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The Ten Commandments 2.0

ADAM J. COPELAND

The questions have changed. A few years ago, tech-savvy pastors advocating for the use of new media in ministry were asked questions from other church leaders like, “How does Twitter work?” “Is Facebook just for college students?” “What is a blog?” Answers to these practical questions came relatively easily through how-to lessons and straightforward seminars.

More recently, inquiries about technology and ministry have shifted from these basic how-to questions to more complex ones having to do with theology, ethics, and the shadow side of technology. It is one thing to sign up for Facebook; it is another skill entirely to respond with appropriate pastoral care (online and offline) when a parishioner admits to an affair via Facebook. As social media becomes part and parcel of life in the twenty-first century, the church searches to find a cogent response to these pressing questions. To what resources might pastors, church members, and even ethicists turn when navigating these new waters of digital life? The possibilities are myriad (just search Google to see) but this essay will draw wisdom and guidance from one particular source: the Ten Commandments.

As a Presbyterian, it is daunting to write on the Ten Commandments for a Lutheran-affiliated publication. From the start, let me make clear that I do not intend to break any new ground examining the nuanced, much-debated theology of Martin Luther and John Calvin concerning God’s law.¹ That is a fine task for an-

¹See Edward A. Dowey, “Law in Luther and Calvin,” *Theology Today* 41/2 (1984) 146–153.

Since the Ten Commandments still enjoy a primary place in both church teaching and cultural debate, it will be both helpful and faithful to interpret them anew in the light of our new media and new technologies. Adam Copeland does just that in this article.

other essay. For now, however, it must suffice briefly to note aspects of Martin Luther's approach to the Ten Commandments before moving on to modern applications of the commandments as they pertain to digital life.

LUTHER ON THE COMMANDMENTS

First, Luther famously wrote, "This much is certain: those who know the Ten Commandments perfectly know the entire Scriptures and in all affairs and circumstances are able to counsel, help, comfort, judge, and make decisions in both spiritual and temporal matters."² Addressed in many catechisms, the Ten Commandments still enjoy a primary place in the teaching of Lutheran, Reformed, and Roman Catholic traditions. Additionally, in the United States today, the commandments hold a prominent position in cultural debate, and they are cited and claimed by many, including those who do not regularly attend church. The Ten Commandments, though ancient, are still exceedingly relevant.

Second, the commandments are meant to be interpreted. As Luther himself exemplified with his many pages of commentary in the *Large Catechism*, the commandments, with their almost terse form, must be interpreted. Such interpretations include both positive and negative meanings—the commandments tell us what we should do, but also what we should not do. As Patrick Miller writes, "Rather than being rigid, fixed, archaic, and obvious, the Commandments open up a moral and theological arc or movement that began long ago and is still going on."³ Of course, interpreting the commandments must be done carefully and with the rest of the Bible in mind, but interpretation is essential.

Third, though sin ensures that humanity will fail to follow them rightly, Luther nevertheless treats the commandments as instructional for daily life. Luther writes, "The one who does fulfill them is a heavenly, angelic person, far above all holiness on earth. Just concentrate upon them and test yourself thoroughly, do your very best, and you will surely find so much to do that you will neither seek nor pay attention to any other works or other kind of holiness."⁴ With this brief overview in mind, we now turn to the commandments themselves.

THE COMMANDMENTS 2.0

In the tradition of interpreting the commandments for contemporary practice, I will consider each as it relates to information communication technologies and digital life. My approach seeks not to overturn any older interpretations but rather to add a contemporary—and sometimes lighthearted—take to the rich tradition of the commandments. I hope readers receive the Commandments 2.0 as a

²Martin Luther, *The Large Catechism*, in *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, ed. Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000) 382.

³Patrick D. Miller, *The Way of the Lord: Essays in Old Testament Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004) 39.

⁴Luther, *Large Catechism*, 429.

proposal, invitation for conversation, and opportunity to reflect upon faithful living today.

The First Commandment 2.0: You shall have no other gods, so don't treat your cell phone like one

When I enjoy a meal out with youth or young adults, rare is the occasion when the tabletop is free of cell phones. It is as if the phones sustain life as much as the food. Sherry Turkle, author of several books on technology and society, cites an interview conducted with a young woman concerning cell phone use. The woman explains that she will answer a cell phone call from an unknown number, even while already speaking to a friend on her phone, because "I need to know who wanted to connect....And if I hear my phone, I have to answer it. I don't have a choice."⁵ New perceptions of friendship, technology, and constant connection have reworked this young woman's practices such that she serves a god of the cell phone who hinders her ability to choose her own action.

"If I hear my phone, I have to answer it. I don't have a choice."

Before older readers begin to feel too smug, thinking they have escaped the mobile-device god, this problem is not one of youth alone. In fact, in my experience it is older adults (often the later adopters of technology) whose phones are more likely to go off in worship or meetings, who opt to take calls at inappropriate times, and who become slaves to demands of constant work e-mail accessed remotely. Or, consider the issues surrounding parents who give their children cell phones. As Turkle writes, "When parents give children phones, there is an implied message: 'I love you, and this will make you safe. I give this to you because I care.' Then schools want to take the phone away."⁶ In many cases, when parents give a cell phone to their child they do so, in large part, to appease their own gods of anxiety that their children always be reachable.

The First Commandment 2.0 calls us to put our trust in God alone. If we feel withdrawal symptoms when away from e-mail too long, get nervous when we leave the house without a cell phone, or feel angry or anxious when we cannot reach a child at all times, then chances are we have made a god out of technology.

The Second Commandment 2.0: You are not to misuse the name of your God, nor misuse language online or offline

As noted, many traditions of interpreting the Ten Commandments include positive and negative interpretations. In this way, even traditional elaboration on the second commandment expands its meaning to include a call to speak in ways

⁵Sherry Turkle, *Alone Together: Why We Expect More from Technology and Less from Each Other* (New York: Basic Books, 2011) 171.

⁶*Ibid.*, 247.

that give honor to God, in ways that are kind and generous, never careless or flip-pant. While many of us do our best to try to speak well of others in face-to-face interactions, when we move to Internet-mediated communication our good words become harsh and snarky. Comment feeds, Facebook posts, chat rooms, and tweets often display our failure to speak in ways that are pleasing to God.

Many online news and commentary sites allow readers to leave anonymous comments, but that tide may be changing, due in large part to the writers' tendency to vitriol. For instance, Arianna Huffington, founder of *The Huffington Post*, has said, "Anonymity is just the way things are done. It's an accepted part of the Internet, but there's no question that people hide behind anonymity to make vile or controversial comments."⁷ With this in mind, *The Huffington Post* has moved to an online comments policy for which persons must register to comment, and all comments are subject to moderation by staff or members of the public. The policy states, "If your comments consistently or intentionally make this community a less civil and enjoyable place to be, you and your comments will be excluded from it."⁸ Other websites and newspapers are experimenting with similar approaches.

The Second Commandment 2.0 does not call us to refrain from posting comments online. Rather, it reminds us that comments should be left with kindness, humility, and love. As one Christian blogging site states in its comments policy: "Blessed are those who refuse to insult or slander others, even if they have been dis-respected themselves. They show us all a better way."⁹

"Once I moved beyond the fear of being unavailable and what it might cost me, I experienced what, if I wasn't such a skeptic, I would call a lightness of being. I felt connected to myself rather than to my computer."

The Third Commandment 2.0: Honor the Sabbath day; give the gadgets a rest

Since the use of Internet communication technologies can be so all-consuming, advocating for a technology Sabbath may seem common sense. The most outspoken advocates, however, sometimes come from unexpected places.

For instance, acclaimed food journalist Mark Bittman published an essay in the *New York Times* on the subject of taking breaks from technology use. Interestingly, Bittman wrote from a secular perspective. Reflecting on his experience of adding a "secular Sabbath" into each week—twenty-four hours without e-mail, Internet, or TV—Bittman wrote:

⁷Richard Pérez-Peña, "News Sites Rethink Anonymous Online Comments," *New York Times*, April 11, 2010, at <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/04/12/technology/12comments.html> (accessed April 15, 2012).

⁸"FAQ: Comments and Moderation," *Huffington Post*, at <http://www.huffingtonpost.com/p/frequently-asked-question.html> (accessed April 15, 2012).

⁹"Comments Policy," *Gathering Voices: Faithful Conversations from TheThoughtfulChristian.com*, at <http://blog.thethoughtfulchristian.com/comments-policy.html> (accessed April 15, 2012).

I would no more make a new-agey call to find inner peace than I would encourage a return to the mimeograph. But I do believe that there has to be a way to regularly impose some thoughtfulness, or at least calm, into modern life—or at least my version. Once I moved beyond the fear of being unavailable and what it might cost me, I experienced what, if I wasn't such a skeptic, I would call a lightness of being. I felt connected to myself rather than to my computer. I had time to think, and distance from normal demands. I got to stop.¹⁰

Even from his secular point of view, Bittman's description should compel believers to consider digital Sabbath-keeping.

Christians, for centuries, have debated how best to honor the Sabbath and keep it holy. For twenty-first-century Christians, the debate now includes the addition of mobile communication technologies. To date, at least, all consumer technologies are manufactured with an “off” switch. God certainly may not mind us texting on Sunday morning, offering to take someone to worship, but we cannot fully connect with ourselves and our God if we are always on. Paradoxically, rest and renewal to focus on God sometimes takes hard work—the first step of which is often turning off.

The Fourth Commandment 2.0: Before reposting or sharing, fact check—this makes your father and your mother very happy

Luther writes that the fourth commandment applies to honoring those in authority, including parents, heads of a household, civil authorities, and spiritual leaders.¹¹ The speed at which information travels online and the ease of sharing via social networks make misrepresenting others—including those in authority—exceedingly simple. Passing along an erroneous story, quotation, or modified picture may not directly affect the sharer, but it might be extremely damaging to *someone's* parent.

For example, after President Obama announced the death of Osama bin Laden, many turned to Facebook to share their reactions. Many people posted quotations (some of which were drawn from Scripture). One quote that went viral read:

I will mourn the loss of thousands of precious lives, but I will not rejoice in the death of one, not even an enemy. Returning hate for hate multiplies hate, adding deeper darkness to a night already devoid of stars. Darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate, only love can do that.¹²

The quote was attributed to Martin Luther King Jr.; however, only the final three sentences are his (from his book *Strength to Love*). As Megan McArdle explains in *The Atlantic*, the first sentence is that of Jessica Dovey, an English teacher in Japan.¹³

¹⁰Mark Bittman, “I Need a Virtual Break. No, Really,” *New York Times*, March 2, 2008, at <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/03/02/fashion/02sabbath.html?pagewanted=all> (accessed April 15, 2012).

¹¹Luther, *Large Catechism*, 400–408.

¹²Megan McArdle, “Anatomy of a Fake Quotation,” *The Atlantic*, May 3, 2011, at <http://www.theatlantic.com/national/archive/2011/05/anatomy-of-a-fake-quotation/238257/> (accessed April 15, 2012).

¹³*Ibid.*

In her original Facebook post, Dovey quoted King correctly, prefacing the quote with her own words before the quotation marks. In subsequent reposting someone moved the quotation marks, attributing the entire paragraph to King. It will likely never be known how many thousands of people shared and came across the fake quote, but reaction to the story appeared on *CNN*, *TIME*, *The Huffington Post*, *Fox News*, and other mainstream news sources.

for the sake of the Internet and to honor all those in authority, it is best to think twice before sharing a questionable quotation, image, or news story

The story of the fake Martin Luther King Jr. quotation illustrates how easy it now is to share inaccurate or damaging material. The problem becomes particularly murky when sharing photos, as it is often difficult to determine whether they—or their captions—have been altered. For the sake of the Internet and to honor all those in authority, it is best to think twice before sharing a questionable quotation, image, or news story.

The Fifth Commandment 2.0: You shall not kill, so of course you shall use the Internet for peace

In 2008, amidst turbulent elections in Kenya and many reports of violence, a group of tech developers built Ushahidi (which means “testimony” in Swahili). The Ushahidi online platform has since been used to track needs among those involved in the Arab Spring, deliver aid to victims of Hurricane Katrina, monitor elections all over the world, and provide help in hundreds of other crises. The system, which can be deployed in a matter of hours, invites members of the public to text message, e-mail, or report via website the needs of an area. These then show up on an interactive online map so aid workers can visualize the needs of a particular region. Clark Craig, who served with the US Marine Corps team responding to the Haiti earthquake said, “I cannot overemphasize to you what the work of the Ushahidi/Haiti has provided. It is saving lives every day. I wish I had time to document to you every example, but there are too many and our operation is moving too fast.”¹⁴

Ushahidi, a nonprofit organization, has accomplished all this in four years by relying on hundreds of volunteer programmers. Ushahidi is not religiously affiliated, but the way they have harnessed the power of the Internet to fight violence and aid victims worldwide should make Christians marvel.

Internet communication technologies can, of course, spark violence, support injustice, and even lead to death. Human capabilities to kill have moved far beyond the resources available to Cain and Abel. But exactly because of the remarkable

¹⁴“Testimonials,” *Ushahidi*, at <http://www.ushahidi.com/about-us/newsroom/testimonials> (accessed April 15, 2012).

power of technology to aid and depersonalize killing (as in the case of unmanned aerial vehicles or “drones”), we must seek ways to use technologies for peace and justice.

The Sixth Commandment 2.0: You shall not multi-life—you only have one after all

As our lives become more filled with digital experiences, scholars are hard at work studying how online experiences affect our lives offline. Generally speaking, as Internet communication technologies become more ubiquitous, we make fewer distinctions between experiences that occur in “real life” and those that are mediated by the Internet. Sadly, teens are finding that bullying hurts as much via Facebook as on the playground, and couples discover infidelity is just as devastating when it occurs in Internet chat rooms as at a neighbor’s house.

Sherry Turkle writes of Pete, a man she interviewed about his virtual life and relationships. Offline, Pete is married and has two children, but he is also in a relationship with a female avatar in the virtual world Second Life. Most mornings, Pete logs on to Second Life, talks with his companion Jade, and the two engage in virtual sexual relations through their avatars. Pete finds it difficult to speak to his wife, but discusses his anxieties with Jade. “Second Life,” Pete says, “gives me a better relationship than I have in real life. This is where I feel most myself. Jade accepts who I am. My relationship with Jade makes it possible for me to stay in my marriage, with my family.”¹⁵ Turkle suggests, “We have moved from multitasking to multi-lifing.”¹⁶

Surely, Pete’s story is extreme, but all of us know the feeling of being deep in conversation with someone, only to be interrupted by a ringing cell phone. If answered, it can feel as if the conversation—or further, the relationship itself—is irreparably interrupted while another relationship is being fostered via the cell phone.

Facebook, chat rooms, social media, and even telephones give us the opportunity to connect to others in wonderful ways, but they also allow us to present ourselves in ways not immediately connected to our embodied selves. It is much easier to present a fake cheeriness on one’s Facebook page than it is to disguise true unhappiness while at lunch with a friend.

Technology is a gift, but it can become a problematic one, particularly when it allows us to present ourselves online in new ways, many of which seem disconnected to our actual bodies. In actuality, we have only one body, only one life. The Sixth Commandment 2.0 warns us not to prioritize online experiences over offline ones and to reflect on all our relationships, whether mediated by new technology or not.

¹⁵Turkle, *Alone Together*, 159.

¹⁶*Ibid.*, 160.

The Seventh Commandment 2.0: Steal neither goods nor time from yourself and others

At \$388 billion, the value of the cybercrime trade is approaching the total cost of global drug trafficking.¹⁷ Every day, the Internet makes possible new ways to steal from our neighbors. Beyond the obvious injunction against such crime, the seventh commandment has also been interpreted more broadly.

Luther argued that the seventh commandment called for Christians to “promote and further our neighbors’ interests, and when they suffer any want, we are to help, share, and lend to both friends and foes.”¹⁸ As we care for the welfare of others today, we must consider our digital media use and, in particular, how much time we devote to activities online. As folk singer David LaMotte puts it, “There’s no time like the present and there’s no present like time.”¹⁹

to ensure technology does not steal time and relationships, some families have a designated “technology basket” in their homes where music players and cell phones sit during meals and other functions, so as not to distract

A 2011 Pew study revealed drastic increases in the number of people who use the Internet “just for fun” or as diversion. On a normal day, 53% of young adults go online for no particular reason.²⁰ Most people on Facebook will admit how easy it is to spend more time on the site than they had intended. Though it is clear that not all time online is spent negatively, we need to recognize the increasing time we spend interacting with new media and to contemplate, through prayer and reflection, whether these efforts serve God.

To ensure technology does not steal time and relationships, some families have a designated “technology basket” in their homes where music players and cell phones sit during meals and other functions, so as not to distract. Similarly, some people designate a “no technology zone” in their house or a time each evening when all new media are turned off.

The Eighth Commandment 2.0: To help you not bear false witness as you have access to new ideas and technologies, help others gain access as well

During a recent presidential debate, the nonpartisan FactCheck.org posted live updates regarding the accuracy of the candidates’ claims. Surely the Internet has affected political campaigns in problematic ways, but in this case new media allowed candidates’ factual claims to be almost instantly questioned. But

¹⁷“Cybercrime Report 2011,” *Symantec*, at http://www.symantec.com/content/en/us/home_homeoffice/html/cybercrimereport/ (accessed April 15, 2012).

¹⁸Luther, *Large Catechism*, 419–420.

¹⁹David LaMotte, “Deadline,” originally released on *Corners*, Lower Dryad Music, 2000.

²⁰Lee Rainie, “The Internet as a Diversion and Destination,” *Pew Internet*, Dec 2, 2011, at <http://pewinternet.org/Reports/2011/Internet-as-diversion.aspx> (accessed April 15, 2012).

not everyone had access to FactCheck.org. For some, access is a question of reliable high-speed Internet service, while others do not even have a computer.

In our world today, lack of access to technology can disadvantage and marginalize people in many ways. The term “digital divide” describes “the uneven nature of access to and quality of Internet access, electronic communication, and cybercultures in general.”²¹ Access to new media, just like access to other resources, is unevenly and unfairly distributed. Even when access to digital resources exists, as Vincent Miller points out, research has shown a difference between *theoretical* access and *effective* access, meaning that simply because people have physical access to a computer—say, at a public library—this theoretical access does not fully close the digital divide.²² J. Van Dijk explains that true digital access involves a broad range of factors including motivational access, material/physical access, skills to use the technology, and usage of diverse applications for a significant period of time.²³

In our world of new technology, including FactCheck.org, Wikipedia, electronic newspapers, YouTube, and so many other websites and technologies facilitating truth-telling, it is imperative that we work to close the digital divide. When our neighbor can access the social, political, and economic benefits of digital technologies, society as a whole benefits, and we follow in God’s commandment.

The Ninth Commandment 2.0: You shall not covet your neighbor’s possessions

The Tenth Commandment 2.0: You shall use technology to love all—not covet, but love—(yes, even those people)

The ninth and tenth commandments, which Luther addresses together in the *Large Catechism*, have an obvious literal connection to technology. Devicemakers profit by designing hardware we love to want. It is common for long lines to form outside Apple stores hours before a new device is released. And which one of us, when at a meeting sitting next to a colleague with new laptop, tablet, or smartphone, does not marvel at its shiny screen and slick features?

In shrewd anticipation of the unhealthy obsessions of Apple devotees, Luther pointed out long ago that the seventh commandment’s prohibition of stealing was for the “common masses” (presumably Microsoft and PC users), but the ninth and tenth commandments are for those who think themselves virtuous (yes, say the ninth and tenth commandments, Apple users must curb their snobbishness and their covetousness).²⁴

Calvin took the final commandment further: “...since God wills that our whole soul be possessed with a disposition to love, we must banish from our hearts

²¹Pramod K. Nayar, *An Introduction to New Media and Cybercultures* (Chichester, UK: John Wiley & Sons, 2010) 184.

²²Vincent Miller, *Understanding Digital Culture* (London: Sage, 2011) 98.

²³See J. Van Dijk, *The Deepening Divide: Inequality and the Information Society* (London: Sage, 2005), as referenced in Miller, *Digital Culture*, 99.

²⁴Luther, *Large Catechism*, 426.

all desire contrary to love.”²⁵ Whether Lutheran or Presbyterian, fulfilling this meaning is impossible, but perhaps it is a helpful conclusion of our technological ponderings. Internet communication technologies, after all, can be used for good, they can spread charity and love, and they can build within us a care for our neighbor and a love of God.

When we approach new technologies, with the Ninth and Tenth Commandments 2.0 in mind, we can recall the direction of all the commandments, finally using the following questions to frame our relationship with Internet communication technology:

How can these new media help me share God’s love in ways unimaginable before?

Where might God’s Spirit be moving on the Internet?

How might my actions online—and offline—praise God, and help me follow God’s commandments, both ancient and modern? ⊕

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²⁵John Calvin, *Institutes of Christian Religion*, vol. 1, ed. John T. McNeill (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960) book II, chap. 8, par. 49, p. 413.