

Beyond the commandments: God's laws on our doorposts

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This summer the U.S. Supreme Court will rule on several cases involving the constitutionality of displaying the Ten Commandments on government property. Public opinion is fairly clear on this question: according to a Gallup poll, 76 percent say state governments should be allowed to display the Ten Commandments, and only 21 percent disagree. Groups supporting public displays, like the newly formed Judeo-Christian Council for Constitutional Restoration, have launched a public relations blitz to ensure that the Supreme Court justices get the message—leave your hands off the Ten Commandments.

The Supreme Court may conclude that the Ten Commandments have been a formative influence in Western jurisprudence; that they constitute the core of civil law; and that since their role in public life is not explicitly religious, displaying them does not violate the First Amendment.

Certainly the common good is enhanced by heeding the Ten Commandments, which commend care for one's elders and proscribe murder, robbery, adultery, falsehood and greed. The implications of obeying the commandments are actually far-reaching. No other gods—not even the god of Mammon? No coveting? If Americans were to stop coveting their neighbors' goods, that might undermine our economic system, driven as it is by acquisitiveness. Don't take the Lord's name in vain? Perhaps that would mean eliminating "God bless America" signs that invoke the name of God for apparent national advantage. But these are probably not the moral concerns that backers of displaying the commandments have in mind.

It's good to have a debate about the moral principles needed for maintaining a civil society and promoting the common good. But such a discussion should go beyond the scope of the Ten Commandments. While the commandments prescribe care for the elderly, for example, they say nothing about care for the young, who also often face neglect and abuse.

A debate about the moral underpinnings of society inevitably raises theological questions. Are rules sufficient to promote good behavior? If they are not, as the apostle Paul argues in Romans 7, then what is needed to motivate humans to look beyond self-interest? Is it possible to have civil law without a higher authority? Is regard for the neighbor (the second tablet of the law) possible without regard for a liberating and law-giving God (the first tablet)?

Christians should be wary of any attempt to unhitch the Ten Commandments from their religious moorings. The commandments were given by a liberating God to an elect people as part of a covenant between God and them. In what sense are the American people God's elect? How have the American people experienced what Old Testament scholar Patrick D. Miller calls God's "freeing grace and covenanting demand"?

God's elect people were told to write God's laws on their doorposts, to teach them to their children and to internalize them in their hearts and minds. That can be done whatever the courts say. n