

Moore Commandments than God?

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So I was reading an article about the confrontation over a plaque of the 10 Commandments in the lobby of the Alabama Supreme Court. The story was riveting, but my eyes kept on being drawn to the accompanying photo. Something was bothering me, but I couldn't figure out what it was. Then finally, it dawned on me – there, on the plaque, written on the familiar shape of the two tablets given by God to Moses. *There were eleven commandments written there instead of ten.* That couldn't be right. So I counted again. Well yes, it was true; there were eleven. Wow, here is a judge who really does have a god-complex! What I subsequently learned from one of my teachers was that the extra commandment was Judge Roy Moore's effort at compromise. Discovering that Jews, Catholics, and Protestants divided the Ten up differently, Judge Moore simply reconfigured them into a list of eleven, aiming to satisfy everyone but apparently satisfying no one but himself! It was, literally, a concrete lesson on how attempts to force personal religion into democratic institutions ends up distorting both.

The Book of Deuteronomy teaches something remarkable. It actually places restrictions on the places where people should worship God. Moses declares, "Look only to the site that the Lord your God will choose amidst your tribes and habitations...and there are you to bring your offerings and your sacrifices, your tithes and your gifts...take care not to make your offerings in any place you like, but only in the place that the Lord will choose... (Deut. 12:4 - 6; 13 - 14).

This is counter intuitive! Why would God, Who elsewhere assures us He is close to us wherever we might call out to Him, tell us that it is a mistake to set up places of worship everywhere we could?

Well the answer is found in the context. The urge to dedicate every possible location of importance to the Most High, while meritorious on the face of it, opens the door to the corruption of that worship. If we use a public place, for example, which will be attractive to worshippers of other gods, the temptation to compromise the integrity of our faith in order to accommodate everyone will be irresistible. God's preference, it seems, is to keep his worship pure and free of corrupting influences. And the best way to do that, God tells us, is to limit worship to places dedicated solely and exclusively to God's service.

It is a strange decision on the part of God, but a decision that's wisdom was very evident to our Founding Fathers. When they added the Bill of Rights to our Constitution, they were very conscious of the corrupting effect that mixing government and God could have on a people. They were also aware that religion can become a powerful tool for tyranny, whether that be the tyranny a king or the tyranny of popular will.

Therefore, pulling a page from Deuteronomy, the framers of the Constitution limited the communal worship of God to places outside the government sphere, to places exclusively and expressly dedicated to God's service, in accordance with the desires of voluntary associations of believers. They created a wall, a wall that protects the individual citizen from having religion imposed on him or her by government coercion, but also a wall that protects religions from the intoxicating and corrupting influence of political power.

Right now we are witnessing a battle between Judge Moore, who is using his governmental position to promote his religious ideology, and those who insist that no religion or symbol, however useful or however popular, can have a privileged place in the public sphere.

Baldly declaring himself the sole and unquestionable arbiter of the Bill of Rights, he has turned the Alabama Supreme Court, an institution meant to serve all Americans, into a personal shrine to his religion. But given that the US Court of Appeals, his eight fellow Alabama justices and his own Attorney General have ruled against him, Judge Moore has, I think, completely discredited himself as an officer of the Constitution.

But beyond the cult-like arrogance of his posture toward the Constitution and its institutions, Judge Moore's effort has been infected with religious corruption. For in his effort to force his beliefs upon the public, he has unwittingly committed the very transgression Deuteronomy warned against – he has compromised the word of God. Substituting his own hand for God's, he has rewritten the Ten Commandments into eleven in a misguided and veiled effort to please everyone.

The Ten Commandments are of unsurpassed importance to both Jews and Christians. Yet we live neither in a Jewish nor a Christian state. The culture of America is unquestionably Christian, but the state is secular. That fact is one of the greatest blessings ever bestowed upon people of faith in human history. For in freeing religious institutions from the corrupting influence of political authority, America has become one of the most God-fearing, genuinely religious countries on earth. In other nations, where religion is part of the government bureaucracy, religion is widely despised and almost universally ignored. Judge Moore is doing a disservice to both his office and to his Christian faith. In his effort to turn his high place into a sacred altar he has corrupted the very thing he holds most dear.

Moses declared, "Such sacred and votive offerings as you may have shall be taken by you only to the site that the Lord has chosen...be careful to heed *all* these commandments that I enjoin upon you; thus will it go well for you and for your descendents after you forever, for you will be doing what is good and right in the sight of the Lord your God (Deut. 26-28)."

There are times when restraint, not license, is truer service to God. Freedom from government established religion has greatly blessed the inhabitants of this nation, both secular and religious, since its founding. It is a very great blessing indeed, and one not to be compromised, even if the intentions are holy.