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THE TEN COMMANDMENTS

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"THE CHRISTIAN FAITH"

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Some months ago one of our newspapers ran a small street survey in order to find out how well known were the ten commandments. Although one woman was able to repeat them verbatim, most of those interviewed could only remember one or two of them. One man said jokingly that he was sure that he had broken them all, and then said that the only ones he could recollect were to do with murder and theft. The survey confirmed my own impression. For some time I had the task of setting an exam paper for incoming theological students; in the paper I would often ask for a knowledge of the Commandments. It was astounding how little they were thoroughly known, even by people who intended to enter the ministry.

Is this good or bad? It is often suggested that the ten commandments are the basic ethic of our society, and that the prevailing ignorance of them threatens the very existence of our nation. It is easy to sympathise with this point of view. Certainly, if we kept the Law of God we would all be far better off than we are now. Mind you, people who speak like this are sometimes very selective about which commandments we should observe. It's O.K. not to lie or steal or murder, and keeping the sabbath day holy is another matter altogether. As someone once said we tend to treat the Commandments like an examination paper: 'five only to be attempted' !

But are the ten commandments basic to society? Are they intended for society at all? If we look at where they appear in the Bible, we can see that they were not given to Adam and Eve, even after the Fall of man. Rather, they were given to God's people,

Israel, after they had been rescued from Egypt. In other words, they are the path of obedience for the people of God; they are not intended for society in general, however good it would be were they to be kept.

You see, the first duty of a human being is to serve God; but in fact, our chief pursuit in life is to avoid serving him. It is no good whatever keeping a few of the commandments without first abandoning our rebellion against God, and turning to him for forgiveness. Until that occurs we are dealing with the symptoms of our disease, and not the cause. We keep the ten commandments only when we have made our peace with God. It is seriously misleading, then, to be told that we should keep them as a society, as though it would be possible to please him without belonging to him. It fills us with a false confidence, and hardens our heart against the true claims of God in our lives. Never mind about whether people know the ten commandments or not, it's knowing God personally in his gospel message that is our only true hope. When we do, we will want to know and keep his commandments - all of them.

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