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*Seven Suggestions and Three Commandments?*  
Lawrence Webb

In the wake of the situation ethics debate sparked by Joseph Fletcher in the late 1960s, the defensive cry often heard regarding the Decalogue was "They're not the Ten Suggestions; they're the Ten Commandments."

For Alabama's Chief Justice Roy Moore the religious aspects of the debate require no translation (or debate for that matter) in the public square, and he apparently does not view these Jewish and Christian teachings as optional for any Alabaman. His refusal to remove a 5,280-pound monument of the commandments from the state Supreme Court lobby boldly proclaims his position.

Justice Moore "believes that America's laws get their authority from the Bible, and has even compared himself to Moses and Daniel" (New York Times, Aug. 21). Facing fines imposed by a federal judge and imminent suspension at the hands of his eight associate justices, Justice Moore says, "This is not about a monument. It's not about religion, or politics. It's about the acknowledgment of God."

Justice Moore for many years has posted a copy of the Protestant version of the commandments in his courtroom, and the United States Supreme Court let this stand. Later, as chief justice, he commissioned a four-foot tall monument of the Decalogue and had it slipped into the courthouse under the cover of darkness without asking or informing his fellow justices. When Judge Myron H. Thompson of Federal District Court ruled the display an endorsement of religion, Justice Moore appealed all the way to the U.S. Supreme Court. This time, the high court refused to hear the appeal.

A traditional division places the commandments on two separate tablets: the first four on one tablet, presenting a believer's duty to God; the last six on a second tablet, listing duty to one's fellow humans. A nation which respects religious freedom cannot demand loyalty and respect for the name of this one God. So the first three commandments can only be viewed as suggestions for people other than Jews and Christians.

However, blue laws in many states continue varying degrees of enforcement of the Christian day of

rest and worship on believers and nonbelievers alike. So, in many instances, this is treated as a commandment. From the second tablet, the prohibitions against murder and theft clearly fall under the legal system as commandments, not mere suggestions. But what about the other four?

Honoring one's parents is highly desirable, but unless a son or daughter physically harms or otherwise abuses a parent, this is more suggestion than commandment. Likewise, falsehoods are hardly crimes against the state unless they are told in order to cover up genuine lawbreaking. Coveting is an internal act which comes to light only if it leads to tangible misdeeds. In the attempt to preserve the sanctity of marriage, many states have largely unenforceable and highly discriminatory laws against adultery and other marital transgressions.

A Boston Globe editorial quoted a supporter of Justice Moore as saying, "Even if they should remove this monument -- and I hope to God they won't -- they'll never be able to remove it from our hearts." The editorial writer then commented: "Well, precisely. Religious liberty, a bedrock principle upon which the nation was founded, is an individual right, to be practiced and held in the heart as each person sees fit. It is not for the state to pressure any American to observe a particular set of religious principles. And religious people agree. Not all Jews and Christians believe people of other religions or no religion should be confronted with the commandments in courthouses or school rooms, with the expectation that they, too, should acknowledge the God of the Jewish and Christian faiths.

With murder, theft, and sabbath-breaking as the only commandments under widespread surveillance by law enforcement officers, might we then conclude -- contrary to Justice Moore's insistence -- that for the general populace, we have Seven Suggestions and Three Commandments?

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