

THE TEN COMMANDMENTS

BACKGROUND: The following excerpts will be the basis for our discussion on how the 10 Commandments have informed Christian civic education. Specifically, we study the commandments to honor one's parents and to not kill via the texts of Martin Luther and Paul Ramsey.

Martin Luther (1483-1546) is the German monk who played a key role in sparking the Protestant Reformation. Luther rejected the Catholic Church and instead wrote extensively on Christian liberty, the authority of Scripture, and faith by grace alone.

Paul Ramsey (1913-1988) is an American and Christian ethicist who spent the large part of his career teaching at Princeton University. He is known for re-introducing the just war tradition into Protestant ethical reflection. The just war tradition examines the morality of going to war, waging war, and resolving war.

I. PREFATORY REMARKS

1. The Place of the Commandments in Christian Education

- “Ever since St. Augustine, the Ten Commandments have occupied a predominant place in the catechesis of baptismal candidates and the faithful. In the fifteenth century, the custom arose of expressing the commandments of the Decalogue in rhymed formulae, easy to memorize and in positive form. They are still in use today. The catechisms of the Church have often expounded Christian morality by following the order of the Ten Commandments”

— *Catechism of the Catholic Church*

- N.b., we actually see the Ten Commandments taught as part of “the way of life” in the earliest extant church manual, the Didache, which is believed to have been written in the 1st century AD.
- “The deplorable, miserable conditions which I recently observed when visiting the parishes have constrained and pressed me to put this catechism of Christian doctrine into this brief, plain, and simple form. How pitiable, so help me God, were the things I saw: the common man, especially in the villages, knows practically nothing of Christian doctrine, and many of the pastors are almost entirely incompetent and unable to teach. Yet all the people are supposed to be Christians, have been baptized, and receive the Holy Sacrament even though they do not know

the Lord's Prayer, the Creed, or the Ten Commandments and live like poor animals of the barnyard and pigpen. What these people have mastered, however, is the fine art of tearing all Christian liberty to shreds."

— Martin Luther, Preface to *The Small Catechism*

2. Justification for a Maximalist Interpretation of The Ten Commandments

- "When someone asks [Jesus], 'Which commandment in the Law is the greatest?' Jesus replies: 'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments hang all the Law and the prophets.' The Decalogue must be interpreted in light of this twofold yet single commandment of love, the fullness of the Law:

The commandments: 'You shall not commit adultery, You shall not kill, You shall not steal, You shall not covet,' and any other commandment, are summed up in this sentence: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore love is the fulfilling of the law."

— *Catechism of the Catholic Church*

II. "HONOR THY FATHER AND THY MOTHER"

- "All authority flows and is born from the authority of parents. For where a father is unable alone to educate his [rebellious and irritable] child, he employs a schoolmaster to instruct him; if he be too weak, he enlists the aid of his friends and neighbors; if he departs this life, he delegates and confers his authority and government upon others who are appointed for the purpose.

Likewise, he must have domestics, man-servants and maid-servants, under himself for the management of the household, so that all whom we call masters are in the place of parents and must derive their power and authority to govern from them. Hence also they are all called fathers in the Scriptures, as those who in their government perform the functions of a father, and should have a paternal heart toward their subordinates. As also from antiquity the Romans and other nations called the masters and mistresses of the household *patres et matres familiae*, that is, housefathers and housemothers. So also they called their national rulers and overlords *patres patriae*, that is, fathers of the entire country, for a great shame to us who would be Christians that we do not likewise call them so, or, at least, do not esteem and honor them as such.

... The same [we have said about parents and those under their authority] also is to be said of obedience to civil government, which (as we have said) is all embraced in the estate of fatherhood and extends farthest of all relations. ... For through them, as through our parents, God gives to us food, house and home, protection and security. Therefore, since they bear such name and title with all honor as their highest dignity, it is our duty to honor them and to esteem them as the dearest treasure and the most precious jewel upon earth.

He, now, who is obedient here, is willing and ready to serve, and cheerfully does all that pertains to honor, knows that he is pleasing God and that he will receive joy and happiness for his reward. If he will not do it in love, but despises and resists [authority] or rebels, let him also know, on the other hand, that he shall have no favor nor blessing, and where he thinks to gain a dime thereby, he will elsewhere lose ten times as much, or become a victim to the hangman, perish by war, pestilence, and famine, or experience no good in his children, and be obliged to suffer injury, injustice, and violence at the hands of his servants, neighbors, or strangers and tyrants; so that what we seek and deserve is paid back and comes home to us.

... In addition, it would be well to preach to the parents also, and such as bear their office, as to how they should deport themselves toward those who are committed to them for their government. For although this is not expressed in the Ten Commandments, it is nevertheless abundantly enjoined in many places in the Scripture. ... For He does not wish to have in this office and government knaves and tyrants; nor does He assign to them this honor, that is, power and authority to govern, that they should have themselves worshiped; but they should consider that they are under obligations of obedience to God; and that, first of all, they should earnestly and faithfully discharge their office, not only to support and provide for the bodily necessities of their children, servants, subjects, etc., but, most of all, to train them to the honor and praise of God.”

— Martin Luther, *The Large Catechism*

III. “THOU SHALL NOT KILL”

- “We should fear and love God that we may not hurt nor harm our neighbor in his body, but help and befriend him in every bodily need [in every need and danger of life and body]” — Martin Luther, *The Small Catechism*

1. The Christian Executioner

- “A judge can say, when by virtue of his office he sentences an evildoer to death, that he serves God thereby. ... We must make a distinction however, for it is vastly different when a person punishes who has the office to punish, and when one punishes who has not this office. An office, call it what you may, is ordained to punish sin; not to tolerate wrong, but protect the right. ... If punishment were altogether omitted and mercy took the place of office, the country would be full of rogues, and the world become a mere den of murderer. ... This would never do; therefore the executioner is a very beneficial and even a merciful man, for he prevents the rogue from repeating his crime, and restrains others from committing crimes. He executes the one and thus threatens others that would do the like, that they may fear the sword and keep the peace. This is a magnificent grace and pure mercy.”

— Martin Luther, “The Right Conduct to One’s Enemies”

- “If you see that there is a lack of hangmen, constables, judges, lords, or princes, and you find that you are qualified, you should offer your services and seek the position, that the essential governmental authority may not be despised and become enfeebled or perish.

In what concerns you and yours, you govern yourself by the gospel and suffer injustice toward yourself as a true Christian; in what concerns the person or property of others, you govern yourself according to love and tolerate no injustice toward your neighbor. The gospel does not forbid this; in fact, in other places it actually commands it.

For the sword and authority, as a particular service of God, belong more appropriately to Christians than to any other men on earth.”

— Martin Luther, *Temporal Authority*

2. The Just War

- “The Western theory of the just war originated ... from the interior of the ethics of Christian love, or what John XXIII termed ‘social charity.’ It was a work of charity for the Good Samaritan to give help to the man who fell among thieves. But one step more, it may have been a work of charity for the Good Samaritan to give help to the man who fell among thieves. But one step more, it may have been a work of charity for the innkeeper to hold himself ready to receive beaten and wounded men, and for him to have conducted his business so that he was solvent enough to extend credit to the Good Samaritan. By another step it would have been a work of charity, and not of justice alone, to maintain and serve in a police patrol on the Jericho road to prevent such things from happening. By yet another step, it might well be a work of charity to resist, by force of arms, any external aggression against the social order that maintains the police patrol along the road to Jericho.

This means that, where the enforcement of an ordered community is not effectively present, it may be a work of justice and a work of social charity to resort to other available and effective means of resisting injustice: what do you think Jesus would have made the Samaritan do if he had come upon the scene while the robbers were still at their fell work?

... While Jesus taught that a disciple in his own case should turn the other cheek, he did not enjoin that his disciples should lift up the face of another oppressed man for *him* to be struck again on *his* other cheek. It is no part of the work of charity to allow this to continue to happen. Instead, it is the work of love and mercy to deliver as many as possible of God’s children from tyranny, and to protect from oppression, if one can, as many of those for whom Christ died as it may be possible to save. When choice *must* be made between the perpetrator of injustice and the many victims of it, the latter may and should be preferred—even if effectively to do so would require the use of armed force against some evil power. This is what I mean by saying that the justice of sometimes resorting to armed conflict originated in the interior ethics of Christian love.”

— Paul Ramsey, *The Just War: Force and Political Responsibility*