



The 10 Commandments of Bible Interpretation

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Introduction

Every Christian should agree that the splintering of the church into warring factions is not the Lord's idea. How can it be stopped? How can it be reversed? A popular answer today is “Deeds, not creeds! Doctrines divide!” Be nice if it worked. Unfortunately, as the sainted Dr. Siegbert Becker of Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary remarked, *“What happens in the ecumenical movement is that they emphasize everything they agree on, which is almost nothing, and de-emphasize everything they disagree on, which is almost everything, until the sum total of their beliefs can be stated in two sentences: ‘Love thy neighbor and be kind to animals.’”*

God's answer is that the source of division is not creeds, but false creeds -- false doctrine. The source of false doctrine is Bible misinterpretation. To aid the church toward a true ecumenical movement, I offer the Ten Commandments of Bible Interpretation. You may look at that ambitious title and think: “This clown thinks he's found Mount Sinai!” But read them and see for yourself whether they are not only Biblical, but so obviously true that even an atheist would probably agree that this is the way to read the Bible if you want to know what the Bible -- rather than a human theologian -- has to say. Read them and see for yourself whether these methods of interpretation are not the methods the Bible itself, and Jesus Himself, use.

The First Commandment

Thou shalt not take out of context.

Members of my first church told the story about how some Jehovah's Witnesses came around to see them while their pastor was at the house. He listened to the way they ripped Bible passages out of context and said, “Give me that Bible.” He opened it and read, “Judas went and

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hanged himself,” Mt. 27:5; “Go and do thou likewise,” Lk. 10:37; “And what thou doest, do quickly!” -- John 13:27.

This shows that you can prove anything by taking passages out of context. Classic misuses are Ps. 14:1, “There is no God;” Mt. 5:43, “Thou shalt love thy neighbor and hate thine enemy;” and Php. 2:12, “Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling.”

It should be obvious that God does not want His words twisted in this manner. If you did it to anyone else but the Lord, you would be risking a black eye. In any case, you twist the words “to your own destruction,” 1 Peter 3:16.

Some religious bodies raise money by promising that the more we give to God the more He must give back, Malachi 3:8-10. Checking the nearer and wider context and the idioms of the language shows that God here promises only to make it rain and give us such great opportunities to work that we won't be able to do it all. Besides which this promise was spoken to the Jews, not to the Christian church.

Mormons add to their blasphemies the teaching that Jesus was a polygamist on the basis of John 11:5 which says that He loved Mary and Martha. The same sentence says “and Lazarus.” Case closed; the Mormons are false prophets.

Exercise: Compare what these passages might seem to say out of context with their true meaning in their context.

- Proverbs 23:7 (KJV) “*For as he thinketh in his heart, so is he.*” [falsely used by the “Word of Faith” movement to teach a “name it and claim it” prosperity gospel]
- Luke 4:18-19 “*He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives.*” [falsely used by proponents of a “social gospel” to promote socialist or communist politics in the name of Christ]
- Proverbs 29:18 (KJV) “*Where there is no vision the people perish.*” [falsely used to emphasize the power of a “mission statement” at the expense of the power of God’s Word]
- 1 Corinthians 1:17 “*For Christ did not send me to baptize, but to preach the gospel.*” [falsely used to teach that Paul denied that Baptism is a Means of Grace]

The Second Commandment

Thou shalt not take passages in isolation.

In the winter of 1980, TV stations showed a demonstrator picketing mass murderer Stephen Judy's prison with a sign that said, "Thou Shalt Not Kill" to protest his execution. The picketers made the mistake of taking passages in isolation. They ignored Genesis 9:6, "Whoso sheddeth man's blood, by man shall his blood be shed," the fact that "a man after God's own heart" killed Goliath, and St. Paul's agreement that some sins are worthy of death, Acts 25:11. We are even commanded to support governments that "bear the sword," Romans 13:4. They are called "servants of God." Roman swords were not very useful as billy clubs. Their main use was in stabbing. Case closed.

To understand a doctrine, collect all the passages that speak about it. Just read through the Bible and write them down. Then you can organize them in the proper order. If you don't have the time, sell your TV. If you don't have the ability, then spend a few bucks on the book that has already done most of the work for you. Luther's Catechism has gathered all the passages on all the chief doctrines of Scripture, stirred them together, and boiled them down to their essence. In my seminary library there were, at last count, some 30,000 books to help us understand the Bible. All of them put together are not worth as much as the Small Catechism. Far better than all other religious books, the Catechism gives a balanced presentation of Scripture. Each doctrine is presented there in just the right order exactly its proper weight and emphasis as found in the Bible. Lutherans don't use Luther's Catechism because it is Luther's. We use it because it's the best.

Exercise: Compare what these passages might seem to say in isolation, then cite others that complete the real picture.

- Ezekiel 16:49-50 *"Look, this was the iniquity of your sister Sodom: She and her daughter had pride, fullness of food, and abundance of idleness; neither did she strengthen the hand of the poor and needy."* [wrongly cited to teach that God was not offended by the homosexual behavior in Sodom and Gomorrah]
- Ephesians 5:21 *"...submitting to one another in the fear of God,"* and Galatians 3:28 *"There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus."* [wrongly cited to teach that the husband does not have any God-given authority in the Christian home]

The Third Commandment

The Third Commandment stems from the second and is like unto it: **Thou Shalt let the Bible interpret the Bible.** (*Scriptura sui ipso interpres*, one of Luther's main contributions to theology.) Let's look at that word "interpret" for a minute.

To "interpret" means to explain the meaning of a statement. (Such as, for instance, "I saw a one-legged man begging on the street, so I gave him a good sock.") Some statements need no interpretation: "You Thief!" has an obvious meaning, but "He's a good man" means different things depending on whether a wife, a boss, a neighbor, or a theologian is talking, and needs interpretation to be clear. Another example: "I'm sure the next pastor won't be as good as you are." Meaning: "Every pastor we've had here has been worse than the previous one."

There are some Bible passages that need no interpreting. They interpret themselves. They are so crystal clear that it is impossible to twist them into meaning something else. now, when I say "clear," I do not mean "easy to understand." I mean "impossible to *mis*-understand." All the "interpretation necessary is to say: "It means what it says." For example, "No man, nor an angel from heaven, knows when the Son of Man will return." Only the height of theological arrogance could have led someone to write a book like "88 Reasons why the World will End in 1988." Even Christ Himself, without using His divine nature, did not know when the world would come to an end, but Jehovah's Witnesses have predicted the end four different times.

On the other hand, many passages are not so clear. They can be explained in two or more ways. My third Commandment just says that a related clear passage is the only thing that can decide which of several meanings an unclear passage can have, by ruling out wrong interpretations.

Unfortunately, most Christians reject this Commandment. The Roman Catholic equivalent -- ignoring 2 Pt. 1:21, which tells us that "No Scripture is of any private interpretation," (KJV) -- would be, "Thou shalt let the Pope interpret the Bible." This deserves much attention, so permit an excursus. Is there a purgatory or not? The pope says yes. Who has the authority? This is when a fundamental flash of insight struck me: John Paul II is pope for Roman Catholicism, the Patriarch is pope for the Orthodox, John Calvin is pope for the classical Presbyterian, John Wesley is pope for the Methodists, Roger Williams is pope for the Baptists, and the founder of every Protestant sect is pope for his confession. His system

of theology or his theological peculiarity interpret Scripture for his followers. Among Pentecostals, practically every pastor is pope of his congregation. Some Pentecostals, and all liberals, are pope in the shrine of their own sovereign hearts. But this brings up the inevitable question: Is Martin Luther pope of the Lutherans?

No one who has read much of Luther could answer “yes” to that question. Neither he nor the system of theology he formulated authoritatively interpret what the Bible means. Note that word “authoritatively.” The only authority in Lutheranism is the authority of the Word itself. Luther’s principles of interpretation are derived from Scripture, not imposed on it. My own “Ten Commandments of Bible Interpretation” were taken from specific instances where Christ used a principle of interpretation to interpret Scripture. In other words, Luther’s teachings had meaning for his followers only because Luther came up with convincing Scriptures to demonstrate his points. Likewise today, no Lutheran pastor, professor, theologian, bishop, college president, synod president, seminary rector or publisher or editor has any spiritual authority other than the authority to speak Scripture first and last, and quote Scripture in between. If the Scripture he quotes is unconvincing, or if he has no Scripture to quote, everyone else is free to disregard him.

“But you, do not be called ‘Rabbi’; for One is your teacher, the Christ, and you are all brethren. Do not call anyone on earth your father; for One is your Father, He who is in heaven. And do not be called teachers; for One is your Teacher, the Christ. But he who is greatest among you shall be your servant.” (Matthew 23:8-11)

Exercise: Compare the following difficult passages with the clear passages that help us to arrive at the Spirit’s meaning.

Difficult Passage	“Seat of Doctrine”
On the Full Deity of Christ	
John 14:28	John 1:1-2 and Phil. 2:5-11
On Salvation by Grace Apart from Works	
John 5:28-29	Titus 3:5-6
On the So-called Millennial Kingdom	
Rev. 20:4-6	John 18:36; Luke 17:20-21

The Fourth Commandment

The Fourth Commandment stems from the third. If we let Scripture interpret Scripture by letting the clear passages determine which of several meanings an unclear passage may bear, then it follows that **Thou shalt not find contradictions in the Bible.** God is not the author of confusion, 1 Cor. 14:33. Therefore, if you think you have found a contradiction, all that proves is that you haven't understood one or both of the passages. This answers questions such as, Were there pairs of animals or sevens of them on the Ark? Two angels at the grave of Christ, or one?

The process of solving apparent contradictions is the way in which we find much hidden truth. God has loaded His 1200 chapters with more material than 1200 libraries have any right to contain. I have gotten some of my best sermons out of solving apparent contradictions. For instance: The two accounts of the Cleansing of the Temple seem to contradict each other. Did Jesus say, "Make not My Father's house a house of merchandise," Jn. 2:16, or did He say, "My house shall be called the house of prayer but you made it a den of thieves," Mt. 21:13? In fact, He said both -- once at the beginning of His ministry, as a warning; once at the end, as an announcement of God's judgment.

What should you do when you find a contradiction? Almost always, you will find that that contradiction is not between one Scripture and another but between a Scripture and *your theology*.

Most theologians act like I did when I was repairing my motorcycle. I took the blasted thing almost completely apart before I found the problem and fixed it, then had to put it back together. When I was done I had several parts left over. In stead of taking the motorcycle apart and making them fit, I quite naturally, in my arrogance, assumed that I knew more than a bunch of motorcycle engineers and simply threw the pieces in the bolt bucket. Apparently those pieces weren't essential, because the motorcycle worked until I sold it. But the word of God isn't a Honda.

When you find a single Scripture that contradicts your theology, it's essential to tear your theology completely apart and rebuild it from the ground up until you can make that Scripture fit. If your theology contradicts a single Scripture, start over! So if, for example, you are a Baptist like Kenneth Taylor translating the Living Bible, and you find that "these are they who believe for awhile, and then in time of temptation fall away," accept that fact and throw out your Calvinist theology. Don't translate the passage "These are they that sort of believe for awhile." If

they “sort of believe” they'll only “sort of” be damned and you'll need to re-invent Purgatory and Limbo.

Exercise: Answer the following claims of contradictions in the Bible.

1. Were animals or man created first? See Genesis 1:24-27 and Genesis 2:18-19.
2. How many times did the rooster crow before Peter's denial? See Matthew 26:34 and Mark 14:72.
3. Did Jesus give sight to one or two blind men? When He did so, was He entering Jericho or leaving it? See Mark 10:46 and Matthew 20:29-30.
4. Can a person who is a genuine believer in Christ fall away from faith and be lost, or not? See John 10:27-28, Heb. 6:4-6 & 2 Peter 2:20-21.

The Fifth Commandment

Thou shalt remember that the Bible was written in foreign languages. This should be self-evident, and yet when Herbert W. Armstrong was alive he attempted to equate Saxons with Isaac's-sons (pronounced beNEY yitzKHAAK in Hebrew) and to find the name Armstrong in Ps. 89:10.

Your translation is not the Bible. This is forgotten by those who call their Bible the “Saint James Version” and not the “King James Version.” We pity them when they fail to see that “Jesus” is actually Joshua in Hebrews 4:8. They do not realize that by elevating the King James Version to canonical status they are doing what they condemn Roman Catholicism for doing: letting its “authorized translation,” the Vulgate, overrule the original Greek and Hebrew.

The original Greek and Hebrew are the Bible. But you say, I can't read Greek or Hebrew. How can I be sure?

Just remember that a translation is a witness. If you want to be sure of anything, ask two or three witnesses. Although I read both Greek and Hebrew, I can get almost as much information -- sometimes more -- out of a four column Bible. You should however, try to find a church body where the original languages are carefully studied. After all, the pastor is a man of the Book. He should be an expert in that Book.

Since translations are witnesses, choose reliable ones. For example: The Living Bible makes a nice story book for children, but I wish I could trust it as far as I can throw it. (I threw mine quite some distance once, when Kenneth Taylor translated “Those who believe for awhile” as “Those who sort of believe for awhile.” I suppose they'll sort of be

damned.) Then there is the Revised Standard Version. It is completely accurate, except where it counts—in prophecy, Messianic prophecy, and the deity of Christ.

The King James is time-tested. Unfortunately, it is also time-worn. During my last year at the seminary, one of my fellow-students, who had spent twenty years in Lutheran schools and has studied Elizabethan English, made it obvious that there were parts of the KJV that even he didn't understand; I doubt that most laymen will do better. The language of King James is rapidly becoming a foreign dialect, just as Chaucer's English is to us Americans. There are words in the King James Version that now mean nearly the opposite of what they used to, words like meat, prevent, brass, and naughty. Hundreds of words are misleading: in Ac. 28:13, we read "From there we fetched a compass and came to Rhegium." In 1611, "fetched a compass" meant "made a circle, circled around." In 1611 you kept your purse in your wallet, and it was mostly men who carried purses. Today a wallet is kept in a purse, and only real and would-be women carry purses.

A Comparison of Modern English Bible Translations:

Word For Word	Thought For Thought	Paraphrase
NASB	KJV NKJV ESV	NRSV NAB
	NIV	
	NLT NJB	CEV
		TLB
		MSG
CEV Contemporary English Version	NIV New International Version	
ESV English Standard Version	NJB New Jerusalem Bible (Catholic)	
KJV King James Version	NKJV New King James Version	
MSG The Message (Eugene Peterson)	NLT New Living Translation	
NAB New American Bible (Catholic)	NRSV New Revised Standard Version	
NASB New American Standard Bible	TLB The Living Bible (Kenneth Taylor)	

The Sixth Commandment

Thou shalt remember that the Bible is an old book.

Can the Word of God mean one thing today and the opposite tomorrow? Obviously not. Therefore, the meaning of a Bible passage is

not what you understand it to be, but what the original writers meant and the original readers understood. Did Jesus rise on Sunday or Monday? Europeans think “the first day of the week,” John 20:1, is a Monday, but the original readers understood it to be Sunday.

For another instance, in Jn. 13:14-15 you would think that Jesus meant that foot-washing is a sacrament for all time, necessary for salvation. But it didn't mean that to the Apostles. To them, foot-washing was a necessary but menial service which you either did for yourself or accepted from the lowest slave on the totem pole. Therefore when a host offered his slave he offered a great courtesy, and when he provided water so people could wash their feet he was enabling them to freshen up, look their best and be comfortable at his dinner table.

Christians should be willing to do such things, if necessary, for the brethren. So to us also that passage means -- not that we wash each other's feet, which would be an embarrassing annoyance and an unpleasant inconvenience -- but that we be willing to do necessary menial services out of courtesy. If you want to do me a necessary menial service, leave my feet alone and volunteer to do my photocopying. In similar fashion, we no longer “greet the brethren with a holy kiss” because that's not how brethren greet each other. In our culture, we obey Romans 16:16 by shaking hands.

We take historical context into account wherever possible, but remember that internal Biblical information is always more reliable than external historical records. A lot of history, as H. L. Mencken is reputed to have said, is bunk, self-serving propaganda, or downright lies.

In 1 Corinthians 11, St. Paul says it is a shame for a man to have long hair. How long is long? Why didn't Paul just give a maximum length? The reason is that Paul never intended to condemn hair of a certain length. He meant to condemn effeminate men. What his hearers understood him to say was that a man should look like a man to the people around him, and a woman like a woman. Among Americans, braids look feminine. To American Indians, the Vikings, and the Chinese, braids were a masculine hairstyle.

Another area where you can get in lots of trouble by forgetting this Sixth Commandment is in time-reckoning. I almost got sucked into Herbert W. Armstrong's heresies because of this. He got a lot of mileage out of the fact that Good Friday to Easter Sunday doesn't add up to the “three days and three nights” required by Mt. 12:40. Well, as a matter of fact, yes it does. Please consider the following exercise in interpretation.

“Then some of the Pharisees and teachers of the Law said to Him, ‘Teacher, we want to see a miraculous sign from you.’ He answered, ‘A wicked and adulterous generation asks for a miraculous sign! But none will be given it except the sign of the prophet Jonah. For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of a huge fish, so the Son of man shall be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth.’” (Mt. 12:38)

To us, “three days and three nights” would be from sunrise one day to sunrise 72 hours later. But to a Hebrew, each day starts with the evening before (Genesis 1:5). The Jews count any part of a day as the whole thing. It’s because the Jews call any day or any part of a day “a day and a night.”

So if you will let the Bible interpret the Bible (see “The Third Commandment of Bible Interpretation,”) and remember that the Bible is an old book, you will see that Jesus *did* spend “three days and three nights” in the tomb. The three days were Friday, Saturday, and a tiny part of Sunday. The three nights were Friday night, Saturday night, and also the Thursday night which the Jews include as a part of Friday. Do not let your reason overrule these clear Scriptures. It is merely a matter of language and culture. The Hebrews would be just a puzzled by our insistence that George Bush was president for only four years, when by their time-reckoning they would call it five.

Exercise: How does the knowledge of language and culture of biblical times help in these cases of Bible interpretation?

1. In 2 Kings 2:9, was Elisha asking to become twice the prophet that Elijah was?
2. Why was it important that Jesus quoted from the book of Exodus when proving the resurrection to the Sadducees? (Mark 12:24-27)
3. Why would anyone have an issue about “meat sacrificed to idols” in 1 Corinthians 8?
4. Should women be required to wear hats in church? See 1 Corinthians 11:4-16.

The Seventh Commandment

Thou shalt remember that the Bible is a lamp unto thy feet and a light unto thy path. (Ps. 119:105) In other words, the Bible is your lamp-post. now, there are two ways you can use lamp-posts. Most people use them for illumination. Drunkards use them for support. So it is with the Scriptures. Some people get their opinions, attitudes, values, and beliefs from Scripture. Others -- most notably cultists and liberals -- have decided

what they believe before they ever open a Bible. All they want from the Bible is support for the opinions they already hold.

It distresses many Christians when cultists seem to know the Bible so much better than we. It distresses us even more because we sometimes fear they might be right. How can they use the same Bible and yet believe exactly the opposite? Let me illustrate.

Suppose you are building a hot rod in your back yard. You ordered a kit from Ford and have followed their shop manual down to the last washer. Everything is complete and up to specs. Now it's time to set in the transmission. Just before you put it in place, a man taps you on the shoulder and says, "You have it backwards." You stare at him in disbelief. "Who are you?" you ask. "Henry Ford III," he replies. Well. Who are you to argue with Henry Ford? So you put it in as he tells you to, start the engine, put it in gear, let out the clutch -- and tear off in the wrong direction. Even with 100% factory parts and instructions, you went backwards. The problem is the phony who convinced you he was an expert and told you to ignore the plain words of the shop manual and trust him instead.

This is what all cultists do. They are told before they ever open a Bible that they will not find the Trinity there, or the vicarious atonement, or the resurrection of the body, or a heavenly afterlife. They are told that they will find a millennium, and that Jesus is only man. So it shouldn't surprise us when they do find those things.

As a matter of **fact**, though, following this Commandment will greatly strengthen your faith. The last time JWs came around to cast mud on the deity of Christ, I decided to search the Scriptures with an open mind before the next time they came. So I sat down with my Bible, started with Genesis, and copied down every single passage that said in plain English, "Jesus is God." I had expected to find a couple dozen passages. Instead, I copied 125 pages of passages -- and another 125 pages of passages that prove the Holy Spirit is a Person rather than a force, which is what JWs teach.

Exercise: The following passages have been cited in an attempt to disprove the Bible's teaching about an eternal punishment in hell for unbelievers. What is the scriptural answer to this false teaching?

"The wicked shall perish; And the enemies of the LORD, like the splendor of the meadows, shall vanish. Into smoke they shall vanish away." (Psalm 37:19-20)

“And do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. But rather fear Him who is able to destroy both soul and body in hell.”
(Matthew 10:28)

“When the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven with His mighty angels, in flaming fire taking vengeance on those who do not know God, and on those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ. These shall be punished with everlasting destruction from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of His power.” (2 Thessalonians 1:7-9)

But see: Daniel 12:2, Matthew 25:41, Revelation 20:10

How does the false teaching of “annihilation” of unbelievers destroy the meaning of the cross?

The Eighth Commandment

Thou shalt not add to, subtract from, or change the words of Scripture. Mormons have a second Bible, the *Book of Mormon*. They also have an armful of other books and revelations to change any doctrines they find inconvenient (like the doctrine of polygamy a century ago, or racism today). Against such “revelations” the Bible stations four watchdogs:

“Don't add anything to what I order you to do or take anything away from it but keep the commandments of the Lord your God that I order you to keep.” (Dt. 4:2 [AAT])

“Be careful to do everything I order without adding to it or taking anything from it.” (Dt. 12:32)

“Everything God said has proved to be true. He's a Shield to those who come to Him for protection. Don't add anything to what he says or He will correct you, and you will be found a liar.” (Prov. 30:5-6.)

“I warn everyone who hears what the prophecy of this book tells him: If you add anything to this, God will add to you the plagues written in this book. And if you take away any words in this book of prophecy, God will take away your share in the tree of life and in the holy city that are described in this book.” (Rev. 22:18-19)

The Revelation passage above does not mean that taking one word out of Scripture is a particularly damnable sin, just that people who start out by fiddling with the Scriptures always end up cutting out the Gospel of Christ. The Bible is a seamless garment, and just as one hole in a pair of pantyhose means they are as good as rags, so the slightest deletion from Scripture turns that sacred Book into “holy rags.” The Gospel of Christ will eventually be taken out. Without him we are lost. I once had

an old parishioner who denied a single Scripture. I went to him with an old Bible and a pair of scissors. I cut the offending passage out but then proceeded to cut out everything implied by the offending passage. Then I offered him the Bible. Funny, he didn't want it. Neither did I.

Some cultists claim their second Bibles are just another Testament. Very interesting! An unpredicted Testament that contradicts everything in both Old and New!

Exercise: In the following examples, list the teaching that has been wrongly added to the Bible, or taken away from it.

1. Seventh Day Adventist churches claim that Christians must worship on Saturday, and refrain from eating pork.
2. The Unitarian Universalist church (along with many liberal “Christian” churches) claims that there are many paths to God.
3. Most reformed churches claim that God does not impart the forgiveness of sins in Baptism.
4. Priests and nuns must be celibate in the Roman Catholic Church.

The Ninth Commandment

Thou shalt not major in minors. It is soooooo tempting to get caught up in the “interesting” parts of Scripture, like Daniel and Revelation, or the non-Messianic prophecies, or alleged predictions of today's scientific discoveries, or numerology. But one risks being the most knowledgeable Bible scholar in hell, if one knows everything about Bible numbers and nothing about the way of salvation through Jesus Christ. We call such an error “majoring in minors.” By that we refer to the fact that a college student has a major subject, perhaps mathematics, and a minor, perhaps French. If he gets barely passing grades in math, but converses brilliantly in French, he is majoring in minors and is likely to get sent home from college as a failure. In college you can always switch majors. In Bible, however, it's a pass/fail course, and we all have to major in the same thing, Salvation 101.

An examination of each denomination's teachings will show that some of them do in fact major in minors.

The Adventist's chief emphasis is on Old Testament laws. Roman Catholics emphasize their seven Sacraments. The Calvinist elevates the majesty of God to center stage, while holy living is the heart and soul of a Methodist's religion. Some churches push missions week after week; others, prayer and the apostolic succession; and at least three major denominations (Presbyterians, Congregationalists, and Episcopalians) are

kept apart mainly by insisting on one of the three forms of church government found (but not commanded) in the Bible.

Well, all these things [those which have scriptural support] are fine and important. But are they most important? Did *Jesus* come to preach sanctification -- or prayer -- or church government -- or religious liberty? All these things have their place. The fault with most denominations is that they take them out of their proper place. What is most important is that every doctrine be given its proper weight and be used at the proper time.

You will not find a Lutheran preacher spending the whole summer on numerology or end-time prophecy. Nor should a true Lutheran pastor ever let anyone walk out of church on Sunday without telling him the way to be saved. This is what the Lutheran strives for: that he would be good to have any sermon he preached be the last or only sermon a man ever heard. The true Lutheran always explains the critical issues, the important things, the Gospel of Jesus Christ, whenever he mounts his pulpit.

The Tenth Commandment

And the Tenth Commandment, closely connected to the Ninth: **Thou shalt distinguish properly between Law and Gospel.** A soul is either estranged from God -- under the Law -- or reconciled with Him by the Gospel. The very worst thing you can do to a man is give him the wrong part of the Bible at the wrong time. A murderer and a suicide need to hear different Scriptures (the suicide needs hope, not hopelessness, condemnation, and further strait jacketing of his options -- he needs to hear about the love of God, not the fires of hell.)

When a man is indifferent to the state of his soul or secure in his sins, then the flames must roar and hell burn hot beneath him. But when he has been crushed by the sledge of the Law, and his conscience is in agony, then the fire must be put out, or he will either die in despair like Judas or harden his conscience against such terrors. At that time Jesus, the Healer, must come forth to bind up his wounds and speak to him tenderly of the love of God. He who can distinguish between the Law and the Gospel deserves the doctor's gown, as Luther says.

All religions except that of Christ boil down to the same formula: "Keep the rules, and you will be rewarded." It doesn't matter what religion you are talking about, all promise some kind of reward for keeping the rules. The only difference lies in what the rules are and what the reward is. Moslems worship on Friday for entrance to a hashish

harem; Jews on Saturday for possession of Palestine, and misinformed “Christians” think their keeping of Sunday is a rule that guarantees them a place in heaven. All three are equally wrong.

Oh, yes, Christians have their rules. And while I believe those rules are superior to the rules in other religions, we don't keep them for a reward. In fact, we have barely kept them at all, and are threatened with a righteous punishment for that, rather than any sort of reward. That's the doctrine of the law. The Gospel is not found in any other religion. This is the message of God's love, a love so great that it sent someone else to be our Substitute in punishment for failure to keep the rules. His sweat and his blood are put on our account; He filled what we can rightfully call the Treasury of Merit, properly understood; therefore He was punished and we are rewarded, for no other reason than the kind heart of God. Where is the rule-keeping, then? We don't do it for a reward. We do it out of gratitude to God and Christ, who loved us and did so much to help us.

To summarize, then: The Law tells us what we must do to be saved; it shows us our sin and the wrath of God. Keeping the Law cannot save us no matter how much we try to keep it. It demands that we be perfectly righteous but gives us no strength for leading a godly life.

The Gospel, on the contrary, tells us what God has done through Christ to save us. It shows us our Savior and the grace of God. It therefore saves us by grace through faith. It declares us righteous juridically before God, and then gives us strength to increase our actual, personal righteousness by living a godly life. The table on the following page should help make it clear.

The Conclusion of These Commandments

Theology is a system of logical thought, built on certain assumptions. These assumptions are rarely exposed to critical view. If the assumptions underlying many systems of theology were exposed, they would be seen as the house of cards they are. Then, perhaps, the church bodies built on those assumptions would merge with other church bodies and would build a Biblical system of thought, to the glory of God, the expansion of the church, and the confusion of the church's critics. Let it be so! Amen.

The distinction between Law and Gospel:

The Law	The Gospel
In the heart by nature	Known only by Scripture
Identifies sin	Proclaims grace
Commands obedience	Forgives disobedience
Demands	Promises
Says we are unrighteous	Declares us righteous
Justifies doers of good	Justifies without the Law
Frightens and terrifies	Quiets and comforts
Threatens	Assures and reassures
Afflicts the comfortable	Comforts the afflicted
Condemns and curses	Acquits and blesses
Anger, wrath, and outrage!	Kindness, pity, and love
Imprisons	Frees
Says what we must do	Says what Christ has done
Says you are guilty	Says you are not guilty
Prepares ground for seed	Sows and is the good seed
Takes	Gives
Cannot save	Saves to the uttermost
Reveals God's wrath	Proclaims God's mercy
Says that God hates sin	Proclaims God's love
Provokes further sin	Motivates fruits of gratitude
Gives no strength	Strengthens and motivates
Punishes	Forgives
Despair instead of hope	Hope instead of despair
Brings death	Gives life
Provokes man to sin	Moves to deeds of gratitude
Uncovers hell beneath	Opens heaven above
Sends to hell	Takes to heaven