



Hope Unfolding



“The unfolding of Your word gives light”
Psalm 119:130

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Can the Ten Commandments Save America?

On August 1, 2001, Alabama Supreme Court Chief Justice Roy Moore authorized the placement of a 5,200 pound granite monument in the rotunda of the Alabama State Judicial Building located in Montgomery. The monument, intended to depict the moral foundation of law in America,



bears excerpts from the text of the “Ten Commandments.” Inscriptions also include quotes from the Declaration of Independence (“Laws of Nature and of Nature’s God”), the National Motto (“In God We Trust”), the Pledge of Allegiance (“One Nation Under God, Indivisible, With Liberty and Justice for All”), and the Judiciary Act of 1789 (“So

Help Me God”). On October 31, 2001, two separate lawsuits seeking the removal of the monument on First Amendment grounds were filed by plaintiffs represented by the ACLU, Americans United for Separation of Church and State, and the Southern Poverty Law Center.

U.S. District Judge Myron Thompson in Montgomery ordered Moore to remove the monument from the judicial building by August 20, 2003. Thompson and a three-judge panel of the 11th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals ruled that the monument is an unconstitutional endorsement of religion by government. Christians gathered on the judicial

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What is the Greatest Sin?

What is the greatest sin that anyone could commit? Possibilities might include homosexuality, rape, murder, and child molestation. Christians are usually more thoughtful in their speculation. Here are some responses offered on an Internet Christian bulletin board:

- Pride.
- Idolatry.
- The sin of unbelief (John 16:8-11).
- Mark 3:29: But he that shall blaspheme against the Holy Ghost hath never forgiveness, but is in danger of eternal damnation.
- All sins are equal but it’s the numbers of sins that are different.
- The rejection of the Lord Jesus Christ.
- Whatever your favorite sin is, that’s the greatest sin!

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Jesus Christ, Film Idol

In his essay “The Menace of the Religious Movie” (published in *Tozer on Worship and Entertainment*, Snyder, James L., ed., 1997), Aiden Wilson Tozer voiced his objection to religious films as an evangelical tool. He noted that, just as the tabernacle was built to carefully dictated specifications, the New Testament Church is built after a pattern. “The doctrines are expressly stated in so many words,” he wrote. “Some of the methods followed by the early New Testament



On the set of *The Passion of the Christ*

Church had been given by direct command; others were used by God’s specific approval, having obviously been commanded the apostles by the Spirit. The point is that when the New Testament canon was closed the blueprint for the age was complete. God has added nothing since

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building's steps in prayerful protest. When Moore failed to remove the monument, he was suspended. On November 12, 2003 workers removed the Ten Commandments monument from the rotunda and two days later Moore was removed from office. State Attorney General Bill Pryor said, "The rule of law means that no person, including the chief justice of Alabama, is above the law." Evangelist Jerry Falwell said that Moore was right to defy Thompson's order if he believed he was obeying God. "Civil disobedience is the right of all men when we believe breaking man's law is needed to preserve God's law."



The Supreme Court has long held that the government may not take any action that endorses a specific religious belief. The Court has also extended this prohibition to the posting of the Ten Commandments. In its decision striking down a Kentucky law requiring that a copy of the Ten Commandments be posted in every public school classroom, the Court said:

The pre-eminent purpose for posting the Ten Commandments on schoolroom walls is plainly religious in nature. The Ten Commandments are undeniably a sacred text in the Jewish and Christian faiths, and no legislative recitation of a supposed secular purpose can blind us to that fact. The Commandments do not confine themselves to arguably secular matters, such as honoring one's parents, killing or murder, adultery, stealing, false witness, and covetousness. Rather, the first part of the Commandments concerns the religious duties of believers: worshipping the Lord God alone, avoiding idolatry, not using the Lord's name in vain, and observing the Sabbath Day. (*Stone v. Graham*, 1980)

The Stone decision, however, allowed that not *all* government use of the Ten Commandments would violate the Establishment Clause (of the First Amendment: "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion"). The Ten Commandments, or the Bible, may be used to teach students lessons about history, civics, or comparative religion. Moreover, in subsequent decisions the Supreme Court has clarified that undeniably religious items may be displayed by the government if they are placed in a context which emphasizes their secular, historical, or other value rather than as a purely religious symbol. With respect to the Moore case, the District Court and Eleventh Circuit Court of Appeals held that the Ten Commandments Monument that Moore chose to install in the Alabama Judicial Building had no secular purpose and therefore violated the Establishment Clause. Indeed, Moore is quoted as saying, "Let's get one thing straight, this is about acknowledging God."

Public reaction to the monument's removal was fervent. A CNN-USA Today-Gallup poll found that 77 percent of Americans disapproved of the court's order to remove the monument. Christians protested that the display of the Ten Commandments in public buildings both reinforces the role of God in the founding of our country and restores a "moral foundation" for those who lack such a moral compass.

Can the Ten Commandments save America? Does its removal from public buildings hasten the moral decay of society? That God's law is important is clearly taught by the Bible. "You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might. These words, which I am commanding you today, shall be on your heart. You shall teach them diligently to your sons and shall talk of them when you sit in your house and when you walk by the way and when you lie down and when you rise up. You shall bind them as a sign on your hand and they shall be as frontals on your forehead. You shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates." (Deut. 6:5-9) "The law of the LORD is perfect, restoring the soul" (Psa. 19:7). We are taught to know the Law, to observe it, to remember it, and to teach it to our children.

The Law, however, cannot provide justification for sin. "Nevertheless knowing that a man is not justified by the works of the Law but through faith in Christ Jesus, even we have believed in Christ Jesus, so that we may be justified by faith in Christ and not by the works of the Law; since by the works of the Law no flesh will be justified." (Gal. 2:16) "Because by the works of the Law no flesh will be justified in His sight; for through the Law comes the knowledge of sin." (Rom. 3:20) "And through Him everyone who believes is freed from all things, from which you could not be freed through the Law of Moses." (Acts 13:39) Nor can the Law give righteousness and spiritual life. "For what the Law could not do, weak as it was through the flesh, God did: sending His own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and as an offering for sin, He condemned sin in the flesh, so that the requirement of the Law might be fulfilled in us, who do not walk according to the flesh but according to the Spirit." (Rom. 8:3-4)

In his second epistle to the Corinthians, Paul wrote:

Therefore if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creature; the old things passed away; behold, new things have come. Now all these things are from God, who reconciled us to Himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation, namely, that God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and He has committed to us the word of reconciliation. Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, as though God were making an appeal through us; we beg you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. He made Him who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf, so that we might become the righteousness of God in Him. [2 Cor. 5:17-20]

As Christians, God has given to us a “ministry of reconciliation.” Newness results from being in *Christ*. It is through *Christ* that God has sought to reconcile sinners to Himself. It is the reconciliation to God, through *Christ*, that brings about righteousness, transformation, and a new creation. It is not morality that we are to preach; we are to preach *Christ*.

Paul wrote, “For while we were in the flesh, the sinful passions, which were aroused by the Law, were at work in the members of our body to bear fruit for death.” (Rom. 6:7) Of this verse, *Matthew Henry’s Commentary on the Whole Bible* says: “The law, by commanding, forbidding, threatening, corrupt and fallen man, but offering no grace to cure and strengthen, did but stir up the corruption, and, like the sun shining upon a dunghill, excite and draw up the filthy steams. We being lamed by the fall, the law comes and directs us, but provides nothing to heal and help our lameness, and so makes us halt and stumble the more.” In his *Notes on the Bible*, Albert Barnes wrote: “The illustration in this verse and the following is designed to show more at length the effect of the Law, whenever and wherever applied; whether in a state of nature or of grace. It was always the same. It was the occasion of agitation and conflict in a man’s own mind. This was true when a sinner was under conviction; and it was true when a man was a Christian. In all circumstances where the Law was applied to the corrupt mind of man, it produced this agitation and conflict. Even in the Christian’s mind it produced this agitation, as it had done and would do in the mind of a sinner under conviction, and consequently there was no hope of release but in the delivering and sanctifying power of the gospel.”

Morality does not bring divine blessing. It damns just as immorality damns. Jesus reserved his greatest invectives for the most superficially moral people of His day, the scribes and Pharisees (see, for example, Matt. 23:13-29). He never used such words on prostitutes and criminals. God’s message to the world is not morality, for all our righteousness is as filthy rags (Isa. 6:46). The Biblical message is not that humanity is divided between the moral and the immoral but rather that “*all* have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Rom. 3:23). Morality saves no one. The most moral, clean-living, upright, virtuous, high-principled person, unless he has been reconciled to God through His son Jesus Christ, will find eternal torment in Hell along with the most reprobate of sinners.

Our commission as Christians is not to promote cultural morality. It is to preach the Gospel. The Bible warns us to be careful, “making the most of your time, because the days are evil. So then do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is” (Eph. 5:16). The will of God is that we preach the message of reconciliation, that we preach the Gospel. This is the only way to bring people to morality: through the saving knowledge of Jesus Christ. No man can be truly righteous and moral before God apart from the transformation of his soul by the Holy Spirit through the Gospel.

The Law of God gives knowledge of sin but it cannot save. Morality is not the power for salvation. Salvation is the power for morality. “For as through the one man’s disobedience the many were made sinners, even so through the obedience of the One the many will be made righteous. The Law came in so that the transgression would increase; but where sin increased, grace abounded all the more, so that, as sin reigned in death, even so grace would reign through righteousness to eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.” (Rom. 5:19-21)

Is it better that Christians direct their energy and effort to participation in marches, protests, and acts of civil disobedience, or to being the living message of reconciliation? Should we hold high signs and placards of political opinion rather than the cross of Christ with its saving power? Instead of defending stone testimony to the legal truth of the law, should we not have a rock solid testimony to the truth on our lips and in our lives of our Lord and His gospel truth of grace? We lock arms and chain ourselves to rocks while neglecting obligatory evangelistic duties. Paul wrote to the believers in Corinth, “You are our letter, written in our hearts, known and read by all men; being manifested that you are a letter of Christ, cared for by us, written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts.” (2 Cor. 3:2-3)

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What is the Greatest Sin? *(continued from p. 1)*

It’s tempting to overestimate the quality of our walk with God when we can look at the sins of others and think, “At least I

don't do that!" We Christians can become comfortably smug in our self-righteousness. It's easy to see the speck in our brother's eye. It's also easy to miss the log in our own.

What *is* the greatest sin? Though the Bible is not explicit on the matter, a simple exercise in logic can provide the answer. Jesus was asked, "Teacher, which is the great commandment in the Law?" Matthew recorded His answer:

"You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind." This is the great and foremost commandment. The second is like it, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." On these two commandments depend the whole Law and the Prophets. [Matt. 22:37-40]

If the greatest commandment is to love the Lord our God with all our heart, and with all our soul, and with all our mind, then isn't it the greatest sin to break the greatest commandment that God has given us? Certainly the sin of disbelief falls into this category, but it is much broader than that. Who can say with any truthfulness that he has kept the greatest commandment? R.C. Sproul said that he doubts he has kept it for more than five seconds at any time in his life. When we are *not* keeping this commandment, we are committing the greatest sin.

We Christians often will look at the sins of the unsaved masses with revulsion and distaste while forgetting our own sin. We dwell on the fact that these people *need* a savior, which is well and good, but we sometimes forget that *we* need a savior too. Yes, it is true that we *have* a savior, but it remains true that we *need* our savior. It is only through His perfect obedience that we become righteous in the eyes of God: "For as through the one man's disobedience the many were made sinners, even so through the obedience of the One the many will be made righteous." (Rom. 5:19)

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Jesus Christ, Film Idol *(continued from p. 1)*

that time." His objections to the religious movie are sevenfold:

1. It violates the scriptural law of hearing. God chose to reveal His redemptive plan by words: "Thus saith the Lord." Indeed, "So faith comes from hearing, and hearing by the word of Christ." (Rom. 10:17) Spiritual truth is not expressed in pictures, but by words. "The movie addresses its message primarily to the eye, and the ear only incidentally," wrote Tozer. The Bible says that "while we look not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen; for the things which are seen are temporal, but the things which are not seen are eternal." (2 Cor. 4:18)
2. The religious movie embodies the mischievous notion that religion is, or can be made, a form of entertainment. To boost numbers, many churches have fused evangelism with amusement in an attempt to tickle the ears of visitors. The message is made slick and palatable, requiring little effort or thought from the audience. Religious movies are equally superficial. "Men and women who are dedicated to sin and appointed to death may nevertheless weep in sympathy for the painted actors and be not one bit the better for it," Tozer wrote. "The emotions have had a beautiful time, but the will is left untouched."
3. The religious movie is a menace to true religion because it embodies acting, a violation of sincerity. Tozer wrote, "It is more than an etymological accident that the word 'hypocrite' comes from the stage. It means actor. With that instinct for fitness which usually marks word origins, it has been used to signify one who has violated his sincerity and is playing a false part. An actor is one who assumes a character other than his own and plays it for effect. The more fully he can become possessed by another personality the better he is as an actor." The Bible may mention drama, but it never approves of it. "Indeed, history will show that no spiritual advance, no revival, no upsurge of spiritual life has ever been associated with acting in any form. The Holy Spirit never honors pretense."
4. They who present the gospel movie owe it to the public to give biblical authority for their act: and this they have not done. Members of the Church meet and pray together. They hear the Word of God expounded, they sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs, and they bring gifts to be used in the Lord's work. There is Biblical authority for all these. "The movie is not the modernization or improvement of any scriptural method," Tozer wrote, "rather it is a medium in itself wholly foreign to the Bible and altogether unauthorized therein. It is play acting – just that, and nothing more."
5. God has ordained four methods only by which Truth shall prevail – and the religious movie is not one of them. These methods consist of prayer, song, proclamation of the message by means of words, and good works. All other biblical methods are subdivisions of these and stay within their framework. Tozer wrote. "The whole preach-the-gospel-with-movies idea is

founded upon the same basic assumptions as modernism -- namely, that the Word of God is not final, and that we of this day have a perfect right to add to it or alter it wherever we think we can improve it.”

6. The religious movie is out of harmony with the whole spirit of the Scriptures and contrary to the mood of true godliness. “To harmonize the spirit of the religious movie with the spirit of the Sacred Scriptures is impossible,” Tozer wrote. “If the movie is needed to supplement anointed preaching it can only be because God’s appointed method is inadequate and the movie can do something which God’s appointed method cannot do.”

7. I am against the religious movie because of the harmful effect upon everyone associated with it. It identifies religion with the theatrical world. The rising generation will naturally come to look upon religion as another, and inferior, form of amusement. Tozer observed that “It takes no great insight to see that the religious movie must become increasingly more thrilling as the tastes of the spectators become more and more stimulated.” And so the recent film *The Passion of the Christ* has ratcheted up the assault on the viewer’s senses just as other modern films have become more graphically violent.

Although Tozer’s views may be extreme, they do provide food for thought. Because commercially produced religious movies are used in classroom settings (sometimes entire semester courses are dedicated to them), W. Barnes Tatum of the Society of Biblical Literature has outlined a framework for viewing and evaluating what he terms “Jesus-films.” First, there is the *artistic dimension*, a movie’s particular integrity as an art form and story-telling medium. Secondly, there is the *literary dimension*, which involves the written sources available on which a screenplay is based. While some films, such as *Matthen*, *Acts*, and *The Gospel of John* use Scripture word-for-word as their scripts, most add embellishments that are far from scriptural. *The Passion of the Christ* is based both on the Bible and on *The Dolorous Passion*, a collection of visions by the Augustinian nun and mystic Sister Anne Emmerich. All movies add the element of dramatization, details of which are left to the imagination of the filmmakers. In the Bible-based *Matthen*, Richard Kiley as Jesus Christ playfully drops a banana peel on an apostle’s head. While this is no great heresy, it is by no means Biblical.

Thirdly, according to Tatum, there is the *historical dimension*, the traditional scholarly distinction between the Christ of faith and the Jesus of history. This not only involves period setting, customs, and dress, but Jesus’ place in that cultural milieu. Finally, there is the *theological dimension*, the faith claims made about Jesus of Nazareth, the one called Christ. Jesus is the one Person of the Holy Trinity with two natures – divine and human. It is important to note how a movie about Jesus deals with this dimension of His personhood.

A daunting question is: What does a man who is also God look like? Herein lies a great danger, the pictorial representation of a divine being such as our Lord Jesus Christ. First, one must wonder if such depictions are possibly in violation of the Second Commandment which prohibits “any likeness of what is in heaven above” (Ex. 20:4). Second, a profane image may be instilled in one’s mind where no image is meant to dwell. Calvin wrote that the Holiness of God is corrupted by the imaginations of man (*Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 1.11.2). Thomas Vincent wrote, “It is not lawful to have pictures of Jesus Christ, because his divine nature cannot be pictured at all; and because his body, as it is now glorified, cannot be pictured as it is; and because, if it do not stir up devotion, it is in vain; if it stir up devotion, it is a worshipping by an image or picture, and so a palpable breach of the second commandment.” (*A Family Instructional Guide*, 1674) And John Owen wrote, “The beauty of the person of Christ, as represented in the Scripture, consists in things invisible unto the eyes of flesh. They are such as no hand of man can represent or shadow. It is the eye of faith alone that can see this King in his beauty.” (*The Glory of Christ*, 1679)

How many impressionable moviegoers, after viewing *The Passion of the Christ*, will have etched in memory the image of actor Jim Caviezel? Could the visual memory of a realistic Hollywood make-up job possibly supplement the Biblical description of our Savior’s redemptive work on the cross? The physical agonies that Christ endured were but a part of His suffering. “Our griefs He Himself bore, and our sorrows He carried; yet we ourselves esteemed Him stricken, smitten of God, and afflicted. But He was pierced through for our transgressions, He was crushed for our iniquities; the chastening for our well-being fell upon Him” (Isa. 53:4-5). “Christ redeemed us from the curse of the Law, having become a curse for us.” (Gal. 3:13) God “made Him who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf.” (2 Cor. 5:21) He who was perfectly holy, harmless, undefiled, and obedient felt the wrath of God, the wrath which is due us for our sin. Christ was, for a while, forsaken by God to bring us near to Him. What cinematic device could possibly convey the true suffering that Christ endured on the cross?

Whatever the merits of the religious movie, it cannot substitute for the Holy Word of God. The Gospel is the power for salvation (Rom. 1:16), and it is through the Word that the Holy Spirit saves the souls of sinners.