Brown, William P., ed.

_The Ten Commandments: The Reciprocity of Faithfulness_

Library of Theological Ethics


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This volume of the Library of Theological Ethics consists of essays that deal with ethical aspects of the Decalogue. The essays are introduced by William P. Brown (1–11), along with an introductory chapter by Patrick D. Miller, “Divine Command and Beyond: The Ethics of the Ten Commandments” (12–29), that sets the stage for the discussion to be undertaken by the book as a whole. Miller’s essay is followed by the first section, “History of Interpretation: A Sampling,” which includes the following chapters: Reginald H. Fuller, “The Decalogue in the New Testament” (33–44); Michael Dauphinais and Matthew Levering, “Law in the Theology of St. Thomas Aquinas” (45–50); Thomas Aquinas, “The Moral Precepts of the Old Law” (51–60); George Lindbeck, “Martin Luther and the Rabbinic Mind” (61–67); Martin Luther, “How Christians Should Regard Moses” (68–77); John P. Burgess, “Reformed Explication of the Ten Commandments” (78–99); John Calvin, “On the Law and the Commandments” (100–105); Stuart Murray, “The Two Testaments in the Anabaptist Tradition” (106–15); and Andreas Karlstadt, Hans Denck, and Peter Riedemann, “Three Radical Reformers on the Decalogue” (116–29).

Section 2, entitled “Contemporary Reflections on the Decalogue,” comprises: Marty Stevens, “The Obedience of Trust: Recovering the Law as Gift” (133–45); Jean Louis


Miller’s introductory chapter provides an excellent opening for the three sections that follow. While he does not accept divine-command ethics in its entirety as a system, Miller does see divine command as providing a starting point for further moral reflection (13–15). The Decalogue is given in the context of the covenant and is, therefore, founded on a complex and intimate relationship. This means “the keeping of the commandments is not an activity that stands by itself. It is part of a relational dynamic, a reciprocity of faithfulness on the part of the partners in the covenant” (18). In other words, if the first table of the Decalogue, which has to do with Israel’s relationship with Yahweh, is not recognized, then the commands of the second table have no weight (17). Miller elaborates on this by stressing the crucial position of the prologue before any of the divine commands (19), arguing that the intimate connection of the prologue to the first command is an integral feature of divine-command ethics (19–21). The narratival setting of the commandments also reinforces this idea; that is, “as the prologue illustrates, the commandments grow out of a shaping narrative, the story of the people’s deliverance” (23). This language of relationship continually recurs in Deuteronomy, and, when the book “seeks to encapsulate the commandments in a single claim, it is in terms of the love of God” (24), which is “the definitive way of speaking about what is involved in the second table of the Decalogue” (25). This leads to one of the primary features of Israelite law: the presence of motivation clauses “that serve as a mode of divine persuasion, on the one hand, and a manifestation of the rationality of the commandments, on the other” (25–6). The commands are not arbitrary. The law is, instead, rationalized and encouraged. At
the outset, then, Miller seeks to remind readers that “the commandments are a form of torah, that is, instruction and teaching” (27).

Section 1 consists of nine essays that give a sampling of how the Decalogue has been interpreted throughout church history. Fuller surveys the use of the Decalogue in the New Testament and concludes that, “for the New Testament writers the central part of it [i.e., the law] is the second table plus the love commandment” (44). The chapters dealing with Aquinas stress the continuity between the covenants, and Lindbeck’s chapter seeks to challenge the common understanding of Luther’s approach to biblical theology as “un-Jewish.” While Lindbeck makes some cogent arguments, the excerpt from Luther that follows may seem to reinforce the prevailing consensus about Luther’s theology. The essay by John Burgess does an excellent job of setting forth the Reformed understanding that law and gospel are not in contradistinction but, instead, that “the Decalogue has been central to Christian ethics because it points Christians to God’s will for a new, redeemed humanity” (98); the excerpt from John Calvin that follows illustrates this. Murray explains the views of the Anabaptist tradition, which held to a more discontinuous view of the Testaments. Excerpts from three of the radical Reformers bring this first section to a close.

The three chapters contained in section 2 each seeks to deal with contemporary issues regarding the Decalogue. The chapter by Marty Stevens recalls the introductory essay by Miller. Stevens stresses that the Decalogue “does not exist in a literary vacuum” (136). It is not set forth in strictly imperative language but follows an indicative-imperative pattern; God’s past actions are first rehearsed, after which the imperative calls for a response to God’s grace (134–38). Stevens elucidates the meaning of this indicative-imperative formula with the application of two German words, Gabe (gift) and Ausgabe (responsibility), and shows how this understanding applies to the whole of the Decalogue, even though the Gabe is not reiterated with the giving of each of the commands (138–42). Ska’s chapter seeks to address the question of whether or not biblical law contributes at all to democratic ideals. In carrying out this task, Ska makes some interesting comparative analyses in which he argues for the uniqueness of biblical law: while cuneiform laws uphold social stratification or class systems, class tends to disappear in the laws of the Hebrew Bible (151–52). Hearkening back to Stevens’s concept of Gabe-Ausgabe, Ska also argues that the biblical pattern of the indicative-imperative is a “special characteristic of biblical law” (155). In addition, he notes that “motive clauses” or final clauses “tend to occupy space normally reserved for references to sanctions and penalties” and that “reasons are often substituted for sanctions and inner conviction replaces the fear of penalties” (157). The final chapter in section 2 is by Nancy Duff, who addresses the question of whether or not the Decalogue should be posted in public. She approaches the question, first, from the perspective of the Constitution, and sets up
Lemon v. Kurtzman and its conclusions as the ideal interpretive paradigm regarding what passes or fails to pass the Establishment Clause (160–65). Second, Duff approaches the question theologically and argues that, “since Christians interpret the Old Testament in light of the New Testament, the prologue invokes not only the exodus narrative but also the story of the cross” (166). The Ten Commandments cannot, therefore, be displayed with any kind of “secular” intent or meaning. She concludes that “posting the Ten Commandments in the public realm … compromises our democratic principles and defies the rich meaning of the commandments themselves” (170). While Duff does make some cogent arguments, some readers may wish that the volume had included a chapter presenting an alternate view for comparative purposes.

Section 3 makes up the remainder of the book and consists of ten chapters on each of the commands of the Decalogue as they are numbered in the Reformed tradition. The writers each take a different hermeneutical approach and draw varying conclusions regarding the legal force, or binding nature, of the command with which they are dealing. Capetz writes at length about what the first commandment might mean today, while Barton writes that the second commandment, in its literal sense, “is almost an uncommittable sin for Christians” (202). Huffman’s chapter on the third commandment is a detailed analysis of oath taking in the ancient Near East, while Heschel’s chapter on the fourth commandment is more of an improvisational celebration of the Sabbath. The chapter by Greene-McCreight, which essentially argues for the release of Christians from the requirement of Sabbath observance, would have been well complemented by a chapter arguing for its continued binding nature. Harrelson’s essay on the fifth commandment sets forth the Hebrew Bible’s vision of the fundamental importance of the family “for the health of the community as a whole” (238–47); Simpson makes the case for allying the just-war tradition with the historic pacifist traditions; Bosman enlarges the definition of adultery to include idolatry; Anderson uses Martin Luther King Jr.’s “beloved community” and its values as a hermeneutical lens through which the eighth commandment—and the Decalogue as a whole—might be more properly interpreted; Brueggemann approaches the ninth commandment with a view to its relevance for modern-day societal truth-telling; and Chaney approaches the tenth commandment “as a rhetorical finale that addresses the motivational wellspring of the concrete actions forbidden in several of the other commandments” (307).

While some might criticize The Ten Commandments for what it fails to include, a work such as this cannot include everything. As a whole, the volume is successful in its attempt to gather both diverse and knowledgeable essays dealing with the history of interpretation of the Decalogue, specific contemporary issues relating to the Decalogue as a whole, and reflections on each of the individual commandments. The Ten Commandments would certainly provide a good starting point for those doing research on the Decalogue, and it
would also work well as a supplementary reading text for undergraduate or graduate-level courses on related subjects.