

The Catechism...

The Commandments

A C A T E C H I S M ;

That is to say, An Instruction to be learned of every Person, before he be brought to be confirmed by the Bishop.

Question.

WHAT is your Name ?

Answer, N. or M.

Quest. Who gave you this Name ?

Answ. My Godfathers and Godmothers in my Baptism; wherein I was made a member of Christ, the child of God, and an inheritor of the kingdom of Heaven.

Quest. What did your Godfathers and Godmothers then for you ?

Answ. They did promise and vow three things in my Name : First, that I should renounce the devil and all his works, the pomps and vanity of this wicked world, and all the sinful lusts of the flesh; Secondly, that I should believe all the Articles of the Christian Faith; And thirdly, that I should keep God's holy Will and Commandments, and walk in the same all the days of my life.

Quest. Dost thou not think that thou art bound to believe, and to do as they have promised for thee ?

Answ. Yes, verily; and by God's help so I will. And I heartily thank our heavenly Father, that he hath called me to this state of salvation, through Jesus Christ our Saviour. And I pray unto God to give me his grace, that I may continue in the same unto my life's end.

Catechist. Rehearse the Articles of thy Belief.

Answer.

I Believe in God the Father Almighty, Maker of Heaven and Earth;

And in Jesus Christ his only Son our Lord; Who was conceived by the Holy Ghost, Born of the Virgin Mary, Suffered under Pontius Pilate, Was crucified, dead, and buried; He descended into Hell; The third day he rose again from the

The Anglican Catechism: Basic Elements



The introduction....

Question. You said that your Godfathers and Godmothers did promise for you, that you should keep God's Commandments. Tell me how many there be?

Answer. Ten.

Question. Which be they?

Answer. THE same which God spake in the twentieth chapter of Exodus, saying, I am the Lord thy God, who brought thee out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage.

- Historical placement: given at Mount Sinai, just after the Exodus from Egypt
- Jewish tradition: '10 sayings' or '10 words'. Pithy, short, theology.
- Note: the 10 sayings are also repeated (with minor variations in Deuteronomy 5)
- God starts by identifying himself: 'the Lord' = YHWH. He reminds the people that he has *already* saved them (from Egypt). God establishes his Covenant with the people.



Ten Commandment boards were officially instituted in 1604 as one of the measures of the Constitutions and Canons Ecclesiastical of the Church of England, under which bishops would have to ensure: "*.... that the Ten Commandments be set upon the East end of every Church and Chapel where the people may best see and read the same, and other chosen sentences written upon the walls of the said Churches and Chapels, in places convenient. All these to be done at the charge of the parish.....*"

Two groups of *relational* commandments:

God

- No other God
- No images or idols
- No 'taking of Name in vain'
- Sabbath

Neighbour

- Parents
- Adultery
- Murder
- Stealing
 - Lies
- Coveting

I. Thou shalt have none other gods but me.

- A plethora of other gods cried out for the Hebrews' attention: especially Egyptian gods.
- Even while Moses was receiving the 10 Sayings, the Hebrews fashioned their own god - the 'Golden Calf'
- Who are the other gods we might be tempted follow, in pursuit of our well-being, joy and security?

Bacchus?

Mars?

Ra?

Eros?

(Remember: ancient gods tend to focus on one aspect of the human condition. The exclusive claim of YHWH is that he is 'sufficient' for all our needs, and that in Him all things are held together (in balance). YHWH 'supplies all your needs' (Philippians 4.19)

II. Thou shalt not make to thyself any graven image, nor the likeness of any thing that is in heaven above, or in the earth beneath, or in the water under the earth. Thou shalt not bow down to them, nor worship them. For I the Lord thy God am a jealous God, and visit the sins of the fathers upon the children unto the third and fourth generation of them that hate me, and shew mercy unto thousands in them that love me and keep my commandments.

- Hebrew word 'pesel' - can mean image OR idol - SO (for caution!) this is *either*.
- *Traditional* understanding focuses on idols - i.e. false gods, like the Golden Calf
- *However*, some Christian traditions have focused on prohibiting images of God - leading to 'iconoclasm' - the destruction of icons, statues and images of God or holy people.
- *Note*: the inter-generational warning. Disobedience (or obedience) has *long-term* consequences

III. Thou shalt not take the Name of the Lord thy God in vain: for the Lord will not hold him guiltless, that taketh his Name in vain.

- This is about *much more* than saying ‘Oh Jesus!’
- To use a name, is to *mobilise* the presence and the power of the person or thing which is named. ‘Stop in the name of the Law’ ‘In the name of the King’.
- Praying ‘in the name of Jesus’ is to mobilise Jesus’ presence and power
- YHWH’s name is therefore only to be used in ways which mobilise (or reflect) true things about YHWH.

Some examples of taking the Name in vain: ‘God hates me’*, ‘God hates *someone else** - e.g. homosexuals, muslims, criminals’. Such uses diminishes who God really is. It takes his name in vain for pseudo-pious purposes.

**untrue because God loves the whole world and all God’s children.*

IV. Remember that thou keep holy the Sabbath day. Six days shalt thou labour, and do all that thou hast to do; but the seventh day is the Sabbath of the Lord thy God. In it thou shalt do no manner of work, thou, and thy son, and thy daughter, thy man-servant, and thy maid-servant, thy cattle, and the stranger that is within thy gates. For in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that in them is, and rested the seventh day: wherefore the Lord blessed the seventh day, and hallowed it.

- A transitional ‘saying’ - partly about God, partly about neighbour, partly about self.
- Why rest? Because God rests. This God is not a workaholic. YHWH has no need to be more secure, more sufficient, more in control, or more noticed.
- Note there is no reference to ‘*worship*’ on the Sabbath. (Worship is something for every day - arguably every day *except* the Sabbath. (This is why clergy have a day off which is *not* a Sunday!))
- Note that Christians don’t observe the *actual* Sabbath. Sunday is ‘the Lord’s Day’ (on which he rose). It is not the Friday-to-Saturday-evening of the Jewish Sabbath.

V. Honour thy father and thy mother; that thy days may be long in the land which the Lord thy God giveth thee.

- ‘Honour’ - does not mean ‘obey’. Hebrew word ‘kaved’ means ‘be heavy’ - or ‘give weight to’
- The saying indicates the constant tension of all societies about the transmission of wisdom and insight down the generations.
- The whole of Exodus is a tale to be told to ensure that children, and children’s children, will know and embrace their history of liberation. Jewish children today continue to rehearse the story, e.g. at Passover meals and Sabbath rituals.
- What do we do to help *our* children inherit the faith and the stories that we have inherited?

VI. Thou shalt do no murder.

- A terse command! Essentially, all human life belongs to God and must be respected.
- Commentators argue though... e.g. does this rule only apply to others within the Covenant with God? Is it (in other words) permitted to kill (or execute) those who have placed themselves outside the Covenant, by their behaviour? What about the death penalty?
- Another interpretation (Karl Barth) assumes the commandment means reverence for *all life*.

Just goes to show that theologians can argue about even the simplest line of scripture! What fun!

VII. Thou shalt not commit adultery.

- Another terse command! So it invites interpretation.
- Essentially, this is about preventing harm to the most precious conveyor of the Covenant - the family.
- Note: this command is about faithfulness to others, within the context of faithfulness to God.
- Note: this command doesn't have anything to say about 'sex before marriage' or willing 'permissive/free-love relationships'. It's assumption is simple - fidelity (faithfulness) is paramount in human relationships.

So - would mutually-agreed 'wife-swapping' be permissible behaviour? I do hope not!

VIII. Thou shalt not steal.

- “What is possessed by another must not be unlawfully seized”
- Note: this terse command doesn’t address wider issues of justice over property ownership - though other parts of Scripture do.

e.g. Any property which has been acquired through violence can be said to have been stolen - including land (from aborigine people, or ‘Nazi gold’ or the contents of much of the British museum.

How much notice of this command do we take as a society?

IX. Thou shalt not bear false witness against thy neighbour.

- This command is not about 'lying' per se...it's about the proper conduct of courtrooms. *(Lying or trickery, as a technique to obtain favour or advantage has a long biblical history. Jacob/Esau, Moses' own mother, St Peter, even Jesus (see John 7.9-10))*
- Other commands deal with the primacy of YHWH, the sanctity of human life, the mystery of sexuality, and the maintenance of property. But the inclusion of this command demonstrates that any functioning society needs an arena in which disputes can be fairly and equitably settled.

Remember - the 10 Commandments are about how a society should be structured. Individual morality is less in question.

X. Thou shalt not covet thy neighbour's house, thou shalt not covet thy neighbour's wife, nor his servant, nor his maid, nor his ox, nor his ass, nor any thing that is his.

- This is about acquisitiveness...not just envy, but the *desire* to own my neighbours things.
- It prohibits the possession of *anything* which deprives one's *neighbour*. SO, again, this is about how to live in community.
- Note: this is the climax of the 10 sayings. It stands in counterpoint to the first sayings about giving primacy to God in all things. The desire to *acquire stuff* is ultimately a sign that one does not trust that God, and God's provision, is enough. In other words - the community is invited to break with the 'theology of scarcity' which drives our consumerist desire to hoard toilet rolls!

A quick recap:

The Ten Commandments are an essential, foundational set of principles of God's Covenant with humanity. They are 'revealed' - directly from YHWH. They disclose the non-negotiable will of God. In that sense they:

- about where the focus of a society should be (i.e. on God)
- underline the importance of *transmission* of these ideas through the generations
- set boundaries around acceptable behaviour in society
- proscribe the most destructive tendencies of people in society - murder, adultery, stealing, covetousness
- underline the importance of a trustworthy arbitration system (*what do they say about our system in which, currently, it can take 18 months to get justice?*)

Next Time...

Identity and
commitment

Belief and
Faith

Naming and
Promising

The Creed



The Ten
(Commandments)

The Two
Commandments
& The Lord's
Prayer

The
Sacraments



Prayer

Law and
Behaviour

Grace and
strength

