

The Hypocrisy in the Public Display of the Ten Commandments in Texas in the United States of America: A Theological and Ethical Critique

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Abstract

Politicians often seek to post a copy of the Ten Commandments in public schools or governmental buildings to proclaim the values that they believe represent America. It is their effort to create a conservative “Christian” society in our country, and it is part of the movement called “Make America Great Again.” However, these politicians and their followers are unaware that their own political views and actions actually violate these Ten Commandments in several ways.

Keywords: Ten Commandments, “Make America Great Again,” Christian Nationalism, Honor your Parents, Honor the Sabbath, Governor Abbott

1. Introduction

For Jews and Christians, the Ten Commandments, or Decalogue have served as a foundational expression of moral and religious instruction for centuries. Although Christians differ in their interpretation and application of particular commandments, the Ten Commandments continue to provide an important framework for Christian reflection on ethical behavior. Some Christians view them as literally binding, others view them as advisory to broadly define what constitutes loving Christian behavior in response to God’s divine grace (as in my own religious tradition). When asked what makes a person a Christian, many Christians in the pews will respond that keeping the Ten Commandments is the most important thing. The correct response would be to say belief in the death and resurrection of Jesus. Though answering with the response of the Ten Commandments is incorrect;

nonetheless, a large number of well-intentioned Christians would respond thus.

2. Attempts at public display of the Ten Commandments

On June 21, 2025 Texas Governor Greg Abbott signed into law the Ten Commandments Bill (SB 10), which took effect on September 1, 2025. This law declared that public school classrooms must display a plaque containing a list of the Ten Commandments that is “16” by “20” inches, sufficiently large enough to be read by all the students in the classroom. Conservative voices in Texas praised the governor for putting morality back into the classrooms of Texas schools. In 2024 Governor Jeff Landry attempted to undertake the same actions in the state of Louisiana. Currently the state of Louisiana has decreed that “11” by “14” inch posters of the Ten Commandments in large font must be placed in all public schools and universities (H.B. 71). Arkansas and Tennessee are considering similar legislation. The Ten Commandments were for a time placed in front of the county courthouse in Jefferson County, Illinois in 2025. This list goes on and on . . .

The Christian National Legal Foundation has articulated their political strategy in a document called “Project Blitz.” This project was articulated in 2018 and suggests that the following agenda be encouraged in state legislatures by prayer caucuses: restriction of pro-choice right, undermining LGBTQ rights, reduction of expenditures for education, health care, and civil rights protections. Particular items to be implemented include posting “In God We Trust” in every public school classroom, using the Bible in literature classes, and posting the Ten Commandments in classrooms and the hallways (Huffman, 158-59).

Patrick Miller boldly declared that the greatest “endangerment” of the Ten Commandments is the political use of posting them in front of government buildings. For this is “civil or cultural manipulation of the commandments” and “gives only lip service—if even that—to the first table of the Decalogue” (Miller 61).

3. Responses to These Political Actions

Protestant Evangelicals in the “Make America Great Again” movement proudly proclaim the Ten Commandments as the standard for their religious and political beliefs, and politicians who cater to this community will prate about how a copy of the Ten Commandments should be placed on courthouse lawns and in public school classrooms. Yet these very people seemingly have no real grasp of the real meanings contained within those commands. In fact, I doubt that most of them could even list those ten commands, or eleven, since that is the real number of commands in the Decalogue (worship one God, make no images, honor the divine name, keep Sabbath, honor parents, no murder, no adultery, no theft, no perjury, no coveting house, no coveting wife). I once taught Protestant Evangelical college students in North Carolina, and upon asking them to list the commandments, most of them were unable to do so. Some of the suggestions were “do not drink alcohol” and “do not smoke.” I surmise their parents could not have done any better. I expect even less from politicians.

4. The Commandments in General

Nor are these folk aware of the two versions of the Ten Commandments in Exodus 20:1-17

and Deuteronomy 5:6-21 with their different wordings and sequence of commands. Were I to tell them that, they would deny it; and were I to offer to show them that reality in a Bible, they would run away from me, as a woman once did in North Carolina. She claimed I “bewitched” that Bible to read differently than what her pastor had taught her. She ran away from me. Such is the determination of Protestant Evangelicals and “Make America Great Again” Christians to hold onto their specific beliefs. Their mantra must be, “don’t confuse me with the text, I know what I believe.” Conservatives too often quote the Bible (sometimes correctly) but do not read it. This is cruel of me to say, but it is true for far too many such pious believers, especially in the deep south.

Unbeknownst to most conservative Protestants and fundamentalists is the awareness that the Ten Commandments actually promote a very liberal social agenda in today’s modern society. The commands they wish to impose upon others self-righteously contradict their very own political beliefs. A few examples might suffice to elucidate my argument.

5. Honor Parents Commandment

The well-known commandment to honor your father and mother is often quoted by many people not only to support parental authority but also to undergird the authority of social institutions and the power of the state. They might proclaim, “my country right or wrong,” and quote the command to justify their stance. But, I say, read the entire command. “Honor your father and your mother, so that your days may be long in the land that the Lord your God is giving you” (Exodus 20:12). The commandment clearly declares that if you care for your parents when they are old, your children, in turn, will care for you. Such care will then enable you to live a long and healthy life.

Bluntly, the command was designed initially to prevent people from exposing old folk to die in a simple, subsistence economy, where the temptation was great to discard old people in the wilderness or drive them from their homes in settled society. The command also would seek to prevent the abuse of old people remaining in their home because they could no longer work (Childs 418; Harrelson 73-74). This is not so much about authority, as it is about protecting weak and old people. It is a social command seeking justice in society as a whole (Hossfeld 97-101). Finally, we might observe that in its present form the command says both father and mother, thus becoming yet another law in the legal tradition which seeks a degree of equality for women (Durham 291).

The commandment is not addressed to children exhorting them to obey their parents, as an old cartoon with Bart Simpson would have it. Rather, the command, as is the case with the other commands, is addressed to adults, especially adult males in the ancient Israelite community (Dozeman 492-93). It says to them that they should care for the old people in their community. The command is addressed to all of the adults in the Israelite community saying that they should take care of the old people in their midst. It is not a command addressed to an individual primarily, telling him or her to take care of his or her specific parents. It is a command addressed to the community, to all the people, saying that in their society as a whole, they must safeguard the lives and well-being of their old parents. The command to adult males to care for their elderly parents is a theme permeating legal and

didactic literature in the Old Testament (Exodus 21:15, 17; Leviticus 19:3; Deuteronomy 21:18-21; 27:16; Proverbs 19:26; 20:20; 23:22; 28:24; 30:11, 17) (Carr 125).

Numerous “Make America Great Again” folk whom I know personally have said that our country must eliminate “entitlements” such as Medicaid, Medicare, and even Social Security. I have heard these observations on radio talk shows also. Such folk are effectively calling for the degradation of the lives of older people in our society, especially the poor ones, who need our support for the quality of their lives and very existence. “Make America Great Again” folk are blatantly violating the command, but then proudly proclaiming that they are good Christians who keep the Ten Commandments (I suppose in contrast to the rest of us). I often wonder why the evangelical preachers are not honest enough to tell their people this. Perhaps such preachers flatter themselves by saying that when each individual attends to the needs of his or her parents properly, it is not the duty of the state or people as a whole to do anything about the needs of the elderly. But that is not how Israelite or biblical law works; it speaks to the entire community about the needs of the entire community.

6. Sabbath Commandment

Another example of social justice is the Sabbath Command as it is found in Deuteronomy 5. The command in Exodus 20 grounds Sabbath observation in an appeal to the creation of the world in Genesis 1 by saying that as God created the world in six days and rested on the seventh day, so also we should rest and worship on the seventh day. In Deuteronomy 5, however, the appeal to keep the Sabbath is grounded in the memory of the exodus out of Egypt. Since God delivered us from slavery in Egypt and the laborious work there, so also we should rest on the Sabbath. But the thrust of the command then focuses upon how we should extend this rest to our family members, our children, our slaves, and even our animals. The inclusion of slaves in this command is worthy of attention. Even the most debased members of human society are given rights equal to that of family members. Slaves are to receive just and equal treatment with other folk (Gnuse 2015: 45-46). Slaves were permitted to participate in the observation of family religious practices, such as Passover, a right certainly not accorded to slaves in America in the early nineteenth century in the south.

In the summer of 2025 I visited Charleston, South Carolina, and one of the sites we observed was an old plantation home, now in the heart of the city. On the tour one could observe the slave quarters, where it was said that two or three slaves would die every winter from exposure to the cold and starvation. Later in the tour we observed beautiful and expensive artwork in a large room. Every summer the lady of the plantation would go to Europe and spend thousands of dollars buying those works of art. Fifty yards from this room were the slave quarters where the slaves lived and died. I sat in that room heavy-laden with precious artwork with a feeling of disgust. Such is the attitude of many wealthy people today who make their fortune today while the poor around them suffer and are dismissed by those rich folk for not having a work ethic.

This Sabbath Command is clearly a social command. It reads extensively in the biblical text. “Observe the sabbath day and keep it holy, as the Lord your God commanded you. 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, or, your son or your daughter, or your male or female slave, or your ox or your donkey, or any of your livestock, or the resident alien in your towns, so that your male and female slave may rest as well as you. Remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the Lord your God brought you out from there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm; therefore the Lord your God commanded you to keep the sabbath” (Deuteronomy 5:12-15; also Exodus 23:12 in reference to slaves). The extreme length of this command belies the extreme importance of the message. Family members, slaves, alien immigrants, and even animals are not to be overworked. Today this would mean that such people should not be abused in the workplace in general and should receive fair wages. (Notice that immigrants are included in the list. “Make America Great Again” folk are so remiss on this.)

Those who have understood this commandment properly in the modern era realize that this command addresses the issue of workers’ rights. It demands that workers are not to be unfairly overworked by their employers, and correspondingly paid an appropriate wage. This is the “living wage” called for by modern social reformers but despised and condemned by those of a conservative political persuasion. In the nineteenth century reformers appealed to this command in their call for an end to child labor, for a forty hour work week, fair wages, and safe working conditions, all won in a hard struggle accomplished by labor unions, and all opposed by the same conservative voices that one can hear singing their siren song on conservative news media yet today.

7. Theft Commandment

The most significant commandment in terms of economic justice is the command “you shall not steal” (Exodus 20:15; Deuteronomy 5:19). For conservatives this command is the bulwark in their defense of private property combined with their second amendment right to shoot anyone who dares to infringe upon their sacred property. Yet the command only partially provides protection for an individual’s personal property. The real thrust of the command is to protect the right of people in the community to have access to those materials that are necessary for their well-being and a healthy life. In effect, the command says that we should not steal from poor people the means they require to live a viable life. The command really says “do not monopolize the wealth of the community, so that other people suffer.” Yes, there should be no billionaires in our society if poor people go hungry, homeless, and without medical care. The command says do not appropriate so much for yourself that other people go without such means.

I hear “Make America Great Again” people screaming now that I am a damn “socialist.” Well, let us now see what the rest of the Old Testament says about wealth and economic issues. Space here forbids a more detailed evaluation, as I have provided elsewhere (Gnuse 2011: 10-49). But a few selected laws will suffice to determine the overall focus of the biblical text on the real meaning of “theft.”

Laws in the Book of the Covenant (Exodus 20:22-23:33), the Deuteronomic Laws (Deuteronomy 12-26), and the book of Leviticus are replete with examples. Loans had to be extended interest free for the poor (Exodus 22:25; Deuteronomy 23:19-20; Leviticus

25:35-38), sneaky variations on interest were also condemned. If you held the coat of a poor person as collateral for a loan, you had to return it every night for the person to sleep in (Exodus 22:26-27; Deuteronomy 24:12-13). In the seventh year the poor had a right to gather whatever grew in uncultivated fields (Exodus 23:10-11); they could also gather grain left in the field after regular harvesting (Leviticus 19:9-10). Significantly, slaves had to be released on the seventh year of their service (Exodus 21:1-6) or on a universal seventh year of release across the land (Deuteronomy 15:12-18; Leviticus 25:39-55). Most importantly, land had to be returned to the original owners every fifty years (Leviticus 25:8-17). A very dramatic law declares that if someone kidnaps another person to sell him or her as a slave, the kidnapper must be put to death (Exodus 21:16; Deuteronomy 24:7). Property which had come into another person's possession legally could be regarded as theft because it put the poorer person at an economic disadvantage. Such legislation reflects the attempt to maintain economic equality among people. Finally, a repeated refrain in the book of Deuteronomy essentially states, "You shall take care of the poor, the widow, the orphan, the stranger in your land; for once you were slaves in Egypt, and I the Lord your God brought you out with an outstretched arm and a mighty hand." One will never hear these words pass through the lips of a "Make America Great Again" believer.

Those ardent conservative defenders of the Bible and the so-called American way of life would never quote these texts, and especially not that final refrain. Yet they would have us believe that they have the Bible on their side in the great debate that engulfs our society on social reform and economic issues. They do not.

The command against theft arose in a simple agrarian and pastoral society in which concern was expressed for other members of the village because it was necessary to preserve a struggling population that always had too few members. A person who aggrandized wealth put other members of the village at risk when there were limited resources. This is the reason for the rhetoric in the Deuteronomic version of the Sabbath command. Today this command would vehemently condemn the person who manipulates the system for economic benefits, the person who bribes politicians with campaign contributions, the person who sells out his business and its employees for a quick profit, the person who makes profit by shady business practices, the employer who underpays his workers, the politician who manipulates the stock market and makes foreign policy decisions to benefit his overseas investments, and similar ilk (Harrelson 138-39).

8. Covet Commandment

The one or two commands that condemn coveting essentially describe attitudes which would lead to actual theft. The commands not to covet your neighbor's house and not to covet your neighbor's wife are accounted as one or two commandments by various Christians and Jews according to how they count the commands (Exodus 20:17; Deuteronomy 5:21). Roman Catholics and Lutherans follow Augustine and separate coveting of the house from the wife, while some Jews and other Christians combine the two commands. The Hebrew word for "covet" in both decalogues is *hamad*, and it carries the overtones of lust and a serious desire to take something (Wallis, 457-58). It might be translated as "plan to get or seize." Coveting

is the result of rapacious greed and it leads to the excessive accumulation of wealth. How many billionaires do we have in our society? The conservative ethos appears to praise such billionaires as hard working and deserving individuals, and not the rapacious individuals that so many are. But the accumulation of tremendous wealth in the hands of some means there is less wealth out there in the hands of others, especially the underpaid workers who serve the billionaires. How many of these “deserving” individuals break laws or stretch laws to garner their vast fortunes. Their generous campaign contributions to politicians help to maintain their rapacious actions by legislative action or inaction. Politicians justify this overt accumulation of wealth with lies about so-called “trickle-down” economics, wherein the rich create jobs for the poor. But that never happens. Overwhelming greed appears to be a personality trait of too many Americans, and perhaps motivates their political choices.

The accumulation of wealth seems to be not only the result of desire for an affluent lifestyle but the over-weaning desire to accumulate the power and prestige that such wealth brings (Harrelson 136). The desire for power and wealth too often brings a sexual attraction for women almost as an act of power more than sexual desire. The Epstein files reveal to us that such are the actions of the rich in American society who feel they have the privilege to engage in such sexual predation. “Coveting” is not a simple vice; it can lead to horrid actions and consequences.

9. Divine Images Commandment

A command that is more subtle in its articulation is the one that forbids making divine images, either of other gods (early in Israel’s history) or of their own God (throughout Israel’s history). The creation of an image is condemned because it reduces the transcendent deity to an object capable of human manipulation. The ineffable God cannot be contained within a chunk of metal no matter how expensive it may be. With this prohibition Israelites distinguished themselves culturally and socially from neighboring societies (Hendel). But who owns the image and uses it? Priests do, and this gives them power over people. In ancient Egypt priests would bring the images of the gods out of the dark recesses of their magnificent temples at Karnak, Luxor, and elsewhere during special festive occasions (Curtis 378). It would be an awesome experience for the Egyptian peasants to view their gods in procession. This would give the priests prestige, and subsequently they would call upon people to throw money into the large kettles that they paraded behind the images. This manipulation of religious piety garnered tremendous wealth for these priests. Most significantly, who makes images? Images are made of gold and silver, either solid precious metal or sheet metal over a wooden base. Only the rich, the kings and the nobles, could afford such extravagant gifts to the temples. Such beneficent endowments to the priests and their temples then gave such rich benefactors prestige and power in their communities. Thus, the command is not only a religious imperative, but it also has social and political ramifications. It was designed to limit the power of the rich and the powerful in the religious worship life of the community.

10. No Other Gods Commandment

One last command might be referenced in this litany of commandments. The first commandment declares that we should have no other gods. I am peevish enough to suggest

that the many cartoons online which portray President Trump in a mode that appears to portray him as Jesus may infringe upon this commandment. Certainly, the cartoon that portrays him as being crucified upon a cross is most clearly designed to envision him as Jesus. Elevating the President to be a Christ figure may be humorous for some, but it is certainly blasphemous. It violates the first commandment. Of course, there is also the golden statue of Trump, set up by Trump himself in his home, which reminds us of the golden calf in the wilderness according to Exodus 3. A better biblical analogy would be the golden statue set up by king Nebuchadnezzar of himself in Daniel 3. Most reprehensible are the Protestant Evangelicals who travel (pilgrimage?) to bless the statue, but claim they only worship Jesus and not the statue. But if you bless something you make it sacred and an avenue for the divine. We bless people because they are in the image of God. We bless objects in the church for liturgical usage in worship. But to bless a statue of either an animal or a human being is to declare it an avenue for the divine. They turn this statue in an idol that makes Trump an intermediary between God and people. The statue then violates the command on images in a most direct and flagrant fashion.

11. Conclusions

Thus, in total, there are six commandments that seemingly condemn the political and ideological beliefs of “Make America Great Again” politicians and voters. In various ways to various degrees these folk and Governor Abbott violate these commandments.

I am struck by the number of times I see conservative preachers waving the Bible as they preach their messages to their conservative masses. Yet they do not open it and actually read the passages they often quote (or misquote). Yes, I have even seen President Trump march forth from the White House and swing a Bible in his hands while misquoting a passage during the Black Lives Matter demonstration in Washington, D.C. He did not read from it. Later that day Nancy Pelosi actually took a Bible and read an appropriate passage from it (from the book of Koheleth or Ecclesiastes).

I will grant to the American Civil Liberties Union the privilege of disputing the constitutional legitimacy of displaying the Ten Commandments in schools and public places. I would say, however, that there is something more systematically problematic with such mandated religious displays by conservative politicians.

The hypocrisy with which conservative politicians act when they speak of using the Ten Commandments (and the Bible in its entirety) as a foundation for morality in our schools and our society as a whole is disgraceful. They need to be called out for their blatant deceit. Were people to truly read and understand the Ten Commandments they would quickly vote such politicians out of office.

United States House of Representatives congressman Jared Huffman has written a fiery book detailing the history of the rise of Christian Nationalism in America since the 1990s, as well as its incredible influence in the current political administration of Donald Trump. He notes that the agenda of many Christian Nationalists include the removal of the guides for the separation of church and state, the replacement of democracy with an authoritarian religious

government (sans elections) that will impose white Christian Nationalism religious values upon the American people. This will include the criminalization of abortion doctors and patients, outlawing contraception, criminalization of non-heterosexual activity, reduction of civil rights legislation, reduction of women's rights including the right to vote, the elimination of welfare programs, reducing aid to college education, mandatory Sunday church attendance, and demanding that all public activities begin with prayer in the name of Jesus. Posting the Ten Commandments in public schools and public places is but a small item in their overall agenda to make America Christian, moral, patriarchal, and white. They have rewritten history to proclaim that George Washington, James Madison, and other founding fathers were devout Christians. They have declared that slavery was not as bad an institution as liberal historians claim it is, and that slavery brought black people from primitive Africa to civilized America which was a blessing for them. Leading spokespersons for this movement in the political area include Vice President J. D. Vance and Speaker of the House Michael Johnson (Huffman). Huffman maintains that this movement will prevail in our country unless the rest of the American population mobilizes to stop it.

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