

DISPLAYING THE TEN COMMANDMENTS

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I once evaluated a teacher in a Catholic school, who was allowed to use his regular position there as his student teaching toward teacher certification, which private/parochial schools did not require. He had been teaching for several years, apparently to the satisfaction of his supervisors. The first time that I walked into his classroom, I knew that he was not cut out to be a teacher. He had posted above the door a poster titled "Mr. ——'s Commandments," and beneath that was a list of forty prohibitions in print so small that I could barely read it, not that I needed, or wanted, to do so.

In our post-class conference, I tried to tell him as gently as possible that if God needed only 10 commandments, no human needed more than that. I discovered that he lacked a sense of humor along with competence as a teacher. I rated him failing—rather, not passing, since failure was not allowed in the education department—but I heard that after I left, the next supervising evaluator passed him.

I thought of this recently when I contemplated—what I had contemplated many times before—writing a column about the so-called Ten Commandments, also known as the Decalogue.

I kept putting it off, because I knew that I already had a reputation for pedantry that was not in need of further enhancement.

Yet, references to, and public discussions of, the Decalogue continued to crop up, as one did recently in a prominent local newspaper.

The time had come, it seemed, for me to say my piece. Fortunately, this newspaper is not ashamed to insist on documentation for columns, even if that documentation is more scholarly than is typical in the news media.

The proponents of such monuments to the Decalogue are typically as humorless and ignorant as my student teacher was. Their lack of knowledge of the very Biblical text that they are seeking to enshrine is astonishing. They are never called to account for that.

Of course, based on the desire of our founders to build a wall of separation between church and state, such requests should be denied on their face. The claim that this was founded as a Christian (or Judeo-Christian, however contradictory that is) nation is simply wrong. In the *Federalist* (1787-1788), Alexander Hamilton, John Jay, and James Madison chose the Roman name "Publius" as a pseudonym, not "Paul" or "Matthew" or "Mark" or "Luke" or even "Moses."

When someone asked Alexander Hamilton why there was no mention of God in the Constitution, he is reported—probably apocryphally—to have said, "We forgot."

Putting aside the issue of church and state, even on the grounds of church alone, the requests are bizarre. Anyone who is as familiar with the Decalogue as one should be would know that a sculptural monument to the Ten Commandments is itself a violation of the second commandment (Exodus 20:4): "Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image."

Furthermore, in the Jewish Bible (the Old Testament), they are not even called commandments.

Moses says (Exod. 20:1), "And God spoke all of these words." The King James translation is exactly correct. The words "spoke" and "words" are the related Hebrew words "dabêr" and "divarim" (literally, "talked" and "talks"). The Vulgate (Latin) Bible is equally precise, using the words "locutus est" and "sermônês" ("has spoken" and "talks"). Similarly, the Septuagint (Greek) Bible uses "elalêsen" and "logous" ("chatted" and "speeches"). Later, God refers to the Decalogue (Exod. 24:12) as "the law [torah] and the command [mitzvah]," but does not specify which are which.

When the Decalogue (literally, "ten-speeches") is referred to as a group of ten, it is called "the ten words (divarim)" (Exod. 34:28; Deut. 4:13 & 10:4).

It is only in the Christian Bible (e.g., Luke 10:19) that they are officially called commands (entolai, in Greek). They are called this in a negative sense as that which, through the intervention of Christ, humans have transcended. Paul said (Romans 7:4 & 6):

So that ... y'all also were made dead to the law through the body of Christ ...
So that we should serve in the opportunity of the spirit, and not in the antiquity of the letter [of the law].

When Paul says "the law," he means the Jewish Bible.

Therefore, on political and theological grounds alike, such monuments are inappropriate to the public square, as is any attempt to proselytize on behalf of any religion.

Contrary to conventional wisdom, not only is ignorance in this area not bliss, but it is fatally dangerous to clear thinking in general.

If ever a candidate for president emerges, who knows this and has the courage to refrain from ending every speech with "God bless someone or something," I will be the first in line to vote for her or him.

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