

THE FIRST AMENDMENT: Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the government for a redress of grievances.

The Ten Commandments – Annotated

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As surely as students shuffle back to school, dodging fallen tree branches, some legislature somewhere will propose posting the Ten Commandments in classrooms.

Ten Utterances,' may be a more accurate title than "Ten Commandments," since the Hebrew word for 'commandment' doesn't appear anywhere in the text. Decalogue – "10 words," in Greek – is what scholars generally use.

While I am not confident this will boost math and reading scores, every dictum in the Decalogue is divine, or at least desirable. But they are not as self-explanatory as they seem. Bible scholars agree there is an overall motion from God-focused ("I am the Lord your God") to Human-focused ("your neighbor"), with "honor your father and mother" as the pivot point.

The Ten Commandments are couched as absolutes, with little reward or punishment attached, quite unlike the following chapters of Exodus 21-23. Other questions emerge upon closer reading: Is "I am the Lord your God" already a commandment?

Philosopher Moses Maimonides (1135-1204) held that belief in God is the basis of all morality. But other sages objected that there is no "do" or "don't do" – to observe or to violate. Like the medieval rabbis, my students at OU find God's self-introduction even more intriguing. Why: "I am the Lord your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt" rather than... the Lord God who created heaven and earth?

How far should one take Commandment 2 or 3, "Don't Make Idols/Graven Images"? As is well known, Protestants-Catholics-Jews disagree on the numbering here, but that's a minor issue compared with the question of proper application.

Rabbinic Judaism took this ban on graven images very far, to the detriment of Jewish sacred art, though not Jewish ritual objects. Catholicism found frescoes, oils, even sculptures a perfectly legitimate method of concentrating the faith of believers, and Reformation-era Protestants landed somewhere in between these poles. (To someone interested in biblically-inspired art, these differences loom large.)

The Decalogue's back five – Don't Murder, Don't Adulter, Don't Steal, Don't Bear False Witness, Don't Covet – are terse and seemingly uncomplicated. But how can one avoid coveting? 'Wow that Audi is nice... wow that woman is cute, etc.' are impulses, with the real challenge being dealing with those impulses. And what are we to make of the significant differences in the Sabbath paragraph of the Ten Commandments, the longest in the Decalogue, found in Exodus 20 and in Deuteronomy 5? (The short version of these differences: Exodus 20 links Sabbath to Creation; Deuteronomy 5 links Sabbath to the exodus from Egypt.)

Posting the Ten Commandments in schools may or may not violate the no establishment religion clause of the Constitution: that's for our judges to decide. At present, the 5th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals has upheld Texas Senate Bill 10, which specifies the version (King James Bible) and the poster size (20 inches by 16 inches minimum) but this case seems likely headed to the U.S. Supreme Court.

The last major SCOTUS consideration of posting the Ten Commandments yielded a split decision: Okay on Texas statehouse grounds, not okay in a Kentucky court. Traditionally, the justices have been stricter in their reading of religious coercion when it comes to children and classrooms, but this court recently decided that prayer after school hours was acceptable.

What size and what shape and which words are eventually posted should stir discussion: artists and commentators have imagined these very differently over the many centuries – possibly twenty-six, since they were first proclaimed at Mount Sinai – whose location is uncertain. The Decalogue itself is described as written on two stone tablets inscribed by the finger of God – not a 20 inches by 16 inches photocopy.

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