to spiritual health and moral sanity – as individuals, families, communities, or as a nation - we must put away all of the things that get in the way of our communication with God. Our ignorance, our arrogant self-reliance, our lust for power and pleasure, and our outright defiance and rebellion must be put aside in repentance.

Understanding and obeying the First Commandment is the first step on a long road to healing America spiritually. Recognizing the One True God will lead us back to moral rectitude, proper social interaction, and civility. Only *Yahweh* can take us out of slavery and into the Promised Land!

The following words from the Old Testament book of Chronicles have been quoted often in recent years, and with good reason. They summarize perfectly what we have learned from this First Word from Sinai: “If My people who are called by My name will humble themselves and pray and seek My face, and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, and will forgive their sin and heal their land” (see 2 Chronicles 7:14). When a nation turns back to God and repents, He will heal it, and moral prosperity will return. He will never turn away from those who seek Him:

And those who know Your name will put their trust in You; for You, Lord, have not forsaken those who seek You. (Psalm 9:10)

NOTES

1 Moses Maimonides (1135-1204), a physician in the court of Sultan Saladin, was the foremost intellectual figure of medieval Judaism. As a device to help pronounce the “unspoken name,” he interspersed the vowels for the Hebrew word *Adonai* (Lord) through the name YHWH, producing *Jehovah*.

2 T. Rees, “God,” *New International Bible Encyclopedia*, vol. II (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1956, reprinted 1980), p. 1254.

3 Martin Luther, *Martin Luther’s Larger Catechism*, translation by Rev. Robert E. Smith (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1921), p. 580.

4 Martin Luther, *Luther’s Small Catechism, with Explanation*, (St. Louis: Concordia, 1986), p. 58.

5 The American Religious Identification Survey (ARIS) 2001, the Graduate Center of the City University of New York, “Table 73. Self-Described Religious Identification of Adult Population: 1990 and 2001.”

6 Ibid.

7 To explore how to celebrate the Passover, visit your local library or Jewish bookstore. For a Christian perspective, I recommend two books: *Christ in the Passover* by Ceil and Moishe Rosen (Moody Press) and *Celebrate the Feasts* by Martha Zimmerman (Bethany House Publishers).

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8 Christine Hoff Sommers, "Teaching the Virtues," *Imprimis*, November, 1991 (Hillsdale, MI: Hillsdale College), p. 3.

9 Emily Sachar, "60% of U.S. High School Students Cheat, 28% Steal," *Bloomberg News*, October 14, 2006.

10 *The Writings of George Washington from the Original Manuscript Sources, 1789 to 1799*, ed. John D. Richardson, 11 vols. (Washington, D.C.: United States Government Printing Office, 1936), pp. 15-55.

11 Benjamin Rush, *Essays, Literary, Moral and Philosophical* (Philadelphia: Printed by Thomas and William Bradford 1806), pp 93-94.

12 Jedediah Morse, election Sermon delivered at Charleston, MA, April 25, 1799.

13 David Barton, *Original Intent* (Aledo, TX: Wallbuilder Press), p. 173.

14 T. Rees, "God," *New International Bible Encyclopedia*, p. 1260.

15 Barton, op. cit., p 327.

16 Ibid., p. 329.

MORTAL AND *PECEL*: MAKING POISON WORSHIP CHAPTER TWO

WORD TWO

“Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth: Thou shalt not bow down thyself to them, nor serve them: for I the LORD thy God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children unto the third and fourth generation of them that hate me; And shewing mercy unto thousands of them that love me, and keep my commandments” (Exodus 20:4-6).

The title of this chapter is a play on words. A pharmacist mixes his potions with a “mortar and pestle.” I’ve turned that into “mortal,” referring to human beings, and *pecel* (pronounced peshel), the Hebrew word used in the Bible for a carved image or idol. When human beings and idols are “mixed” together, they make for a deadly spiritual elixir. You may be surprised, though, to hear that the Second Commandment is not just about idols. It is about something far more serious.

One gray day in October, it was raining in New York City. Harvey Belew and I crossed Pearl Street to ascend the long flight of stairs leading up to the majestic Greek Revival Courthouse for the Southern District of Manhattan. As we approached, our conversation was drowned out by a chanting mob that surged toward us from behind a long stretch of police barricades.

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Harley worked as a producer for a religious radio station in Fort Worth, Texas. We were appearing in federal court after being sued for organizing pro-life activity during the Democratic National Convention. Abortion was a major theme as then Governor Bill Clinton of Arkansas reversed his previous pro-life stance to become his party's "pro-choice" candidate.

A gaggle of bare-breasted lesbian activists, their faces and chests spattered with fake blood, angrily shook their fists. They whirled rubber snakes above their heads and chanted: "Not the church, not the state, women will decide their fate!"

"Reverend Schenck, Reverend Schenck," one young woman called to me. "Want to kiss my fetus?" She held up what appeared to be a urine-filled jar with a Barbie doll suspended inside. Their bizarre street theater reminded me of a scene from a B-grade horror movie.

"Don't you shove your morality down our throats!" a goateed young man shouted, spraying his saliva on my face as I passed to enter the building. Even behind the thick brass doors and marble walls, I could still hear the pandemonium outside.

The type of brouhaha seen on those courthouse steps has actually been going on for a very long time. It is the continuation of a moral rebellion begun thousands of years earlier. The rebellion first began when Adam and Eve grasped at moral autonomy by defying God's order not to eat from the tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil (see Genesis 2-3; especially 2:16-17). We also saw it when Moses came down from Mt. Sinai. Every generation has attempted to fashion its own code of right and wrong. Like new lines of designer jeans, the lists of do's and don'ts have alternately shrunk and lengthened over the years. It all depends on what's hot and what's not - and appropriate idols have been fashioned to accommodate the latest trends.

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WHAT IS IDOLATRY?

What do you think of when you hear the word “idolatry?” Perhaps, like many, you imagine a primitive tribesman bowing down in front of a carved statue. If you do, you are partly right, but only in a technical sense. Bowing to a statue is certainly an expression of idolatry, but it is only one expression. Idolatry is not about statues. Rather, it is about the motivation and attitude behind their making.

Contrary to popular belief, the Second Commandment is not a prohibition on religious art. It does not forbid glass windows, crucifixes, pictures of Jesus, or other renderings of God and His heavenly, angelic beings. If it were, we would have to draw the impossible conclusion that God contradicted himself when He ordered the Israelites to decorate the Tabernacle with images of heavenly beings made out of gold (see Exodus 25:18).

Above all, idolatry is a projection of the human will upon a God-like subject. It is a human usurping of divine authority. It reduces “God” to something that can be controlled, bullied, or deceived by man. In America, the actual worship of physical images is rare, though it can be found. Rather, many Americans commit idolatry by worshiping ideas or ideologies that set themselves up against the God of the Old and New Testaments. This, too, is idolatry.

Idolatry is the purest form of human pride. It was for the sin of idolatry that Isaiah the prophet denounced the King of Babylon, whom many see as symbolizing Satan:

“How art thou fallen from heaven, O Lucifer, son of the morning! *how* art thou cut down to the ground, which didst weaken the nations! For thou hast said in thine heart, I will ascend into heaven, I will exalt my throne above the stars of God: I will sit also upon the mount of the congregation, in the sides of the north: I will ascend above the heights of the clouds; I will be like the most High.” (Isaiah 14:12-14)

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Exalting oneself to Godhood suggests that there is no higher moral authority than oneself. This was often done overtly by ancient monarchs who proclaimed themselves to be Gods. The story of the Jewish Holiday of Hanukkah revolves around Antiochus the pompous Syrian despot. He called himself Epiphanes, meaning “the revealed one.” Antiochus decreed that the Jews could follow their religion, provided their God was subordinated to him. The Jews knew the One True God would not bow to a human being, so they fought back in His name. They miraculously reclaimed the Holy Temple that had been defiled by a statue of the tyrant.¹ Despots are not the only ones who play God, though. Ordinary people play God when they decide for themselves what is right and what is wrong. The highest expression of power is exercised in the making of moral judgments. The course of our very lives stems from our presuppositions of right and wrong.

THE MEANING OF THE SECOND COMMANDMENT

The Second Commandment’s prohibition on making idols or “graven images” is aimed directly at our human predisposition to take ultimate moral authority into our own hands. The pro-abortion activists who harassed me outside of the courthouse chose a lifestyle that violates the moral will of God. Thus, they were erecting an image that reflects their own nature rather than the nature of the One True God.

Properly understood, the Second Commandment is simply a reiteration of God’s directive to Adam and Eve in the Garden, “You are free to eat from any tree in the garden; but you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat of it you will surely die” (Genesis 2:16-17 NIV). By instructing the newly formed humans not to partake of the tree, God prohibited them from meddling with morality. Human beings were not endowed with the right to change in any way what God had declared to be right and wrong.

Many take this passage to be a blanket decree against having fun and enjoying life, but nothing could be further from

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God's intent! Notice that God gave permission before He gave a prohibition. When God said, "Of every tree of the garden you may eat freely," He was actually saying, *Go ahead, Adam and Eve, enjoy what I have given you. Live life to its fullest. Enjoy the beauty of My creation, the scents, the tastes, the sensations; they're all for your pleasure. The only thing you must not do is usurp My moral authority. Only I possess the right to decide what is good and what is evil.*

The lesbian protestors I encountered outside the courthouse in Manhattan were sure that if the Bible forbids one sort of pleasure, then it must forbid all pleasures. But this is not true. One of the Old Testament poetical books, Song of Solomon (also called Song of Songs), celebrates sexual pleasure. It should only be enjoyed, though, within the parameters set by our Creator - between a man and woman who are married to each other (see Genesis 2; Leviticus 18:22; 20:13; Romans 1:20-32; 1 Corinthians 6:9; 1 Timothy 1:9-10).

Shortly before my trial in New York City, I participated in a pro-life prayer walk through the city with other religious leaders. Along the way, a young man appeared on the sidelines, screaming to us that he was HIV positive. He asked us why we hated him so much. I turned and asked, "Whatever gave you that idea?"

"You wouldn't ever let me in your church!" he shouted.

"Oh, you're wrong," I said, pausing and stepping away from the parade of ministers and priests. "I would not only allow you into my church, I would welcome you with a holy kiss." With that, I gently embraced the young man and kissed him on his neck in typical Christian fashion. He was stunned. I said to him, "That may have been the first nonsexual kiss you've received from a man. You see, God allows men to love men; in fact, He commands men to love men, but never sexually. If you play by His rules, the Lord will show you the joy of living." He wept, and I prayed with him.

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Eve was beguiled by the serpent's suggestion that if she were to take of the forbidden fruit, she would become just like God (see Genesis 3:1-3). In other words, Eve wouldn't have to listen to the rules anymore. She would be making the rules. The Second Commandment stands in stark contrast to this wrong-headed assumption. The key to understanding this is the Hebrew word *pecel* that we translate "idol" or "graven image."

Pecel refers to a physical object that has been "graven" or "tooled" by a human hand and then asserted to have divine powers. It could be a statue, a painting, or anything that has its origin in human artistic prowess or ingenuity. "Graven" stresses the human crafting of the image and the worship of it, not the image itself. An idol can also be something intangible, like the ideas I spoke of earlier in this chapter. History is rife with examples of people who have tried to replace God with a political ideology.

No object or idea in and of itself violates the Second Commandment. Sin enters the picture when that object or idea is made into an object of worship by human beings. This is why I prefer to translate *pecel* as "graven image," as the Authorized Version does, or even "carved image," like the New King James Version. Whenever I use my hand or my mind to make something into a God that isn't God, I violate the Second Commandment.

Yahweh declares, "I the Lord your God am a jealous God" (Exodus 20:5). God will allow no substitutes for Himself. He loves His creation too much to give any member of it up to unfit surrogates. Godly jealousy is not the insecure, possessive human emotion that this word often describes. Rather, it is an intensely caring devotion to the objects of His love, similar to a mother's jealous protection of her children, a father's jealous guarding of his home, or professionals' jealous defense of their reputations.

Idolatry subverts this protective, "jealous" relationship. If God allowed idol worship, He would be abandoning His

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people to cheap counterfeits that would inflict cruel disappointment and disillusionment.

THE NEW AMERICAN IDOLATRY

Return with me for a moment to that gray day in Manhattan. The pro-abortion demonstrators were essentially saying, “We’re not playing by God’s rules anymore. We don’t like the way He does things. We don’t like His rules about sex and babies. We’re going to have sex with anyone we please, and if we want to, we’ll abort any babies we conceive. We’re making our own rules now!”

These activists echo the cry that has gone up throughout history from those who have rejected God and His commands. Those homosexual activists could just as easily have been the Hebrews who dressed themselves in the finery of their pagan Egyptian captors. They indulged in sexual revelry at the foot of Mount Sinai even as Moses was receiving the Ten Commandments.

My heart goes out to those souls on the courthouse steps. I can only imagine how the Lord weeps for them, as He wept for the Samaritan woman at the well (see John 4), or the rich young ruler (see Luke 18:18). As I stood among them they hissed at me, spat at me, and even urinated on me; yet my impulse was to somehow communicate to them the enormous love of God who cares enough to enforce the rules intended only for their protection and happiness.

Unfortunately, powerful forces in American culture are cheering these wayward souls on toward misery and death. Rebellion against God is standard practice in many sectors of American society. An ever-growing number of companies are jumping on the “diversity” bandwagon by offering full company benefits to the unmarried partners of their employees. These modern-day idolaters think they are sending their constituents a message of personal liberation and self-actualization, when they are actually feeding them to the lions. Federal and local

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governments also promote this organized rebellion against God aggressively.

It is appropriate to mention here that homosexual political and social activism is not the same thing as the private sin of homosexual desire.² Those who struggle with homosexual desire as a private sin are no different from anyone else. The temptations we struggle with fall into one of three categories: the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life (see 1 John 2:16). At one time or another, we are all tempted in one of these areas. Some of us succeed in resisting these temptations; others of us do not. The Bible has promises for both.

Blessed is the man who endures temptation; for when he has been approved, he will receive the crown of life which the Lord has promised to those who love Him. (James 1:12)

“There hath no temptation taken you but such as is common to man: but God *is* faithful, who will not suffer you to be tempted above that ye are able; but will with the temptation also make a way to escape, that ye may be able to bear *it*.” (1 Corinthians 10:13)

The homosexual political and social activist movement, better known as The Gay Agenda, is an attempt to morally legitimize sin and institutionalize it in the culture. This shaking of the fist at God is almost always a corporate act rather than a private one, and it has far greater consequences. For this sin, the Bible has an ominous warning.

“But whoso shall offend one of these little ones which believe in me, it were better for him that a millstone were hanged about his neck, and *that* he were drowned in the depth of the sea.” (Matthew 18:6)

CHAPTER TWO: MORTAR AND PECEL MAKING POISON WORSHIP

THE LONG MARCH OF CAESAR

America's federal courts are the most serious offenders when it comes to corporate violation of the Second Commandment. The last fifty years have seen a string of enormously consequential decisions by district and appeals courts, as well as the United States Supreme Court. Religious expression is increasingly limited and religious believers, particularly Jews and Christians, are being pushed to the margins of society. The courts have removed God from many corners of American life. They have replaced Him with the idol of the secular state.

During the last half-century, the Supreme Court has been at the forefront of the war waged against God. Under the banner of "separation of church and state," the Court marches like a mighty army of ancient Rome. It leads America towards the same idolatrous civil religion that thrived in the Roman Empire.

The assault was launched in 1947 with a decision dubbed "The New Jersey School Bus Case." Officially argued as *Everson v. Board of Education of Ewing Township*, this case concerned the reimbursement of parents for the bus fare necessary to send their children to independent schools. The plaintiff argued that this amounted to a government subsidy. Reimbursing the parents of children at religious schools resulted in government support of religion. They further contended that such support was strictly prohibited by the Constitution. The plaintiffs lost their case, but won a more significant victory. The justices ruled that the fare reimbursements were constitutional as they aided individual families rather than subsidizing schools. The majority opinion, however, included a strongly worded statement that "the separation between church and state is a wall that must be kept high and impenetrable."³

The *Torcaso v. Watkins* decision of 1961 followed the New Jersey School Bus Case. Here the Supreme Court struck down an oath to God required of all notaries public in the State

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of Maryland. *Engle v. Vitale* followed in 1962. This decision removed prayer from public schools in 1962. The following year the *School District of Abington v. Schempp* decision did away with Scripture readings over public schools' address systems.

The *Lemon v. Kurtzman* decision in 1971 restricted public school teachers from serving in religious schools. This created an atmosphere of hostility and distrust between public and religious schools. Public school personnel were left with the impression that religious schools were outside the mainstream and perhaps even unconstitutional. Religious school personnel, on the other hand, sensed the tension and suspicion of their secular counterparts and withdrew from interaction with them.

In 1980, *Stone v. Graham* banned the Ten Commandments from display in public schools, even if they were used strictly for historical purposes. *Wallace v. Jaffree*, decided in 1985, struck down a modification to an Alabama law that allowed for a moment of silence at the beginning of each school day. The legislature had added a clause listing "voluntary prayer" as an option for students during the moment of silence. The new language of the law was challenged and the court eliminated the prayer option.

The most spiritually damaging Supreme Court decision, however, was the infamous *Roe v. Wade* in 1973. It constructed a whole new definition of human life based on an entirely secular, humanistic theory of life's origin. *Roe v. Wade* struck down foundational rights first enunciated in the Declaration of Independence which were, at that time, still secured for every American citizen in the Constitution. Prior to 1973, every American was guaranteed the rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. This guarantee was based on the presupposition that our most sacred rights come from God:

When in the Course of human events, it becomes necessary for one people to dissolve the political bands which have connected them with another, and to assume among the