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A publication of the
Church of God (Seventh Day)
 This magazine is published to advocate
 the Bible, represent the Church, and
 glorify the God of grace and truth.

Volume 140 • Number 2

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The BIBLE ADVOCATE (ISSN 0746-0104) is
 published eight times a year January-February,
 March, April-May, June, July-August,
 September, October-November, and December
 by Bible Advocate Press, 330 W. 152nd Ave.,
 Broomfield, CO 80020. Periodicals postage
 is paid at Broomfield, CO, and at additional
 offices. Subscription is free to any who ask.
 POSTMASTER: Send address changes to Bible
 Advocate Press, Box 33677, Denver, CO 80233-
 0677.

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Bible Advocate Press
 P.O. Box 33677
 Denver, CO 80233-0677
 tel: 303/452-7973
 fax: 303/452-0657
 e-mail: bibleadvocate@cog7.org
 orders: bap.orders@cog7.org

Notice: Send all address changes and other
 correspondence to the address above.

Publications Agreement No. 40042428

**Scripture quotations are from the New King
 James Version, unless otherwise noted.**

The Bible Advocate Online appears at www.cog7.org/BA.

Cover photo: Corel Photos

Recovering the Balance



A 1956 movie titled *The Ten Commandments*, directed by Cecil B. DeMille, delighted theatre audiences far and wide. It depicted the deliverance of ancient Israel from Egypt and the giving of God’s laws at Mt. Sinai.

A half-century later, neither that epic film nor its sacred theme gets much respect. Those commandments, framed forever in Scripture and once on screen, are steadily attacked, twisted, depreciated and ignored – in the church and out. Children and grandchildren of those who once thrilled at DeMille’s work now consider the Ten to be outdated, even offensive, for today’s world. A lot of night has fallen in fifty years, and biblical morality wields little of its previous influence in the wider culture.

We can’t turn back the calendar, and it doesn’t help to curse the darkness. But clear thinking and straight shooting can help us recover balance in three areas:

1. Get biblical issues straight: law and grace. Don’t settle for either-or here; it’s both law and grace, each in its proper role. All the Bible’s covenants contain stipulations (laws) within the larger framework of God’s choice of a people for Himself (grace). Grace is the saving agent, no doubt about it! But God’s commands are so vital to the whole of Scripture that without them there would be no covenant with humanity and no need of grace from God.

2. Get political issues straight: church and state. Our Lord tells us to pay the tax to Caesar, and receive the protection of the state. The democratic state should be informed and influenced by all citizens, including those who are also God-followers – the church. But the state is not the prime caretaker or proponent of God’s laws and Christ’s gospel. These roles of faith and obedience belong to the church instead. A neutral state in America offers the church a level playing field and its best opportunity for success.

3. Get personal issues straight: heart and stone. The first telling of the Ten Commandments entailed a burning, quaking Mt. Sinai and words etched in stone. Awesome! Compare today’s version: Our Lord kept the commandments perfectly, taught them truly, and wrote them internally for us by the Spirit. The words are still true, and no jot or tittle of meaning is lost. But the impact and effect are immeasurably better: Instead of slavery and death in sin, we have the law of life and liberty in Christ – written on the heart!

– Calvin Burrell



I am a stranger in the earth; do not hide Your commandments from me (Psalm 119:19).

Anyone approaching the east steps of the U.S. Supreme Court building in Washington D.C. can see at the center of its impressive pediment a seated figure holding two tablets in his hands: Moses and the Ten Commandments. Well, almost. Actually, the tablets are blank. And no one should overlook the figures beside him: Confucius and Solon, famous lawgivers of China and Athens. Designer Hermon A. McNeil explains that he chose these three to symbolize and personify the ancient civilizations of the East and their contributions to the development of law in the West.¹

Inside the Supreme Court building the tablets are seen again, on the two large doors of the courtroom. No text is here either — just the Roman numerals I to X.

Past these doors and into the courtroom Moses and the Decalogue can be spotted one last time. In two large friezes on the north and south walls they are featured along with seventeen other historical figures, including Egypt's Menes, Babylon's Hammurabi, Islam's Mohammad, Rome's Caesar Augustus, Solon, Confucius, and others. Small portions of the last five commandments written in Hebrew appear on the tablets Moses carries.

Are these careful, abridged depictions of Moses and the Ten Commandments true expressions of faith, or something else? Long before the so-called culture wars began, designers of the Supreme Court created monuments more

Blank Tablets

The truth about the Ten Commandments in America.

by Jason Overman

to history than to faith, more secular than sacred. Moses is a potent and familiar symbol for law in general, not just for God's law. These tablets never actually speak but silently await the finger of God. Here, Moses and Confucius stand as equals.

Last summer the Supreme Court confounded many when it ruled 5 to 4 that the state of Texas could keep its Ten Commandments display, but it denied the state of Kentucky the right to exhibit its. Confusing as this seems, the logic of the Court is consistent with the blank tablets that adorn its building. Note the remark of Justice Souter, for example: "In the company of 17 other lawgivers, most of them secular figures, there is no risk that Moses would strike an observer as evidence that the National Government was violating neutrality in religion."²

Arguments before the Court followed in similar fashion. Attorneys defending state displays of the Ten emphasized their historic and secular significance, while opponents tried to show that they are not neutral at all but deeply religious. Even Justice Scalia, conservative champion of the tablets, would succumb to this line of reasoning in his dissent in the Kentucky case: "Government officials may have had a religious purpose when they originally posted the Ten Commandments display by itself in 1999, but their efforts to dilute the religious message since then by hanging other historical documents in the courthouse made it constitutionally adequate."³

The Ten Commandments, it turns out, are tolerated only if they are diluted and secularized; they are rejected if they

have "religious purpose." Texas passed the test of insignificance, but Kentucky failed by taking its displays seriously. The Supreme Court has succeeded in duplicating the blank tablets that hang above the justice's heads. Such faint displays can exist, they seem to say, whether God does or not.

With my whole heart I have sought You; oh, let me not wander from Your commandments! (Psalm 119:10).

The tablets are blank in America in more important ways than this. The empty tablets of the Court serve as the perfect metaphor for America's increasingly superficial faith. As Justice Scalia joked during oral arguments, 90 percent of Americans agree with the law, even if 85 percent can't tell you what it is.⁴

He is about right. Recent polls reveal that over 75 percent of Americans support the Ten Commandments displays, while only 40 percent can accurately name as many as four of them.⁵ Herein lies the American paradox: The vast majority of us claim to believe, but we remain woefully uncommitted and uninformed in the practice of our faith. As

Dietrich Bonhoeffer once said of Americans, "[T]hey do not see the radical claim of truth on the shaping of their lives."⁶

The Ten Commandments may be beloved symbols, but their content as "the radical claim of truth" that shapes our lives is diminished to little more than artistry for the Court — nostalgic and irrelevant. We have the show of faith, but lack the substance.

So why are the tablets of America's court and culture blank? For the answer we turn to yet another monument in the Supreme Court. Above the justices, on the courtroom's east wall, is a large frieze that contains at its center a tablet engraved with the Roman numerals I to X. The average observer generally assumes this to be another Ten Commandments depiction. But according to its designer, Adolf A. Weinman, this is a reference not to the biblical code but to the Bill of Rights, the first ten amendments to the U.S. Constitution.⁷ This suggestive little monument provides opportunity to set these famous texts of ten side by side for comparison. The reason the Ten Commandments must be diluted if they are to be



The reason the Ten Commandments must be diluted if they are to be constitutionally adequate is that they are in tension with the ten amendments.

constitutionally adequate is that they are in tension with the ten amendments.

When introduced in the summer of 1787, the U.S. Constitution held, “. . . in contradiction to many absent-minded claims by pious citizens of a later time — no formal commitment to Christianity, or to belief in God, or to any religious belief whatsoever.”⁸ Its only explicit reference to religion was to forbid any religious test for elected officials (Article VI). Across the sea, the king of England may be the “supreme head . . . of the national church,” Alexander Hamilton would write in defense of the Constitution; but here in America the president has “. . . no particle of spiritual jurisdiction.”⁹

When James Madison, father of the Constitution, proposed the Bill of Rights two years later, the secularization of the state was complete. Its first ten words erected what Thomas Jefferson famously called a “wall of separation between Church and State” — a wall that haunts the Ten Words of God to this day.¹⁰

The First Amendment begins, “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of

religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof. . . .” For Madison, freedom of religion for the individual meant freedom from religion for the state. He believed that any accommodation of Christianity at all by the state or federal governments differed from “the Inquisition . . . only in degree.”¹¹

But if the state in its various manifestations has no spiritual jurisdiction, if it must refrain from speaking in any way that suggests an establishment of religion, then what is it to do with the Ten Commandments? In the very first commandment, “You shall have no other gods before Me” (Exodus 2:3), the Lord manages in one breath to demand exactly what the First Amendment forbids. He establishes a religion and jealously denies free exercise. This, of course, is constitutionally inadequate.

I will walk at liberty, for I seek Your precepts (Psalm 119:45).

The Ten Commandments tablets must be officially blank in America because she has committed herself to neutrality in matters of faith, and the Ten

Commandments are not neutral. No privileged religion, no preferred faith, no endorsed god exists in the U.S. Constitution. The opposite is true of ancient Israel, however. Her constitution is premised on a fundamental relationship between the Lord God and the people He has redeemed. Israel’s first obligation (commandment) is that she acknowledge this redeeming God as her only God, while America’s first liberty (amendment) is to leave this matter to individual opinion.

For better or for worse, the First Amendment simply reflects the blunt indifference of Thomas Jefferson who wrote, “It does me no injury for my neighbor to say there are twenty gods, or no gods. . . . It neither picks my pocket nor breaks my legs.”¹² The state, unlike Israel, does not concern itself with idolatry.

The tension is even more apparent culturally than it is politically. The amendments are directed toward our personal “rights” as citizens, whereas the commandments are concerned with our collective “oughts” toward God and neighbor.

Stanley Hauerwas has noted that the moral limits of the state were not lost on our founders. For instance, John Adams, as vice-president under the new Constitution, said:

We have no government armed with power capable of contending with human passions unbridled by morality and religion. Our constitution was made only for a moral and a religious people. It is wholly inadequate for the government of any other.¹³

The irony, Hauerwas explains, is that while the founders as-



sumed that this system would work only if its people were virtuous, it not only failed to provide for the development of such people but also encouraged the opposite — the development of a people who push self-interest as far as possible.

In a democracy like ours, blank tablets — whether of court or culture — may be inevitable.

Not surprisingly, most actions and attitudes prohibited in the Decalogue are perfectly legal in America. This country justifies covetous desire as an end in itself as long as it does not encroach on a neighbor's right to desire. But for Israel, idolatry, blasphemy, adultery, and covetousness are not actually "rights." She knows that any desire chosen apart from God's Word will only degrade into new forms of bondage. Freedom reduced to mere choice, without relationships to train us to choose rightly, must lead to tyranny of the self — America's truest heritage.

Teach me, O LORD, the way of Your statutes, and I shall keep it to the end (Psalm 119:33).

Our intention is not to disparage our constitutional order, which, for all its weaknesses, is preferable to the idolatrous church/state systems that bloodied Europe for over a thousand years. Our point is simply to note that the state — any state — is a poor substitute for the church. If the Decalogue is to speak with authority as God's Word today, it will be through the witness of the church, not through the mandate of the Court. The Ten Words are about God first — the worship of that God of Abraham, Isaac, Ja-



If the Decalogue is to speak with authority as God's Word today, it will be through the witness of the church, not through the mandate of the Court.

cob, and Jesus. Only the church can say what must be said here; it cannot be neutralized. Any public display that avoids confessing the Lord as God is a sham for truth.

Further, the Decalogue is about the Israel of God knowing the God of Israel. It is given to that people who know and belong to the One who first came down and rescued them from slavery. This cannot be diluted. Any public display that advances the rules without reference to the relationship is fragmentary.

Finally, the commandments are not just words on rocks but the Word made flesh. Stone was never enough, so the Ten Words came and lived among us. Only in Jesus Christ are they perfectly revealed and written on our hearts. More than just memorizing them, He would have us *be* them in a world that has forgotten where they came from or what they are. This is our religious purpose. No Court-approved display of morality can match the public exhibit of our lives.

Jesus is not among the eighteen figures that adorn the nation's Supreme Court building. Blank tablets, indeed. ■

Jason Overman serves the congregation in Jasper, AR.



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Questions & Answers

Can one be a strict follower of the law and still not be holy?

Yes, one can obey the letter of the law without being holy in God's sight. But that's only half the truth. The other half is that you can't be holy without obedience either. This is an interesting paradox.

Jesus said much the same in Matthew 5:17-20. For those who wanted God without the benefit of His law, Jesus said, in essence, "Don't even think about it" (v. 17). Three verses later He explained that unless our righteousness exceeds that of the law-honoring Pharisees, we shall not inherit the kingdom (v. 20).

The solution to this puzzle is that holiness (or righteousness) is not produced by human obedience. Rather, genuine holiness produces biblical obedience. New covenant holiness comes through faith in the Lord Jesus and the work of the Holy Spirit. From this personal connection, the fruits of righteousness and obedience spring.

Paul is the prime illustration of this. Formerly as a Pharisee, he had prided himself on full obedience to the law's demands (see Phil. 3:4-6). But he was missing God's ultimate will and was not truly productive for God's kingdom.

After meeting Christ on the Damascus road, Paul exchanged his previous notions of holiness based in the law for the righteousness (holiness) that comes by faith and by knowing the Lord's sufferings and resurrection (vv. 7-10).

Obedying the law won't make us holy, but we can't be holy in disobeying either. Holiness doesn't come until we get rightly related to God through His grace and truth: Jesus. In that relationship, the power of the gospel is released and the righteousness (holiness) of the law is fulfilled in us who believe and walk after the Spirit (Rom. 8:1-4).

— Elder Calvin Burrell

Does Jesus' command to love others refer only to brethren, or do we owe Christian love to all persons?

In a dozen texts, words like "Love one another" or "Love your neighbor as yourself" are on the lips of Jesus and in the writings of His apostles. We should apply "one another" and "your neighbor" in the widest sense for these reasons:

- When Jesus was asked, "Who is my neighbor?" (Luke 10:29ff), He replied with the Good Samaritan story, thereby teaching that our love must not be restricted to friends, fellow countrymen, or believing brethren.

- In two places Jesus qualified His "Love one another" command with the phrase "as I have loved you" (John 13:34; 15:12). His love was not limited by the boundaries that too often separate people.

- Christians are to imitate God in the way we love: He loved the whole world (Eph. 5:1, 2; John 3:16).

It is true that we may give priority to serving the "household of faith" (Gal. 6:10). But we have no right to be uncaring or unloving toward anyone created in God's image (Matt. 5:43-48).

— Elder Calvin Burrell

We Ask

Having resolved the previous question "Should we love all persons?" in the affirmative, these questions remain: How do we express such love? How can one person love the whole world as Jesus does, as Scripture insists?

Readers are invited to write their own answers to these questions. Responses will be considered for publication in a future issue and may be edited for length and clarity.

Debating Decalogue Displays



Do the commandments
deserve a place in the
public square? by **Richard
A. Wiedenheft**

In recent years the Ten Commandments have made headlines all across the country.

In 2003 Alabama Supreme Court Justice Roy Moore was ordered by the 11th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals to remove a Decalogue monument from the rotunda of the state judicial building. Many Christians vehemently objected, organized prayer vigils, and staged sit-ins supporting the commandments and Justice Moore. They hailed him for courage in standing up against an anti-God federal system. While a few Christian leaders urged compliance with constituted authority, most seemed to relish the fight.

In the end the U.S. Supreme Court declined to hear Judge Moore's appeal. The monument was removed over Moore's continuing objections, and he was stripped of his office for failing to obey a federal order.

In 2005 two similar cases were heard by the Supreme Court. The justices voted to allow one Ten Commandments display on the Austin, Texas, capital grounds and to prohibit another in a McCreary County, Kentucky, courthouse.

What made the difference? Why the apparent inconsistency?

Finding balance

Well, the courts have a tough job finding a proper balance in applying the two guarantees of religious freedom in the First Amendment: "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof . . ." The first part of this statement is known as the "establishment clause" and the second part, the "free exercise clause." The two are in tension with each other because anything governments do to encourage or support one type of religious activity or belief may infringe on the rights of those who want to freely exercise another type of religious activity or belief.

Based on the Fourteenth Amendment, courts have extended the protections of the First Amendment to all levels and branches of government. And they have consistently interpreted the establishment clause broadly, ruling that public officials at all levels, from school teachers to presidents, must not use their offices to advance or show preference for one religion above another. In response, many Americans argue that the courts, by limiting government expression of faith, are advancing a secular religion. Undoubtedly, there's some truth to this.

On the other hand, courts

have also ruled consistently that it is legitimate for government to recognize the role of religion in our national heritage. When religious symbols and documents are part of a larger display that includes other historical items, they have usually been allowed.

When Judge Moore addressed the possibility of the Decalogue being part of a display including other historical documents, he said, "To put things around the Ten Commandments and secularize it is to deny the greatness of God" (*Christianity Today.com*, September 8). We may heartily agree with the judge's conviction, but his words reveal a motive to advance specific religious causes in a public building. This the courts do not permit.

We might disagree and insist that displaying the Ten Commandments alone is hardly forcing anyone to embrace Judaism or Christianity. But what if our government went the other way and allowed officials wide latitude in promoting religious beliefs? Do we really want Muslim teachers promoting Sharia law or Buddhist officials displaying figures of Buddha or Catholic mayors setting up public statues of the Virgin Mary?

Government as an ally

Several aspects of the Ten Commandments controversy ought to be troubling to Christians.

First is the presumption that government entities should somehow be supporters of the kingdom of God. If history teaches us anything, it is that when governments support religious practice — even "Christian" practice — Christianity suffers. By



When we look to public aid or support for the cause of the gospel, we are descending a very slippery slope.

their very nature, governments are in business to enforce outward compliance, and Christianity by its very nature is a free choice from the heart. When we look to public aid or support for the cause of the gospel, we are descending a very slippery slope. Governments serve best when they assure a level playing field, a truly free marketplace of ideas, so the gospel can move forward through the mouths and hands of God's true children, by the power of the Spirit.

Warning to Sabbathkeepers

Sabbathkeeping Christians, of all people, should be wary of government promotion of religion, even of the Ten Commandments. If Uncle Sam ever got in the business of enforcing the Ten, how do you suppose they would interpret commandment four?

Less than three hundred years ago, some colonial governments with established religions imprisoned and fined those who worked on Sunday. We are far better off with a government leaning the secular, liberal direction than one dominated by militant Christians who would establish their brand of Christianity above all others. Have we forgotten what the Western world was like before separation of church and state ideals became fixed in our political psyche just two centuries ago? Have we forgotten that many immigrants came here to escape a government that endorsed a particular religion and oppressed those who disagreed?

Irony and hypocrisy

In all the controversy over images of God's law, isn't there just



Is it because Christians don't deeply embrace the principles of the Ten Commandments that they protest so loudly when the images are in jeopardy?

a little irony in the fact that the second commandment forbids graven images (Exodus 20:4, KJV)? To be sure, Christians do not view Decalogue displays as objects of worship — what the commandment seems to prohibit. Considering how vehemently some have opposed removing the images, however, an outsider might easily conclude that they are indeed objects of worship.

And isn't there a measure of hypocrisy in the fact that the vast majority of people who support public displays of the Decalogue pay little attention to the fourth commandment? "Remember the Sabbath day to keep it holy. Six days shall you labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is the Sabbath of the Lord your God. In it you shall do no work" (Exodus 20:8-10).

This command is repudiated, ignored, or explained away by most Christians. It has no significant place in the lives of the very people who insist that the whole law should be prominently displayed in public buildings.

Both Old and New Testaments teach that what God really wants is changed hearts and minds, with His law written within us (Leviticus 19:17a; Deuteronomy

6:6). Jesus taught that disdain for a brother is like murder and that even our enemies are to be loved with God's love (Matthew 5:21-26, 43-48). Perhaps if His law were truly inscribed in our hearts, we wouldn't feel a need to fight about physical displays in public places. Perhaps the true people of God should be so busy demonstrating compassion, honesty, and justice that legal wrangles would be irrelevant. Is it because Christians don't deeply embrace the principles of the Ten Commandments that they protest so loudly when the images are in jeopardy? Do we fight for the symbols because we don't have the reality?

The real test for the people of God is not how well they marshal votes or bring out demonstrators, but how well they demonstrate the love of God to their enemies and how well they portray the gospel in word and deed. The work of Jesus Christ is not erecting monuments; it is sowing gospel seeds in the minds and hearts of human beings. **BA**



Www7



What Would Jesus Do . . .

About the Ten Commandments?

Suppose Jesus were walking among us in the flesh, and Christian leaders came to ask Him, "Lord, what about these displays of the Ten Commandments in public buildings? Should we fight to keep them in place or let the courts remove them?"

Would Jesus look at our impressive monuments and chide us for not being clean and beautiful on the inside (Matt. 23:27, 28)?

Would He insist that God's law needs to be written in our minds, that God doesn't regard outward appearance but what is in the heart (1 Sam. 16:7)?

Would He prophesy that all these physical features will soon be destroyed and that we must be busy doing our Master's will, with God's Word in our hearts (Matt. 24:1, 2, 42-46)?

Would He remind us to render to Caesar what is Caesar's and render to God what is God's (22:21)?

No one can know exactly how Jesus would react, of course. All we have is what He did and said on earth two thousand years ago. If His encounters with religious leaders and government officials in the first century is any indication, Jesus might not offer much encouragement to those who exert political pressure or promote civil disobedience to prevent remov-

ing religious symbols from public property.

There is little doubt, however, about what Jesus would do and say regarding the moral law of God in the Ten Commandments, once written on tablets of stone.

- He would obey it Himself, as He did perfectly when He lived among men: "I have kept My Father's commandments and abide in His love" (John 15:10).
- He would correct those who think He came to revoke the law (Matt. 5:17ff) and those who teach as doctrines the commandments of men (Mark 7:6-8): "All too well you reject the commandment of God, that you may keep your tradition" (v. 9).
- He would teach His followers God's commandments as a way of life ("If you want to enter into life, keep the commandments," Matt. 19:17), while extending forgiveness and a fresh start to all who are ensnared by sin ("Neither do I condemn you; go and sin no more," John 8:11).

Questions

1. Do you agree that Jesus' recorded encounters indicate that He might not have great sympathy for today's "post 'em in public" crowd? Why or why not?
2. Though Jesus always obeyed the Father, He often had severe words for the Pharisees and lawyers of His day who prided themselves in knowing and keeping the law. Why?
3. If He were to speak to today's church, how do you think Christ might change our understanding and practice of the moral law?

by Charles Irwin

Before his journey to Damascus, Saul the Pharisee had the law of God and the condemnation that came with it. What he needed was the grace of God and the forgiveness that comes with grace.

After his dramatic roadside conversion, Paul the evangelist became an effective laborer for Christ. Now he owed everything to his Savior: forgiveness of sins, infilling of the Spirit's power and love, a transformed life, and eternal life — all by God's grace through Jesus Christ. That grace wrought through Paul the ministry to the Gentiles.

Is it any wonder, then, that Paul's letters proclaim, with minor variations, the salutation "Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ" (Ephesians 1:2)? Both epistles of Peter, 2 John, and Revelation begin similarly.

Such greetings are not mere rhetoric. Paul, Peter, and John knew they had been forgiven much, and they wanted to reassure others about God's unfailing love. We, as they, must be recipients of grace — God's undeserved acts of lovingkindness toward us.

Acts of grace

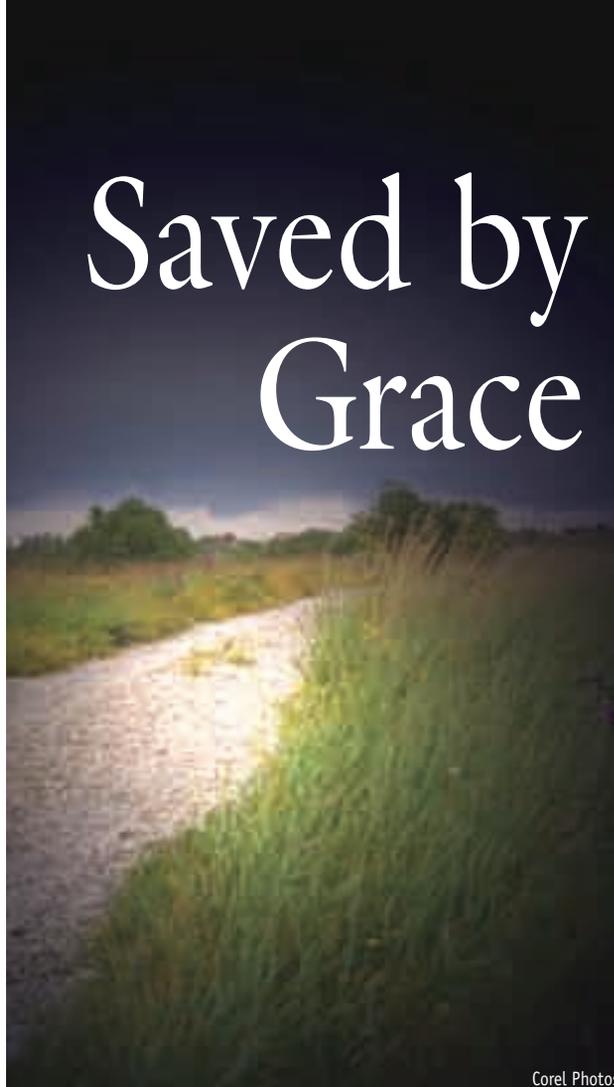
Saved, not by the law but by the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ. Grace is the key to all God's blessings. Through Christ, God has opened heaven's treasure chest of riches and lavished millions of acts of grace upon us.

Were it not for God's grace, we would have none of the common blessings of life: no food, clothing, or shelter; no love of family or friends; no existence! The special blessings of salvation are all by grace as well. By the blood of Jesus Christ on the cross and His resurrection from the dead, we have forgiveness of sins, righteousness by faith, deliverance from death, and the gift of the Holy Spirit.

We believed on Christ, in fact, through grace (Ephesians 2:8). This is how faith comes.

Because of grace, humanity was given the law of God, including the Ten Commandments. The Sabbath is an act of God's grace. Without the grace and love of God in our hearts and lives, obedience would be impossible. Efforts to obey apart from God's grace are counterfeits of Spirit-empowered obedience.

Saved by Grace



Corel Photos

Precondition to power

In spite of all this, some people in church may be indifferent or even hostile toward grace. Some fear God's grace, thinking it is opposed to His law. What an absurdity! How can anyone be saved and keep His commandments without a sincere acceptance of God's grace?

The Holy Spirit's work of grace on human hearts is necessary to an infusion of God's power and love and to a life of obedience. Review Saul's conversion. An undeserved encounter with Jesus Christ on the Damascus road preceded his obedience to the Master's commands. Christ's appearance to Saul was an act of grace, not something he earned or deserved.

Failure to embrace the grace of Christ, to stand in it, and to confess and proclaim it will lead people into the wastelands of righteousness by the law and salvation through human effort. We will never earn or deserve salvation. Lives and churches without the love of God are barren and unfruitful.

Biblical theme

The grace of God is the main theme of the Bible and the good news of Jesus Christ.

After the voice of God flushed them from their forest hideout, God confronted Adam and Eve with their disobedience. They made excuses: Adam blamed his wife, and she blamed the serpent. They offered no known apologies, shed no tears of remorse, and asked for no mercy, giving God sufficient reason to execute them.

But because of His grace and love, God had a plan for eternal redemption that did not depend on the whims and weaknesses of a man and woman. As every believer should know, our Father fulfilled the plan through the woman's seed, Jesus Christ. This is good news; this is grace!

What is the role of God's law in that plan? The law shows sinners their need for forgiveness, lays bare their motives, and prescribes their punishment. Forgiveness, justification, and salvation, on the other hand, come only through the blood of Jesus Christ, the conveyor of grace to the world: "For the law was given through Moses, but grace and truth came through Jesus Christ" (John 1:17).

Embracing grace

Once we are saved by grace, we must stand by grace (Romans 5:2). Then His righteous law will come to be inscribed in our hearts by the Holy Spirit. This is more grace.

Many are those who lament over perceived misconceptions of grace by others. Do not focus on those who abuse and misuse the grace of God, turning it to license and lewdness (Jude 4).

Rather, embrace the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, continue in it, grow in it, proclaim it to a lost world and to humble brothers and sisters in the Lord. Only by God's grace can the world be turned upright for Jesus Christ.

We should be steadfast concerning the grace of Jesus Christ for four reasons: it is biblical, it saves, it works, and we have experienced it. **BA**

Charles Irwin, a member residing in Quartz Hill, CA, once attended Spring Vale Academy.



by Barbara Neal Varma

I operate on the GooGoo scale of good attempts. In case you don't know, a GooGoo is a chocolate-covered candy cluster sold to advertise the legendary Grand Old Opry (abbreviated G-O-O) in Nashville, Tennessee. For Southerners it's a little slice of heaven, a chocolate treat packed with caramel and nuts — all the usual sinful, gooey ingredients.

The GooGoo scale, however, is an invention all my own — my personal rating for noble near-misses and a good effort's worth.

Twist of perspective

I got the idea from a fellow lover of GooGos, surprisingly found while I was flipping through the TV channels one day. I'd heard the word *GooGoo* and quickly clicked back to see a businesswoman on stage addressing a studio audience. She clutched a hand-held microphone. At first I thought she was singing, but no, she was telling a story.

I listened closely. Had I only imagined her mention of the confection? Nope, there it was again, in her account of a recent humble confession to her husband. It seemed that while waiting at the Nashville airport, she'd . . . well . . . eaten a GooGoo.

"A lapse in diet," she drawled into the microphone. "My husband just looked at me and said, 'Darlin', I'm disappointed in you. You were doin' so well.'"

Ouch. I felt a sense of empathy rise between us, remembering my own diet battles under the watchful eyes of others.

She stared intently at the camera, drawing in her TV audience, including me. "You know what I told him?"

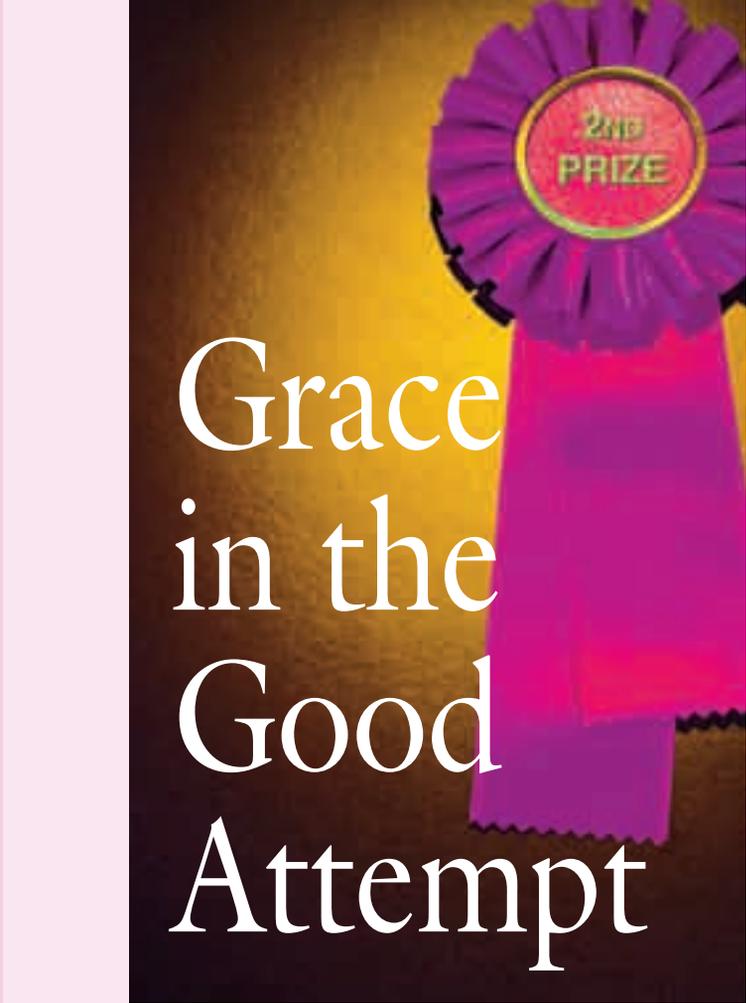
I leaned forward. What?

"I looked him right in the eye and said, 'Darlin', you don't know how many I wanted!'"

Ha! I fell back against the couch, surprised and delighted. With a mere twist of perspective, failure had become triumph, the seeming slip, a success.

Success in striving

From that moment on, I've seen grace in the good attempt. From the Ten Commandments to common courtesy, we're measured by our willing-



Grace in the Good Attempt

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ness to try to get it right, set it straight, put a life back in order. It's that first faithful step that wins the race. Where there's room for improvement, there's room for God.

One of my favorite movies is *Rudy*, a true-life story about a young man's football quest not to win but to just play for the team he loved — Notre Dame. At five feet, five inches tall, Rudy was more heart than height, but what he lacked in bulk he made up for in determination. When the coach finally let Rudy play during a final, critical match, he tackled an opposing player at least twice his size and won the acclaim of a roaring crowd. Rudy's team had already clinched the game, but the victory was his. Success was found in striving to succeed.

Staying in the game

The Bible tells us about Peter, whose desire to walk on water as Jesus did was ripe with promise and wrought with failure. Looking away from Him and into the storm, Peter became afraid and began to sink into the sea. Yet he won the helping hand of God that day. And another chance to try again.

I have a writer friend whose goal is to collect one hundred rejection letters in a year. Why would she

subject herself to the barrage of bad news? "Because each rejection," she says, "is confirmation that I'm still in the game. The odds of my being published drop down to zero the moment I stop trying."

Never stop trying, not even in the face of danger. The band of brave souls onboard United's Flight 93 on September 11 saw the threat, knew the odds, and still, with the roar of silent prayers, gave it literally everything they had. They "failed" to survive yet saved many lives that day. Forty people perished on that flight, but bless them, we don't know how many more would have died.

God of love

So the next time you see someone giving it her all — or seeming to succumb to chocolate — be glad for the effort and thankful for a God who knows our failures, sees our flaws — but loves us anyway.

He loves us when we have a Coke instead of coffee, coffee instead of scotch. When we try — again and again — to parallel park.

He loves us when a smile defeats us but we manage not to cry. When we feel the temptation but resist the sin.

He loves those who have strawberries instead of cheesecake, Baked Lays instead of fries.

He loves walkers and mountain climbers and those who roll in wheelchairs to keep up with the crowd.

He loves shower-time singers and women who dance in the kitchen more than they'll ever stir a stew.

He loves the kid who gets back on the bike.

He loves the widow who walks down the aisle.

He loves all the stubborn souls who daily exhibit seemingly small acts of bravery, proving their willingness to give it a try. Again.

And one day we'll all score a perfect "10" on the GooGoo scale of good attempts. I know I'll be eager with excitement and, like Peter, thrill to the chance to emulate Jesus — humbly triumphant, quietly victorious. And in that moment I'll whisper a prayer to my biggest fan, my steady Coach: "Thank You, Lord. After all that practice, I finally got it right." ■■

Barbara Neal Varma writes from Lake Forest, CA.





Reasons for the

Why we or anyone else should obey the Decalogue

1. Because we are Christians first and foremost. Keeping the commandments of God is the biblical twin to faith in Jesus Christ. One role of the Decalogue, then, is to guide believers in living our faith in the Lord and Savior.
2. Because Christ died for our sins (i.e., our transgressions of God's law). To continue in willful sin after God forgives and we know His way is not grace; it's a *disgrace!*
3. Because Jesus obeyed His Father's commandments. Christ was an obedient child of Abraham, and we are called to imitate Him. The Decalogue is at the root, if not at the heart, of our faith as Christians.
4. Because we love God. His law is a faithful reflection of His character, His holiness. To refuse God's law is to say no to His love.
5. Because we love our neighbors. We will not love others nearly so well if we remain ignorant or apathetic regarding the Decalogue's demands.
6. To learn and develop positive, productive character. Learning the Ten by heart early in life can contribute toward living them by heart later on.
7. To avoid the degradations of sin. The world, the flesh, and the Devil lead us counter to God's law and into slavery. Obeying God from the start avoids such pain along the way.
8. Because God gave His laws for humanity's good. Instead of a "terrible ten," the commandments are a terrific testimony of God's love and care. His prohibitions are our protection; obedience brings blessing.
9. Because right conduct carries its own earthly reward, even for those who believe not. Jews, Muslims, and Christians especially — all rooted in Abraham and regarding Moses as a prophet — should be committed to the Ten Commandments.
10. Because God's law is essential to the gospel. If we have no law, we have no sin. If we have no sin, we need no Savior. Thank God for His law because it leads us to Christ for salvation!

Biblical Uses of the Law

- As a universal guard to limit the evil tendencies of men (1 Tim. 1:9ff). Without the rule of law, peaceable society is impossible.
- As a custodian to tutor sinners in Christ alone for salvation (Rom. 7:7-11, 24, 25; Gal. 3:23, 24). God's perfect law is so high, wide, and deep that it forces all to admit sin, for which Jesus' death and resurrection are the sole remedies.
- As a guide in the Christian way of righteousness (Rom. 13:8-10; Eph. 6:1-3). God's moral law continues in the new covenant, not as a method to salvation but as a standard for holy life.

Ten Commandments

What Saith the Gospel?

The question of God's law for Christians finds its final word in the new covenant.

Paul taught that the law is holy and the commandment is holy and just and good (Rom. 7:12). He wrote that circumcision is nothing and uncircumcision is nothing, but keeping the commandments of God is what matters (1 Cor. 7:19). He said that the law is good if one uses it lawfully (1 Tim. 1:8) and that faith establishes the law (Rom. 3:31).

James wrote, "Now if you do not commit adultery, but you do murder, you have become a transgressor of the law. So speak and so do as those who will be judged by the law of liberty" (James 2:10-12).

Beloved Apostle John was most emphatic about the role of God's law and the importance of obedience.

- "By this we know that we know Him, if we keep His commandments. He who says, 'I know Him,' and does not

keep His commandments, is a liar, and the truth is not in him" (1 John 2:3, 4).

- "This is the love of God, that we keep His commandments. And His commandments are not burdensome" (5:3).
- "Here is the patience of the saints; here are those who keep the commandments of God and the faith of Jesus" (Rev. 14:12).
- "Blessed are those who do His commandments, that they

may have the right to the tree of life, and may enter through the gates into the city" (22:14).

What about Hebrews? This author quoted the prophet Jeremiah in explaining the new covenant that Christ made with His followers: "I will put My laws into their hearts, and in their minds I will write them" (Heb. 10:16; 8:10).

For the answer to "What would Jesus do?" about the Ten Commandments, see page 12.

Principles of the Decalogue (Exodus 20)

1. Faith - first things first: God is first (v. 3)
2. Spirituality - worship God, who is spirit (vv. 4-6)
3. Integrity - worship God, who is holy (v. 7)
4. Time - worship God, who created and rested (vv. 8-11)
5. Family - respect others, starting with family (v. 12)
6. Life - respect human existence, in God's image (v. 13)
7. Sexuality - respect procreation, pleasure of marriage (v. 14)
8. Possessions - respect the property of others (v. 15)
9. Reputation - respect truth and accuracy in reporting (v. 16)
10. Contentment - respect what God provides for you (v. 17)



External laws fall short of curing internal sin. **by Israel Steinmetz**

The Ten Commandments have recently been embroiled in a heated political debate. The issue is, “Does the Decalogue deserve government support?”

Many conservative citizens are working to display the Ten on public property. Conversely, liberals insist that America must be even-handed toward the diverse religions that exist here, in harmony with our First Amendment. To some Christians, it can seem as though liberals are trying to remove recognition of God and His laws from society.

Each side in this debate can cite American history, the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, and court precedent in its favor. Each accuses the other of bending the documents and

the laws toward its viewpoint, and each uses scare tactics to warn what will happen to the country if the opposing view prevails.

In all of this, the call grows louder for Christians to be more active in stemming the tide of secularism in America. How should this insistent call be answered? Should our main focus be on supporting legislation that enforces public morality according to God’s law? Or should we direct our primary attention and energy a different way?

A perfect law

The Bible answers this. It teaches that God oversees the affairs of nations and uses their leaders for His purpose (Daniel 2:21; Romans 13:1ff). Every na-

tion, however, cannot be a theocracy like Israel, ruled directly by God through His laws or ministers. He gave Israel a perfect law based on the Ten Commandments, capable leaders, and His own guidance and protection.

Because of their wickedness and hardness of heart, even the Israelites refused to obey God’s perfect law. Their rebellion was not caused by imperfect laws or bad legislators but by the sinfulness of their unrepentant hearts. After Israel’s theocracy failed, God chose a better plan by which to evoke the obedience and righteousness He so much wanted from His people.

New covenant

That better plan is called the new covenant. In it Christ’s death

pays for the people's sins, and God's law is written in believers' hearts by the Spirit. Those whose hearts cannot be touched by Jesus' love and mercy are destined to live in sin and rebellion, leading to damnation. But those who receive God's grace manifested in Christ are empowered by the Spirit to live righteously, leading to everlasting life.

We must understand, as Romans teaches, that the best law ever given still lacks the power to transform our hearts or to justify us before God. The law serves mainly to point out our sins, convict us of our guilt, and lead us either to judgment or to Christ. In short, unless we are born again of the Spirit and transformed into a new creation, we cannot keep the law. We can only be condemned by it.

Change through the gospel

The concern of those who believe the Ten Commandments should be displayed on government property, and that Christians should be politically active to ensure it, is laudable. They recognize that the real issue often is not the commandments but that unregenerate people want God removed from both their public and private lives.

Their public responses, however, are misguided if they believe that internal problems can be repaired in an external way. Many fear that America will become less spiritual, less blessed, less protected if God and His laws are removed from public life. But think about this: If Americans want to kick God out of the country, then something is wrong with Americans that laws cannot fix.

Laws are not the solution to rebellious hearts. Moral behavior can be legislated and the prisons filled, but morality of character can never be enforced by law. Even if God's laws were upheld by the courts, posted in public, and outwardly observed by the majority of Americans, this would not prove a "Christian" nation or that the people in it were redeemed of the Lord.

Only the gospel of Jesus Christ can change hearts and save our country. Only a relationship with God can transform people to want to keep God's law in a way that truly honors and pleases Him.

Greater responsibility

Should Christian politicians and citizens stand by biblical principles and support the morality of God in voting and in public service? Certainly! Our responsibility as Christians is to seek the temporal welfare of our nation by supporting high moral standards in public life.

We have a much greater responsibility, however, to seek the spiritual well-being and eternal salvation of the citizenry of every nation. Thus, the majority of our efforts should be directed toward spiritual issues, not mostly politi-

cal ones. Let's commit our first work toward revival in the body of Christ and evangelization of the unsaved. Let's seek for God's work in the hearts of our fellow Americans, convicting them of their sins. Let's pray that God will convict us as Christians to honor and obey the laws that His Spirit has written in our hearts, as a true witness to those around us. People who claim to be Christians engage in theft, lying, adultery, envy, and idolatry. With that example of law-breaking among believers, how do we expect non-Christians to honor God or His law?

Let all believers seek the salvation of their nation and its citizens through the message of personal faith in Christ and repentance from sin. As God changes the hearts of Americans and of citizens around the world, they will desire to obey His laws and will not be ashamed to post them in their homes, businesses, and government buildings. ■■

Israel Steinmetz is a graduate seminary student living in Chesapeake, VA.



The best law ever given still lacks the power to transform our hearts or to justify us before God.

Are the Ten Obsolete?

by Julio Martinez

More than three millennia ago, the divine Author spoke and wrote the Ten Commandments at Mt. Sinai. God's moral law has been under attack most of the time since.

Not just by the irreligious either: Moses broke all ten laws in a moment of anger at the start. But today many in the church and out consider the commandments outdated — even offensive — for society. Why is that?

Because when anyone thinks of self first, the Ten Commandments don't make much sense. Consider the perfect garden spot in Eden, where the first residents were instructed concerning their Creator's honor and the well-being of others. Under demonic influence, Eve thought egocentrically. She could not practice good to Adam but offered him fruit that led to death. Adam followed by opting for what seemed best for himself. Both proved that the big "I" takes priority over God and neighbor.

This is opposite of what God teaches us and of the way Christ lived. The first commandment says we shall not have other gods before the true One (Exodus 20:3). Humans are constantly tempted to do just that. Anyone who puts himself first is a god to himself.

Just as he used the "good and pleasant" tree to deceive Eve, Satan tempts us to put our eyes

on possessions that can become like gods. The second commandment (vv. 4, 5) says that we shall not make any graven image or likeness of anything in heaven, on the earth, or under the earth to worship them. If our minds are set on money, we cannot live for the true God. The New Testament, too, tells us that greed is idolatry (Colossians 3:5).

We see this truth applied to Sabbath observance. When God finished creating, He set the seventh day apart as a special time (Genesis 2:2, 3) and commanded us to rest each week (Exodus 20:8-11) — not on any day but on the same the Creator rested. A person blinded by the gods of money and possessions cannot see the benefit of a day of rest. Sabbath is absurd and a waste for those who could be working to make more money. God's law offends those whose minds have been absorbed by the gods of materialism. The Decalogue is obsolete.

From the fifth to the tenth words of the law (Exodus 20:12-17), God tells us how to be good to others: parents, family, neighbors, friends — impossible when one believes he is the center of the universe. The more the Enemy of our souls persuades us to think of self first — our honor, our rights, our pleasure, our reputation, our wants — the more the Ten Commandments don't seem

relevant to us. Our philosophy totally opposes them. God's law is ridiculous and offensive to an egocentric mind.

By the sacrifice of God's Son on the cross, we were saved. God continues to be gracious to us in Christ: Our salvation will be complete only when our Lord Jesus returns to establish His kingdom. Nothing we can do will repay what God has done and will do for us.

We are grateful, aren't we? Could someone be grateful with God and wilfully deny the Lord's voice? If someone does voluntarily ignore God's law, he chooses death just as Adam did in the garden.

Let's not ignore the voice of God as our first parents did. The Ten Commandments are a set of instructions that any Christian will find of great value. God's law is applicable in any country, any century.

Christians should not be offended when reminded of the commandments. We should thank God for His law and ask Him to help us obey it as proof of our love, for His honor. **BA**

Julio Martinez, his wife, Brenda, and their three daughters live in Montreal, Quebec, where he serves as lay pastor of the Church.

I
You shall have no other
gods before Me.

II
You shall not make for yourself a
carved image, or any likeness of any-
thing that is in heaven above, or that is in
the earth beneath, or that is in
the water under the earth; you shall
not bow down to them
nor serve them.

III
You shall not take the name of the
LORD your God in vain, for the LORD
will not hold him guiltless that takes
His name in vain.

IV
Remember the Sabbath day, to keep
it holy. Six days you shall labor and
do all your work, but the seventh day
is the Sabbath of the LORD your God.
In it you shall do no work. . . . For in
six days the LORD made the heavens
and the earth, the sea, and all that is
in them, and rested the seventh day.
Therefore the LORD blessed the Sab-
bath day and hallowed it.

V
Honor your father and your mother,
that your days may be long upon the
land which the LORD your God is
giving you.

VI
You shall not murder.

VII
You shall not commit adultery.

VIII
You shall not steal.

IX
You shall not bear false witness
against your neighbor.

X
You shall not covet your neighbor's
house . . . your neighbor's wife . . .
nor anything that is your neighbor's.

Exodus 20:3-17

Heart of the Matter

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Know the law by heart? Try a more excellent way. **by Jerry McClenagan**

“**B**ut officer, the only reason I took the milk from the grocery store was to feed my baby.”

“Makes no difference, ma’am. Just because the hurricane flooded our city doesn’t give you license to steal.”

“Sir, I don’t mean any disrespect, but which should I choose: killing or stealing?”

“Pardon me?”

“Let my baby die, or steal the milk that will go stale soon?”

Puzzlement on the policeman’s face masked his frustration. He shook his head, handed the woman the gallon of milk, and slogged away.

This scenario from the Katrina disaster demonstrates an observation Philip Yancey makes in his book *What’s So Amazing About Grace?*: “You can know the law by heart without knowing the heart of it.”

Jesus didn’t make that mistake; He focused on the heart of the law. He said that He had not come to destroy it (Matthew 5:17), then amplified the true intent of the Decalogue: He equated hatred with murder and described lust as equal to adultery.

Part of Jesus’ new covenant mission was to help those who would obey God to learn the

heart of the Torah. Jesus applauded the letter of God’s everlasting law by showing its spirit as a vital principle of a godly life. He pointed up the fallacy of external religion (5:21ff; 23:25-28). The sins listed in this warning from Christ point directly to the need for an internal Decalogue:

“For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false testimony, slander. These are what make a man ‘unclean’” (15:19-20a).

The killer, the weapon

It is necessary to wrestle with Paul’s understanding of this topic in Romans and 2 Corinthians:

I found that the very commandment that was intended to bring life actually brought death. . . . the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life (Romans 7:10; 2 Corinthians 3:6).

In essence, Paul says that the written code (or letter of the law) pronounces a sentence of death. But who is the real killer here?

King Sin had reigned since Adam, and his entire rule was strewn with the carcasses of the slaughtered, says Paul in the first half of Romans. This reign of terror had no reprieve until God in His grace provided a way out from the penalty of sin. “The

wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord” (Romans 6:23).

Just earlier, Paul had asked the pivotal question “Shall we sin because we are not under law but under grace?” and answered it emphatically, “By no means!” (v. 15). Then he described what it means to be under grace instead of under law:

But now, by dying to what once bound us, we have been released from the law so that we serve in the new way of the Spirit, and not in the old way of the written code (7:6).

When we submit to the rule of King Grace, says Paul, we “die” to what once bound us and what delivers the death sentence empowered by sin: the law.

King Sin is a killer all right, and he uses the law as a weapon. But the written code in the killer’s hands is not evil in itself. The misuse of the law by the evil king does not alter the law’s essential character of holiness. Paul declared that the Ten Commandments were “holy, righteous and good” (v. 12).

Inward grace

King Sin has been dethroned. Christ paid the death penalty for sins, and King Grace now rules

in the lives of God's people. Released from the law's curse imposed by sin, we fulfill the righteous requirements of the law by walking in the Spirit (see "Role of the Law").

Jeremiah predicts a time when the law would become inward and dynamic under a new covenant (Jeremiah 31; Hebrews 8:6-13). The old covenant was defective because it was merely outward, written on tablets of stone.

Glorious Sun, fading moon

In 2 Corinthians 3 Paul contrasts the old and new covenants by their differing degrees of glory. The old covenant began brightly enough. But it belonged to a vanishing order that started to fade immediately after its inception, just as the glory on Moses' face began to fade as soon as he left the divine presence with the tablets of the law.

On the other hand, that covenant destined to be permanent was invested with a far greater glory. The new covenant's glory, seen in the Lord Jesus Christ and the Spirit's ministry, caused the glory of the old covenant, seen in the stone-written law, to fade into insignificance.

The greater light always obscures a lesser light. As the moon remains in its orbit, so the written Decalogue remains intact — but only as a reflection of Him who is greater. The essence of the new covenant is the brilliant Sun of righteousness (Malachi 4:2), whose resplendent glory gives the law its power.

In 2 Corinthians 3 the heart of the matter is that the spirit of God's good law is fulfilled in and through the human spirit by the

presence of the Holy Spirit. The greater glory is not seen outwardly on the face but inwardly in the character. Far from losing its intensity and luster, as did Moses' glory, the glory experienced under the new covenant increases progressively until the Christian finally acquires the eternal glory of the risen, ascended Christ (v. 18).

Fruit of the Spirit

Today, almost twenty centuries into the new covenant, God's people tend to slip back to the lesser glory, substituting external rules and regulations for issues of the heart.

It may help us to approach matters of the Decalogue in a fresh way. The positive expression of the law's "thou shalt nots" may be found in the fruit of the Spirit: "love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control" (Galatians 5:22, 23). Jesus spoke of this fruit in His Sermon:

"Each tree is recognized by its own fruit. . . . The good

man brings good things out of the good stored up in his heart, and the evil man brings evil things out of the evil stored up in his heart" (Luke 6:44, 45).

In this manner, the Decalogue comes to its most positive expression in the fruitful overflow of a transformed life. The heart of the matter is that the spiritual intent of God's holy law is manifested in holiness and service by the presence and power of the Holy Spirit.

The heart of this matter is God's purpose and provision that all His children practice the great and glorious law as exemplified and taught by the Lord Jesus Christ. ■■

Jerry McClenagan attends the Christian Church of God, a Sabbath-observing congregation in Amarillo, TX.



Scripture quotations were taken from the *New International Version*.

Role of the Law

Romans 8:1-4 is a grand summary of Paul's teaching about law and gospel in chapters 4-7. After assuring believers of their justification in Christ (vv. 1, 2), Paul reviews his two main points about the role of the law:

- Because of human sin, the law is powerless to save: "For what the law was powerless to do in that it was weakened by the sinful nature . . ." (v. 3a).
- By the Son and the Spirit, God has achieved for us and in us the true intent of His law: "God did by sending his own Son . . . in order that the righteous requirements of the law might be fully met in us, who do not live according to the sinful nature but according to the Spirit" (vv. 3b, 4).

This is the heart of the matter for Paul — in perfect harmony with God's perfect law.

— Jerry McClenagan

Mail Bag



Changing the world

Hurricanes like Katrina and other natural disasters [December '05, p. 16ff] would occur if the city of New Orleans existed or not. So why would a loving God deliberately do evil to innocent people?

Our Creator has decreed that [man] should choose the path of his own existence while simultaneously setting up inexorable laws that challenge man by the course of nature's operation. Apologist Walter Martin suggests that God's greatest gift to mankind was the decree that we must choose whom we will serve (Deut. 30:16-20), even if this means that we often stray from the Creator's will, thereby bringing about many disasters He did not decree. But man cannot short-circuit or alter the final will of his Creator no matter which way [he chooses]. Ultimately, our Creator brings His will to pass. The theology of Ronald Neibuhr says that God does not govern every situation, but He enters our situation in a limited manner to make things come out according to His ultimate will.

God is calling His people not to issue a decree of judgment on fellow humans but to show them love, grace, and mercy in their time of need. It is up to us to act on the decree of our heavenly Father, bringing His redemption to those who need it. We may not be able to greatly change the world until Christ returns, but how can we leave it the same?

*T. R.
Weiser, ID*

Bipolar struggles

Hats off to Nancy Hagerman for having courage to go public about her condition [*Now What?*, January '06; <http://nowwhat.cog7.org>]. I take medicine for bipolar disorder, too. I attend a church but find a tremendous lack of knowledge about mental health issues there and in the general public. When people discover an individual [is] bipolar, many become fearful. It is a biochemical problem, not demonism. It took seven years before I received the proper diagnosis. By that time, my marriage had fallen apart, and I was unable to hold down a job. I have had people retreat or even flee from me when they discovered I have bipolar disorder. Some at church whispered that I was demon-possessed, and the reaction of others can be quite surprising.

Please tell Nancy thank you from another bipolar who appreciates the struggles she has had in her life. And thank you for printing an accurate picture of what happens when someone is afflicted with this

major health problem. Excellent and very educational!

*B. F.
South Carolina*

Reaching souls

Thank you for your perseverance. You have not ceased sending me the BA. You have taken your time, busily putting together all articles from "First Word" to "Last Word" to be understandable. It has glorified the grace of the Lord. Thank you for reaching to many souls, by many modern ways, in many countries.

*M. W.
Kenya*

Thank you for all the years you have sent me your excellent magazine free of charge. I've enjoyed it greatly and learned a lot about how to be more like Jesus.

*D. W. (inmate)
Orofino, ID*

I started contact with BAP in 1978. Since then you [have been] encouraging me in the way of salvation. Through your magazines and tracts, a Bible study class has been established in my house, and many souls [have been] won to Christ. Through our personal and open-air evangelism, many have repented and entered the Christ fold. I congratulate the staff and directors and thank God Almighty who made it possible for the Church to have such a magazine.

*M. T. C.
Nigeria*



Giving Your All

by Israel Steinmetz

I've met people who think they're Christians mostly because they keep a lot of rules and regs. Yeah, right.

I've also met people who say they're Christians but think they can live any way they want and still "go to heaven." They say things like "You don't have to keep the Ten Commandments. Jesus did away with the law."

Then I've seen people who wouldn't say such things out loud, but it's obvious by what they do that they believe them. Yeah, right again.

Did Jesus teach that we're saved by keeping rules and regs? Regarding how you live, did He say that anything goes because we all end up in the same place anyway? 'Fraid not. Here's what Jesus said: "Do not think that I came to destroy the Law or the Prophets. I did not come to destroy but to fulfill" (Matt. 5:17).

OK, you've heard that before, but what did Jesus mean?

Well, in Matthew 5 He talked a lot about keeping — not canceling — the laws of God. The people He was talking to knew they weren't supposed to commit adultery, but Jesus wanted them to not even think of bedding someone who wasn't their husband or wife. The people also knew they weren't supposed to murder, but Jesus didn't want them to hold onto hatred or be angry for no good reason. Tough stuff.

Jesus took the law to a whole new level in order to fulfill it. He said that true obedience

is not something visible for the whole world to see. It has to start with the heart, with change deep inside. Inward sins — those that no one but God sees — are as wrong as outward ones.

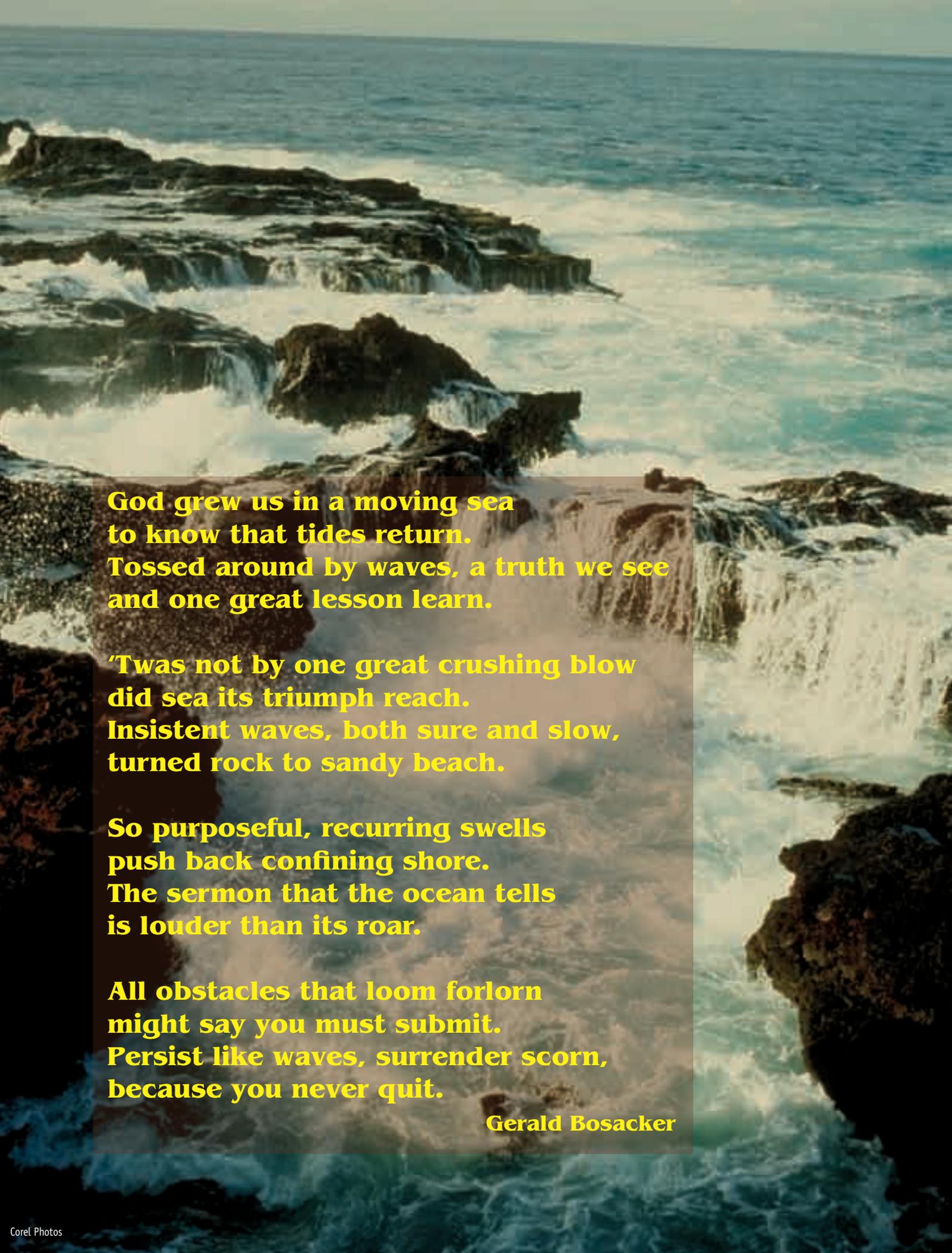
Living for Jesus means being changed by God's Spirit from the inside out so that our attitudes, thoughts, and actions change. It starts with asking Jesus to forgive our sins and wash the dirt from our lives (1 John 1:9). As we get to know God better each day by spending time with Him, He can change us so that we obey Him not out of habit or guilt, but out of love.

Jesus calls us to extreme love for God and people (Matt. 22:37-40) and to radical obedience to Him as a result of that love (John 14:15). This kind of faith will take care of the sin stuff over the long run.

The biggest turn-off for Jesus was fake obedience from people who didn't truly love God, like the Pharisees. You must be better than that, He said. It's not enough to keep the Sabbath if you're not resting in the free salvation that Jesus gave you (Heb. 4:1-11). It's not enough to refuse unclean meats if you're filling your heart and mind with all kinds of unclean music, movies, and Internet sites (Matt. 23:23).

Jesus wants your heart, not just your actions. He wants your love, not just your obedience. Ultimately, He wants it all.

Israel Steinmetz is a graduate seminary student living in Chesapeake, VA.



**God grew us in a moving sea
to know that tides return.
Tossed around by waves, a truth we see
and one great lesson learn.**

**'Twas not by one great crushing blow
did sea its triumph reach.
Insistent waves, both sure and slow,
turned rock to sandy beach.**

**So purposeful, recurring swells
push back confining shore.
The sermon that the ocean tells
is louder than its roar.**

**All obstacles that loom forlorn
might say you must submit.
Persist like waves, surrender scorn,
because you never quit.**

Gerald Bosacker

What's new with . . .

Publications

- For deeper knowledge, order *A Study of the Holy Spirit* from the BAP (\$1.50)



National FYC

- **Mission Possible** near Jasper, AR, July 16-23

Spring Vale Academy

- **Alumni weekend**, March 24-26

Ministries Training System

- **Summer Session** in Denver, CO, June 12-22

North American Women's Ministries

- **National Women's Retreat** in Springfield, MO, April 14-16

Publications

Keith Michalak, Director

The Bible Advocate Press publishes and distributes gospel magazines and tracts for the Church of God (Seventh Day), usually without charge to those who receive it.



The *Bible Advocate* magazine has taught and inspired tens of thousands of readers for 142 years. Its messages of salvation, doctrine, prophecy, and current events have changed lives by directing readers to Christ. The BA has fortified believers to face life's struggles and overcome them to the glory of God.

Printed material is an effective way to share the teachings of Scripture. At a small cost, this literature travels many places – even to areas with restricted communication. Much of it goes to pastors and church leaders in other countries, where gospel material is more precious and less abundant than in the United States. Often tracts and magazines are passed around until they are worn out.

In recent years, the Internet has provided an open door to share the BA and literature around the world. Many times people come across a BAP tract or magazine and contact us to learn more. Personal correspondence with readers is an essential follow-up function at BAP. In cooperation with the Holy Spirit, we continue to sow the seeds and water the plants.

Care to support this ministry? Here's how:

1. A small donation several times per year will join readers to the Editor's Circle. Ask for coupon reminders to give and to pray.
2. Order and read the best of CoG7 literature, such as our Light for Life tract on *The Da Vinci Code*. Then pass it along.
3. Watch for our annual funding letter in April-May. This is the only direct-mail request that readers who respond will receive all year.





Dedicated property:

The church in Madera, CA, presented themselves to the Lord on December 3, 2005, as they gave thanks for facilities recently purchased. Elder Heber Vega preached the dedica-

tion sermon. Other speakers were Larry Zaragoza, Martin Cicero, and Loren Stacy. Elias Escoto is the pastor, and everyone is welcome to attend at 420 E. Fourth St. in Madera.



Alexandria, VA, church leaders receive a General Conference certificate of recognition from Northeastern District Superintendent Richard Wiedenheft on December 25, 2005. The congregation began as an outreach of the Lanham, MD, church in early 2000 when lay leaders Jose Fredi Mata, Jacobo Martinez, and other families began meeting there. Now some 60 brethren gather each Sabbath at the Bethel World Outreach Ministries, 8305 Richmond St., Suite 2A, in Alexandria. They hold evangelistic services on Sunday evenings and share the gospel with friends, relatives, and neighbors throughout the week.

Missions to Cambodia

Utilizing an estate offering designated for the poor in Cambodia, Missions Abroad partnered with Far East Broadcasting Corporation (FEBC) to fulfill the wishes of the donor. Every day the FEBC radio network broadcasts the gospel in 150 languages, with a potential audience of 2.5 billion. Working with the FEBC office in Cambodia, Missions Abroad provided 100 bicycles, vegetable seedlings, and 400 radio sets to the poor in that country. The recipients were members, workers, and leaders of 100 churches in the villages of St. Vay, Rieng province, 122 kilometers from Phnom Penh, Cambodia's capital.

— *Bill Hicks*
Missions Director

MTS Summer Session '06

The second Summer Session of Ministries Training System is planned for June 12-22 in Denver, Colorado. A strong line-up of courses and instructors will address educational requirements for the Lay Pastor Certificate and for ordained ministers. Summer students are limited to those who apply and are approved, with preference given to mature men who will pursue pastoral or vocational ministry in the Church. Interested students may apply online at <http://mts.cog7.org>, by phone at 303-452-7973, or by e-mailing training@cog7.org.

— *Calvin Burrell*
MTS Director

Clarence and Louella Severson celebrated their 60th anniversary in Lodi, CA, on November 18, 2005. They are both children of CoG7 pioneer ministers, Elder Ed Severson and Elder E. A. Straub.



In the June BA we will print names, hometowns, and dates of CoG7 couples celebrating their 50th anniversaries anytime in 2006. Please send information of those you know to the editor by April 3.



Elder Antonio Vega prays for five baptismal candidates at the Lanham, MD, church on December 7, 2005. The candidates (L to R) are Noelle Briones and Carmen, Janeth, Sergio, and Ariel Rodriguez.

Mission Possible '06

Life takes on new meaning when we discover our identity, our purpose, our destiny. We'll help you discover all three as you join other youth from across North America at Mission Possible in Jasper, Arkansas, July 16-23. Here, you can let go of the chains of impossibility and be set free for all God created you to be. Contact the National FYC office at 541-517-1079 or nfyc@cog7.org.

– Kurt Lang
NFYC Director

PMT Journeys On

Fourteen people answered the call to foreign fields through Pioneer Missionary Training (PMT) December 21-31, 2005. Nine traveled to serve and learn in Tijuana, Mexico, the seventh consecutive year a team has trained with our neighbors to the south. Five others took a new journey into Argentina. View reports from these teams online at <http://home.cog7.org/ministries/pmt/>.

– Kurt Lang
PMT Committee

Biennial Conference

West Coast District will hold its biennial Family Conference July 4-8 at the Radisson Hotel Sacramento, Sacramento, California, with the theme "The Life-Giving Church." For late information, visit the WCD section of the G. C. Web site (www.cog7.org), or e-mail the office at wcd.office@cog7.org.

– Roy Roche
WCD Office

Calendar of Events

- March 1- LITES applications due for spring/summer term; contact 660-783-9544 or lites@cog7.org
- March 4 - Pacific Northwest Super Sabbath, Jefferson, OR; contact Ken Knoll (541-688-6008)
- March 12 - Local Leadership Conference, Owosso, MI; contact Pastor Max Morrow (989-723-2251 or pastormax@juno.com)
- March 24-26 - Alumni Weekend at Spring Vale Academy, Owosso, MI (989-725-2391)
- April 11 - Lord's Supper Service in every church
- April 14-16 - National Women's Retreat, Springfield, MO; contact Mary Ling (mary.ling@cog7.org)
- April 15-16 - Conroe, TX, Youth Conference; contact Jason and Rose Rodriguez (281-220-9652; jrande@houston.rr.com)
- April 20-22 - National Youth Week/Hunger Lock-In; info packets at <http://fyc.cog7.org>; contact Kurt and Kristi Lang, NFYC director (541-517-1079)
- April 28-29 - Fifth Sabbath Fellowship in Marion, IA; Whaid Rose preaching; contact christy@cog7.org
- October 3-7 - Biennial meeting of the North American Ministerial Council, Overland Park, KS
- November 13-18 - The quadrennial International Ministerial Congress, Mexico City (previously scheduled for Brazil)



Over 1,000 persons attended Sabbath services of the 10th National Youth Congress in Spanish Town, Jamaica, December 23-26, 2005. Kurt Lang of Oregon and Naomi Diaz of Texas represented the North American Youth Ministries. Homer Hamilton and a team of six lead the youth work in Jamaica.

International Tour

Mexico

It began in 1920 when a Mexican citizen living in the U.S. came back to his hometown of Saltillo, Coahuila, and pioneered the Church of God (Seventh Day) in this country. In 1924 this small group studied its first Sabbath School quarterly, inaugurating a tradition of Bible-based reflection and dialogue that remains to this day.

Other congregations soon began in Mexico City; Guadalajara; Panuco, Veracruz; and Acatlipa, Morelos. A tradition was born: general convocations that bring much fraternal communion and many memories of brethren.

An integrating element of the Church's identity was its decisive preaching against idolatrous and pagan customs practiced by the dominant religion of this culture. The imminent return of our Lord, the Ten Commandments and Sabbath, Israel's return to Palestine, annual Lord's Supper, and Church name were among the distinctive doctrines preached. For a time the Mexican churches also taught the Jewish festivities of Passover, Pentecost, and Tabernacles as important markers with the God of Israel.

The 1950s saw a notable increase in missionary preaching in the states of Coahuila, Chihuahua, and Baja California in the north and Yucatan (Merida)



Church offices, Cuernavaca, Morelos

in the south. A large number of ministers were consecrated then, many of whom are still alive.

In 1967 the ministerial college was created to prepare pastors with leadership tools. Eight administrative districts and a central economic system were organized in 1973, about the time that hundreds of youth felt the drive to begin national congresses.

In the 1960s and 70s division came to the bosom of the Church. Hard times have matured our community as we sense God's incomparable closeness and learn that love alone will last through eternity.

In the 80s the Church adopted changes designed for growth. It organized into 16 districts, reflecting expansion into all states of the Mexican Republic, and it created an Evangelism and Missions Department. In 1987 the winter sessions of the Ministerial Training Seminary started, resulting in a more responsible and serious study of the Bible. The 1989 council focused on evangelism as its main work and

included the gospel as its central message. In the early 1990s the Church sent missionaries to places like Belize, Panama, Argentina, and Uruguay and began sharing with other countries materials it produced.

In 1997 the Mexican government recognized the Church as ninth in more than 2,000 registrations of Religious Associations in the Republic, and it assigned the Church the exclusive use of the name Iglesia de Dios (7^o día).

Yesterday we saw the action of men and women who, with tears and sacrifice, brought the Word of God to cities and towns, communities, and families. Now we see a church reflecting on its past and longing for a better tomorrow. Now the Church consists of 760 congregations in 17 districts, 248 ministers, 370 deacons, and 228 Church workers/pastors serving with 46,171 members and parishioners.

With His powerful arms, God is upholding His church. He gives meaning and perspective to our presence in this world. The Church still writes history each day to accomplish our mission in our own context, "to the end of the earth," under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. We acknowledge the challenge of sharing our faith and tradition with Mexico and that we have a supreme model in this job: Jesus Christ.

— *Jacobo González Torres*,
President, Mexican Conference

Sinai Revisited

Sinai was a significant stopover in Israel's forty-year journey through the wilderness. It is where God gave the Ten Commandments — instructions to govern the people in their relationships with one another and with Him. This was a defining experience for the nation of Israel.

Let's revisit Sinai for a moment. Notice that the giving of the law was only half of what God did there (Exodus 20–23). In addition, God gave to Moses the pattern for building the tabernacle, with instructions for its use (25–30).

The tabernacle was given for the worship of God. The detailed instructions provided both a blueprint for the building and a pattern for worship. Through the law, God called His people to walk in the truth of His Word. Through the tabernacle, God called them to a walk in the spirit of worship.

These two elements, Word and worship, nicely balance each other. This calls to mind the saying "Word without worship tends toward legalism, and worship without the Word tends toward fanaticism." Legalism is an unhealthy approach to Scripture in which my personal convictions about what God requires of me become your obligation. Fanaticism is marked by excessive enthusiasm and intense, uncritical devotion, according to the dictionary.

Both extremes should be avoided; balance is the key. In His infinite wisdom, God gave not just the law but worship when He met with Israel on the holy mount. Said another way, here's what happens when we balance the two: Spirit without Word: People blow up. Word without Spirit: People dry up. Spirit and Word: People grow up.

The annual festivals God gave to Israel include Pentecost, which commemorates the giving of the law at Sinai fifty days after the Passover and the Red Sea crossing. And so it was that fifty days following the death of Christ, our Passover, Pentecost took on a whole new meaning through the coming of the Holy Spirit (Acts 2).

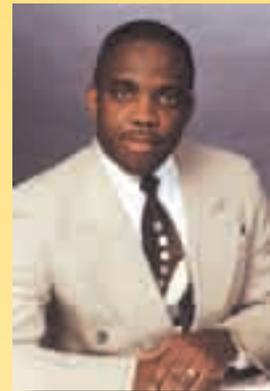
The giving of the law at Sinai, therefore, corresponds with the coming of the Spirit at Pentecost. Through the presence of the Holy Spirit in our lives, we more clearly understand God's written Word and are moved to worship the living Word, Jesus Christ. It is through the Spirit that Word and worship find meaning and balance.

Historically, the Church of God (Seventh Day) has emphasized the importance of the Ten Commandments and the continuing role of the law in our lives. I affirm our belief that the commandments were God's charter for His chosen people Israel and that they still define sin and morality for humans today. Debates between Christians and secular culture over the place of the commandments in public places is evidence that the "Big Ten" are still on people's minds.

But our emphasis on commandments must be balanced by the other half of God's revelation at Sinai. God spent as much time — maybe more — revealing a pattern for tabernacle worship as He did giving the law. We must remember that Pentecost, corresponding with Sinai, took on new meaning with the coming of the Spirit. We are not just a people of the Word and truth; we are also a people of worship and the Spirit.

Worship is not an invention of New Testament Christians. It was God's design for His people even before Sinai. It is a central theme of Scripture, from the altars of Genesis to the songs of Revelation. Experiencing the fullness of the Holy Spirit is directly related to our capacity to honor God with biblical worship. God help us to do so.

— *Whaid Guscott Rose*
General Conference President



CHURCH OF GOD (SEVENTH DAY)



General Conference officers and board, district superintendents and boards, ministries directors and key leaders met in Denver January 22-24 for planning and team-building.

Keep on Sowing the Seed

General Conference of the
Church of God (Seventh Day)
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Offices@cog7.org

- Operational plan
- “Good to Great”
- District structure
- Issachar Forum
- Mission Possible
- Ministries growth
- Cristo Viene
- *The Seventh Day* DVD
- The Link @ MTS
- 215 affiliated groups