
The Preface to the Ten Commandments: Exodus 20:1-2

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The door to your home is the most important part of it, for it is the means by which you, your family, and your friends enter and leave it. Yet, that door can become so familiar that you fail to appreciate its design, construction, utility, and beauty.

The door to the Ten Commandments is its introduction, or preface, found in Exodus 20:1-2, and, minus verse 1, in Deuteronomy 5:6. Like the door to your home, this Preface can be easy to ignore, despite its importance. Yet, to push the metaphor of the door a little further, the preface serves as the door into the house with the ten rooms of God's moral law.

The Contexts to the Preface

The first things to note about the Preface to the Ten Commandments are the contexts to the preface, of which four are most significant.

The first context is the redemptive context. Since creation, God had impressed his will upon all of humanity through the law written on their hearts (Rom. 2:15). In that light, it is incorrect to say, as some do, that the giving of the Law occurred at Mount Sinai. Indeed, Moses records, in Genesis and Exodus 1-19, examples of the Law of God at work among humanity.¹ One may even argue that Genesis provides predominantly examples of the violation of the last six commandments, while Exodus concentrates on the first four. Moreover, since the Garden of Eden, God had, through direct but occasional revelations of His will, communicated more about that will to select individuals, such as Noah and Abraham. The latter practice God supplemented by the written record of His will, to which itself His incarnate Son, Jesus Christ, added his personal testimony. But why, at the time of the Exodus, had a written law become necessary? Because the organic development of sin among mankind increasingly obscured the law of God as written on the heart and rendered mankind more vulnerable to iniquity.

The second context to the Preface to the Ten Commandments that should be noted is the historical context. Israel had left behind four hundred years of suffering in Egypt, had wandered for several months in the wilderness, and had arrived before Mount Sinai, where they had set up camp (Exodus 19:1-2). Exodus 19, then, serves as the immediate historical context of the

¹ Philip Graham Ryken, *Exodus: Saved for God's Glory* (Wheaton: Crossway, c2005), 529. Ryken also argues that Adam and Eve violated most of the Ten Commandments in eating the forbidden fruit. Ibid.

giving of the Ten Commandments. British pastor Brian Edwards observes in his book, *The Ten Commandments for Today*, “We must not lose the significance of the fact that they came to a desert (19:1). God deliberately brought the Israelites to a place of total dependence upon him.”² And, Edwards continues, the desert is “a silent place; a place to listen.”³ Amid the bickering and belly-aching among the Israelites in the Desert, they needed to learn to listen.

Encamped before Mount Sinai, the people were challenged to become obedient to their Liberator (verses 3-6), to which command they responded in a commitment to action, first by the elders and then by all the people (verses 7-8). God wanted to impress upon them that He Himself would be speaking directly to His people, so he told Moses about His plan, which Moses then relayed to the people (verse 9). The Lord ordered certain preparations for this momentous event. First, the Israelites were to clean their clothes – in the midst of the desert, no less (verses 10-11, 14)! Second, the married couples in Israel were to refrain from sexual intimacy, with its resulting discharges (verse 15). Third, the Israelites were to stay away from the mountain, even from its base (verses 12-13).

On the third day of the encampment, God put on a polytechnic display which no Independence Day celebration can match: thunder, lightning, clouds, earthquake, trumpet sound (verses 16-25). God was impressing upon the people of Israel who it was who was about to speak to them. They were to listen to and to heed His words. Our familiarity with these historical events should not minimize their importance. As the nineteenth century Presbyterian commentator George Bush writes, Exodus 19 and 20 constitute “the most remarkable event, perhaps, taken in all its bearings, that occurred in the history of the chosen people prior to the incarnation of Christ ... and one of the most remarkable that ever did or will distinguish the annals of the world itself.”⁴

The third context to the Preface to the Ten Commandments is the literary context. In the mid-1950s, University of Michigan Professor George Mendenhall first popularized the theory that the Old Testament law was written in a style that was common in the Ancient Near East.⁵ Mendenhall observed that, when a ruler or suzerain conquered a people, he would establish a covenant with that people through a written document which codified their relationship.

Then Westminster Theological Seminary professor Meredith Kline introduced Mendenhall’s idea into Reformed circles with his book *Treaty of the Great King* in 1965.⁶ While Kline mostly focused on the Book of Deuteronomy, the second law, the first chapter of his book is a consideration of the first codification of the Law in the Book of Exodus, beginning with chapter 20. Kline writes that the words of the preface to the Ten Commandments:

2 Brian H. Edwards, *The Ten Commandments for Today* (Bromley, Kent: Day One, 1996), 35.

3 Ibid., 36.

4 George Bush, *Commentary on Exodus* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1993), 249.

5 George Mendenhall, *Law and Covenant in Israel and the Ancient Near East* (Pittsburgh: Biblical Colloquium, 1955).

6 Meredith Kline, *Treaty of the Great King* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1965).

correspond to the preamble of the zuzerainty treaties, which identified the zuzerain, or ‘great king’, and that in terms calculated to inspire awe and fear ... Such treaties continued in an ‘I-thou’ style, with an historical prologue, surveying the great king’s previous relations with, and especially his benefactions to, the vassal king.⁷

Such prologues could be extensive: Hammurabi’s famous one runs to ninety lines of text. With only a few words in Exodus 20:1-2, God establishes His sovereign right to impose the strictures that follow. Perhaps there is an inverse relationship between the length of the covenantal prologue and the legitimacy of the particular sovereign imposing covenantal demands!

Kline admits that the Book of the Law in Exodus is not as accurate a representation of the covenant form as is the Book of Deuteronomy.⁸ In particular, the expected section of curses and blessings is found in Exodus 20, but it is interspersed among the stipulations (verses 5, 6, 7, 11, and 12), rather than limited to a separate section.⁹ Still, Kline maintains that the literary context here is important, for it stresses “not law, but covenant. That must be affirmed when we are seeking a category comprehensive enough to do justice to this revelation in its totality.”¹⁰ Not that Kline is denying that the Sinaitic covenant is law. He continues: “The increased emphasis on the covenantal context of the law underscores the essential continuity in the function of law in the Old and New Testaments.”¹¹ Another benefit of stressing “the covenantal ‘I-thou’ nature of this law is also to reaffirm the personal religious character of [B]iblical ethics[;] at the same time[,] it recognizes that covenantal religion and its ethics are susceptible of communication in the form of structured truth.”¹² And finally, the terms of the Preface are designed to impress upon God’s hearers His sovereignty and thus their responsibility to obey what He says.

Orientalist Kenneth Kitchen argues in his work *Ancient Orient and Old Testament* that the covenant form of Exodus and Deuteronomy is a strong indication that they were written in the time of Moses, during the second millennium BC, rather than much later, as liberal critics have alleged. Kitchen compared the forms of first millennium BC covenants to second millennium BC covenants and found that the earlier forms showed greater similarity to the Pentateuch than do the later ones.

The fourth and final context of the Preface to the Ten Commandments to be considered is the confessional context. Although the Reformed confessions do not generally discuss the Preface as such, and the Heidelberg Catechism fails to consider the Preface at all, the Westminster Divines, in both of their Catechisms, consider the Preface in some detail. Question and Answer 43 of the Shorter Catechism give the text of the Preface. Question 44 asks: “What doth the preface to the ten commandments teach us?” The answer affirms that it, “teacheth us, that because God is the

7 Ibid., 14.

8 Indeed, in both books, there is no invocation of the gods of both sides to witness the agreement, since God alone is the witness to this covenant, implicit in the Third Commandment.

9 See Kline, *Treaty of the Great King*, 16.

10 Ibid., 17.

11 Ibid., 24.

12 Ibid.

Lord, and our God, and Redeemer, therefore[,] we are bound to keep all his commandments,” giving two proof-texts, Luke 1:74-75 and I Peter 1:15-18. Question 101 of the Larger Catechism gives the significance of the Preface as follows: “Wherein God manifesteth his sovereignty, as being Jehovah, the eternal, immutable, and almighty God; having his being in and of himself, and giving being to all his words and works: and that he is a God in covenant, as with Israel of old, so with all his people; who, as he brought them out of their bondage in Egypt, so he delivereth us from our spiritual thralldom; and that therefore we are bound to take him for our God alone, and to keep all his commandments.” Six Old Testament and five New Testament proof-texts are provided to justify this answer.

Besides Exodus 20:2 itself, these proof-texts include: the definition of the relationship between God and His people in the Abrahamic Covenant, as recorded in Genesis 17:7; the revelation of the name of God to Moses in Exodus 3:14; and, God’s observation that he was revealing Himself by a new name to Moses on that occasion (Exodus 6:3). Leviticus 18:30 and 19:37 urge the people of Israel to obey His statutes and judgments, for, “I am the LORD your God,” or “I am the LORD” (NKJV). Perhaps most significant among the proof-texts is Isaiah 44:6, which connects the LORD to both Elohim and to the work of redemption, and defines the LORD as “the First and the Last”. It reads as follows:

“Thus says the LORD, the King of Israel,
And his Redeemer, the LORD of hosts,
‘I am the First and I *am* the Last;
Besides Me *there is* no God.”

In the New Testament, the Divines direct our attention toward Acts 17:24 and 28, where the apostle Paul says before the Areopagus in Athens, “God, who made the world and everything in it, since He is lord of heaven and earth, does not dwell in temples made with hands ... for in Him we live and move and have our being, as also some of your own poets have said, ‘For we are also His offspring.’” And Paul writes to the Romans, in chapter 3, verse 29: “Or *is He* the God of the Jews only? *Is He* not also the God of the Gentiles? Yes, of the Gentiles also.”

The two proof-texts which both Catechisms cite have a narrower, redemptive focus. In Luke 1:74-75, Zacharias prayed, “Grant us that we, Being delivered from the hand of our enemies, Might serve Him without fear, in holiness and righteousness before Him all the days of our life.” And in I Peter 1:15-18, the apostle writes:

But as He who called you *is* holy, you also be holy in all *your* conduct, because it is written, “Be holy, for I am holy. And if you call on the Father, who without partiality judges according to each one’s work, conduct yourselves throughout the time of your stay *here* in fear; knowing that you were not redeemed with corruptible things, *like* silver or gold, from your aimless conduct *received* by tradition from your fathers.

The Contents of the Preface

The matter of most interest in the confessional tradition is the way that both the Larger and Shorter Catechisms fail to include the words of Exodus 20:1 in the Preface. If Meredith Kline is correct, then these words are essential to a correct understanding of the Preface, being an integral part of its literary structure. And so that verse will be included for consideration in this paper.

Kline's insight also underscores the fact that the Preface is not an introduction only to the first commandment, as some have argued, but also to all the Ten Commandments and to all the case laws that follow them. Confirming that interpretation is the observation that the contents of the Preface, to which we now turn, are all centered on the identity of the One who will bring the Ten Commandments to the people, and that these contents are all relevant to all the commandments.

The law-giver and covenant-establisher identifies Himself in four ways in Exodus 20:1-2. This revelation is so important that He does not delegate the responsibility for bringing it to an angel, as He does in some other instances of revelation in the Older Testament. The first identification is as the Creator God, in verse 1: "And God spoke all these words, saying". These words immediately take our minds back to the creation of the world in Genesis 1:1-2:3. There, the usual name given for God is Elohim, a plural word suitable to a divine being who is both one and three. This name for the Creator appears here as well. Furthermore, the refrain in the account of creation is that "God said," eleven times over,¹³ and here again, God speaks. Therefore, Moses first emphasizes that the Covenant God is also the Creator God, and thus, the One to whom all, not only the Israelites, are responsible.

In Romans 9:20-21, Paul compares God to a potter, for he functions in relation to all His creation like a potter to his pots. A student at Westminster Seminary in the 1970s had been a professional potter. On one occasion, he showed some other students one of his pots, announced that he was dissatisfied with his creation, and dropped it on the floor, where the pot broke into scores of pieces. Similarly, the One speaking in Exodus 20:1 is reminding His hearers that He is like that potter, and they had better listen to him. And the physical manifestations of His sovereignty, recorded in Exodus 19, have prepared them to heed His words. While we have never experienced such sensual overkill – nor have any others – the Preface to the Ten Commandments calls us, as well as all mankind, past, present, and future, to heed and obey the words of our Creator.

The second way that the speaker identifies Himself is as the Self-Sufficient God, as He says, "I am the LORD." The traditional English translation of the tetragrammaton as "LORD" (all in capital letters) is problematic. LORD has been adopted by our translators because the Jews vocalize this word as יהוה, or "Lord", and the Septuagint and New Testament followed suit, by rendering the word as κύριος, or "Lord". However, יהוה is a form of the Hebrew word "to be", this name refers more to His being than to His actions, as Isaiah 44:6, cited above, makes clear. God is the one who is without beginning or ending, prior to all being or matter besides Himself. He is not a projection of man's imagination, nor the divine expression of some aspect of the world, as with the false

¹³ Genesis 1:3, 6, 9, 11, 14, 20, 22, 24, 26, 28, 29. The word translated "called" may well involve speaking in Genesis 1 as well (verses 5 twice, 8, 10 twice; five total occurrences).

gods of man's own creating. In this way, as Westminster Theological Seminary professor William Edgar writes in his book *Les Dix Commandements*, He "is the only God, not only because there is no other, but because there are no other gods which resemble Him."¹⁴ Standing thus beyond and above and before and after time, God is "eternal"; hence, the traditional French translation of this name as "L'Éternel", the Eternal One, is a more accurate way of expressing the truth contained in the name than is our traditional English translation.

The eternality of God, however, is not some ethereal reality, floating above the clouds in vacuous space. As the Eternal One, God is self-sufficient, for He does not depend on anything or anyone beyond Himself. His being does not require God to create anything, let alone the vast universe and His image-bearers. God's being does not dictate that, once His creatures turned rebellious against Him, that God should redeem a portion of them in praise of His grace. But, in love and mercy, He freely chose to do so. And so this name was particularly apropos when God chose to communicate to the people of Israel in Egypt as He sent Moses to ready them for their deliverance from slavery there (Ex. 3:14). We are called by the Preface to the Ten Commandments to recognize this Self-Sufficient God. The special name of God prepares for the third way that the speaker identifies Himself, which is as the Covenantal God.

God has already referred to the people of Israel in the immediate historical context as "a special treasure" (Ex. 19:5). The apostle Peter will take up similar language – "you are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, His own special people" – in Chapter 2, verse 9 of his First Epistle, not long after one of the proof-texts to the preface provided by the Westminster Divines. In the last two of His four self-descriptions, the Speaker is making the transition from the universal names which express something of His being and works in relation to all mankind to the more particular names which express something of His being and works in relation to His special people.

"I am" is, in a real sense, a redundancy, for that is what "the LORD" means. And, this divine being does not say that they will become His people, but that they already are such: "I am ... your God." This covenantal language is reminiscent of God's communications with Abraham, the father of the people of Israel, especially in Genesis 17:7-8, to which the Westminster Divines draw our attention. The language is expressive of a relationship already established and now to be further developed. As prolific writer R. J. Rushdoony puts it, "The law is given to the people saved by grace as their way of grace, to set forth the privilege and blessing of the covenant."¹⁵ Anticipating later developments in redemptive history, Dutch Reformed theologian G. H. Kersten writes, "It was the covenant of grace which was established at Sinai ... in which God testifies, seals, and grants the salvation which is in Christ to those whom He has purchased with His precious blood."¹⁶ And it was particularly wise for God to use such language, for, as another Dutch Reformed theologian, G. Van Rheezen, observes, "Consider this introduction a balm which you will need for the soul

14 William Edgar, *Les Dix Commandements* (Cléon-d'Andraon, France: Éditions Excelsior, c2009), 78.

15 R. J. Rushdoony, *The Institutes of Biblical Law* (Philadelphia: Craig Press, 1973), 15.

16 G. H. Kersten, *The Heidelberg Catechism in Fifty-Two Sermons* (Sioux Center, IA: Netherlands Reformed Book and Publishing Committee, 1992), 476.

piercing words you are to hear.”¹⁷ Through the Preface to the Ten Commandments, we are called to recognize the covenant relationship God has established with us and all His people.

On behalf of that covenant of grace, the God who speaks here reminds them that He is, fourth, the Liberating God, for He says He is the one “who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage” (Ex. 20:2b). For four hundred years, the descendants of Abraham had experienced increasing persecution at the hands of their Egyptian lords. The God who is speaking at Mount Sinai liberated them from this dreadful condition with a series of amazing miracles, from the ten plagues to the division of the Sea of Reeds to the guidance of the pillar of fire by night and smoke by day. As Robert Reymond declares in his *A New Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith*, “The very preface of the Ten Commandments ... places these ten obligations within the context of and represent them as the anticipated outcome of the redemption which they had just experienced.”¹⁸ This redemption was the great Older Covenant type of the liberation of God’s people from their sins through the work of Jesus Christ.

The literary form of God’s speaking may well be that of a suzerainty treaty, but Dutch Reformed ethicist Joachim Douma observes that its Imposer “is unlike a despotic Hittite king who compels respect from his vassals.”¹⁹ No, in the language of John Calvin in his *Institutes*, the speaker “holds out the promise of grace to draw them by its sweetness to a zeal for holiness.”²⁰ How could the people gathered at the Mount not respond in love and obedience, not merely in awe? Calvin preached on this text, claiming that God “has truly bound them to himself[,] so that the people cannot revolt against him without meriting further punishment.”²¹ And what punishment that would be! Professor Douma again: “In the foreground of the law is not its strictness, but its concern to keep the one who has been liberated from falling back into slavery,”²² that is, slavery to sin, with all that such enslavement involves. And yet the language of the Preface does not contain the suggestion that the law is, as the Puritan James Durham put it, “laid on them as a covenant of works, or that by which they are to seek or expect justification,”²³ for they already had been justified in God’s sight. In a real sense, gospel precedes law! No wonder that Henry Belfrage, pastor in Scotland’s Associate Synod, comments, “While the mere intimation of his will should have been sufficient to secure our obedience, he has been pleased to present it to us in such a form

17 G. Van Rheenen, *The Heidelberg Catechism Explained* (Sioux Center, IA?: Netherlands Reformed Congregations in America, 1955), 431.

18 Robert Reymond, *A New Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2001), 521.

19 Joachim Douma, *The Ten Commandments: Manual for the Christian Life* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R, 1996), 2.

20 John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. by Ford L. Battles (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, c1960), 2: 379.

21 John Calvin, *John Calvin’s Sermons on the Ten Commandments*, ed. by Benjamin w. Farley (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1980), 58.

22 Douma, *Ten Commandments*, 4.

23 James Durham, *A Practical Exposition of the Ten Commandments*, ed. by Christopher Coldwell (Dallas, TX: Naphtali Press, c2002), 53.

as to make it appear a reasonable service, an expression of gratitude, and the dictate of love.”²⁴ We are called by the Preface to the Ten Commandments to a responsive obedience to His now-finished work liberating us from our sin.

Therefore, the contents of the Preface to the Ten Commandments define in some detail the identity of the One who imposes them, as the Creator God, the Self-Sufficient God, the Covenantal God, and the Liberating God. George Bush writes, “No greater sanction can be conceived to any code of laws than the supremacy, sovereignty, majesty, preeminence, and power of the source from which it emanates.”²⁵ But again, this law is no mere exercise in divine hegemony, befitting the Allah of Islam, for what God commanded was based entirely on who He is and what He had done.²⁶ What a remarkable redemption He had provided to the people of Israel — and yet that redemption pales in comparison to what Jesus Christ accomplished at Calvary!

The Contrasts with the Preface

Having looked at the contexts to the Preface of the Ten Commandments and then the contents of the Preface to the Ten Commandments, let us turn now to the contrasts with the Preface. The first such contrast is with any Dualism which posits that God’s moral law is not binding upon those outside the covenant people of God. Even in Reformed circles, such reasoning is becoming commonplace, although it cannot be justified by the Larger Catechism’s teaching on the Preface, which begins, “wherein God manifesteth his sovereignty, as being, Jehovah, the eternal, immutable, and almighty God; having his being in and of himself, and giving being to all his words and work,” and then proceeds to separate out the special responsibility of God’s people to obey the Ten Words from their general applicability. It is true that the Ten Commandments are particularly binding upon God’s people, but that fact does not remove their universal relevance.²⁷ In an age of increasing secularization, it is crucial that Christians not give in to the spirit of the age and embrace a two-track notion of God’s standards among men, one for the world and one for the church.

Yet the universality of the law’s relevance is not an argument for the universality of grace. In the Israelites’ peculiar responsibility to obey God’s commands, they did not typify humanity in general but the elect people in every age. The Moral Law functions to drive the elect to faith in Christ, but also the reprobate to condemnation in hell.

What support does the Catechism’s teaching about the universal relevance of the Moral Law summarized in the Ten Commandments enjoy? Some Jewish scholars have argued that the delivery of the Law outside the Promised Land proves its universality, but that line of argument is more confirmation than true support. More convincing is the Preface’s text itself, which begins

24 Henry Belfrage, *A Practical Exposition of the Assembly’s Shorter Catechism* (Edinburgh: William Oliphant, 1834), 369.

25 Bush, *Commentary on Exodus*, 242.

26 Philip Graham Ryken, *Written in Stone: The Commandments and Today’s Moral Crisis* (Wheaton: Crossway, c2003), 59.

27 In Galatians 6:10, we find the same kind of dynamic: “As we have opportunity, let us do good to all, especially to those who are of the household of faith.”

with the statement that the speaker is the Creator God. That makes Him the Creator of all mankind, to whom men and women, boys and girls, are then accountable. As Calvin Theological Seminary professor Sidney Greidanus writes, “God’s moral laws have a universal dimension because they are based not on historical circumstances or cultural norms but on God’s creation.”²⁸ And those laws are not arbitrary or ridiculous, for, as John Mackay of the Free Church College, Edinburgh, states, “When the Lord sets out the conduct He expects, it is a mirror of his own perfections.”²⁹ As a result, Jesus was the living embodiment of those laws and respected them as He did.

A second argument supporting the universality of the Moral Law is the unity of God’s law in all times and places. As Brian Edwards asks, “What government makes one set of laws for the law-keepers and an easier set of laws for the law-breakers?”³⁰ But the New Testament does contain such statements as, “We are not under law but under grace” (Romans 6:14-15). However, as Arthur Pink observes, the word “law” in the Scriptures normally refers to the Moral Law, but, where “law” is criticized, it invariably refers to other aspects of law, such as works-righteousness.³¹ Moreover, the universal perspective of the law is strongly suggested in the historical context to the Preface, for, in Exodus 19:5, God claims that, “all the earth is mine.”

A third argument for the universality of the Moral Law is that God would not require anything at anytime that is inimical to man’s general welfare. What is there to object to in the Ten Commandments? Without the Moral Law being in effect, mankind would be condemned to an anarchy beyond what we have already at times experienced among us.

A fourth argument in favor of the universality of the Moral Law against all dualistic counter-arguments is that God’s law is knowable by all human beings, being ingrained in their nature, since, as image-bearers of God, they must know something of His perfections in themselves. Indeed, one may argue that everyone instinctively knows the law of God,³² and that the conscience enforces it, to a greater or a lesser extent, upon each one of us.

A fifth and final argument for the universality of the Moral Law is that death, the penalty of sin, reigns over all mankind, not just the people of God,³³ so there must be a universally-applicable and universally-known law to serve as the basis upon which God could condemn sinners to everlasting punishment. The fact that death reigned from the time of Cain and Abel through the Wilderness wanderings of Israel confirms that this Moral Law was in effect throughout those thousands of years. Yes, the Moral Law of God is of universal applicability.

28 Sidney Greidanus, “The Universal Dimension of Law in the Hebrew Scriptures,” *Studies in Religion = Sciences Religieuses* 14:1 (1985): 47-48.

29 John L. Mackay, *Exodus* (Fearn: Christian Focus, 2001), 340.

30 Edwards, *Ten Commandments for Today*, 38.

31 Arthur W. Pink, *Gleanings in Exodus* (Chicago: Moody Press, ca. 1965), 160.

32 Greidanus, “Universal Dimension,” 51.

33 See Buddy Hanson, *God’s Ten Words: A Commentary on the Ten Commandments* (Tuscaloosa, AL: Hanson Group, 2002), lxiv.

A second contrast with the Preface to the Ten Commandments is with Dispensationalism, which is the theological viewpoint that God deals with His creation and His people in differing ways during seven major periods in human history. The Mosaic Dispensation is the period of Law, with a capital “L”, which is definitively ended by the work of Jesus Christ. However, the Mosaic Covenant, as the Preface makes clear, reposes upon God’s *eternal* attributes. Therefore, Pastor Joseph Morecraft argues that God’s “moral law is unchanging and is binding upon all people in all ages in all cultures and circumstances as the will of the Lord for His subjects.”³⁴ Indeed, as Presbyterian pastor Philip Ryken puts it, God “would have to un-God himself to set them aside.”³⁵

The key here is to distinguish the Moral Law, which always abides, from the Mosaic civil and ceremonial laws, which do not abide, except for the general equity of the former. Arthur Pink points out that, even in the text of Exodus itself, it is clear that the Ten Commandments are differentiated from the rest of the Mosaic Law. How so? First, they were communicated by the very voice of God. Second, they were “written directly by the finger of God, written on tables of stone, and written thus to denote their lasting and imperishable nature”;³⁶ and the tables of stone were the only items housed in the arks of the covenant. Even John N. Darby, founder of Dispensationalism, had to admit that what he termed “the character of the Law” is “a rule sent out to man, taken in its largest character.”³⁷ Thus, the coming of the new Covenant in Christ does not do away with the Moral Law, which, as the preface states, proceeds from the Creator God, the Self-Sufficient God; indeed, by virtue of the Creator God’s eternity and immutability, the Moral Law can never be abrogated. For this reason the Moral Law is of continual application.

A third contrast with the Preface to the Ten Commandments is with Legalism, which is the view that the Law is our way of salvation, although with a twist, as Brian Edwards trenchantly remarks, for “Legalism is not what constraints I place myself under[,] but the demands I place on others.”³⁸

Notice, as Joseph Morecraft observes concerning the Preface, that “the miracle of the Red Sea took place *before* the giving of the Law at Mount Sinai. We must never lose sight of this historical fact. Redemption precedes Law in the experience of God’s covenant people.”³⁹ The Preface itself mentions redemption from slavery in Egypt before moving on to the Ten Commandments. In relation to God’s law, our motivation is not to earn God’s favor, but to respond in love to His mercy towards us by obeying Him. Arthur Pink comments, “The supreme test of love is the desire and effort to please the one loved, and this measured by conformity to his known wishes.”⁴⁰ Those who have been liberated from the power and practice and penalty of sin in their lives will always want to obey the One who accomplished this wonderful salvation, but if they correctly understand

34 Joseph C. Morecraft III, *Authentic Christianity: An Exposition of the Westminster Larger Catechism* (Powder Springs, GA: Minkoff Family Publishers, c2008), 700.

35 Philip Graham Ryken, *Exodus: Saved for God’s Glory* (Wheaton: Crossway, c2005), 528.

36 See Pink, *Gleanings in Exodus*, 161.

37 John N. Darby, *Synopsis of the Books of the Bible*, (New York: Loizeaux Brothers, 1942), 1:86.

38 Edwards, *Ten Commandments for Today*, 54.

39 Morecraft, *Authentic Christianity*, 701.

40 Pink, *Gleanings in Exodus*, 156.

the nature of God's dealings with them, they will not view the Law as a way of salvation. Properly understood, the Moral Law keeps us from legalism.

A fourth contrast with the Preface to the Ten Commandments is with the opposite of Legalism, or Antinomianism, an outlook which alleges that mankind, including believers, is free from responsibility to obey the Moral Law. Antinomianism is the creed of modern times, when, as Brian Edwards puts it, "We have a morality of consensus and experiment."⁴¹ But, as the Preface shows, the Moral Law reposes upon the twin aspects of God's being and action, that He is the Creator and Self-Sufficient God on the one hand, establishing His Law over all His creatures, and He is the Covenantal and Liberating God on the other, imposing His Law particularly over His people.

The Law of God has a key role in driving us to Christ for redemption from our manifold sins. Peter Eldersveld says, "If we have never been to Mount Calvary, we will never get there unless we go by way of Mount Sinai."⁴² Moreover, this Law also was given to the people of the Lord as a rule for their life and thought, after being redeemed from Egypt, as the Preface clearly states. The law remains for believers to obey. Joseph Morecraft again: "The opposite of law is not grace; it is lawlessness."⁴³ Or, as Brian Edwards puts it: "We either keep the Ten Commandments, or we illustrate them."⁴⁴ Yes, the Moral Law protects us from antinomianism.

A fifth and final contrast with the preface to the Ten Commandments is with Formalism, an attitude that views mere personal acquiescence to the truth of God's Word as sufficient for eternal life. The Preface, like the Ten Commandments themselves, was addressed to the nations and the church in the singular: "your" god and "you" in verse two are both singular. One might argue that these are collective singulars, and so they are, but we should not try to avoid the significance of the personal address which each singular brings to bear upon each one of us. Especially to those who have the Creator and Self-Sufficient God as their personal, redeeming God, these Ten Commandments are to be their life's study and practice. They are personal as well as communal. In this way, they undercut attempts to shift the focus from personal sins to corporate sins, as in the various Liberation Theologies and theological and political liberalism in general.

Professor Douma of Kampen writes about the Preface: "Every social ethic is doomed to failure if it is blind to personal responsibility."⁴⁵ And the first step in taking such responsibility personally is to let the law convict of personal sin. Whenever someone attains a correct view of the Law, he clearly senses that he has broken it.⁴⁶ Once burdened by the weight of sin, the sinner must seek salvation from that and all sin in the God-appointed way, which is the way of Christ freeing His people from their slavery to sin, parallel to, but so much greater and more glorious than, the

41 Edwards, *Ten Commandments for Today*, 12.

42 Peter Eldersveld, *Of Law and Love: The Ten Commandments and the Cross of Christ* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1954), 16.

43 Morecraft, *Authentic Christianity*, 701.

44 Edwards, *Ten Commandments for Today*, 56.

45 Douma, *Ten Commandments*, 10.

46 See Bush, *Commentary on Exodus*, 252.

redemption from Egypt mentioned in the Preface. Recall the words of Jesus, “Not every one who says, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the Kingdom, but the one who does the will of my Father” (Matt. 7:21). If we truly love the God of our salvation, we will keep His commandments.

Every Israelite was addressed by God in the Preface and contents of the Ten Commandments, but not all benefited from this gracious revelation of God’s will. Not all stepped through the door God had graciously provided. Professor Kersten observes that: “We must always make a distinction between the external relationship to the covenant – into which Israel as a people had entered – and a being personally in the covenant by faith.”⁴⁷ A covenant-keeper is a Law-keeper. A covenant beneficiary lives and dies with the confidence that God intends for us. As the Scottish Secession leader Ebenezer Erskine lay dying, he told a visitor, “I am resting on that word, ‘I am the Lord your God.’”⁴⁸ The Preface to the Ten Commandments calls us to do the same.

⁴⁷ Kersten, *Heidelberg Catechism*, 479.

⁴⁸ John Whitecross, *The Shorter Catechism Illustrated from Christian Biography and History* (London: Banner of Truth, 1968), 70.