

WHICH OF "THE TEN WORDS" IS THE HARDEST? THE FIRST+Deut.6.5 *

Hearing the missionary say "The Bible is the Word of God, God speaking," a black African held a Bible to his ears--first one, then the other--and his face registered his disappointment. "I didn't hear anything," he said. But the missionary taught him to read the Bible. Then he could "hear" God speaking! And with both his ears & his eyes he could hear God speaking through the missionary. And when he was dragged from Africa, in America he made noble use of what he had heard.

Did you hear-see him last week on PBS's four-hour with the ironic title (for slavery), "A Respectable Trade"? Whether you did or not, I believe you can feel the shock, the force, the truth, as well as the naivete in the protagonist's holding the Bible to his ear **with expectation**. And I ask you this morning to imagine, as I preach, that you are holding the Ten Commandments to your ear, your good ear, praying that you will hear a word from the Lord, a word for you.

1 In my private devotions, I read the Ten Commandments in Hebrew (Ex.20) just before I was asked to preach in a Cape Cod church next Sunday. No problem numbering them in the text: they're marked, in Hebrew letters, 1-10. And the first one is not a "commandment" at all: it's a **statement**: "I the LORD [YHWH] am your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt, the house of bondage [slaves]"--v.2. It's a God-spoken, self-identifying word. He identifies himself both by **name** (as in chap.3, the burning bush) & by **relationship** (as our God--first of Jews, then also of Christians).

2 I said that's not a commandment but a statement. In fact, v.1, the introduction, is not to ten commandments (for which Hebrew has three words) but to ten "words": "God spoke all these words [the general term for statements], saying:" God spoke. God spoke words, three times in Torah (Moses, the Pentateuch) called ten words. Ten words forming the Preamble (in Ex.20 & Deut.5) to the OT's ritual & ethical code--roughly parallel to our Declaration of Independence (freedom not from Pharaoh but from Geo.III), which functions as preface to our U.S.Constitution.

Ten? Ten, though it seems there's never been agreement as to the numbering in Ex.20 or Deut.5. The NT regularly calls these words "commandments," so it's especially easy for Christians to consider that God's opening statement (v.2) is not one of them. But consider: Do you not see the commandment in the words "your God"? Obviously the phrase doesn't mean that you possess God, so you can design your own deity--as some now do--& write your own commandments--as many now do. No, it means the reverse: *God*, the God of Abraham, Moses, the prophets, Jesus, & the apostles, possesses you, us. As his "servants" (the same Hebrew word as "slaves"), we are covenant-bound to hear-discover & do his will: we are from "sin, death, & the devil" (as the baptismal formula has it) **freed** to be God's servants in freeing others--as Israel was freed from the darkness of Egypt to be "a light to the nations" (Is.42.6). Service to Pharaoh was slavery: slavery to God is freedom, the true freedom. "Perfect liberty is perfect obedience to the perfect law" (Fosdick), the law of God, the law of Christ, the law of love divine. God redeems us from our Egypt to be co-redeemers with him in the world, which is the global Egypt of rebellion against God, with resultant oppressions, corruptions, pollutions....One more contrast: slavery to Pharaoh was involuntary servitude, but the service of God requires our freely given "yes." And the choice must be personal: in Hebrew, "your" in "your God" is singular, individual. Your personal honor, personal duty, personal share in bearing the world's sorrowful load of sin (& we Christians add, so completing the sufferings of Christ, the world's Savior & ours corporately [in the body of Christ, his church] & ours personally)....Elohim, the God of justice, wills to be--& with our cooperation can be--Yahweh, the God of mercy.

3 The Second Word (v.3-6): God says "You shall have no gods alongside me, nor make for yourself a sculptured image of me." Monotheism finds a reflection in monogamy: Clinton's addiction to finding women alongside Hillary is a personal, familial, national tragedy. And who among us is not at least attracted to having, as idols alongside God, self esteem & wealth & fame & power to whatever degree may be

within our reach? How pitiable! In the short run, we are all sinners; in the long run, we are all dead. None of us has the powers or the time to abound. Only grace abounds. As I learned long ago in Sunday school, "Only one life, 'twill soon be past; only what's done for Christ will last." Life is tragic, we cannot win. But eternal life now & forever has been won for us by the cruciform sufferings of the God who serves us when we set our hearts to serve him alone, him only, him always. This God, the God of the Old & of the New Testament, is the God whom we are to acknowledge as *our* God. Nothing more, but also nothing less. No hedging. No fudging. No compromise.

4 The Third Word (v.7): God says "You shall not make wrongful use of the name of the LORD your God...." God is One, unique, & his name should be used with the unique feeling of awe & in unique reverential worship. No bad habit of loose exclamations like "Gee" (for God) or "Jee" (for Jesus), & of course no cussing (blasphemous, negative usage). Like God, God's name is "holy," not to be devalued, eroded, by overuse (or even, Jesus says, in legal oath-taking [Mt.5.37; Jas.5.12]).

5 The Fourth Word (vv.8-11): God says "Remember to sanctify the sabbath...." Every week the Jews recapitulate God's rest after the creation* of the world--the model for Christians doing the same (though on the next day) vis-a-vis Jesus' resurrection (& Muslims, the day before the seventh). We work in space, but we rest in time--a weekly time for worshiping the Sovereign Lord of Time & Space & meditating on the eternal in the temporal, the holy in the common.

6 The Fifth Word (v.12): God says "Honor your father & your mother....," treating them with deference & treating to their needs. Being an aspect of God-honoring, parent-honoring is (in Jewish tradition) on the first tablet, stating vertical duties; the second tablet is horizontal, human-to-human duties. Respect for God, then respect for humanity. (In Lev.19.3, the word is not "honor" but "revere" [or "fear"], & mother comes before father.)

7 The Sixth Word (v.13): God says "You shall not murder." "Kill" is wrong: Hebrew has two words for it, & neither is used here. Pacifists wrongly read "kill," & use the text against war; so-called proliferers wrongly read kill, & use the text against abortion; opponents of the death penalty & of assisted suicide wrongly read "kill" & use the text against those practices. Augustine, who could not read Hebrew, wrongly read "kill" against suicide...."Murder" means "unauthorized homicide": being legal, abortion is not murder except by rhetorical nullification-extension--ethically, a questionable ploy.

8 The Seventh Word (v.13): "You shall not commit adultery." According to Jewish & Southern Baptist (eg, Clinton) tradition, this refers not to "fooling around" (sexual dalliance, as Bill with Monica) but to penetration, genital intercourse. In the whole Clinton mess, Bill was making a standard distinction, not legal hair-splitting. Ken Woodward in NEWSWEEK got that right, as few in the media did.

9 The Eighth Word (v.13): God says "You shall not steal." Private property (including slaves!) is a solid value in the OT. Death to kidnappers (21.16)! The Talmud extends theft to include deceit as the stealing of another's mind. In light of this extension, Clinton for eight months violated this commandment: he consistently lied about what is easiest (& therefore most forgivable) to lie about, viz. sexual deviancy.

10 The Ninth Word (v.13): "You shall not bear false witness...." Says a midrash, "Everything in the world was created by God except the art of lying." THE TORAH: A MODERN COMMENTARY, 558: "The liar infects both himself and the social fabric, and, when he practices his deceit in court, the damage is doubly destructive."

11 The Tenth Word (v.14): God says "You shall not covet...." Greed is the God-unharnessed soul on a self-centered rampage. Jesus says wrong inward desire is in a straight line with outer transgression of territory belonging to God & territory belonging to neighbor.

11 Jesus summarizes Torah--the Ten Commandments & all they are preface to--as God-love & neighbor-love (Mt.22.34-40, M.12.28-34, L.10.25-28).

* The word for "word," in v.1, also means "thing": in Gn.1-2, God "said" things, creation, into being.