

Should the Ten Commandments be at the Courthouse?

The media has been replete with issues of Church and State since the American Civil Liberties Union (ALCU) has recently taken legal steps to remove monuments that contain the Ten Commandments from courthouses across the country. Christians have taken to the steps of courthouses in an effort to let their legislators know that they want their monuments to the Ten Commandments to remain. The idea behind this political activism is that the United States is a Christian nation that was founded upon the principles of Scripture. Courthouses, therefore, should be allowed to post monuments to the Ten Commandments. What might come as a surprise, however, is that this idea and subsequent conclusion are contrary to Scripture. The idea that monuments of the Ten Commandments should be displayed in courthouses is built upon a misconception of what constitutes a Christian nation and a misunderstanding of key biblical doctrines.

First, any and all Christians should seriously challenge the idea that the United States is a Christian nation. Yes, the United States gives mention to “God” in some of its foundational documents. The Declaration of Independence speaks of “nature’s God,” and of course, who can forget one of its most famous lines: “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.” We also find the phrase, “In God We Trust,” inscribed and written across our currency. And, yes, there were undoubtedly many godly Christians who participated in the founding of the United States. In the end, however, these facts are but fool’s gold.

We do not worship a generic ‘God.’ We worship the one and only God, Creator of heaven and earth, who is supremely revealed in his Son, Jesus Christ. Why do we call a nation ‘Christian’ when nowhere in our founding documents do we find the name of Christ or even a pencil shaving from the great oak of Scripture quoted? On the plain of history there is only one nation that can lay claim to the title of being a “Christian nation,” and that is Old Testament Israel. Old Testament Israel could lay claim to this title because it pointed to the person and work of Christ and this was not by the will of man but by God’s sovereign election. The United States, no matter how many Christians participated in its founding, was not ordained or commissioned by God for any special redemptive historical task. In the eyes of God, the United States is no different than Bulgaria, Iraq, or China. Now, even though this data is important, it pales in comparison to the theological errors involved in thinking that the Ten Commandments should be displayed in a courthouse. What theological areas are involved?

The first error involves the doctrine of Scripture. I must challenge the idea that Alabama State Supreme Court Chief Justice Roy Moore posted the Ten Commandments in a courthouse. The stone monument that Justice Moore constructed only had excerpts from the Ten Commandments. For example, the monument omits the prologue: “And God spoke all these words, saying, ‘I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery’” (Exo. 20.1). Though Moses records all of the words of the Lord, the monument does not. The monument has removed the all important historical referent to God’s redemption of the Israelites from Egypt. Similarly the

monument cuts the fourth commandment short: “Remember the Sabbath day to keep it holy.” The monument excises the rest of the commandment, which states: “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, you, or your son, or your daughter, your male servant, or your female servant, or your livestock, or the sojourner who is within your gates” (Exo. 20.9-11). The Ten Commandments are incomplete on Justice Moore’s monument.

When congregations read the Law in corporate worship they do not typically excise large portions, or at least they should not. Some might think that this is scholastic hairsplitting, but these are significant omissions that contain key doctrinal truths. By omitting the prologue to the Ten Commandments we lose important historical, contextual, and typological information. We do not worship generic God but the God of Israel, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, who, just as he delivered Israel from bondage through his chosen servant Moses, will deliver his chosen people from bondage to sin and death through his only Son, Jesus Christ. What does it mean to ‘remember the Sabbath day to keep it holy’? Within the fourth commandment there is the important aspect of refraining from work as well as the connection to God’s creation work week. We do not labor to enter God’s Sabbath rest but enter it by grace through faith alone in Christ alone. Just as God created the heavens and earth by his Word, Jesus Christ, he is now creating the new heavens and earth by the ministry of his Son, his life, death, and resurrection.

The second error involves the doctrine of the Church. We all agree that the Ten Commandments are God’s special revelation. General revelation, the knowledge of God that is revealed through nature, is available to all men. Special revelation is now available only through God’s Word. Now, we must ask ourselves, To whom has God given the task of propagating his special revelation? To the Church or State? To whom has God given the keys of the kingdom? To the Church or State? The answer, of course, to both of these questions is, the Church. It is the Church that heralds special revelation, Law and Gospel, to the world. God has given the keys of the kingdom to the Church. In this regard, the Westminster Confession states: ‘Civil magistrates may not assume to themselves the administration of the Word and Sacraments; or the power of the keys of the kingdom of heaven’ (23.3). What many do not realize is that God has given the Church the sword of the Spirit (Heb. 4.12) and the State the sword of steel (Rom. 13.1ff). It is the State’s responsibility to punish evil doers with the sword of steel. It is the Church’s responsibility to wield the sword of the Spirit and bring the Law and Gospel to bear against men’s souls. This line of demarcation becomes much more evident when we take a closer look at the Ten Commandments.

Speaking generally, the first four commandments deal with matters of ‘religion’—the command to worship God, the prohibition against polytheistic worship, idolatry, and the observance of the Sabbath. Old Testament Israel was given the right to enforce these commands even with the death penalty because Israel typifies the kingdom of heaven. The idolater and the one who labored on the Sabbath could be punished with death because it foreshadowed the eternal death that the idolater or one who tries to merit God’s grace will suffer on the Day of Judgment. It is not the responsibility of the State to enforce this aspect of the will of God. The government cannot imprison people who refuse

to worship God. The sword of the State is impotent to change the heart of man. The sword of the Spirit, however, can change the recalcitrant heart. Moreover, the Church through church discipline wields the sword of the Spirit against those who violate the first four commandments. God has ordained the functions of the Church and the State. Christians should not attempt to make the State perform functions that are reserved alone for the Church.

There are undoubtedly many godly Christians who were upset by the recent Federal ruling to remove the Ten Commandments from the Alabama State Courthouse. Yet, these well-intentioned Christians should have taken the doctrines of Scripture and the Church into consideration. Additionally, they have bought into the misconception that the United States was or is a Christian nation. Christians of this nation have confused the responsibilities of the Church and State. Why did droves of Christians flock to Alabama to protest the removal of the monument of the Ten Commandments? How many of those same Christians read the Law of God in gathered corporate worship on a regular basis? Why do they protest the removal of the Ten Commandments from a government building, an edifice of the State, an institution that has no mandate to propagate God's special revelation, and yet remain silent when Churches across this nation, who have been given the mandate to propagate God's Law and Gospel, have removed the Ten Commandments from their midst? Is it any wonder that the government becomes more hostile to the things of Christ on a daily basis when the Church fails to embrace its divine calling? Let the State punish the wicked with the sword of steel. Let the Church wield the far more powerful sword of the Spirit, Law and Gospel. Let us not settle for the fool's gold of a generic God and a truncated version of the Law of God inscribed upon a stone. Rather, let us pray that the Church would herald the Law and Gospel of Christ and that God would inscribe the Law upon the hearts of men.

As a result of this legal battle over the monument many believe they have lost much ground. In actuality, the loss is far greater than most realize. Justice Moore was removed from office for disobeying the order of a federal judge to remove the monument. The true loss was not in the removal of the monument but in the removal of Justice Moore. Justice Moore has the Law of God inscribed upon his heart and brought it to bear in his judicial rulings as the Chief Justice of the Alabama State Supreme Court. His opportunities to bring the Law of God to bear in rulings as a civil magistrate were far greater than the power of any stone monument. So, if you ask, Should the Ten Commandments be at the Courthouse? The answer is both, Yes and No. No, the State should not propagate God's special revelation—that is mandate of the Church. Yes, Christians, no matter where God calls them to serve, should be light in a dark place.