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# The Ten Commandments and the Character of God (The President's Desk)

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The President's

DESK

Stephen Bauer

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## The Ten Commandments and the Character of God

Each semester in my Christian Ethics class, I have a unit on the Ten Commandments. I used to assign a reaction paper in which each student would write on how Ellen White's exposition of the Decalogue affected his or her understanding of any two out of the final six commandments. The results were predictable yet frustrating: The vast majority of students used Ellen White's comments to conjure up a near-infinite number of ways a given commandment could be broken, would plead guilty to breaking the command in multiple manners, and then conclude that the commandments were impossible to keep. My assignment seemed to drive students to conclude that the Ten Commandments cannot be properly kept!

This was not the result I wanted.

The student responses exemplify how many Christians approach the Ten Commandments. I call this approach the Rule-Compliance (RC) model. RC practitioners see the Decalogue as a catalog of rules to be complied with or violated. The Ten Commandments are thus viewed as rules to protect one from

evils that need to be avoided. Thus, how we keep the commandments is usually expressed in terms of things not to be done. We keep the eighth commandment by not taking things that are not ours. Minimal attention is paid to doing positive good.

Such an approach to the Ten Commandments seems less than compatible with the enthusiasm for the law expressed by David: "Oh how I love your law! It is my *meditation all the day*" (Ps. 119:97, ESV, italics supplied).<sup>1</sup> Why should I want to meditate day and night on what I ought *not* to do? How is it, then, that David could rise above the RC model to find actual delight in God's law? How can we find a more positive view of the law without undermining its moral content and its fundamental rules?

I would like to propose that the Ten Commandments are vital tools given by God to teach us how to reflect His character in our lives. Ellen White frequently asserts that the law of God is a transcript of His character. (I got 139 hits in searching for this phraseology on the Ellen White CD-ROM, 2007 edition.) She states: "Christ came to our world to represent the character of God as it is represented in His holy law; for His law is a transcript of His character. Christ was both the law and the gospel."<sup>2</sup> When I press most people as to what this means, I get very vacuous answers.

How, then, is the Law a transcript of God's character? I suggest that instead of viewing the Ten Commandments merely as a collection of rules that can be complied with or broken, that we need to expand our vision. I call this approach the Personal-Power (PP) model.

Let us use the eighth commandment to articulate the PP paradigm. "Thou shalt not steal." This commandment does not address a group of people. Instead, it addresses the individual hearer or reader. Thus, when I read it, it addresses me: I am not

to steal. This injunction does not address me as the potential victim of stealing. Rather, I am addressed as a potential perpetrator, one who has the power to steal (or lie, murder, etc.). Each of the commandments addresses me as the potential perpetrator and is thus designed to protect others from my power to violate their God-given rights.

The commandment to refrain from stealing implies that God has granted rights to those around me in reference to property ownership, and it reminds me that I have the power to deny them those rights in an attempt to benefit myself at their expense. So we can deduce a basic right to legitimate property ownership being protected here. But I would go further. Property rights imply that the property owners have the right not to have their property taken from them without their consent and without fair and agreed-upon compensation.

Suppose I go to the store and make a \$5 purchase. I hand the clerk \$10, expecting \$5 in change. But the clerk is tired and somehow thinks I gave her \$20, so she offers me \$15 in change. I now have the power to make a \$10 gain and get away with it. By the time she figures out her register is short \$10, I will be long gone and forgotten. I can get away with this act without arousing suspicion.

The eighth commandment calls me to restrain myself and to exercise my power to protect the rights of the cashier and store, even though I can exploit them without their detecting it. Ten Commandment morality thus centers on how I use my power when I can get away with something. It calls me to voluntarily self-restrict the use of my power to protect the God-given rights possessed by others. Thinking about how I need to restrain my use of power to protect others' God-given rights *is* something I can meditate on day and night and is an exercise I can delight in! There are always new nuances as to how I am to self-restrain my use of power into unselfish expressions. But what does this have

to do with the character of God?

In Philippians 2:5-8, Paul depicts Christ as being fully God, yet who voluntarily relinquished the exercise of His rights and powers as God. He “emptied himself” (vs. 7, NRSV) of His divine privileges to function as a servant and to die on the cross. Michael Gorman rightly argues that the logic of the passage is that Christ emptied Himself *because* He is God. God is self-sacrificial, self-emptying in character, and for Paul the incarnation of Christ and His death on the cross proved this.

Paul takes this principle that Christ self-emptied *because* He is God and applies the same logic to the Corinthians over food offered to idols (1 Cor. 8-10). Because those who are “strong” see no problem with eating, they are called to self-restrict and voluntarily refrain from eating in order to avoid causing the weaker brother to stumble. In the middle of this application of the emptying principle, Paul presents himself as an exemplar of this ethical ethos (1 Corinthians 9), using the same logical structure there as in Philippians 2.

Paul asserts that he has the right to be paid full-time for his ministerial work. But because Paul is an apostle, he chooses to make no use of his rights (1 Cor. 9:12, 15) in order not to hinder the gospel. As Paul has chosen not to exercise his power to enforce his rights to a salary, so the strong are not to use their personal power to exercise their rights in a way that damages the weaker brother.

The moral DNA of Philippians 2:5-8 and 1 Corinthians 9 is the same as the moral DNA of the Decalogue! The law indeed is a transcript of God’s character, teaching the same principle of voluntarily laying aside personal rights to bless and nurture others.

After a lively discussion of the PP model in class one day, a young man came to my office, his brow deeply furrowed, his spirit subdued yet agitated as he mulled over the meaning of the

Decalogue. Haltingly, he asked several clarifying questions, followed by a long, pregnant pause as he continued thinking.

Then he quietly exclaimed, "If I take this seriously, I will have to become a different man by the time I get back to the dorm!" This opened the opportunity to introduce him to new birth in Christ as the basis for living the self-emptying life, and I saw in a new and refreshing way the truth of David's words: "The law of the Lord is perfect, reviving the soul" (Ps. 19:7).

## NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations in this column are quoted from the *English Standard Version of the Bible*.

2. *Selected Messages*, Book 2, p. 106.

3. Michael J. Gorman. *Inhabiting the Cruciform God: Kenosis, Justification, and Theosis in Paul's Narrative Soteriology* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2009), pp. 22-32.

4. Ibid.