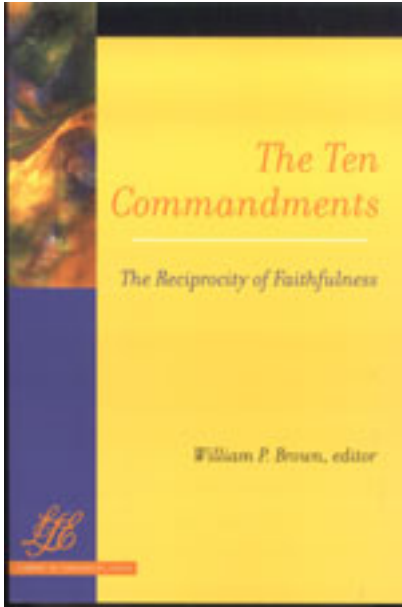


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Brown, William P., ed.

The Ten Commandments: The Reciprocity of Faithfulness

Library of Theological Ethics

Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2004. Pp. xiv + 349. Paper. \$34.95. ISBN 0664223230.

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The Decalogue, the Ten Words, or Ten Commandments have been foundational both for belief and ethics in Judaism and Christianity. Next to that it has often been claimed that the moral code of human civilization is, one way or another, based on the Mosaic law. These observations make the ongoing discussion on the significance of the Decalogue an important task, not only for church and synagogue, but also for biblical scholars. William Brown should be thanked for editing this nice collection of essays on the Decalogue. Most the essays in this reader have been previously published, but in their entirety they supply the reader a panoramic view over the landscape of the law.

After an introduction by the editor, the volume opens with a newly written essay by P. D. Miller, “Divine Command and Beyond: The Ethics of the Commandments” (12–29). In discussion with “divine-command” theories in ethics and in view of the possible fundamentalistic pitfalls of these theories, he proposes to read the Decalogue as a “given-text” that is embedded in covenantal relationship between God and community. By implication, Miller opts for an ethics of human response—and reciprocal responsibility—in answer to the gifts of God.

In the first full section, chapters 2–10, a sampling from the history of interpretation is offered. R. H. Fuller opens this section with a discussion on “The Decalogue in the New

Testament,” showing that the early Christians continued Jewish traditions while applying them more and more to the Hellenistic moral code. After that, the views of Aquinas, Luther, Calvin, and the Radical Reformation are displayed both by an essay on these theologians and by a sample of their thoughts in English translation. This section is very informative on such features as natural law and the theory of the *triplex usus legis*. Next to that, I found it very interesting to read the radical Anabaptist views of Andreas Karlstadt, Hans Denck, and Peter Riedemann.

The next section offers three contemporary reflections on the Decalogue. In a very stimulating essay, “The Obedience of Trust: Recovering the Law as Gift” (133–45), M. Stevens revives the rabbinic idea of the Decalogue as “gift” and “assignment” (German *Gabe* und *Aufgabe*). It is in this balance between “word” and “response” (*Wort* and *Antwort*) that human life can be revitalized, even for Christians, as she stresses. Using midrash-like techniques, she applies this idea to the various commandments. J.-L. Ska, in “Biblical Law and the Origins of Democracy” (146–58), approaches the Decalogue from a comparative point of view and arrives at the conclusion that, unlike other ancient Near Eastern moral codes, any social stratigraphy is absent from this Hebrew code. This implies, for Ska, that the Decalogue should be construed as an important groundwork for a democratic mentality. N. Duff, in “Should the Ten Commandments be Posted in the Public Realm? Why the Bible and the Constitution Say, ‘No!’ ” (159–70), examines the much-debated question whether in relation to the American democracy the Decalogue could play a role in a secular moral debate. Posting the Decalogue in the public realm would, in her view, be an act of double denial. Such an act would deny the personal responsibility of Jews and Christians, and it would distort the freedom of religion as a human right. Christians would do better to post the Decalogue at their doorposts.

In the third section, containing ten chapters, contemporary reflections on the commandments are given by eleven esteemed scholars, most of them with a background in Old Testament studies. The chapter on the fourth commandment contains two essays. The editor very wisely included Heschel’s “A Palace in Time” next to the contribution by K. Greene-McCreight. The essays are not only well written, but all offer more than mere exegetical remarks. Each contribution is a full theological discourse on the pertinent commandment and its implications for moral life. Since all have already been published elsewhere, I will not enter into a detailed analysis of their content but only give voice to the—probably very European—feeling that most contributions are typically contextualized in the North-American society.

In all, I recommend the reading of this volume. It can be of great help for an undergraduate seminar on the Decalogue.