



The Big Ten

A Study of the
Ten Commandments

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*For cousin Mark
a fellow traveler*

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INTRODUCTION

We live in an age of increasing lawlessness. It is not simply that there is a void of law, far from it. Quite the opposite is actually true. There is an overwhelming preponderance of laws, the size, scope and complexity of which the world has never before seen. The body of law for any modern country, and in particular the United States—the most litigious society in history—is phenomenal. There are laws for everything. No one can keep up with the constant flood of laws produced by every body that is capable of law making. People everyday violate laws they have never heard of. So, how can I say that we live in an age of increasing lawlessness?

What is in view here is not human law, but *God's law*. Just to speak the phrase brings a chill upon many a backbone. People don't like to talk about God's law. To do so is to be branded a fundamentalist, legalist, theonomist and/or extremist, all in the most vile sense possible. For the most part contemporary Christians believe that they have arrived at a time in history that is beyond the application of any Old Testament laws, and in many cases, a time that is beyond all biblical law. People have converted the gospel of grace to mean a gospel without law—without obligation or responsibility. The good news that is preached in too many pulpits today is lawlessness, couched in terms of a gospel of positive thinking, of upbeat moralisms intended to make life better, richer, fuller, more meaningful, and happier. In order to justify the human distaste for biblical law, people—Christians among them—no longer speak of God's law or the human obligation to it, not even in Bible study or worship.

However, the Bible is not a divided witness. It is a whole, a unity. God's Word, God's testimony is completely true. No part of it contradicts any other part. All parts are true and applicable to faith and life. There are two testaments, but only one God. The God of the Old Testament is none other than Jesus Christ, the Messiah of God. This understanding of Scripture is not new, but it has fallen on hard times. Thus, as it is resurrected in these pages it will no doubt seem odd or foreign

—even heretical to many Christians who have forgotten their own roots. How I wish it were not so!

These chapters were originally sermons for a home fellowship. They have been reworked to make them more generally applicable. They are intended to be foundational for a proper understanding of biblical Christianity. They are neither comprehensive, nor complete; neither systematic, nor extemporaneous. They are, however, intended to address issues of orthodoxy and error that plague modern society and the contemporary churches. They are neither scholarly nor popular in style or content. They simply expose the Bible for what it is, and apply it to the world in which we live. Though these insights and applications will distress many people, they are an honest effort to represent Scripture in and of itself, apart from ideology and the subtle influences known as political correctness. It is an effort in the Spirit of Jesus, who asked the Pharisees, “Why do you also transgress the commandment of God by your tradition?” (Matthew 15:3). There is no intention to produce a traditional denominational or theological perspective, but rather to cut through the kind of denominational and theological baggage that so blinds contemporary Christians.

I am indebted to those who endure my preaching and feeble efforts to get at God’s truth, and pray that these pages will not be an unnecessary burden to those who still seek God’s truth in these days of darkness and blindness. Come, Lord Jesus!

Phillip A. Ross
October, 2001

It is amazing how time flies. Seven years have passed since completing this manuscript. I have made some minor revisions to it and put it into a standard layout format, and now offer it to a wider audience in the hope that it will be useful to the Lord.

I treat some of Scripture’s “hard sayings,” but I have tried to insure that they belong to Scripture and are not part of my own peculiarities. Of course, my peculiarities will color them—and everything else, and so I pray for your understanding, forgiveness and persistence to wrangle God’s truth from my words.

Phillip A. Ross
Marietta, Ohio
April, 2008

BY WHAT AUTHORITY?

Why do you attend church? By what authority do God's churches gather together? What's the purpose? What difference does it really make? And, regardless of your answers, how do you know that what you think is actually right? Does being right really mean anything?

The Old Testament word for authority is *yad*, which means *hand*. There are many idioms related to the hand. For instance, the phrase "into (or under) someone's hand" means responsibility, care, and dominion over that person. Here is the responsibility, for instance, of Sarah over Hagar, of Joseph over Potiphar's house, of Moses and Aaron over Israel, of King David over his kingdom. Similarly, God has this kind of authority over His people, who place themselves under His care, His authority, His *hand*.

The many uses of the word or idea of *hand* are quite interesting because they are so varied. It is amazing how many different thoughts are associated with *hand*.

To be "delivered into someone's hands" is to be defeated by them. Christians, who are delivered by Jesus Christ—saved—surrender themselves to God in response to their salvation. To be "delivered out of someone's hands" is to be spared. This is not contradictory but suggests that being delivered *into* God's hands is to be delivered *out of* Satan's hands. In Scripture, the hand symbolized power and strength, means and action. "Though he fall," writes the Psalmist, "he shall not be utterly cast down; For the Lord upholds him with His hand" (Psalm 37:24).

The phrase "in one's hands" means possession. The old adage said, "A bird in the hand is worth two in the bush." To have something "in hand" is to own or control it. To be in God's hands is to be His possession. "To give one's hands under" someone else means to submit to them. "To stretch out the hand" generally means to attack or hit. "To put one's hands to" something means to work on it. "To strengthen the hands of" someone means to help them, to increase

their power and/or holdings. And obstinate rebellion is often characterized by “high handedness.”

“To lay hands on” someone has at least four different connotations. First, it can mean to kill or injure someone. When Joseph was put into the pit by his brothers, “Reuben said to them, ‘Shed no blood, but cast him into this pit which is in the wilderness, and do not lay a hand on him’” (Genesis 37:22). In other words, do not hit or hurt him.

Second, it has been used in ritual ceremonies conferring blessing. “Now when Joseph saw that his father laid his right hand on the head of Ephraim, it displeased him; so he took hold of his father’s hand to remove it from Ephraim’s head to Manasseh’s head” (Genesis 48:17). This kind of laying on of hands conferred a blessing.

Third, it has been used to commission a person for a particular office or task. “As they ministered to the Lord and fasted, the Holy Spirit said, ‘Now separate to Me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.’ Then, having fasted and prayed, and laid hands on them, they sent them away.” Here the laying on of hands confers not only blessing, but power and authority.

Fourth, it was used to convey the theological concept of substitution. On the Day of Atonement the high priest transferred Israel’s sins to a goat, a substitute sacrifice (Exodus 29:10-19). Similarly, to be delivered into Christ’s hands indicates the reception of Christ’s substitutionary atonement on the cross for one’s own sin (Colossians 2:14). Here the laying on of hands by the high priest conferred not blessing or power, but sin and guilt. Through the laying on of hands came a transfer, an exchange.

In worship the saints raise their hands to God. “Hear the voice of my supplications When I cry to You, When I lift up my hands toward Your holy sanctuary” (Psalms 28:2). Paul called upon “men (to) pray everywhere, lifting up holy hands, without wrath and doubting” (1 Timothy 2:8). Thus, in a general sense the word *hand* means authority, but it is an active authority not a passive authority. It is not mere authority, but authority with the power to act. The use of the word *hand* to define authority suggests that biblical authority was a kind of decision-making that resulted in the accomplishment of something. In the case of biblical authority God’s will is accomplished by God’s authority. And the bible teaches that all authority is derived from God, or is based upon God’s absolute authority.

The Greek word for *authority* (*exousia*) means the liberty of doing as one pleases. To do as one pleases requires having the power of authority or influence, and the power of right or privilege. Generally speaking, authority means the power to rule or govern. Authority implies the ability to set or make law. It is the power of leaders whose wishes and commands must be obeyed. Of course, no one has ultimate

authority except God Himself. Thus, human authority is always a derived authority and is divided into various areas of application or kinds of authorities, or jurisdictions. A jurisdiction provides certain fixed limits within which a particular authority may be exercised. Jurisdiction—the right to have a particular authority in a particular case or area—always limits the extent of the various authorities.

A synonym for authority is *power*. And *power* is defined as the ability or capacity to accomplish something or to act effectively. Thus, authority is not simply the barking of commands, but requires the ability to carry out or execute those commands. If I harp on my children to clean their rooms, but they fail to do so, then, my parental authority has been denied or broken because my authority failed to accomplish its stated purpose. In this case while I think I may have authority, I don't because my command accomplished nothing.

Here we can see that the power of authority is not simply a possession of the person who commands it. The parent commanded that the room be cleaned, but it didn't happen. Thus, the parent's authority was in vain. It was powerless, and therefore, was not authority at all. Authority, in order to be effective, must be acknowledged by those who stand under it. If the lieutenants do not obey the captain, then the captain's authority is ineffective. He may as well not have any authority. The effective power of authority must be given (bestowed or acknowledged) by those who are under it.

Thus, human authority, in order to be effective, cannot be merely imposed from the top, but must be bestowed or honored from the bottom up. It must be honored and respected enough to result in obedience, or it is not authority. The authority or power of a king is not established by his military or political might alone, but for the kingdom to be successful (long lived, sustainable) the authority of the king must also be accepted by the willing obedience or respect that is given to him by his subjects. Apart from obedience to commands authority is meaningless. There is no authority without the means and ability to enforce one's authority. Without teeth, authority is at best merely influence, and at worst delusion.

DIVINE AUTHORITY

God's power, however, is established upon a different basis. God's power is a given in the universe. God speaks and it is done (Genesis 1:3). God's will shall be done, period, no ifs, ands or buts. And yet the establishment of Christ's power and authority on earth, the establishment of His authority in the hearts and lives of his people produces the faith and obedience of His people. There is no question that Christ's people will obey Him. They can do no other—not because they are

unable, nor because of some misunderstood irresistibility, but because they do not want to disobey their Lord. God's people want what God wants, and work to enact it.

However, the establishment of Christian authority, biblical authority—church authority—in the hearts and minds of God's people is not merely a top-down enforcement of God's domination, though such enforcement is not beyond God's abilities. Rather, God has decreed a bottom-up acquiescence to the authority of God's will as found in Scripture as a matter of love and appreciation (Deuteronomy 6:5, Matthew 22:37). God does not shove His authority down the throats of His people, though He can and does sometimes chastise them for their own good. Rather, God's people willingly acknowledge and submit to His authority of their own free will. When God's authority is exercised through human agency, as it often is, it operates as authority honored and bestowed by believers rather than imposed by the Lord. Christians willingly submit to the structures of God's authority, just as those who reject it do so willingly.

Let's trace the major uses of the word *authority* (*exousia*) in the New Testament. Matthew tells us that Jesus "taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes" (Matthew 7:29). The authority of Jesus was recognized by His people. Sheep naturally recognize the voice and the authority of their shepherd. Later, Jesus commended the authority of the Centurion for his faithfulness, which was based upon the Centurion's understanding of authority. Jesus honored the Centurion's understanding of authority. The Centurion said, "For I also am a man under authority, having soldiers under me. And I say to this one, 'Go,' and he goes; and to another, 'Come,' and he comes; and to my servant, 'Do this,' and he does it" (Matthew 8:9). The Centurion understood that authority requires obedience.

Not everyone recognized Jesus' authority. The Pharisees and Sadducees challenged Jesus' authority on more than one occasion. "Now when He came into the temple, the chief priests and the elders of the people confronted Him as He was teaching, and said, 'By what authority are You doing these things? And who gave You this authority?'" (Matthew 21:23). The Pharisees and scribes acknowledged Jesus' authority in a back-handed way. They suggested, not only the fact that Jesus had authority, but that His authority was other than—not related to—their own. By not recognizing Christ's authority, they testified to the fact of their own opposition and disobedience to God's authority.

The resurrected Christ appeared to the disciples and gave them the Great Commission, saying, "All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and

of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age” (Matthew 28:18-20). All authority is God’s authority, and all has been given to Christ. Thus, even what we might call secular or pagan governmental authority belongs to God. Paul taught, “Let every soul be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and the authorities that exist are appointed by God” (Romans 13:1). If Paul could say this about pagan Rome, then we are certainly are under obligation to live in obedience to our government!

CHURCH AUTHORITY

There is a special authority that sustains Christ’s church. That authority originates in God’s Word as it is taught and illuminated by church leaders, and acknowledged by the people of the church—in continuity with the historic teaching of the evangelical and Reformed churches through the ages and informed by the presence and power of the Holy Spirit, of course. Paul, a leader of Christ’s church, had such authority as is evidenced by 1 Corinthians 9:18, “What is my reward then? That when I preach the gospel, I may present the gospel of Christ without charge, that I may not abuse my authority in the gospel.” Paul was saying that biblical authority cannot be bought or sold, but is always conferred by the Holy Spirit and honored by God’s people. It is also important that such authority not be abused. Church authority, like all of the various God-given authorities, must recognize and operate only within the limitations of its own jurisdiction.

What is the purpose of biblical authority in the church? Paul said that it was given to church leaders “for edification, and not for destruction” (2 Corinthians 10:8). To edify is to instruct or to make someone understand something. In particular, it is to instruct in order to encourage the intellectual, moral, or spiritual improvement of God’s people. To edify means to teach. Thus, God’s authority in the church provides the authority to teach Scripture, as well as to learn and practice obedience to Scripture. God’s people gather for the purpose of worship, which involves teaching and learning. The point is that worship occurs on the basis of biblical authority alone.

Are there biblical limitations upon church authority? Are their limitations regarding the various kinds of authorities? There are. One of them that has given churches much difficulty involves the roles and responsibilities of women. It is an important issue and is dealt with forthrightly in Scripture. Thus, it behooves us to study it and to willingly abide by it.

Regarding this issue Paul wrote to Timothy, “I do not permit a woman to teach or to have authority over a man, but to be in silence”

(1 Timothy 2:12). The first thing to notice is that the Greek word for *authority* here is not *exousia*, but *authenteo*, which means to usurp or assume authority. Women are not to usurp authority. Then again, no one is to usurp authority. It does not mean that women have no biblical authority at all. Nor does it mean that women have no authority in the church. Nor does it mean that women cannot teach. Rather, it means that biblical or church authority—teaching authority—is not self-conferred. It is inappropriate for women or anyone else to assume or usurp authority of any kind for themselves.

FAMILY AUTHORITY

The first unit in which biblical authority is defined and granted is the family unit. There the husband/father is to be the head of the household, and the wife/mother is to be his helper in the accomplishment of God's purpose for their union. God's fundamental purpose is defined in Genesis 1:28 as human dominion of the earth for the glory of God. That mandate rests primarily upon the family because it was given to the family prior to the establishment of God's church or any form of extra-family government. But it is not for the family alone, but rather it is for the family in the midst of the other God-given authorities: personal conscience, family, church and civil.

The basic story of the Old Testament pertains to the lesson that God's people are not based upon family or blood ties, but on grace. The establishment of the Jewish theocracy and its various abuses served to teach us the errors of believing that God's "chosen people" are a particular race or extended blood family. They are not and never have been. Paul discussed this in Romans 9. It was a hard lesson then, and it is still a hard lesson, as evidenced by the lack of preaching on Romans 9 today.

Jesus later redefined God's family, not as a biological unit, but as a social structure built upon the grace of God and fellowship between "brothers and sisters" (related by regeneration) who have been born-again in Christ. Paul clarified that the Christian family was structured like the biological family, with the husband/father as the head and the wife/mother as the helper. Thus, men were to provide primary leadership for the church as for the family, and women were not to usurp or assume for themselves positions of authority in the church that were not given to them first by the heads of their own households, and secondly by the leaders of the church. That doesn't mean that women can't teach or that women can't serve in the church. Remember, church leadership is service not domination (Matthew 20:25-26).

All Christian authority is derived authority. It is authority in submission to a greater authority—wives to their husbands, church

people to their church leaders, church leaders to Scripture. All Christians are to live in submission to God through Christ as revealed in Scripture and empowered by the Holy Spirit, and within the structures of authority in which they find themselves—family, church, and state. Christians are to bloom where they are planted.

Both Peter and Jude addressed this issue of usurping authority. Peter wrote about “those who walk according to the flesh in the lust of uncleanness and despise authority. They are presumptuous, self-willed” (2 Peter 2:10). Presumption and self-will are to be avoided personally and in all matters of biblical authority. Peter used a different Greek word for authority, the same word used in Jude 1:8, “Likewise also these dreamers defile the flesh, reject authority, and speak evil of dignitaries.” The word used here was *kuriotes*, which contains the root of the Greek word for Lord (*kurios*) suggesting divine authority or Lordship. Peter and Jude both noted that the authority that was being rejected by some people in their day was Christ’s authority or Lordship over His people—biblical authority.

What defines God’s people as God’s people is their faith or belief in Jesus Christ as the Messiah of God who brings them into willing and joyful submission to God’s authority, biblical authority. To be a child of God is to relish—to love and wholeheartedly desire to live in obedience to—God’s authority, God’s Word. To gather as a people of God is to gather under God’s authority, biblical authority. Upon this foundation—the foundation of the authority of God’s Word—Christian families and churches of Christ are governed. And apart from this foundation, God’s people are delivered into the hand of Satan.

BIBLICAL AUTHORITY

Thus, Christians gather under the authority of Scripture, but they must clarify what parts of Scripture are authoritative. Are Christians under the authority of the Old Testament? Or the New? Are just the words of Jesus authoritative? Christians are under all of it! Because Christians claim the inerrancy and infallibility of Scripture, they claim that *all* of the words of Scripture are authoritative, both the Old Testament and the New. Our task is to understand all of Scripture as best we are able in the light of the history of the Christian church, and to apply it to our lives, our families, and our fellowship with one another.

Because the lives of the faithful are lives of repentance, God’s people live in repentance. The new millennium provides an opportunity to rethink, to reevaluate everything that we think and do, to repudiate what is not according to God’s authority and to reaffirm what is. We have an opportunity and an obligation to repent and rethink everything we understand and think we understand, to reevaluate

everything in the light of God's Word, personally, as families, and as a people of God. This is the opportunity that God has given us in the midst of our circumstance. This is the purpose for which God has called us together.

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