

Lecture 11 – The Universal Norms of Love (Part III)

“I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery. ...” Exodus 20:2ff. (NIV)

“Do I say this merely from a human point of view? Doesn’t the Law say the same thing? For it is written in the Law of Moses: ‘Do not muzzle an ox while it is treading out the grain.’ Is it about oxen that God is concerned? Surely he says this for us, doesn’t he? Yes, this was written for us, because when the plowman plows and the thresher threshes, they ought to do so in the hope of sharing in the harvest.” I Corinthians 9:8-10 (NIV)

Key Terms

Restraint, pedagogical (tutorial), guide, convict

Objectives

- *List at least 4 uses of the moral law.
- *Explain the history of the moral law’s secular use.
- *Identify the ground of the moral law.

The Universal Norms of Love (Part III)

[Review of prior lesson]

I. The Law

C. The use of the moral law

1. Classification of the moral law in the 16th century
 - a. Civil—restrain
 - b. Pedagogical—convict
 - c. Third use of the law—guide
2. The Moral Law in the *Westminster Confession of Faith*
 - a. The use of the Law
 - b. For all men ...
 - 1) to inform/humble
 - c. For the unregenerate ...
 - 1) to awaken/drive to Christ
 - d. For the regenerate ...
 - 1) to show us how much we are bound to Christ/provoke us to thankfulness

Questions & Answers

Discussion of the 10 Commandments in church history

The Ten Commandments in the Church

A. Hellenistic Judaism

The use of the Ten Commandments for the organization of ethics predates its Christian expression. Philo of Alexandria (c. 20 B.C. - c. A.D. 50), the most outstanding representative of Hellenistic Judaism at the time of Christ, provided for his Greek-speaking audience a commentary on the Pentateuch that included a treatise on the Decalogue, followed by four books on the “special laws” arranged under the Ten

Commandments as “summary heads.”

Note: Both Philo and Josephus take Exod. 20:2-3 together as the first commandment (as does also Calvin); the standard Jewish enumeration takes vs. 2 as the first and vv. 3-6 as the second commandment.

Philo is notable also for his division of the Decalogue into two groups dealing respectively with the service of God and human justice. “The superior set of five ... enactments begins with God the Father and Maker of all, and ends with parents who copy His nature by begetting particular persons. The other set of five contains all the prohibitions, namely adultery, murder, theft, false witness, covetousness or lust.” Only those who practice both tables are whole in virtue, being both lovers of God (*philotheoi*) and lovers of humankind (*philanthrōpoi*).

B. The Early Church

1. The Didache (c. A.D. 100?)

Also called “The Teaching of the Apostles” or “The Teaching of the Twelve Apostles.” The date and origin are uncertain. It is referred to by patristic writers but was lost until the 1875 discovery of a manuscript dated 1056. Thought by some scholars to be derived from an earlier Jewish presentation of “The Two Ways.” Two parts: ethical (§§1-6) and ecclesiastical (§§7-16).

The opening paragraph expounds the summary of the law in light of the Sermon on the Mount. “The way of life is this. First of all, thou shalt love the God that made thee; secondly, thy neighbor as thyself. And all things whatsoever though wouldst not have befall thyself, neither do thou unto another.” The second paragraph quotes and expands on the Decalogue:

And this is the second commandment of the teaching. Thou shalt do no murder, thou shalt not commit adultery, thou shalt not corrupt boys, thou shalt not commit fornication, thou shalt not steal, thou shalt not deal in magic, thou shalt do no sorcery, thou shalt not murder a child by abortion nor kill them when born, thou shalt not covet thy neighbour’s goods, thou shalt not perjure thyself, thou shalt not bear false witness, thou shalt not speak evil, thou shalt not cherish a grudge, thou shalt not be double-minded nor double-tongued; for the double tongue is a snare of death. Thy word shall not be false or empty, but fulfilled by action. Thou shalt not be avaricious nor a plunderer nor a hypocrite nor ill-tempered nor proud. Thou shalt not entertain an evil design against thy neighbour. Thou shalt not hate any man, but some thou shalt reprove, and for others thou shalt pray, and others though shalt love more than thy life.

The third paragraph treats several root sins: anger, envy, lust, magic, lying, avarice, vainglory, murmuring.

2. Irenaeus (c. 130 - c. 200)

Irenaeus is representative of the post-apostolic fathers. He defends the permanence of the Ten Commandments in *Against Heresies* (4, 15, 1). They are “natural precepts” which God gave humanity from the beginning. The patriarchs had the power of the Decalogue (*virtus decalogi*) written in their hearts before Sinai. In his *Demonstration of the Apostolic Preaching*, ch. 86-96, Irenaeus proposed the Decalogue for the early stage of Christian instruction, followed by the Sermon on the Mount as Christians mature in their faith and obedience.

3. Cyril of Jerusalem (c. 315-386)

Cyril's Lenten *Catecheses*, preparatory for baptism on Holy Saturday, expounded the Creed and the Lord's Prayer. Moral instructions were included, but not as an exposition of the Ten Commandments.

4. Augustine (354-430)

As the catechumenate developed in the early church, those undergoing progressive instruction in the Christian faith were divided into four groups: (1) *accedentes* = candidates for instruction in the faith; (2) *catechumeni* = candidates for baptism; (3) *competentes* = those approved for baptism; (4) *neophyti* = the newly baptized.

Augustine's *First Catechetical Instruction* (c. 405) is the only surviving work dealing with the *accedentes*, consisting of pagans and heretics (covenant children received instruction in the home). The instruction is in the form of narrative (creation-fall-redemption). It was given in a single lesson, after which the candidate is asked whether he believes these things and desires to observe them. In ¶41 Augustine provides this summary of Christian practice:

[Jesus] sent to [his disciples] the Holy Spirit (for so He had promised), that through the love poured forth in their hearts by Him, they might be able to fulfill the law not only without its being a burden but even with delight. Now this law was given to the Jews in Ten Commandments, which they call the Decalogue. And these again are reduced to two, namely, that we should love God with our whole heart, and with our whole soul, and with our whole mind; and that we should love our neighbor as ourselves. For that on these two commandments depend the whole law and the Prophets the Lord Himself has both said in the Gospel and made manifest by his own example.

Augustine divided the "tables" of the law 1-3 (the third being the sabbath) and 4-10 (the ninth and tenth being covetousness). *Confessions*, 8.16; cf. *Sermon* 9. Augustine provided an exposition of the Sermon on the Mount but did not expound the Decalogue as such. (For Augustine's bipartite analysis of the law of Moses, see *Biblical Christian Ethics*, 110-11.)

As Augustine entered the last decade of his life, he wrote a small treatise in response to the request of a certain lay Christian, Laurentius, who wanted a portable handbook containing the answers to some key questions of apologetics. Augustine interprets the request as a desire for a summary of the true wisdom which consists in the service of God. Because to say, "God is to be served in faith, hope, and love," would be too brief an answer even for Laurentius, Augustine wrote an exposition of faith, hope, and love. He gave it the Greek title *Enchiridion* (handbook), intending it to function as a comprehensive summary of the Christian way of life. Having spent 113 sections expounding the Creed, Augustine wraps it up with three on hope, the substance of which is contained in the Lord's Prayer, and five on love, which fulfills the law by grace and the power of the Holy Spirit.

5. Gregory the Great (c. 540-604)

Pope from 590 and last of the acclaimed Western "doctors of the church." One of the highlights of his papacy was the conversion of England. Gregory's *Moralia*, ch. 18 of which depreciated the Decalogue, has been described as "a patchwork of moral teaching organized into seven virtues and seven vices" (Bast, 34). (The earliest known list of seven capital sins appears in the apocryphal *Testament of the Twelve Patriarchs*, dated around 100 B.C.)

C. The Medieval Church

Following the division of the church East and West in 1054, there was a revival of interest in the Decalogue among Western theologians. The *Institutiones* of Hugh of St. Victor (1096-1141) gave a brief exposition of each commandment and love as the fulfillment of the law (cf. Augustine). Hugh directly influenced Peter Lombard (1100-1160), whose inclusion of a section on the Decalogue in the *Sentences*, the prime textbook of systematic theology in the Middle Ages, was a first.

1. Alexander of Hales (c. 1170-1245)

Professor at the University of Paris, 1222-1241. Introduced commentary on Lombard's *Sentences*, replacing traditional commentary on the Scriptures. Distinguished between natural law, moral, and judicial precepts in the Mosaic law, and taught that the Decalogue is necessary for salvation, "the first theologian to formally propose this teaching" (Slattery, 171). Alexander also taught that "just as all the virtues are included in the 'eight virtues,' in the same way, all commandments are included in the Decalogue" (172).

Summa Theologica (Venice, 1475), 4 vols. May be a later compilation of Alexander and other Franciscan authors. Lengthy (158 pp.) exposition of the Decalogue, followed by a short (10 pp.) catechesis: *Brevis explanatio praeceptorum ad instructionem simplicium*.

2. Thomas Aquinas (c. 1225-1274)

Aquinas provides a complete account of Christian ethics, including a detailed exposition of the Decalogue, in his masterful *Summa Theologicae*, "the highest achievement of medieval theological systematization and the accepted basis of modern R[oman] C[atholic] theology" (ODCC). Augustine's moral/symbolical distinction gave way to Aquinas's more precise tripartite analysis. See *Biblical Christian Ethics*, pp. 111-12. Both Aquinas and Bonaventure produced model sermons on the Decalogue.

3. The Fourth Lateran Council (1215)

Convened by Pope Innocent III, the Council's twenty-first canon, known by its incipit *Omnis utriusque sexus*, has been called "the most important legislative act in the history of the Church" (Braswell, 25).

Omnis utriusque sexus fidelis ... All the faithful of both sexes, after they have reached the age of discretion, must confess all their sins at least once a year, to their own parish priest, and perform to the best of their abilities the penance imposed, reverently receiving the sacrament of the Eucharist at least on Easter Sunday ... Otherwise they shall be cut off from the Church during their lifetime and shall be without a Christian burial in death (trans. Braswell, 26).

4. The Lay Folks' Catechism (1357)

Archbishop John Peckham of Canterbury in 1281 bound the English clergy to teach "four times a year, on one or more holy-days," the articles of faith, the commandments of the Decalogue, the two precepts of the Gospel, the seven works of mercy, the seven capital sins ("with their progeny"), the seven principal virtues, and the seven sacraments of grace.

John Thoresby, archbishop of York (d. 1373) issued his Instruction or "Lay Folks' Catechism" in both Latin and English in 1357. Lord's Prayer, Ave Maria, Creed, Ten Commandments [expanded by Wycliffe; heads each with a rhymed couplet], the two precepts of the Gospel, the seven sacraments, the seven works of corporeal mercy [feed the hungry, give drink to the thirsty, clothe the naked, shelter the homeless, help those in prison, visit the sick, bury the dead], the seven works of spiritual mercy [teaching,

counsel, reproof, consolation, forgiveness, patience, prayer for enemies], the seven virtues, and the seven deadly sins. John Wycliffe (c. 1330-1384) issued an adaptation, expanding the exposition of the Ten Commandments and providing a rhymed version to assist the memory.

Thou schalt haue o[ne] god and no mo.
Ouyr al thyngge loue hym al-so.
And thy neghebore bothe frend and fo.

These ar the commaundementys ten
that god ghaf to alle men.
Mekyl ioy schal be to [t]hem.
that kepe wel and trewly [t]hem.

5. Jan Hus (c. 1372-1415†)

Hus begins his *Exposition of the Decalogue* by rehearsing Exodus 19, and concludes with the blessings and curses in Deut. 26 and 28. He proceeds with a well-organized plan through the two tables, freely citing Augustine and other church fathers, cross-referencing many scriptures, and addressing contemporary issues such as usury and false indulgences.

6. Jean Gerson (1363-1429)

The Ten Commandments figured prominently in the popular exposition of the Christian faith offered by Jean Gerson, chancellor of the University of Paris. His poem of ten quatrains begins:

Ung seul Dieu de tout creatour
Croyras, craindras et serviras
Sur toutes choses nuyt et jour
T'amour, force et pensée mectras.

Gerson's *A.B.C. des Simples Gens* is a list of lists without comment: the seven deadly sins (and the contrary virtues); the seven petitions of the Lord's prayer; the twelve articles of the Apostles' creed; the ten commandments; the seven virtues, the seven gifts of the Holy Spirit, the seven works of spiritual mercy; the seven works of corporal mercy; the seven holy orders; the seven sacraments; the seven beatitudes from the Sermon on the Mount, plus some other pious material on the joys of paradise and the pains of hell.

The highly influential *Opusculum tripartitum* was a Latin translation of Gerson's popular catechetical-pastoral works: *Le miroir de l'âme*; *Examen de conscience selon les péchés capitaux*; *La science d bien mourir*. "The Mirror of the Soul" is a concise exposition of the Ten Commandments.

7. Dietrich Kolde (1435-1515)

A Fruitful Mirror or Small Handbook for Christians (1470) by Franciscan Brother Dietrich von Münster. First printed catechism in German. Receiving the imprimatur of the theological faculties of Cologne and Louvain, it was reprinted nineteen times before 1500 and at least twenty-eight times afterward (Janz 8).

To be carried by Christians at all times "since it contains everything that is necessary for the well-being and salvation of the soul" (Preface). Order: Creed; Decalogue; the five commandments of the church; the seven deadly sins; the nine alien sins; the openly discussed sins and the mute sins against nature; the six

sins against the Holy Spirit; the great sins of the tongue; six conditions of forgiveness; seven signs of the state of grace; repentance, confession, and satisfaction; various devotional instructions and prayers, including the Paternoster and Ave Maria; how to die. The sacrament of penance is of central importance.

You should know that according to canon law the penance we receive from the priest is not sufficient even for the least mortal sin that we have committed. Therefore it is necessary for us to do even more penance, for example by groaning, crying out, begging help, giving alms, private mortification of the flesh, sharp clothes or belts around the body, or by disciplines, or vigils, or humbly going on pilgrimages (ch. 22).

D. The Reformation Era

1. Martin Luther (1483-1546)

“Luther’s catechisms were the product of a long and gradual development. Just as medieval works on theology failed to satisfy his religious needs, so the medieval manuals on the Ten Commandments, the Creed, the Lord’s Prayer, and the sacraments proved inadequate as textbooks on the fundamentals of Christian faith and life. It was Luther’s outstanding contribution to Protestantism that he appropriated the catechetical work of the church since apostolic times, adapted it to the needs of his own day, and produced in the Small Catechism a textbook that has served as a summary of evangelical theology for more than four centuries” (Harold Grim in Volz, 30-31).

In 1516-1517 Luther preached a series of sermons on the Ten Commandments in Wittenberg. These were published the following year, as was also his *Short Explanation of the Ten Commandments*, written as a preparative for confession. In 1520 he published his three main pastoral works as *A Short Form of the Ten Commandments, of the Creed, and of the Lord’s Prayer*. The logic of Luther’s order: conviction of need, where to find aid, how to ask for it.

A man who is sick needs first to know what his illness is and what he can and cannot do. Then he needs to know where the medicine is that can help him live the life of a well man. Third, he must desire this medicine and look for it until he finds it or have it brought to him (cited in Volz, 47).

These materials became the basis for Luther’s justly famous Small Catechism (*Der Kleine Katechismus*), first published 1529 in the form of placards or posters for display in churches, schools, and homes. The larger Deutsch Catechismus was published later the same year. In 1580 both were made official doctrine by inclusion in the Book of Concord. For Luther on the use of the law, see *Biblical Christian Ethics*, 117-118.

The parts of Luther’s Small Catechism: Ten Commandments, Apostles’ Creed, Lord’s Prayer, Baptism, Communion, and the Office of the Keys, including Confession. Sample treatments of the commandments (Augustinian order):

The First: “You shall have no other gods.”

What does this mean?

Answer: We should fear, love, and trust in God above all things.

The Fifth: “You shall not kill.”

What does this mean?

Answer: We should fear and love God, and so we should not endanger our neighbor’s life, nor

cause him any harm, but help and befriend him in every necessity of life.

2. John Calvin (1509-1564)

Institutes of the Christian Religion, 1536. The first five chapters follow the standard catechetical format: Decalogue, Creed, Lord's Prayer, Sacraments (with a fifth chapter on False Sacraments). The sixth chapter is an *apologia* in three parts: Christian Freedom, Ecclesiastical Power, Civil Government. Calvin explains his intent in an open letter to Francis I:

My purpose was solely to transmit certain rudiments by which those who are touched with any zeal for religion might be shaped to true godliness. And I undertook this labor especially for our French countrymen, very many of whom I saw to be hungering and thirsting for Christ; very few who had been imbued with even a slight knowledge of him.

Catechism, 1537 (French, *Instruction et confession de foy*); 1538 (Latin, *Catechismus, sive Christianae Religionis Institutio*). *Catechism of the Church of Geneva*, 1541 (French), 1545 (Latin). Question and answer format. Order: Concerning the Faith (creed), the Law (Decalogue), Prayer (paternoster), and the Sacraments (baptism and the Lord's supper). Total of 373 questions.

Minister. *What is the chief end of human life?*

Child. To know God.

Why do you say that?

Because He created us and placed us in this world to be glorified in us. And it is indeed right that our life, of which He Himself is the beginning, should be devoted to His glory.

What is the sovereign good of man?

The same thing.

Why do you hold that to be the sovereign good?

Because without it our condition is more miserable than that of brute beasts.

In 1555 Calvin preached sixteen sermons on the Ten Commandments as part of a nearly year-and-a-half series on the book of Deuteronomy. Two paragraphs on motivation are especially worthy of note.

“For if God only demanded his due, we should still be required to cling to him and to confine ourselves to his commandments.” But it pleased God “by his infinite goodness to enter into a common treaty...mutually binds himself to us without having to do so...enumerates that treaty article by article...chooses to be our father and savior...receives us as his flock and his inheritance.” It is as if God said, “I set aside my right. I come here to present myself to you as your guide and savior. I want to govern you. You are like my little family. And if you are satisfied with my Word, I will be your King.” Besides, the purpose is not “to take anything from you.” Rather, “I procure your well-being and your salvation” (45).

[T]he beginning of obedience, as well as its source, foundation, and root, is [the] love of God ... this love cannot exist until we have tasted the goodness of our God. For as long as we conceive of God as being opposed to us, of necessity we will flee from him. Therefore do we wish to love him? Do we wish to be reformed by being obedient to him that we might receive all of our pleasure in his service? Then we must realize that he is our Father and Savior, that he only wants to be favorable to us. Thus once we have tasted his mutual love which he

reserves for us, then we will be motivated to love him as our Father. For if this love is in us, then there will be no doubt that we will obey him and that his law will rule in our thoughts, our affections, and in all our members (76).

3. The Prayer Book Catechism (1549)

Instruction in Creed, Decalogue, Lord's Prayer as preparation for Confirmation. Thought to be the work of Alexander Nowell (c. 1507-1602).

Ques. What is your name?

Ans. N. or M.

Ques. Who gaue you this name?

Ans. My Godfathers and Godmothers in my Baptisme; wherein I was made a member of Christe, the childe of God, and inheritour of the kingdome of heauen.

Following recitation of the Ten Commandments, two summary questions are asked concerning their substance:

Ques. What is thy duetie towardes god?

Ans. My duetie towardes God is, to beleue in him. To feare him. And to loue him with al my hart, with al my mind, with al my soule, and with all my strength. To wurship him. To feue him thankes. To put my whole truste in jym. To call upon him. To honor his holy name and his word, and to serue him truely all the daies of my life.

Ques. What is thy dutie towardes thy neighbour?

Ans. My duetie towardes my neighbour is, to loue hym as myselfe. And to do to al men as I would they should do to me. To loue, honour, and surroure my father and mother. To honour and obdy the kyng and his ministers. To submitte myselfe to all my gouernours, teachers, spirituall pastours, and maisters. To ordre myselfe lowlye and reuerentelye to al my betters. To hurte no bodie by woord nor dede. To bee true and iust in al my dealing. To beare no malice nor hatred in my heart. To kepe my handes from picking and stealing, and my tongue from euill speaking, liyng, and slaundring. To kepe my bodie in temperaunce, sobreness, and chastitie. Not to couet nor desire other mennes goodes. But learne and laboure truely to geate my owne liuing, and to doe my duetie in that state of life: unto which it shal please God to cal me.

The child is then reminded that “thou arte not hable to do these thinges of thyself, nor to walke in the comaundementes of God and to serue him, without his speciall grace, which thou muste learne at all times to cal for by diligent prayer.” This leads to recitation and explanation of the Lord's Prayer.

The emphasis on the Decalogue and the Reformed understanding of the second commandment had a dramatic effect on interior of Anglican churches. They were given preeminence “by being painted up, in all their admonitory fulness, above the denuded altars of English churches, dramatically replacing the Host, lights, images, and sacramental paraphernalia of the old regime” (Bossy, 228).

4. The Heidelberg Catechism (1563)

1. What is your only comfort in life and in death?

That I am not my own but belong—body and soul, in life and in death—to my faithful Savior

Jesus Christ. He has fully paid for all my sins with his precious blood, and has set me free from the tyranny of the devil. He also watches over me in such a way that not a hair can fall from my head without the will of my Father in heaven: in fact, all things must work together for my salvation.

2. *What must you know to live and die in the joy of this comfort?*

Three things: first, how great my sin and misery are; second, how I am set free from all my sins and misery; third, how I am to thank God for such deliverance.

We learn our misery from the law of God, which requires us to love God and our neighbor, neither of which we are able to live up to perfectly because of our natural tendency to the opposite; as a result, we are liable to eternal punishment (qq. 3-11). Deliverance through faith in Christ, the mediator, expressed in the articles of the Creed (qq. 12-64) and confirmed and maintained through the sacraments (baptism and the Lord's Supper) and the keys (preaching and discipline). Gratitude is expressed in good works (qq. 32-115) and prayer (qq. 116-119).

105. *What is God's will for us in the sixth commandment?*

I am not to belittle, insult, hate, or kill my neighbor—not by my thoughts, my words, my look or gesture, and certainly not by actual deeds—and I am not to be party to this in others; rather, I am to put away all desire for revenge. I am not to harm or recklessly endanger myself either. Prevention of murder is also why government is armed with the sword.

106. *Does this commandment refer only to killing?*

By forbidding murder God teaches us that he hates the root of murder: envy, hatred, anger, vindictiveness.

107. *Is it enough then that we do not kill our neighbor in any such way?*

No. By condemning envy, hatred, and anger God tells us to love our neighbor as ourselves, to be patient, peace-loving, gentle, merciful, and friendly to him, to protect him from harm as much as we can, and to do good even to our enemies.

5. Peter Canisius (1521-1597)

Summa Doctrinae Christianae or *Catechismus Major* (1554). Over 130 subsequent editions (ODCC). English translation: *Ane Catechisme or Schort Instruction of Christian Religion* (Paris. 1588). Wisdom consists of faith, hope, and charity (cf. Augustine). Question and answer format. Five chapters: I. Creed. II. The Lord's Prayer and Hail Mary. III. The Decalogue and the five commandments of the church. IV. The seven sacraments. V. "Christian Justice," a treatise on the doctrine of sin and of good works (fasting, prayer, works of mercy).

6. The Roman Catechism (1566)

Formal title: *Catechism of the Council of Trent for Parish Priests*. The official catechism of the Roman Catholic church, 1566-1994. Four parts: Creed, Sacraments, Ten Commandments, Lord's Prayer. Compendium of church teaching for priests to use in instructing the faithful.

7. The Westminster standards (1647)

The Westminster Assembly (1643-1647). See note on the Solemn League and Covenant (1643) in *BCE*, 184. A parliamentary commission rather than an ecclesiastical synod. All chief parties among English

Protestants included—presbyterians, independents, Episcopalians, Erastians. Six non-voting Scottish commissioners.

The Confession of Faith. Ch. 7, Of God's Covenant with Man, distinguishes between the covenant of works, conditioned on "perfect and personal obedience," and the covenant of grace, which requires only faith in Christ through the gift of the Holy Spirit (cf. Augustine). Ch. 16, Of Good Works, "done in obedience to God's commandments, are the fruits and evidences of a true and lively faith." Ch. 19, Of the Law of God, affirms the tripartite analysis of the law of Moses (cf. Aquinas) and the use of the law for true believers. Ch. 20, Of Christian Liberty and Liberty of Conscience (cf. *BCE*, 40).

The Shorter Catechism. Qq. 1-3 establish purpose, norm, and content of catechesis. No exposition of the Apostles' Creed, though it was published at the end of the first edition. The Lord's Prayer follows the Ten Commandments as part of the section on the means of grace (word, sacraments, prayer).

The Larger Catechism. Qq. 94-97, on the use of the law. Q. 99 asks, "What rules are to be observed for the right understanding of the ten commandments?" Eight are specified. Q. 151 asks, "What are those aggravations that make some sins more heinous than others?" Q. 152 implicitly rejects the distinction between mortal and venial sins. Cf. Confession, 15.4.

E. The Ten Commandments and Civil Society

1. Public morality in medieval Europe

"[T]he new weight placed on the Ten Commandments raised the stakes for magistrates by making it possible to apply the lessons of Israel's salvation history to the local territory: neglect of God's Law ... held dire political consequences" (Bast, 172-73). "[S]in endangers the common good, and ... magistrates must therefore prevent it" (175). As Jan Hus exhorted: "Kings and princes, counts, knights and lords, should always see that the Commandments of God are not broken" (177).

A few weeks after hearing a sermon on the Ten Commandments in 1452, Duke Wilhelm of Saxony issued an ordinance for the reform of public morality, mandating officials to enforce the following provisions:

1. Labor to cease on Sundays, feasts and festivals.
2. Every able person to attend Mass and Sermon every Sunday.
3. All gambling forbidden; paraphernalia to be confiscated and burned.
4. Drunkards subject to fine or imprisonment.
5. Idlers no longer tolerated.
6. "Unmarried, cohabiting couples in the cities and villages have fourteen days to desist, or to leave the land; thereafter, any discovered still living in sin will be imprisoned."
7. "Usury and the deception of the marketplace must be stopped. Guilty parties will be executed, and their goods confiscated."
8. "Henceforth, condemned criminals will be permitted to make confession and receive the sacrament ... before their execution."
9. "The prices of bread, beer, meat and other things necessary for the common good will be standardized throughout the land, and any who charge differently will be punished." Cited in Bass, 182-83.

2. The Decalogue in a divided Christendom

The application of “Honour your father and your mother” to civil authorities in the Reformation era was overly paternalistic. Plato had referred to magistrates as “guardians of the law.” “By 1534, Melancthon was developing in print the ideas that would come to define the magistrate as the ‘Guardian of the Two Tables’ of the Decalogue ... and the ‘foremost member of the Church’” (Bast, 205). Christian magistrates were to be persons of exemplary virtue “who would fight back against the forces of disorder by imposing discipline and promoting true religion” (Bast, 236). Mixed results. Bucer’s experience in Strasbourg has a familiar ring.

Already in 1544, a coalition of the city pastors was establishing a system of “Christian fellowships,” cell groups in which lay people in select parishes voluntarily subjected themselves to pastoral discipline and fraternal correction. These efforts did not signal a loss of faith in magisterial reform so much as a loss of faith in Strasbourg’s magistrates. After two solid decades of fervent preaching and admonition, the pastors felt that their struggle to create a godly society had been stymied by indifference. ...

In the end, the Strasbourg Council not only rebuffed most of the preacher’s proposals but denied them the right to continue their fellowships....[D]isillusionment with paternal authorities was a common experience among the Protestant clergy, and it led many of them to assume they had failed. (Bast, 226).

Calvin did not propound the “Guardian of the Two Tables” doctrine in the original edition of the Institutes, but concentrated rather on the office of the magistrate to do justice and that the laws of the commonwealth “must be in conformity to that perpetual rule of love,” the key principle of which is equity, “the goal and rule and limit of all laws” (6.43, 49). “It should be clear 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 men’s hearts” (6.49). The definitive edition of the Institutes (1559) strongly affirms the Two Tables doctrine:

If Scripture did not teach that [the office of the magistrates] extends to both Tables of the Law, we could learn this from secular writers [such as Cicero]: for no one has discussed the office of magistrates, the making of laws, and the public welfare, without beginning at religion and divine worship. And thus all have confessed that 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 (4, 20, 9). [Cf. commentary on Dt 5:8-10.]

The Belgic Confession (1561): “Their office is not only to have regard unto and watch or the welfare of the civil state, but also that they protect the sacred ministry, and thus may remove and prevent all idolatry and false worship, that the kingdom of antichrist may be thus destroyed and the kingdom of Christ promoted” (Art. 36). [Deleted by the Gereformeerde Kerken in Nederland in 1905.]

The Westminster Confession (1647): It is the duty of the civil magistrate “to take order that unity and peace be preserved in the Church, that the truth of God be kept pure and entire, that all blasphemies and heresies be suppressed, all corruptions and abuses in worship and discipline prevented or reformed, and all the ordinances of God duly settled, administered, and observed” (23.3). [Deleted by the Presbyterian Church in the USA in 1788.]

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See also "The Character Education Movement," Lesson 8, regarding the Ten Commandments.