

Ten Commandments

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Meet the Writer

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Introduction to *Being Reformed: Faith Seeking Understanding*

Reformed and Presbyterian Christians are people of faith who are seeking understanding. From the beginnings of our Reformed tradition, Presbyterians have realized God calls us to explore ways the Christian faith can be more fully known and expressed. This vision has driven concerns for the education of people of all ages. Presbyterians have been big on providing resources to help us delve more deeply into Christian faith and the theology that gives our living tradition its distinctive heritage.

This *Being Reformed* curriculum for adults is one expression of the desire to open up what it means to be Presbyterian Christians in the world today. Our purpose is to enhance, enrich, and expand our insights. We want Presbyterians to grow in understandings of elements that are foundational and significant for their faith. Encounters with theology, church, worship, spirituality/discipleship, and social righteousness will guide our ways.

These studies engage our whole selves. We will find our minds moved by new ideas, our emotions stirred with responses of gratitude, and calls for action that can lead us in different life directions. Heads, hearts, and hands will be drawn into the joys of discovering what new things God is calling us toward.

We invite you to join this journey of faith seeking understanding. Celebrate the blessings of our Reformed and Presbyterian tradition of faith. Be stimulated and challenged by fresh insights that will deepen your understandings. Find a stronger commitment to the God who has loved us in Jesus Christ.

To the Leader

The authors of *Being Reformed: Faith Seeking Understanding* emphasize essential Reformed theological principles that relate to our lives of faith. These sessions will help you lead a group into the theology and thoughts inspired by the challenging and interesting articles in the participant's book.

You might choose simply to begin the session with the prayer that precedes each session in the participant's book, then reading through the articles together, stopping when you or a student wishes to comment or raise a question. You could then close the session by discussing the questions at the end of the session and encouraging the group members to do the spiritual practice.

Unfortunately, that style of leading does not meet the needs of every kind of learner. The session plans encourage group leaders to try some new things to light up the hearts and minds of more people. Most teachers teach the way they like to learn. Choosing one new activity during each session will stretch you and open a door to someone who learns differently than you. Over the weeks, you will notice what your group enjoys and what they are unwilling to do. Let that, rather than your preferences, be your guide as you prepare to lead.

These session plans are designed to encourage group participation. Discussion and sharing create community and provide practice that all of us need in expressing our faith and wrestling with our questions. When asking questions, get comfortable with some silence while group members contemplate a response. Resist the urge to fill up the silence with your words.

If your group members like to talk, you might not be able to ask every suggested question. Also it will make a difference in your group session if group members have read the articles prior to the session. If you find it necessary to read from the participant's book during the group session, choose the passages that convey the core ideas.

You are more than a dispenser of information. In your role as group leader, you cooperate with God in the formation of faith and in the transformation of lives. You are the lead learner, modeling a way that faith seeks understanding. You are not trying to cover a lesson, but to uncover truth. Pray for yourself and your group members, prepare your session, relax, and enjoy!

May God bless your faithfulness!

No Other Gods

Scripture

Exodus 20:1–3

Main Idea

The Ten Commandments arise from the context of Israel’s particular relationship with God and God’s salvation. As such, they provide an opportunity for grateful response to God. The First Commandment demanding loyalty and worship of God alone flows naturally as a response to God’s saving grace.

Teaching Points

This session invites participants to consider:

1. That the God who delivers is the God who commands.
2. The First Commandment as a natural response to the prologue.
3. Contemporary personal, social, and political applications of the First Commandment.

Resources Needed

Bibles

Participant’s book

Newsprint, markers

Newspapers or magazines from the past week

Index cards or half sheets of paper printed with Exodus 20:1–3

Leader Prep

As this study begins, recognize the perceived familiarity of the name “The Ten Commandments,” perhaps one of the most recognized codes of religious behavior. Debates over the commandments’ use and display in public and civic places have generated controversy and media attention. Views within Christianity range from a strict, legalistic reading of the commandments to rejection of them as

having been superseded by the life and death of Jesus Christ, and there are many views in between. Whether or not participants can name the commandments or have studied them before, chances are that they are entering this study with certain preconceived notions. It thus offers them an opportunity to read what is old and familiar—or at least assumed to be familiar—with new eyes.

Each week invite participants to read a variety of magazines and/or newspapers from the previous week, and ask them where they see transgressions of the commandments in the news. Place announcements in the bulletin, or ask church members, neighbors, or friends to collect their publications each week and donate them for your group to use. Try to collect news from a variety of sources. Chances are that as the study progresses, participants might bring in clippings that they have found throughout the week as they become more attuned to reading the news through this lens.

For some of the exercises, you will need to be able to write responses in some way for the participants to see. If you have projection capabilities, you can type responses onto a tablet or laptop and project them. Otherwise, newsprint and markers are always an option.

Leading the Session

Gather

- Welcome the participants, encourage introductions, and open with the prayer at the beginning of session 1 of the participant's book.
- As the group embarks on this new study, begin by asking: *What comes to mind when you think about the Ten Commandments? Are your associations positive? Negative? Neutral? What are you expecting or hoping to get out of these six sessions?*

Head

- Invite participants to list the Ten Commandments from memory. Point out the differences between the Jewish, Catholic/Lutheran, and Reformed/Presbyterian lists.
- The prologue, in which God says, "I am the LORD your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt," sets the tone and gives the context for the commandments. Invite participants to look up other passages where God self-identifies in similar ways. Ask volunteers to read a few or all of the following

passages: Genesis 15:5–7; Genesis 28:10–15; Exodus 3:16–18; and Exodus 6:2–8. These include some of the central covenantal passages, highlighting what God has promised, God’s faithfulness to past generations, and God’s continued faithfulness to the people. Ask: *What is the importance of God’s faithfulness for the Ten Commandments?*

- Invite participants to recall all that the Hebrews receiving the Ten Commandments would have already witnessed firsthand regarding God’s power and salvation. Examples include the plagues in Egypt, the parting of the Red Sea, the pillars of cloud and fire, the provision of manna and quail, and water from a rock.

Heart

- Invite participants to close their eyes and imagine that they are among the Hebrews as you read Exodus 19:16–21 aloud slowly and dramatically. Then read Exodus 20:1–3 aloud in the same tone. Ask: *How do you respond as a witness to this scene? Does placing yourself in the narrative change your personal response to receiving the Ten Commandments from God?*
- The commandments arise from the context of a relationship with a saving, gracious God. The God who delivered the Hebrews from slavery continues to speak grace into our lives today. Using whatever materials you have available, write on a board or wall, “I am the LORD your God, who. . . .” Invite participants to complete the phrase with responses from their lives and experiences, and write each response on the board or on paper.
- Invite participants to examine society and their own lives and list gods that are worshiped above or before God. Write down the responses on the board or paper. Ask: *How does each of these gods command our devotion? Why is it so easy for us to fall into patterns of devotion to other gods?*

Hands

- Using the responses to the two exercises in Heart, lead the participants in composing a prayer of confession, thanking God for the many signs of grace in our lives and confessing/repenting of the other gods that we hold before God today.
- Distribute newspapers and/or magazines from the previous week. Invite participants to study the news for examples of transgressions of the First Commandment. Take a few minutes to allow the group to share their stories.

Depart

- Hand out index cards or half sheets of paper with Exodus 20:1–3 printed on them. Invite participants to carry this passage with them throughout the week and to be conscious both of God’s grace at work and of temptations to give allegiance or devotion to other gods in our lives.
- Close with the prayer of confession composed earlier in the session. After the prayer, provide an appropriate assurance of pardon, using words from Scripture (such as Romans 8:34; 2 Corinthians 5:17; 1 Timothy 1:15; 1 Peter 2:24; or others).

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No Other Gods

Scripture

Exodus 20:1–3 The Ten Commandments open with a reminder of what God did for God’s people in the past. Based on God’s salvation, God then demands that we give God complete devotion.

Prayer

O God, you are our hope and our salvation. You formed us as your people and made possible all we are and all we have. Help us now to turn our hearts fully to you so that we may see the way that leads to life. In the name of Christ our Lord we pray. Amen.

Introduction

The Ten Commandments appear in Exodus 20:1–7 and are repeated in Deuteronomy 5:1–21 when Moses gives his final speeches before his death. Exodus 20 introduces them simply as God’s “words” (Exodus 20:1) and the identification of “ten words” comes later in Exodus 34:28. This language reminds us that the Ten Commandments are not laws in the strict sense of the word. Therefore, we should not read them as the antithesis of grace as many Christians have done. Jewish tradition maintains in fact that the “laws” contained here are “the foremost expression of grace.”¹ Indeed, the commandments begin with God’s self-identity as the one who brought the Israelites out of bondage in Egypt. The injunctions that follow therefore present the proper response to God’s grace, not a way to earn or maintain right relationship with God.

The commandments appear in two tables, corresponding to the two tablets Moses brought down from Mount Sinai (Exodus 34:1). The first table contains the prologue (Exodus 20:1–2) and four commandments that focus on relationship to God (Exodus 20:3–11). Commandments 2 and 4 have particularly long explanations that tie these injunctions closely to the prologue. The second table contains

1. Göran Larsson, *Bound for Freedom: The Book of Exodus in Jewish and Christian Traditions* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1999), 138.

the final six commandments, which direct behavior toward other people (Exodus 20:12–17).

Jewish and Christian tradition hold fast to the count of ten commands in Exodus 20:1–17. There are different understandings, however, of how those ten commands should be divided to get to that number. For example, Jews read Exodus 20:1–2 as the first commandment whereas Christians understand these verses as an introduction or prologue (Jews then combine commandments 2 [no other gods] and 3 [no idols]). Roman Catholics and Lutherans read the command against worshipping other gods and the prohibition against idols together as the first commandment and then divide Exodus 20:17 (on not coveting) into two commands. In this study, we will follow Presbyterians and other groups from the Reformed tradition in reading Exodus 20:3 (no other gods) and 20:4–6 (no idols) as separate commandments.

The God Who Commands Is the God Who Saves

The Ten Commandments begin with a statement by God about God that sets the tone and gives the context for the commands themselves: “I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt” (Exodus 20:2). This introduction to the commandments is important for at least three reasons.

First, it sets the imperatives that follow in the context of a relationship between God and God’s people. The commandments are guidelines for living in relationship to God, who first saved and then commanded. So though we do not read the prologue as the first command as Jews do, there is much to learn from the Jewish counting of the commandments. The first statement is about God’s identity and action as savior, and the commandments cannot be properly understood without that understanding.

Second, the relationship begins with God’s action, and therefore obedience to the commandments is a response of gratitude for what God has done. This underscores the nonlegalistic nature of commandments. It also highlights the fact that God’s initiative brings

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salvation and occurs before the human response. In other words, the commandments do not present a way to gain God’s favor—God

granted love and care without any human act—but offer instead a way to respond to God’s act of salvation. The identity of God and what God has done for God’s people will not allow us to reduce the commandments to a set of moral guidelines or to a source or morality that has inspired Western law. Though the commandments have served those purposes admirably, the Decalogue must always remind people of faith that God has delivered them from bondage. They have been freed from oppression and death.

Finally, while the commandments begin with God’s grace, they present this God of liberation as one who saves Israel from slavery in Egypt in order to worship and serve the Lord who provided that salvation. As Patrick Miller says, the Ten Commandments invite us to draw a distinction between being *free* and being *freed*.² Freedom is sometimes taken in the abstract to mean an existence with no regulations, limits, or boundaries. Such a vision of freedom, however, is an illusion. The commandments know nothing of that type of being free. Rather, they embrace the truth Bob Dylan proclaimed when he said that no matter who you are or how powerful you are “you’re gonna have to serve somebody.”³ The question is, Who or what will you serve? The commandments declare God has freed us from the forces of evil in order to *serve* God, who is the source of life.⁴ They show us the shape of service to God that comes as a result of being freed from Pharaoh. The apostle Paul echoes this notion of service when he calls himself a “servant of Jesus Christ” (Galatians 1:1). The commandments urge us to be servants of the Master who leads us to goodness and life.

No Other Gods

The First Commandment gives the most basic and most demanding requirement of relationship with God: “You shall have no other gods before me” (Exodus 20:3; Deuteronomy 5:7). The form of the sentence in Hebrew is very simple. It consists of a negative particle and an imperfect verb. Two features of the sentence, however, pose questions for us.

First, what does it mean to “have a god?” Essentially, it means to have someone or something that is the object of your worship and ultimate devotion. In the Old Testament world, it

2. See Patrick Miller, *The Ten Commandments*. Interpretation: Resources for the Use of Scripture in the Church (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009).

3. Bob Dylan, “You Gotta Serve Somebody,” from the album *Slow Train Coming* (New York: Columbia Records, 1979).

4. Miller, *Ten Commandments*, 16.

meant expressing and pledging loyalty to one of the other deities that occupied attention. Baal is a good example of another god frequently mentioned in the Old Testament that posed temptations for the Israelites. Recognizing only one deity might seem to remove us from the prohibition against having other gods, but on closer consideration, we have as much of a problem with this issue as our forebears in faith. “Gods,” now or in the past, are not abstract beings. Rather, they represent certain values and concerns that vie for our attention. Baal was the god of fertility, so he represented wealth and abundance. Worshipers of Baal thought he made them prosperous. When we realize Baal’s identity, therefore, we also realize he is still with us. He is the god of markets and riches.

The second feature of the First Commandment that makes it complex is the end of the sentence: “before me.” *Before* is an ambiguous English word that reflects an equally ambiguous Hebrew preposition. Other possible translations are “beside me” or “other than me.” Some scholars believe this expression refers to having an image or representation of another deity in a shrine devoted to Yahweh. The question of whether the commandments assume the reality of other gods is interesting, but it is really beside the point of the First Commandment. The fact is, Israel frequently turned to other gods (just as we do), and the First Commandment is written in light of that fact. The real point of the commandment is that God expects absolute devotion. Deuteronomy 6:5 tells us essentially what the First Commandment means: “You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might.”

By identifying the commandments as the demands of a God to whom the people owe their very lives, the prologue makes clear that the commandments themselves are prime illustrations of how to demonstrate allegiance to that God. As noted above, the First Commandment (“You shall have no other gods before me”) is the logical consequence of the prologue’s declaration. God, and no other, rescued you from bondage; therefore, you must declare ultimate allegiance only to this God. This is the First Commandment, and it is the constant challenge for people who realize they owe their very lives to

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God but are drawn to other gods who promise alternative sources of life and fulfillment.

The Political Nature of the First Commandment

In recent decades, the Ten Commandments have been at the center of political controversy. Particularly interesting have been the debates about where the commandments may be displayed. Is it appropriate, for example, to display them on the walls of a courthouse? Should they appear on the walls of public school classrooms? In 2005, the question about displaying the Ten Commandments on a monument on the grounds of the Texas state capital arose. It appeared along with sixteen other monuments that reflect the history and culture of the state. The argument was made that the commandments were part of the state's religious heritage, part of Texans' identity as people who are guided by the words of the Ten Commandments.

Each of the examples cited has been controversial because of the question of whether a country that promotes no single religion should permit a text from Jewish and Christian Scripture to appear on government property. But perhaps Jews and Christians should voice another concern: Does the display of the Ten Commandments on government property remove them from their true context—in Scripture and in the life of the people of faith—so that their meaning is irreparably altered? Does the characterization of the commandments as an expression of Western culture and morality reduce them to much less than they are?

There are no definitive answers to these questions. It is essential, however, to consider the inherent political demands of the First Commandment. Politics in the most general sense have to do with influencing people toward certain convictions that order and govern their lives. It is telling that many public displays of the Ten Commandments do not include the prologue, or at least not the full statement of the prologue. By removing the commandments from the prologue, however, the most essential and most important political dimension is erased, namely, the call to be in relationship with the God who rescued from slavery and oppression. Public displays of

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the commandments such as the ones described here do not have to remove the reader from his or her obligations to God. It seems clear, however, that when they are placed within government institutions, they are placed there primarily to enhance an understanding of and to support the reputation of that institution, not, directly at least, to call those who see the commandments to submit to the authority of the One who said, “You shall have no other gods.”

A few years ago, I visited Westminster Abbey in London. I was struck by the fact that English artists—poets, novelists, and musicians—along with famous political figures are immortalized there. On my return from the trip, I told a colleague who grew up in Great Britain about my visit to Westminster Abbey. He scoffed, “Civil religion!” I realized that as a Christian from Great Britain, he was put off by the fact that Christian faith and worship had been co-opted by the state for its own purposes. The state in democratic societies is willing to share some of its devotion with religion because the state embraces religious traditions to support its goals and ideals. But God demands absolute devotion.

Spiritual Practice

Imagine how your life would be different if you were truly devoted to God with your entire heart, soul, and might. How would you spend your time and money differently? Would anything change in the way you treat other people? Commit one week to praying every day for these changes to take place in your life.

Questions for Reflection

What “gods” are most tempting to Christians in North America today? How do they entice us to commit ourselves to them?

How do we alter or reduce our commitment to God because of the temptations of these other gods?

How could the church better proclaim the demand of God for complete devotion? What practices could the church foster to help its members better respond to that demand?