

# The Ten Commandments: Divine or Cultural? Universal or Tribal?

Exodus 20:1-17  
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

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March 15, 2009

I have long tended to **categorize sermons** in the following way: Some come at a topic or a passage of Scripture primarily from a teaching perspective, some are meant to provide inspiration, some are primarily pastoral in nature, others more prophetic. Therefore, some are comforting while others are meant to challenge. And some are quite personal, while others are more academic.

There is, of course, often a mix of several of these elements in any given sermon, not to mention that one person may categorize a particular sermon one way, and another person in a different way.

There's another category, however, that I haven't mentioned yet, primarily because it's one that I use very, very sparingly. I call this category: **The Heretical Sermon**. These are sermons that not only challenge traditionally held beliefs, norms and conventional wisdom, but tend to turn them completely upside down and inside out, and all but toss tradition completely out the window.

Perhaps you picked up the fact that this may be one of those types of sermon based simply on its title: The Ten Commandments: Divine or Cultural? Universal or Tribal?

But before I completely step off into the abyss and you report me to the Presbytery, let me begin by talking about the issue of rules. Let me ask you some similar questions that I asked of the children of the church a few moments ago.

Did you have a lot of rules to follow in your home when you were growing up? Which rules do you remember best? Do you still follow them? Who made the rules in your household when you were growing up? Who makes them in your life now?

Let me also ask, What's your stance when it comes to following rules? Do you tend to follow them diligently, bend them occasionally to suit your needs, or break them regularly and make your own rules?

What about the rules we encounter in the Bible? There are thousands, by the way. But more specifically, what about those rules we call the **Ten Commandments**? Any possibility of bending or even disregarding those? Written thousands of years ago for a relatively small tribe in the ancient Middle East, do they even still apply to us today?

In other words, and for some this may qualify as the 'heretical' part, **are the laws we call Ten Commandments universal in nature – meant to apply to all people in all times and places – or, should they be seen primarily as ancient tribal laws that applied to that particular band of ancient Israelites who had recently left a life of captivity in Egypt?**

Well, you may (or may not) be surprised to learn that some progressive biblical scholars believe that the laws given to the nation of Israel do *not* apply specifically as written to Christians and the Christian church. See what kind of reaction you get when you tell that to the self-professed Christian lawmakers who currently want to erect a Ten Commandments monument on the State Capital grounds in Oklahoma City.

Let's look at this issue from a couple of different perspectives. First, I would suggest that **the Old Testament does not cease to contain meaning for us today just because it may or may not be specifically applied to the Christian church.** For yes, murder, stealing, bearing false witness, etc. are still rightfully considered morally wrong in the 21st Century.

But again, do the Ten Commandments apply "as written." In other words, were they written with a more specific intention in mind that dealt with the culture in which they were written? Many would interpret that question itself as heresy. But it brings up a very important issue.

What is the difference between the conventional wisdom of society as a whole (the rules "everybody knows" and are expected to follow) and the subversive, alternative wisdom of an individual whose words and actions go against the grain – a person such as Jesus, for example. Yikes, more heresy? Not according to the New Testament.

**It is this subversive, alternative wisdom that at times led Jesus to act and make statements that seemed so contrary to the political and religious rules in his day.** In today's gospel lesson we heard the familiar story of Jesus "cleansing the temple," overturning the tables of the moneychangers. In reality, however, selling animals so that people could make sacrifices was perfectly legal, in fact, it was required. It was Jesus who was breaking the rules of conventional wisdom!

In the past century, others that have worked to overturn conventional wisdom have included such leaders as Gandhi and Martin Luther King - both very subversive to their dominant culture and system.

There is another person who has spent his career offering alternatives to the conventional wisdom of church tradition in our day. Many of you may know his name, and may have read some of his books. He is the now-retired Episcopal Bishop of Newark, **John Shelby Spong**. I've had the honor of hearing him speak in person.

Called a heretic by some, Spong has written books with titles like: *Rescuing the Bible from Fundamentalism; Why Christianity Must Change or Die; A New Christianity For A New World;* and his provocatively entitled 2005 book, *The Sins of Scripture: Exposing the Bible's Texts of Hate to Reveal the God of*

Love. Let's just say that everything that most Christians hold near and dear to their heart is open game in the hands of Bishop Spong.

I'd like to share a bit of subversive, alternative wisdom with you this morning, using Bishop Spong's words from *Why Christianity Must Change or Die*, concerning the Ten Commandments. Spong begins by informing us that the folklore of every ancient people contains a narrative that purports to record the moment when that nation received the laws by which its tribal life was organized. These laws were almost invariably said to have been dictated by, or in some way received from, the divine hand.

We are most familiar with the Jewish version of this tradition. It is said to have occurred on Mount Sinai while the Jews were wandering in the wilderness toward their promised land, and it resulted in the divine gift of the Torah – the “Law,” the first five books of the Hebrew Bible, that we call the Old Testament. Included in the Torah are the Ten Commandments.

I'm sure we all have ingrained in our heads the 1956 Cecil B. DeMille movie classic, *The Ten Commandments*, where Moses climbs a mountain, hears the voice of God, and watches the very finger of God become a fiery divine drill that carves Hebrew letters into stone tablets.

This film captured accurately the primitive assumptions about the sacredness of the laws by which the Israelites lived. But, quoting Spong:

This mythology of a divine source of ethics enforced by the all-seeing God, however, has been revealed by the ancient codes themselves to be utter nonsense. A careful study of these codes reveals nothing less than the tribal prejudices, stereotypes, and limited knowledge of the people who created them.

How do you like that statement for heretical subversive wisdom? Spong continues:

The first clue in the Bible to the human rather than divine origin of these rules is seen in the fact that they were regularly violated when dealing with people outside the Jewish world.

For instance, The Ten Commandments state, “You shall not kill,” or literally, “You shall do no murder.” But Joshua was said to have murdered five captured Canaanite kings (Josh. 10:22-27). David killed his “tens of thousands.” God was pictured as ordering Israel to go to war against two nations and, in those two wars, to kill “every man, woman, and child” of their enemies.

Even the God of the Bible did not appear to take the commandment not to kill seriously when dealing with the non-Jewish world.

Spong declares, "A universal or divine code these laws were not."

These laws also reflected the patriarchal mentality present among ancient people in that they assumed that a woman was the property of a man. This sexist attitude is overtly present in the last commandment, "You shall not covet," and by implication it is present in the commandment "You shall not commit adultery."

The full text of that final commandment says, "You shall not covet your neighbor's house. You shall not covet your neighbor's wife, nor his manservant, nor his maidservant, nor his ox, nor his donkey, nor anything that is your neighbor's (Exod. 20:17). [This, plain and simple, meant that a person should not covet or desire that which is the property of a neighbor.]

Please note there is no written prohibition anywhere in the Torah against coveting your neighbor's husband! This is not an oversight. The reason for this was that a husband was not property, but a wife was.

The seventh commandment, against adultery, was enjoined in a culture that practiced polygamy, not monogamy. A man could possess as many women as he could afford. In its primary, literal meaning, this commandment simply prohibited a man from violating the woman who was the property or possession of another man.

If a Jewish man had a sexual liaison with an unmarried woman, it was not considered adultery. It was rather a crime against the property of her father, because he would be unable to collect a proper "bride price" for a daughter who was now considered "damaged goods." [Old Testament] biblical adultery was about property and economics [not the faithfulness and fidelity between spouses]!

Spong forcefully comments, **"A code of law that treats human beings as if they are property needs to be pronounced immoral at once and forthwith abandoned. Parts of the Ten Commandments are surely in this category."**

We don't have time, unfortunately, to get into the other commandments, like making graven images (how many of you ever wear a cross - oops). And what do the Ten Commandments have to say about modern-day situations? Is abortion murder? Always, never, sometimes? Some say that even practicing

birth control is murder; or destroying unused embryos for stem cell research. But what about massive starvation caused by overpopulation?

**Ethics, including biblical ethics, is *not* always black and white!** As Spong concludes, "How inadequate the ancient code we call the Ten Commandments has become amid the vagaries of ethical concerns today. The ethical debate today is so complex, and the ancient religious codes are not capable of shedding light on that complexity."

Well, the purpose of today's sermon was to get us to focus not so much on whether or not we should follow the rules, but rather look at where those rules might have come from in the first place.

So consider this: The Ten Commandments: Divine or Cultural? Universal or Tribal? I'll leave you to ponder the implications, and whether what you have heard this morning is heretical or not.

Amen.

Resources:

Bishop John Shelby Spong, *Why Christianity Must Change or Die: A Bishop Speaks to Believers in Exile*, 1998, Harper Collins Publishers.