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Research Note

On the Numbering and Teaching of the Decalogue

During nearly four decades of teaching the Bible to undergraduates, I have encountered the same question about the Ten Commandments almost every year: Why are there different ways of numbering them?¹ The division of Exodus 20:2–17 and Deuteronomy 5:6–21 varies among several Christian and Jewish traditions, yet all begin and end at the same places. In this brief essay, I would like to undertake two different tasks: a literary analysis of the Decalogue and a defense of the pedagogical use of it in Luther’s catechisms.

The Literary Arrangement of the Decalogue in Exodus and Deuteronomy

Two observations about the Decalogue as it appears in the Pentateuch have influenced my thought on this matter:

1. The “ten words/sayings” (עֲשֶׂרֶת הַדְּבָרִים) in both Exodus and Deuteronomy are supposed to be what God said from Mount Sinai (Deut 4:13; 10:4), yet, as far as I know, no enumeration of them takes seriously the prologue’s gospel emphasis as a guide for understanding the Decalogue (Exod 20:2; Deut 5:6).
2. Deuteronomy 5 is not merely a repetition of Exodus 20. Unless we are blinded by the historical-critical treatment of the Pentateuch, we must acknowledge that Deuteronomy 5 is informing a new generation of God’s instructions to their parents and grandparents. It comes forty years after the first giving of the commandments. These forty years of experience under the commandments are important, especially if we heed what the Scriptures tell us about human sinfulness. During those forty years, there must have been ways in which the Israelites tried to find loopholes in the law or attempted to reinterpret them to serve their own sinful desires. I believe this explains most, if not all, the differences between the two presentations of the Decalogue in Exodus 20 and Deuteronomy 5. From this perspective, Deuteronomy 5 should be seen not

¹ On this topic, see also Paul L. Maier, “Enumerating the Decalogue: Do We Number the Ten Commandments Correctly?,” *Concordia Journal* 16, no. 1 (January 1990): 18–26; Nathan Jastram, “Should Lutherans Really Change How They Number the Ten Commandments?,” *Concordia Journal* 16, no. 4 (October 1990): 363–369; Horace D. Hummel, “Numbering the Ten ‘Commandments’: A Response to Both Jastram and Maier,” *Concordia Journal* 16, no. 4 (October 1990): 373–383. —Ed.

merely as a restating of the commandments, but something akin to its official interpretation.

With this in mind, we now turn to the Decalogue itself. I would propose that the following is the enumeration of the commandments as suggested by the text itself.

The First Command: “I am Yahweh your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt, from the place of slavery. Do not have other gods besides me” (Exod 20:2–3; Deut 5:6–7).² Note that this contains a gospel statement followed by a law statement—precisely what Luther presupposes in his catechisms. The presumption from the beginning is that God intends this to be a discourse focused not only on the first and second uses of the law, but also on the third use. Furthermore, this would seem to indicate that the nine commands that follow this first one may be only more specific applications. That is, breaking any other command contained in the subsequent nine commands amounts to the most dangerous idolatry of all—the worshiping of one’s own being and desires above all others (compare LC I 48).

The Second Command: This is the prohibition against constructing images in order to worship them, including the familiar Close of the Commandments learned as part of the Small Catechism (Exod 20:4–6; Deut 5:8–10). Note that this command ends with another statement about “Yahweh your God”—a statement of law followed by gospel, motivating the Israelites to keep the law (third use).

The Third Command: This contains the prohibition against wrong use of Yahweh’s name (Exod 20:7; Deut 5:11).

The Fourth Command: The command to honor the Sabbath appears with several differences between Exodus 20:8–11 and Deuteronomy 5:12–15. These variations seem to be speaking to the new generation. Perhaps during the forty wilderness years some had tried to whittle down the Sabbath’s all-encompassing prohibition of work. They could have argued that they were *remembering* (זָכַר) the Sabbath, and, therefore, they were observing the command. The word *keep* (שָׁמַר) interprets what *remember* meant. The phrase “as Yahweh your God commanded you” (Deut 5:12) tells the new generation that this is not merely a social custom invented by a previous generation. Instead, it is a command of Yahweh. The expanded list of who is to rest (ox and donkey are added in Deuteronomy) and why they are to be given rest (“so that your male and female slaves may rest as you do”; Deut 5:14) closes a perceived loophole that some may have tried to open in the command. It also further interprets what work is.

The different motivation clauses for keeping the command—God’s creative activity in Exodus 20:11 but God’s deliverance of his people from Egypt in Deuter-

² All Scripture quotations are the author’s translation.

onomy 5:15—seem to speak to the needs of the two generations. The first generation was told why the Sabbath was every seventh day. The next generation was reminded of the rest they had been given from the slavery of Egypt. They did not experience the exodus deliverance but were benefiting from it. Thus, they were reminded of this. Note that in both cases this is gospel motivation.

The Fifth Command: This is the instruction to honor parents (Exod 2:12; Deut 5:16). Again there are some differences in the text of Deuteronomy as compared to Exodus. The phrase “as Yahweh your God commanded you” again indicates that this is more than mere social convention. The addition of “and so that it will go well with you” may be Moses’ prophetic interpretation of the promise of this command—another gospel motivation.

The Sixth Command: This is the prohibition of murder (Exod 20:13; Deut 5:17).

The Seventh Command: Adultery is specifically forbidden. Note that this command is slightly different in Deuteronomy in that it begins with the copula, as do all the subsequent prohibitions (cf. Exod 20:14 [לֹא תִנְאָף] with Deut 5:18 [וְלֹא תִנְאָף]). This would seem to suggest that the first five commands were one “table” of the law (note that all but one contain gospel motivation), while the final five are the other “table” (note that none of these contain gospel.)

The Eighth Command: This law prohibits theft (Exod 20:15; Deut 5:19).

The Ninth Command: False witness is proscribed (Exod 20:16; Deut 5:20). Note the difference in the adjectives describing false witness. In Exodus it is a lying witness (שֶׁקֶר), while in Deuteronomy it is a worthless witness (שׁוֹן). It is hard to determine the reason for the difference there. Perhaps it is redefinition by use of a synonym.

The Tenth Command: This final stricture is the prohibition of covetousness (Exod 20:17; Deut 5:21). There are several differences in Deuteronomy. First is the transposing of *neighbor’s wife* (אִשְׁתֵּי רֵעִי) and *neighbor’s house* (בַּיִתֵּי רֵעִי). Second is the use of a different but synonymous verb to describe coveting of house, field, servants, and cattle (Exodus: תִּחְמַד/Deuteronomy: תִּתְאַוָּה). Third is the addition of *field* (שָׂדֵה) to the list of property covered in the prohibition. All these differences can be explained by the different setting of Deuteronomy. The moving of wife forward to the initial position may be a reaction to the use which could have arisen out of the original form of this command. Some may have used the original form (“Do not covet your neighbor’s house. Do not covet your neighbor’s wife . . .”) to view *wife* as a type of property. With the form in Deuteronomy (“Do not covet [תִּחְמַד] your neighbor’s wife. Do not desire [תִּתְאַוָּה] your neighbor’s house . . .”), this is not possible, since wife is listed first and a different verb is used for property. That some Israelites abused the command in this way during the wilderness wanderings is pure speculation on my part. However, it is not an unreasonable suggestion considering

how humans often try to twist even modern laws to suit their desires. Furthermore, the interchange of *wife* and *house* seems to indicate that this is one command, not two. The addition of *field* to the list in Deuteronomy is understandable, since the Israelites were soon to be acquiring land.

The Pedagogical Use of the Decalogue

Would I suggest, then, that we renumber the commandments in catechetical instruction on the basis of literary analysis? No, I would not—for two reasons. First, no matter what the literary arrangement of the Decalogue is, catechesis is a pedagogical endeavor, not a literary one. Teaching the faith is more than literary-historical analysis. Luther's genius in his explanation of the commandments lay in his emphasis on arranging and explaining them in a way which is easy to understand and easy to remember. It has stood the test of time. Furthermore, it is not insignificant that Luther's arrangement follows the traditional enumeration in his day and has generally helped Lutheranism avoid the iconoclastic misuse of the prohibition of images to which the Reformed are prone. Lest this be taken too lightly, I remember on more than one occasion during my parish ministry when otherwise well-informed lay members of my congregation would object to crucifixes because they were images prohibited in Exodus 20. This appears to me to be an unfortunate Reformed heritage from our culture. It certainly was not a result of the way the commandments were arranged in the catechism. The lingering Reformed shape of American culture should never be taken lightly. Moreover, we ought to think twice before acquiescing to the Reformed enumeration of the commandments merely on literary grounds.

Second, while the Scriptures make at least three references to "ten words/sayings" given by God to the people on Mount Sinai, the Scriptures themselves are never concerned enough to enumerate them for us. Thus, any literary analysis used to divide the commands into ten, no matter how convincing, cannot be made decisive for faith and life. Instead, we must use the analogy of faith and the analogy of Scripture to determine how much emphasis to place on the individual statements of Exodus 20 and Deuteronomy 5 in our catechesis. It would seem that in light of the divine command to Moses to fashion a bronze serpent and the divine approval of animal and angelic images on the ark of the covenant, the tabernacle, and the temple, it is wise to downplay the images emphasis which the Reformed bring to the Decalogue. Instead, we need to continue teaching a more general view of idolatry as putting anything before God. On the other hand, since St. Paul himself notes that it was the command against coveting that made the reality of sin known to him (Rom 7), it is proper that we retain somewhat of a double emphasis on coveting. This helps to beat down the Pharisee in all of us, which would like the law to be only an outward

obedience to God. If we could accomplish such a thing with God's law, we could convince ourselves that we have kept the entire law, since we did so outwardly. To lose the catechism's emphasis on sinful desires may mean diluting the power of the law to prepare for the gospel.

Literary analysis is useful in helping to determine the message and meaning of the biblical text. However, literary analysis is not and should never be the final arbiter of how the Christian faith is taught. There are several reasons for this, including the fact that the Scriptures are more than a single pericope or literary work. To base the numbering of the Decalogue, and therefore the catechesis of the church, on literary studies of Exodus 20 and Deuteronomy 5 would be foolish. It would be ignoring the prophetic and apostolic application of the Decalogue.³ Moreover, it would subordinate the word of God to the changing standards and methods of literary criticism.

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³ Not only do we possess Moses' own prophetic interpretation of God's words from Mount Sinai (Deut 5), we have other scriptural references such as found in Proverbs and the Sermon on the Mount. See, for example, Andrew E. Steinmann, *Proverbs*, Concordia Commentary (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2009), 61–64.