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The Place of the Ten Commandments in Civil Government Today

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The Lord God, when establishing His covenant people through Moses, revealed His will for how they should obey Him with the Ten Commandments as a rule for living. God didn't communicate through an angel or a prophet, but spoke these commandments directly to Moses Himself, so we should pay earnest attention. The first four tell us how to live before God:

1. You shall have no other gods before me
2. You shall not make for yourself an idol
3. You shall not misuse the name of the LORD your God
4. Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the LORD your God. On it you shall not do any work, neither you, nor your son or daughter, nor your manservant or maidservant, nor your animals, nor the alien within your gates.

The next six tell us how to live with men:

5. Honor your father and your mother
6. You shall not murder
7. You shall not commit adultery
8. You shall not steal
9. You shall not give false testimony against your neighbor
10. You shall not covet [anything that belongs to your neighbor]

These commandments were to instruct the Israelites how to live in fellowship with God and each other, while being a shining testimony to the one true God over which the rest of the nations of the world would marvel. And God and His commandments are marvelous – observe the Israelites' response at Mount Sinai upon receipt in Exodus chapter 20: “When the people saw the thunder and lightning and heard the trumpet and saw the mountain in smoke, they trembled with fear. They stayed at a distance and said to Moses, ‘Speak to us yourself and we will listen. But do not have God speak to us or we will die’” (vs. 18, 19). But God's commandments were not intended to bring death (the result of sin); rather, fellowship and life: “Moses said to the people, “Do not be afraid. God has come to test you, so that the fear of God will be with you to keep you from

sinning" (vs. 20). The Ten Commandments were given to keep God's people from sinning, and witness to His holy nature and sovereign rule.

DECALOGUE A SOVEREIGN DECREE OVER A NATION

For tentative Christians today in the United States of America who are cautious to talk of God and His law in the context of civil government, it is important to point out that God did not give His law simply to a religious sect within a state – He revealed His will to a nation state that He was creating as a testimony to Himself and as an example for the nations to follow in submission. God is sovereign, and His will applies to all the people in His nation. There was no separating the Law of God from the people – in fact, the Law of God was to be the law of the people. There was no separation of church and state, and there is no allowance for God's people to compartmentalize God's moral law from civil government, the latter of which is subordinate to the former.

All men were created by Him and in His image. All men rely on God for their very breath. No man does a thing outside of God's decree. All of us are under His law, because He and His will are eternal, so we are all bound as His created beings to obey what He reveals is His will for our lives in the Ten Commandments, whether or not the government over us acknowledges their authority. God is sovereign over every nation state throughout every generation because He created everything and through Him all things are held together.

For nations and their civil governments today, those who reject God's commandments on how to live will reap severe consequences: "...for I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God, punishing the children for the sin of the fathers to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me..." (Ex. 20:5). However, for the nations that

honor God by keeping His commandments there is marvelous blessing: “but [I am a God] showing love to a thousand [generation] of those who love me and keep my commandments” (Ex. 20:6).

MORAL LAW BOUND AND BINDING SAVED AND HEATHEN

God’s moral law is bound on the hearts of all men, saved and unsaved, and is binding upon them before God because the Ten Commandments simply bring to light God’s eternal nature and will. They are true before creation and after the fall. God simply spells out His moral law in the Decalogue, but they are not new to His nature, nor outdated expectations for all His creation. Calvin writes:

It is a fact that the law of God which we call the moral law is nothing else than a testimony of natural law and of that conscience which God has engraved upon the minds of men. Consequently, the entire scheme of this equity of which we are now speaking has been prescribed in it. Hence, this equity alone must be the goal and rule and limit of all laws.”¹

An example that God’s moral law has always been binding on man even before being revealed in the Ten Commandments is in the story of Joseph in Genesis chapter 39. When Potiphar’s wife tries to get Joseph to have sex with her, he refuses, saying, “My master has withheld nothing from me except you, because you are his wife. How then could I do such a wicked thing and sin against God?” (vs. 9). It is important to note that Joseph knew he would be sinning against his master, and against God, and yet God had not yet explicitly revealed this (the Ten Commandments came long after Joseph had died). Joseph’s conscience, as a creation in the image of God Almighty, told him it would be a sin to commit adultery. We see these moral, eternal mandates pricking the hearts of nations and their governments just the same today. Why do we have civil laws and

¹ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, vol. 2 (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, N.D.), 1504.

consequences against murder, theft, lying, and the like? Because, the consciences of each created being are innately sensitive to the moral law exuding from the character of their Creator. And God's will and character explicitly revealed in the Decalogue have impacted nations with Christian subjects even more. While some try to erase The Ten Commandments' presence in the United States of America today, they still own an indelible place in our conscience, in our memory, and upon our civil law and government.

God's moral character is binding even on those who do not acknowledge God's encompassing and eternal sovereignty. In the Book of Daniel, King Nebuchadnezzar, a pagan ruler who had conquered Israel, was struck down for breaking the first and second commandments by glorifying himself as a god. A voice from heaven pronounced that he would lose his mind and live like a beast in the field until he "acknowledge that the Most High is sovereign over the kingdoms of men and gives them to anyone he wishes" (4:32). The same thing happens in the New Testament after Christ is resurrected. In the twelfth chapter of Acts, King Herod is heralded as a god by his subjects after giving a public address sitting on his civic throne. Again, this civil authority, having broken the first and second commandment by acting as if he presided over a throne of deity, saw swift judgment by the sovereign Creator: "Immediately, because Herod did not give praise to God, an angel of the Lord struck him down, and he was eaten by worms and died" (vs. 23). Clearly, God's commandments are binding on all governments, rulers, and authorities, and not just on those who worship Him. And this is true both in the Old and New Testaments.

Consider that God also directs the affairs of pagan nations with His people and will, such as when He gives dreams to pagan monarchs like Pharaoh in Egypt and Nebuchadnezzar in Babylon and only provides interpretation of these dreams by His Israelite people, revealing His will imposed on various pagan nations as part of His redemptive historical plan. He is sovereign over all the affairs of men, and so His sovereign will revealed in the Ten Commandments has always been, and always will be binding on our consciences and behavior, even nations who rebel against Him.

CHRISTIANS SHOULD SEEK GODLY GOVERNMENT, LIVE GODLY LIVES

We Christians in these last days must continue to call on all nations of the earth to “kiss the Son, lest He be angry with them” (Psalm 2), for God is indeed currently conquering and putting all nations under Christ’s feet (Psalm 110). While we must remember this is namely a spiritual battle in terms of how we fight through prayer, evangelism, and personally loving, obeying, and proclaiming the Ten Commandments, we should expect earthly consequences if we think obeying God’s moral law is merely biding on religious folk. God is much bigger than us and our human sanctuaries. He serves judgment on the nations of the world both temporally and eternally. We should thus pray for and seek (and in the case of Americans, vote for) Christians who live godly lives as our leaders who will care about seeing not only the Church, but the nation in all its facets – civil as well as personal – honor God’s moral laws that reflect his eternal character. Let us remember that even King David, the man after God’s own heart, brought terrible consequences on his nation when he disobeyed the seventh commandment, and then tried to cover it up by breaking the sixth commandment. Many people died.

We Christians should be in earnest to see the kingdom of our Lord and of His Christ become the kingdom of this world more and more as we see The Day approaching. As we participate as citizens of the United States, let us heed the words of Calvin in trying to influence the rule and law of civil government to join us in honoring God's Ten Commandments: "...no government can be happily established unless piety is the first concern; and that those laws are preposterous which neglect God's right and provide only for men ... let Christian princes and magistrates be ashamed of their negligence if they do not apply themselves to this concern."²

² Ibid. , 1495.

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