

*Magnar Kartveit: Ten commandments.  
Zhongshan University, Guangzhou (Febr. 2001) and Chinese People's University, Beijing (March 2001)*

1

## Magnar Kartveit

### **Are the Ten Commandments relevant today?**

Lecture at Zhongshan University, Guangzhou (Febr. 2001)  
and at The Chinese People's University (Renmin University of China), Beijing (March 2001)

One of the most famous texts from the Bible is the Ten Commandments. They have been used in many contexts as an expression of the ethical teaching of the Bible. Even if they have played a major role in many societies throughout history, it might seem very difficult to use them today. A number of objections have been raised against using them in the modern world. To many people, the ethics of the Old Testament is time-bound, inconsistent and relies upon concepts that are alien to us. Thus, it might seem ridiculous or even abhorrent to use this material in our modern ethical reasoning.

In this lecture, I will examine these three objections, before having a closer look at the Ten Commandments and trying to understand what they probably meant in their historical setting. It will emerge that there are some basic concepts underlying the Commandments. I will deal with the concepts upon which they rest, in relation to the Commandments themselves. There have been different attitudes through history to this phenomenon, and these attitudes will be described and evaluated. I will then give some examples of the history of interpretation of the Commandments in the New Testament and in Church history. Finally, an answer to the question in the title will be given. Are the Ten Commandments relevant? Yes and no. The problem is to find where we should place our yes's and our no's.

The lecture will explore some of the ethical values of the OT, their context in history and society and their expressions in various types of literature within the Bible. The Ten Commandments are important witnesses to these values, and we will focus on them. But cultic, narrative, liturgical, wisdom and other texts also testify to them, and this should not be forgotten when we concentrate on the Decalogue.

The Old Testament has some basic concepts about human life and dignity, about the individual and the society, about the world and conduct of life. These are brought out

in the many diverse literary expressions of the different parts of the Bible, in poems and prose alike. On closer inspection, they might prove to be a valuable contribution to modern moral reasoning.

I shall use the expression 'The Old Testament', even if several other expressions are used today, notably 'The Hebrew Bible'. There have been several attempts over the last years to create new designations that would not seem to favor one faith over another. However, the old name is still the most widely used.

The Ten Commandments are also known as the Decalogue, from the Greek translation *deka logoi* of a Hebrew phrase that literally means 'the ten words', but could be more appropriately rendered as 'the ten sayings'.

The Decalogue is found in two different places in the OT, in Ex 20 and Deut 5, but the former is best known. I quote it from the New Revised Standard Version:

'Then God spoke all these words:

I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery;

you shall have no other gods before me.

You shall not make for yourself an idol, whether in the form of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I the LORD your God am a jealous God, punishing children for the iniquity of parents, to the third and the fourth generation of those who reject me, but showing steadfast love to the thousandth generation of those who love me and keep my commandments.

You shall not make wrongful use of the name of the LORD your God, for the LORD will not acquit anyone who misuses his name.

Remember the sabbath day, and keep it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work. But the seventh day is a sabbath to the LORD your God; you shall not do any work-- you, your son or your daughter, your male or female slave, your livestock, or the alien resident in your towns. For in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but rested the seventh day; therefore the LORD blessed the sabbath day and consecrated it.

Honor your father and your mother, so that your days may be long in the land that the LORD your God is giving you.

You shall not murder.

You shall not commit adultery.

You shall not steal.

You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.

You shall not covet your neighbor's house; you shall not covet your neighbor's wife, or male or female slave, or ox, or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbor.'

In the Hebrew text, the Decalogue is addressed to males, since the grammatical forms are second person masculine, singular. This is also the form of the introduction, which is directed to the Israel that was liberated from Egypt. The first observation that we make is that the text does not have a general address; but is limited to one segment of the ancient Israelite society, the men, and then to men who considered themselves as belonging to the group that was liberated from slavery in Egypt.

The impression that this text has a particular setting is strengthened when we try to envisage the society presupposed here: the addressee is a man with a household of wife or wives and slaves and animals, and his neighbor has the same. He is competent to give evidence in court, and he has a father and mother who should be looked after. He is the person responsible for worship, and for the observation of the sabbath in his whole household. With such a large household he seems to be rather affluent and in order to give evidence in court he must have been a free man. He is – in the words of the British scholar John Barton – ‘the kind of person who had the vote in most Western democracies a century ago’<sup>1</sup>.

In the original text, the cultural and societal setting is even more conspicuous, but much of this has been lost in translations. One of the elements still visible in modern versions is the reference in the introduction to the liberation from the house of slavery in Egypt. This is expounded in the Deut-version in a special way. There, the rationale for observing the sabbath is not that God rested on the seventh day and blessed and consecrated it, but that Israel had themselves been slaves in Egypt. The focus of the sabbath-commandment in Deut is therefore not the sabbath in general, but that the slaves

be exempt from work on this day. In the Ex-text the attention is turned to the principle of observing the sabbath, as a consequence of God's creation in six days and his sanctification of the seventh. In the Decalogue of Deut, however, the observation of the sabbath is taken for granted, but the addressee should keep the holiness of the sabbath in particular by having the rest of the slaves in mind. Israel had themselves been slaves in Egypt, and now the time had come to remember this in the observation of the sabbath rest for everyone in the household. The position of the addressee as an employer is therefore expressed more directly there.

Only such a brief look at the Decalogue reveals that it seems removed from our world and immersed in its own times and conditions. It is time-bound. This objection is evidently correct.

But there is more about the Ten Commandments in their OT setting that calls upon a comment. There seems to be inconsistency in the ethical teaching of the OT. On the one hand murder is forbidden in the Decalogue, but we all know that the death penalty was a part of the OT legislation. Take Ex 21:15-17 as an example: 'Whoever strikes father or mother shall be put to death. Whoever kidnaps a person, whether that person has been sold or is still held in possession, shall be put to death. Whoever curses father or mother shall be put to death.'<sup>2</sup> In the prescriptions for the so-called 'holy war', there is more of the same: 'When the LORD your God gives [the town] into your hand, you shall put all its males to the sword', Deut 20:13. The OT is not consistent on the question of taking other people's lives.

Another example might be the issue of personal responsibility. In the rationale for the second commandment, the relation between deeds and results seems to be lying within the larger family context of three or four generations, or even within the human history of a thousand generations. This is different from the principle of Ezek 18:1-4: 'The word of the LORD came to me: What do you mean by repeating this proverb concerning the land of Israel, "The parents have eaten sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge"? As I live, says the Lord GOD, this proverb shall no more be used by you in Israel. Know that all lives are mine; the life of the parent as well as the life of the child is mine: it is only the person who sins that shall die.' This doctrine is further explained in Ezek ch. 18, and combined with the idea that a sinner who converts will be

saved, but a righteous person who sins, must die for the sins – an idea central to the whole book of Ezek. Deut 24:16 supports the doctrine of individual retribution: ‘Parents shall not be put to death for their children, nor shall children be put to death for their parents; only for their own crimes may persons be put to death.’ Ezek and Deut 24 seem to contradict the principle of shared family destiny in the Decalogue.

If we ask for definitions of the assembly of the Lord, the profile we can read from the Decalogue is a male community with a certain economic independence. In addition to this, Isa 56 includes the eunuchs and the foreigners. This is an open attitude compared to Deut 23, where men with mutilated private parts, children from mixed marriages, Ammonites and Moabites down to the tenth generation all are excluded from participating in it. The assembly of the Lord seems to be differently defined in various texts.

These three cases are not the only examples that may be adduced.

To sum up these reflections: The OT seems not only to be time-bound, but also inconsistent. It even presupposes a society with slaves and where women did not have a status equal to that of men. It thus rests upon concepts that are alien to us. All three objections mentioned at the beginning, have thus been substantiated from the OT itself.

What are the consequences?

First: The connection to time and society. This should not come as a surprise, for in this respect every text suffers the same fate. Every text is time-bound and rooted in its historical and societal setting. One of the lasting insights from recent OT research is how deeply texts and their interpretations are linked to their surroundings. The OT is profoundly linked to the Ancient Near East in many ways. Later expositions of the texts were also a reflection of their own times. Does this make the OT texts and their expositions irrelevant in our world?

This is not a necessary consequence, unless we think that the impact of surrounding conditions upon texts and interpreters is so profound that there is no possibility for crossing cultural and other barriers. If this is the case, we might end up with only communicating with ourselves, with the self of every human being, or with our inner being, however that communication should be understood. Most scholars would,

after all, maintain that there is a possibility for communicating with other human beings, even across time and space and cultural differences.

Secondly: the inconsistencies. Texts that came into being over an extended period of time – such as the OT – would run the risk of including material that was not completely aligned with the rest. To many OT scholars, this state of affairs would only attest to the historical nature of the texts; and in recent scholarship it would be considered an advantage to recognize that the individual parts of the OT are related to their context, dependent upon it, reflective of it, and part of it. The OT reflects many centuries and many different situations, so there is no surprise in the fact that there are differences. Does this make the Decalogue and its setting irrelevant today?

Again, I do not think so, if we allow for a certain amount of historical work to be done on the material before we use it in our world.

Lastly, there are the concepts that are alien to us. We would like to discuss the type of society the OT presupposes before we accept it as ours. Would we accept slavery and treat women as a part of the property of men? In the modern world one is not accustomed to simply accept a certain state of affairs; we would prefer that everything should be in the open and subject to discussion and possibly to general agreement. Does the underlying concepts make the OT ethics irrelevant?

This might, of course, be a serious problem; but I would suggest that one takes a closer look at the Decalogue before discarding them for this reason. Before doing that, however, I will develop the question of background concepts a little further.

It has often been said that the Decalogue only deals with individual morality and not with the issues of society. The truth of this claim lies in the fact that matters of war and peace, equality of humans, systems for justice and social balance and many others are not mentioned in this text. What it fails to recognize, however, is the position of the addressees in the society and their obligations as sustainers of worship and ethics on a general scale in their society. They might not have been responsible for defining and answering ultimate questions, but as the most important class after king and aristocracy they carry the responsibility of securing the proper functioning of human fellowship and practice. Thus, even if the Decalogue seems to focus on individual morality, the impact of it was to make the fundamentals of society function and be healthy.

We know from other OT texts that the greater questions are dealt with by the top officials in the society, first and foremost the king, and under him the priests, the wise men and the prophets.

An example of the king as the highest judge in Israel is the story of the two prostitutes who brought their case to king Solomon in 2 Kings 3. Each of them had a child, but one of the children was dead, and the king was able to make a just and lasting verdict on the question which of them should be considered the mother of the living one. This is in the context of 2 Kings an expression of the wisdom granted him by God, a quality necessary for the king in order to be a definer of justice and the highest court of appeal.

In contrast to other Ancient Near Eastern societies, however, the king in Israel did not give any laws. According to the law for the kings in Deut 17, 'When he [the king] has taken the throne of his kingdom, he shall have a copy of this law written for him in the presence of the levitical priests. It shall remain with him and he shall read in it all the days of his life, so that he may learn to fear the LORD his God, diligently observing all the words of this law and these statutes, neither exalting himself above other members of the community nor turning aside from the commandment, either to the right or to the left, so that he and his descendants may reign long over his kingdom in Israel.' This is a sensational law in the Ancient Near East. Not only is the king no lawgiver, but he is to obey the priestly laws.

Immediately preceding this law, Deut emphasizes that the priests were the highest court of appeal. If there were any competition between king and priest in this respect, the king would probably have to yield.

The priests were important for defining moral conduct. According to Jer 18.18, one of their tasks was to supply *torah*, 'instruction', *torot* in the plural, probably reflecting that they responded to questions from the people. The term developed into the Torah, the Law of Moses. The laws in the Pentateuch must to some extent contain summaries of these answers, these *torot*.

Malachi presupposes that the priests were supposed to answer questions from the people about right and wrong. Mal 2:6f says about Levi, the true priest: 'True instruction (Heb.: *torah*) was in his mouth, and no wrong was found on his lips. He walked with me

in integrity and uprightness, and he turned many from iniquity. For the lips of a priest should guard knowledge, and people should seek instruction (Heb.: *torah*) from his mouth, for he is the messenger of the LORD of hosts.' Here, we have a description of the whole process of questions and answers, and the status of the priests as definers of the law, perhaps even as law-givers is evident. Even if the book of Mal was created after the kings has disappeared from Israel, this seems to have been the practice also at the time of the kings.

Another segment of the aristocracy was constituted by the wise men, who are attributed with 'counsel' in Jer 18.18. These counsels are commonly supposed to be found in the book of Proverbs, a book that could be a text-book for the training of higher civil servants, if a modern term be allowed into this context. Its self-presentation as 'The proverbs of Solomon son of David, king of Israel' almost makes it into a text-book for coming kings. In that case, also the wise men were entitled to instruct the king. The proverbs also are of divine origin: 'The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge; fools despise wisdom and instruction', Prov 1:7. The wise men received divine wisdom, and they would advise and even instruct the king.

The last group in this connection would be the prophets, who were very concerned with ethical questions. At the hey-day of the little red book by Mao in the West, the sixties, we also got God's little red book. It contained quotations from the prophets and Jesus advocating social justice and reform. Amos chapter 5 was one of the favorites in those days; one could also mention Isa 1 and 2. Indeed, the whole prophetic corpus has to do with ethical standards, and prophetic words come from God.

The prophets belonged to the court of the king, and acted as advisors or members of the government, to use another modern term. They would not always follow the lead from the king, but criticize him. They would turn from being the king's advisors to his adversaries. Jeremiah, Isaiah, Amos and Hosea would be examples of this, so would Nathan and Micaiah, the son of Imlah. Their divine words instructed the king.

The king, the priests, the wise men and the prophets constitute the top of the pyramid, and their authority is derived from their status as divinely installed personnel. They all got messages with ethical teaching from God.



This is again part of a larger concept of the whole world, of heaven and earth and all that is therein – in the words of the OT. It has often been observed that the word for natural laws, in Hebrew *tsedeq* or *tsedaqa*, is the same as for righteousness. It seems then, that there is a connection between the correct order in nature and in human life. If justice is not upheld in the human realm, nature will suffer and be out of order. One could be tempted to compare this to the modern discussion about ecology, but our knowledge is based upon scientifically established knowledge, and the OT thinking has a different basis. This basis is the assumption that God was the ruler over the whole world, nature and history, and a violation of his righteousness for humans would affect the laws for nature. This is beautifully brought out in the prayer-psalm for the king, Ps 72. If the king rules with justice, nature will prosper. And Hosea states that Israel's worship of Baal instead of Yahweh hindered rain and crops.

Thus, the Decalogue is only one element in a world-view that encompasses the creation and sustaining of the world.

This is a brief survey of some of the concepts upon which the Decalogue rests. Some of these are clearly abandoned in the modern world, and nobody would think of reintroducing them. This goes for the world-view and the structuring of society, among other things. One principle has, however been developed further in many societies. This is the principle of multiple sources for ethics and law. Whereas the Law Code of Hammurabi from 1750 BC propagates divine rules transmitted by the king, we saw that the king in Israel had to receive instruction from the priests, the wise men and the prophets. He might have been the final court of appeal in some cases, and was responsible for justice in his land, but the priests were also given the authority of court of final appeal, and the other groups were also sources for ethics and law.

This division of power between the king and the other parts of the aristocracy in ancient Israel has been developed into the principle of separation of powers in the modern world between the legislature, the judiciary and the executive. Most people would agree that this is a sound separation, and we can end this section by stating that the Decalogue was part of a system that was a precursor to this separation. Indeed, the Decalogue itself is presented as God's words to the people through Moses, who was not a king, nor the

forefather of a king. By contrast, the king came from another tribe, from Judah, and not from Levi, the forefather of Moses.

The underlying concepts of the Decalogue are thus not an absolute hindrance to its relevance today, even if some of them cannot be introduced into our world.

Consequently, the three objections we mentioned, cannot be said to represent absolute hindrances to the relevance of the Decalogue today.

If we then proceed to take a closer look at the Ten Commandments, we might divide them into three categories. Perhaps some would object to this division on the basis of the commonly used expression 'The two tablets of the law'. According to that division, one tablet deals with religious affairs and the other with human ones, and I have no objection to this bipartition. I would, however, suggest that we make of the last commandment a third category, one dealing with vices or virtues. Not to covet is not on the same level as the outward actions described in the previous commandments, but has to do with inner human qualities. This commandment thus forms a section different from the two others.

The first section deals with religion, what we would today call religion, as such a category was not used in Biblical times. The first commandment prohibits to Israel the worship of other deities than Yahweh, even though the existence of other deities is not denied. This is commonly called monolatry, to serve only one of the possible gods, to distinguish it from the monotheism of Isa 40-55 and other texts, where only one God is said to exist. That a god or gods exists or exist is simply taken for granted.

The second commandment prohibits the production and worship of idols; one is led to think of idols depicting Yahweh, since the worship of other gods is dealt with already in the first commandment. Worship itself is not mentioned, but presupposed. The ban on idols is motivated by a strong threat that God is jealous and punishes within limits; but also by a reminder that God blesses limitlessly.

The third commandment is directed against the wrong use of God's name, presumably in contexts involving taking oaths or using magic.

The sabbath commandment has also received a motivation or rationale, that God rested on, blessed and consecrated this day of the week. Human observation of the sabbath imitates the divine rest, and it is also a participation in the divine realm.

The second part of the Decalogue contains five commandments for human conduct of life. A simple rendering would be: take care of your parents, refrain from murder, do not sleep with women who are married to other men, do not take property belonging to others, do not produce lies when testifying in court. These rules could be used for prosecution of offences, even if they are of a general nature. Again, we can see that several things are taken for granted and not mentioned, the relationship between parents and children, some basic respect for human life, the existence of marriage and the judiciary, the right to own property. Marriage is instituted by God, according to Gen 1 and 2, while the other underlying concepts are not motivated but presupposed in the OT.

The last commandment prohibits a vice, covetousness, and proscribes, perhaps, indirectly, a virtue, contentment with your own belongings. The interest for vices and virtues is much more developed in the New Testament, especially in the Pauline letters, e.g. Galatians 5:19-23: 'Now the works of the flesh are obvious: fornication, impurity, licentiousness, idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissensions, factions, envy, drunkenness, carousing, and things like these. I am warning you, as I warned you before: those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God. By contrast, the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against such things.' Here we have some elements from the Decalogue blended with many vices and virtues. On the whole, the OT is more concerned with deeds than with virtues, but in the last of the Ten Commandments we have the exception that proves the rule.

As a result, I would assume that there are three parts of the Decalogue, not just two.

We made the observation that there are several 'givens' under or behind the Ten Commandments – phenomena that are not mentioned explicitly. The OT seems to suppose that these are things that every human being knows and acknowledges, perhaps in the vein of Paul when he states that, 'For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. Ever since the creation of the world his eternal power and divine nature, invisible though they are, have been understood and seen through the things he has made', Romans 1:19f. The existence of God is evident, says Paul, and we might add that according to the OT so is worship of God, parenthood,

respect for life, a legal and court system, the right to have property. On another level, the right and possibility to issue divine commandments for the conduct of life, is also presupposed.

There have been different attitudes to this phenomenon through history. They all use the fundamental distinction between natural and revealed law, or natural and positive law. What the Bible presupposes, belongs to natural law, common to all human beings; and what it addresses, belongs to revealed or positive law. The Catholic tradition has based its moral teaching on natural law, and used the Bible as an illustration for this teaching. Karl Barth, the Swiss scholar of the Reformed Church, on the other hand, rejected completely natural law, and based himself exclusively on positive law in the Bible. The Lutheran position has been to acknowledge both laws, and arrange them in a system. Natural law is seen as guiding all humans, but it is too general and unclear for many moral decisions. Positive law comes as a clarification and specification of natural law, and spells out what is unsaid in natural law. It helps in clarifying many issues and resolving problems not resolved by natural law.

This last way of handling the question would fit our observations on the Decalogue. That there is a divine being, is presupposed. That only one God should be worshipped and that this is Yahweh, is said explicitly. That God should be worshipped, is taken for granted; that it should be done without images, is spelled out. That there are relations between the generations, is a given; that children should honor and care for their parents, is stated. We could prolong this list, but this is enough to show that the basic structure fits the Lutheran position.

Following this position, one might be tempted to consider the natural law as fundamentally important, and only use positive law as far as it does not neglect or contradict present conditions. This would relieve us of the burden of historically conditioned aspects of the Decalogue. We have seen that this is no small burden at all. At least this position could lead us to reduce the commandments to some basic ones, or create a summary of the leading principles.

This has been done many times. Several texts in the NT present us with a condensed version of Ten Commandments. The most famous is Jesus' presentation of the twin commandments of love: Matthew 22:37-40: 'You shall love the Lord your God with

all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.' This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.'

Another famous sentence from Jesus is the so-called Golden rule in Matthew 7:12, 'In everything do to others as you would have them do to you; for this is the law and the prophets.' This also is a summary of OT ethics.

In the last case, a certain subjectivity is evident. What people want to experience varies a lot, and this makes it difficult to use this rule for common ethics. Short rules can also be deficient as a help in concrete questions. What would be the consequence of these two short rules for a person contemplating suicide, e.g., or for one who is offered a bribe?

No wonder, therefore, that many cultures developed the opposite attitude. In response to a demand for specific answers to new questions, Judaism e.g. developed rules for new cases based on the old rules, and created what has been termed casuistic laws, laws covering many different cases.

Archaeology has brought forward many examples of casuistic laws from antiquity. One example is the aforementioned Law Code of Hammurabi, from 1750 BC. It starts in this way: 'If a citizen has accused a citizen and has indicted him for a murder and has not substantiated the charge, his accuser shall be put to death. If a citizen has indicted a citizen for sorcery and does not substantiate the charge, the one who is indicted for sorcery shall go to the river and shall throw himself in. If the river overwhelms him, (then) his indicter shall take away his house. If the river exculpates that citizen and he is preserved, the one who indicted him for sorcery shall die, (and) the one who threw himself into the river shall take away his house. If a citizen in a case has borne false witness, and does not substantiate the statement which he has made, (and) if that case is one warranting the death penalty, that citizen shall be put to death.'<sup>3</sup>

Formally, these laws describe cases as precisely as possible, and then proscribe actions to be taken. We have many examples of the same type of laws in the OT, e.g. the ones quoted above proscribing death penalty for various cases.

The quotations from Hammurabi's code deal with false accusations and witnessing in court. In comparison, the ninth commandment in the Decalogue is brief and only states the principle of truthful witnessing. On the other extreme, the twin

commandments of love and the Golden rule must be seen as attempts at focusing on central ideas in the law instead of developing the law in a casuistic way. But they are too general to help us when witnessing in court. Here, the Decalogue is more elaborate.

This is typical of the Decalogue; it represents a middle road between casuistry and short formulas and can therefore serve as a useful help for ethical reasoning.

How this can be done is seen in the NT, where we have several renderings of the Decalogue. Matthew 19:19: 'You shall not murder; You shall not commit adultery; You shall not steal; You shall not bear false witness; Honor your father and mother; also, You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' The last sentence is not taken from the Ten Commandments, but from Lev 19.18.

Another example is Romans 13:8-10: 'Owe no one anything, except to love one another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. The commandments, "You shall not commit adultery; You shall not murder; You shall not steal; You shall not covet"; and any other commandment, are summed up in this word, "Love your neighbor as yourself." Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law'. Love is not a theme in the Decalogue, except in the description of God's love for thousand generations towards those who love him and keep his commandments. Paul makes it the key word in the commandments.

Still another rendering is 1 Timothy 1:9f: 'This means understanding that the law is laid down not for the innocent but for the lawless and disobedient, for the godless and sinful, for the unholy and profane, for those who kill their father or mother, for murderers, fornicators, sodomites, slave traders, liars, perjurers, and whatever else is contrary to the sound teaching'.

It is conspicuous how diverse these renderings are, and how they are supplied with the keyword 'love' and combined with other quotations. This does probably not mean that the number ten was discarded at the time of Jesus, but that the commandments could be adapted and applied.

The most significant adaptation was made for the first commandment. In the OT it addressed the sole worship of Yahweh, but for the NT it would have to include Jesus as the Son of God. As we know, the whole NT is centered on the controversy over this question, but if the Decalogue were to be kept for future use by the church, Jesus would

have to be understood as included in the first commandment. Perhaps one could even say that this commandment was understood by the Christians to apply to the divinity of Jesus in particular.

A further development took place when Martin Luther created his two Catechisms and included the Ten Commandments in them. He left out the prohibition against idols, as this battle had been fought to the end earlier, and split the last one into two commandments in order to maintain the pedagogical number ten. He then also reinterpreted the observation of the sabbath to pertain to Sunday and put the emphasis on the positive aspect, worship, and not on the prohibition against work.

Christian theology today will have to see how material from the OT is used in the NT, and then consider what those sources have to say. Further, the Christian tradition through 2000 years and from many different countries has to be listened to. The last step in the ethical work is the systematic evaluation and coordination of what the Bible has to say. This is then brought into the discussion with contemporary knowledge based on many different sciences, and, finally, with the voices from other religious traditions. In the end, one might obtain something like world ethics, or global ethics. This is the agenda propagated by dr. Hans Küng in the search for a common set of ethics for our age.

Are the Ten Commandments relevant today? The answer will have to be both yes and no. Some underlying concepts are not relevant any more, and some of the rules will have to be understood in a different way. But to have a set of ten rules is helpful in many situations, and it is necessary to have more than brief summaries or slogans. On the other hand, one must look out for the temptation to develop casuistry. Rules must be adapted and applied, but not into regulations for every possible case. As a middle road, it is advisable to keep in mind basic natural laws, as well as the principles materialized in the ten sayings of the Decalogue.

---

<sup>1</sup> *Ethics and the Old Testament*, Trinity Press International, Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, 1998, p. 5.

<sup>2</sup> Differently from other cultures, the Bible never has the death penalty for material offenses, Tikva Frymer-Kensky, 'Biblical Cosmology', *Backgrounds of the Bible*, Michael Patrick O'Connor and David Noel Freedman (ed.s), Eisenbrauns 1987, 231-240, p. 237.

<sup>3</sup> D. Winton Thomas (ed.), *Documents from Old Testament Times Translated with Introductions and Notes by Members of the Old Society for Old Testament Study and Edited by D. Winton Thomas*, Harper Torchbooks, Harper & Row, New York, 1958, p. 29.