In the coming months and years, there is bound to be plenty of discussion over Martin Luther’s understanding of the Sixth Commandment, especially as it pertains to modern questions about homosexual relations. On one hand, it is very simple. Luther said next to nothing about such behavior, except to condemn it in the most general terms. Like others of his age, he was extremely reticent to talk about any sexual sins, even while he seemed to delight in scatological expressions that leave modern folks longing for censorship. On the other hand, if one inquires after Luther’s approach to the Ten Commandments in more general terms, the answer suddenly becomes more complicated and far more interesting for historians and theologians. This essay examines one small piece of Luther’s wide-ranging commentary on the Ten Commandments within his catechisms in the hopes of gaining more clarity on Luther’s interpretation of the commandments and the role they played in his overall theology.

These particular documents, standing between expositions in the Personal Prayer Book of 1522 and A Simple Way to Pray of 1536, have the additional advantage of having been included in The Book of Concord of 1580. Thus, they provide an important confessional voice for the current deliberations.

**The heart of the matter is the heart**

Luther views all of God’s commandments in the light of the First Commandment. It is “to illuminate and impart its splendor to all the others. In order that this may be constantly repeated and never forgotten, you must let these concluding words run through all the commandments, like the clasp or hoop of a wreath that binds the end to the beginning and holds everything together.”

The recurring “we are to fear and love God” of the Small Catechism sounds the same theme.

However, to say that this commandment is the heart of the matter is not to have said everything, unless one makes clear what this commandment means. In this


case, Luther's explanation is one of the most famous in all of his theology. "It is the trust and faith of the heart alone that make both God and idol." Faith, then, is the heart of the matter for all the commandments. Fearing God's wrath and loving God's mercy are simply more traditional expressions that Luther uses to make the same point. It is about trusting God above all things.

Luther so concentrates on this aspect of all the commandments that he never misses an opportunity to make the same point over and over again. Faith drives us to call upon God, to listen to God's Word, to obey God's representatives, to love and care for our neighbor—whether in the person of our children, our parents, our spouse, or the poor. In this regard, Luther, who was only too happy to obey any command of God, no matter what ("If Christ commanded me to eat dung, I would do it," he once said to Ulrich Zwingli), always ties the Ten Commandments to God's purpose and goal for humanity. The commandments were not given for the same purpose my second-grade teacher handed out mimeographed "seat work" (to keep us busy). Instead, they serve God and the neighbor always by serving faith.

In this regard, one remarkable thing about statements in the Bible regarding homosexual behavior is that many of them, too, have as their main concern not behavior per se but behavior in the light of faith and unbelief. Most reputable modern scholars, no matter what their specific opinion of the passages in Romans 1 and Leviticus 18, are nearly unanimous in their agreement that the real issue in both places is faith in God. Indeed, when Luther arrives at the Sixth Commandment in the Small Catechism, he simply assumes that faith alone is the fulfillment of the commandments. "We are to fear and love God so that we live chaste and decent lives..." For Luther, then, the fulfillment of this commandment, like the others, is not simply a matter of external obedience to the letter of the law. Instead, it arises only out of a faith that refuses to worship pleasure or power (in sexual relations or anywhere else) but only worships the God who gives all good things and protects from all evil. Wherever else the present discussion about sexuality may lead us, it dare not lead us away from faith in the Triune God, who creates, redeems, and makes holy.

**The inapplicable Ten Commandments**

Luther's creative, open approach to the Ten Commandments has always managed to amaze his heirs. Imagine, if you will, Henry Eyster Jacobs's surprise when he discovered that Luther did not believe Christians had to keep the Sabbath the way late-nineteenth-century American Protestants were insisting. Jacobs, a professor first at Gettysburg College and later at the seminary in Philadelphia and a translator and editor of *The Book of Concord*, had been asked to assemble Luther's comments on the Third Commandment by his church, the Pennsylvania Ministerium, and by the General Council to which it belonged. The expectation had been that German Lutherans could once again prove how American they had become. The result was the one document for which Jacobs (much to his chagrin) was most well known. Luther did

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5. See his summary of the dispute in "Sunday, Luth. View of," in *The Lutheran*
Luther's creative, open approach to the Ten Commandments has always managed to amaze his heirs.

not much care for the fanatical sabbath-keeping that so preoccupied nineteenth-century American Protestants.

The fact remains: Luther was no bibli-cist and no fundamentalist. He insisted that Moses' rendition of the Ten Commandments was simply his meditation on the natural law of God written on all human hearts. Those parts that belonged to the specific situation of the Israelites, such as the prologue ("I am the Lord your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt"), had nothing to do directly with Christians. Just because the Bible says it does not mean it applies willy-nilly to us!

There are two striking examples of this refreshing attitude toward the commandments in the Large Catechism. The Third Commandment is the most obvious case. This commandment, Luther wrote, does not apply to Christians literally. We do not keep the Sabbath holy. In Luther's day, everyone worked on Saturday, which is literally the Sabbath. Moreover, Luther did not think much of the notion that Christians had simply transferred Saturday observances to Sunday. Not only did he have Jesus' own behavior to back him up, but he also introduced here the concept of an "external matter" (related to the term adiaphora). The important thing for Luther was the fact that this law did not apply to Christians in a literal sense at all! God's Word makes every day of the week holy for a Christian, Luther stated, so what is all the fuss about Saturday or Sunday?

Of course, this does not mean to say that for Luther this commandment had no use at all. He had far too much respect for Scripture as God's Word to say that. What he notes in his explanation, however, should give all obsessive-compulsive legalists pause. First, he underscores just how important it is to give people a day off, especially laborers, a piece of good news for workers in every generation. Second, he insists that the way to apply this commandment to the Christian is to concentrate on its original purpose—not only to provide real rest for tired bodies but also to give people an opportunity to rest in God's Word.


6. A third example, the prohibition of graven images, can only be an argument from silence. Nevertheless, one of the reasons Luther did not renumber the Ten Commandments (as did Ulrich Zwingli and other Reformed theologians) is that he understood the prohibition of graven images as simply one way Moses applied the First Commandment to his own people.


10. Luther, The Large Catechism, Ten Commandments, par. 84, in The Book of Concord, 397.
On this second point, his treatise *On Good Works* from 1520 is particularly insightful. Faith itself frees a person from works and provides the proper way to keep the Sabbath not only externally but also in the heart. Thus, God wants people to come together precisely to hear this word that frees us from work. Of course, this means that the biggest Sabbath-breakers, in the Large Catechism's view, may be found not simply among those who lie dead drunk in taverns on Sunday morning (or not so drunk at sporting events or in fishing boats) but precisely among those preachers whose sermons are paean to the law and legalism and among those hearers who listen to a year's worth of good sermons with no appreciable effect!

The other place where Luther (cavalierly) dismisses one of the Ten Commandments comes with the Ninth and Tenth and applies more directly to the current discussion of sexuality. Luther notes at the outset that these two commandments, which forbid coveting, were given by God to Moses precisely because otherwise the Israelites would have conceived of the commandments as applying only to externals and not to the heart, that is, to faith. Christians have the advantage that they understand this from sermons on the commandments delivered by Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount and by Paul in Romans 7.

However, there is another reason the Tenth Commandment in particular does not apply directly to Luther and his readers: Germany had no slaves and did not treat women like chattel—both things this commandment clearly assumes by lumping wives and servants in with the cattle. What a remarkable turn of a text! Here Luther, who more than anyone focuses theology on the Word alone, dismisses a clear Word of God as inapplicable for social reasons! We have no slaves, and women are not property! Now, unlike some of the Bible's modern readers, who read everything in the light of their own desires and dreams, Luther does not gloat at this point. "So many lands, so many customs," as he happily proclaims in his preface to the Marriage Booklet, citing an adage familiar to his readers. When it comes to questions of social behavior, Luther glorifies neither the social relations of the Bible nor those of his own time. Instead, he takes both into consideration as he attempts to find his way as a Christian preacher in this world. We are still not to covet, but we dare not mistake the social situation reflected in the commandment for our own and thereby glorify one or the other.

**The expanding commandments**

If Luther is capable of showing how commandments do not apply literally to his situation, he is equally willing to expand the commandments far beyond their original scope so that they do apply to his own age. This is not the work of a literalist or a legalist but of a believer who assumes that the clearest statement of God's law written on each human heart came in the Ten Commandments.

This approach of expanding the commandments, to some extent already present

in the exegetical tradition,\(^\text{16}\) began as a reaction to what Luther viewed as a particularly pernicious way to interpret the biblical text—one that infected the late-medieval church. Already church fathers had distinguished between commandments of God, which were required of all people, and counsels, which a Christian could freely follow. In Thomas Aquinas’s *Summa*, the three chief counsels became poverty, chastity, and obedience, and they were best followed by bishops or those under a vow—monks and friars. Such persons, by virtue of their vows, were in a state of perfection and, by fulfilling the counsels, their “works of supererogation” produced more merit than those who simply followed the Ten Commandments.\(^\text{17}\)

When Luther challenges this myth in the 1520 *Treatise on Good Works*, he delights in repeating for each commandment that there are enough works in each to keep a person busy for a lifetime.\(^\text{18}\) There is no need to look for better things to do; the Christian believer simply does not have the time.\(^\text{19}\) This same theme runs through the Large Catechism as well. The First Commandment reveals all kinds of idols—not simply graven images but common “gods,” like money or fame, and more complicated ones, like works-righteousness. In the latter case, he even warns the readers (simple parish pastors) that this may be too complicated for the children to understand.\(^\text{20}\) The Second Commandment, which Luther rightly assumes was meant for the law court, also includes every other case where God’s name is used for nothing.\(^\text{21}\) The Third Commandment includes not simply taking a day off or refraining from work on Saturday but also respecting God’s Word and preaching—something that many congregations in conflict (and sometimes their pastors) fail to do. The Fourth Commandment includes not only parents but all their helpers (school teachers, pastors, employers, and the government).

Explanations of the other commandments show a similar generosity. Following Jesus’ lead in the Sermon on the Mount, Luther is quick to point out all the other ways we have invented for killing people that do not involve physical death. The Sixth Commandment includes decency and love and forbids lust. The Seventh includes not just pickpockets but bigwigs (accounting firms?) and other “arm-chair robbers.”\(^\text{22}\) The Eighth again goes far beyond Moses’ concern for the law courts and includes simple lying, gossip, and a host of other sins especially, but not exclusively, found in parish life today, too. As we examine below, Luther also includes the positive aspects of these commandments: caring for the neighbor, the spouse, the neighbor’s property, and the neighbor’s reputation.

16. Such tradition looked at how one violated a commandment in “thought, word, and deed” and at the work of the “Devil, the world, and our sinful flesh.”

17. Aquinas, *S.Theol. II/II*, q. 184, a. 1–8 and q. 186, a. 1–10. (See also *S. Theol. I/II*, q. 108, a. 4.)

18. *Luther’s Works* 41:61, for example.

19. He makes some of the same points the following year in his *Judgment of Martin Luther on Monastic Vows* (for example, *LW* 44:256–61).

20. It is remarkable how many pastors and theologians have remained ignorant of this idol over the years.

21. One of the complaints about the author’s translation of the Small Catechism was that it included magic—something that modern folk have grown out of. Of course, its inclusion arose not only from a desire to reflect more carefully Luther’s actual text but also from personal pastoral experience.

22. Luther’s clever (but inaccurate) rendering of the low German dialect, *Stohl*, which actually means interest, not stool.
“But instead”
One always must make remarkably important decisions when translating from one language to another. Most translations of the Small Catechism take Luther’s little word sonder, which occurs in eight of the explanations to the Ten Commandments, to mean “but.” Thus, the explanation to the Second Commandment that I memorized as a child ran like this: “We are to fear and love God, so that we do not curse, swear, use witchcraft, lie, or deceive by his name, but call upon him in every trouble, pray, praise, and give thanks.” However, sonder is a much more powerful word in Luther’s thought, nearly the German equivalent of immo, one of Luther’s favorite Latin adver­satives. It is etymologically related to the English sunder (as in: “What God has joined together let no man put asunder”), and it still has that meaning as a verb in German. Thus, the current translation renders this powerful word “but instead.”

In fact, the sonder in Luther’s expla­nations points to a second important way in which he expands the commandments: by including both “shalt nots” and “shalts.” Every Word of God, whether a command or a promise, always implies for Luther its opposite. In the case of the command­ments, every prohibition ("Do not use my name in vain!") implies that God wants us to put that name to good use (“in every need” we are to call on God in prayer, praise, and thanksgiving). Commandments are not busy work; they reveal the best God intends for humanity.

At the same time, every positive com­mand implies there is something God does not want us to do. Thus, the Third and the Fourth Commandments, which are posi­tive (“Keep the sabbath” and “Honor your parents”), also imply negatives (“Do not despise the Word or preaching” and “Do not despise parents or superiors”). We often forget what Luther did not: that fail­ure to honor God’s Word or other people in their God-given offices is not neutral; it always implies despising.

Moses’ good order
Most people read the Ten Commandments like a phone book, where each entry has equal value. Luther does not. Not only does he see the First Commandment as the most important and as expressed through­out all the commandments, but he also argues that there is a distinction to be made among the remaining commandments as well. They are given in descending order of importance. Thus, honoring one’s parents or others in authority has an automatic limit: the first three commandments. When parents or other authorities command things that contradict faith in God, prayer, worship, or God’s Word, Christians must not obey.

In a similar fashion and by virtue of their office, parents and other authorities may “break” the commandments that follow the Fourth. Thus, governments wield coercive power (breaking the Fifth Commandment either literally in capital punish­ment or in more general ways through imprisonment). They or the church can pronounce a couple divorced (breaking the Sixth Commandment and the dominical command in Matthew 19:6). They can expropriate property through taxes or the
right of immanent domain (breaking the Seventh Commandment). And they can even speak evil of persons, as when a judge pronounces sentence (breaking the Eighth Commandment). This last example was a particularly sensitive one for Luther, who took the time to explain to his congregation why he could speak evil of the pope and not break this commandment—he did it by virtue of his office as teacher of the church! Before jumping to the conclusion that such an approach to the commandments would foster tyranny, it should be noted that such lawbreaking was only allowed to the office of good governing (or good parenting, where even moderate discipline also "breaks" some commandments). Luther describes such governance not only in his appeals for good schools but also in his explanation to the fourth petition of the Lord’s Prayer. Those in authority are to see to it that bread gets placed on their subjects' tables. The special place of the Fourth Commandment could never excuse selfishness or tyranny. However, the office of parent or magistrate or pastor does wield authority. Otherwise, there is the tyranny of anarchy. Against those who think that taxation is evil or that no judge can be a Christian, for example, Luther's discovering of the Mosaic ordering of the commandments speaks a firm No.

Moreover, in a reverse of this process, but consistent with it, Luther also realized that the poor and oppressed had a special place in the commandments. This becomes especially clear in the Seventh Commandment. Luther, interpreting it positively, insists that we are to see to our neighbors' bodily needs. What if we and the government do not? The poor will cry to God—the only authority higher than neighbor or prince in Luther's world—and God will assuredly hear their cry. Then, look out! There will be hell to pay.

Moses’ silence and Luther’s loquacity
In one interesting case involving the Fourth Commandment, Luther has expressly more to say than Moses. Moses, after all, simply commands obedience to parents with no questions asked. In our own day, no one could in good conscience simply tell children to obey their parents no matter what. Luther also makes two important exceptions. First, as we have stated, he realizes what many teachers of the commandments forget: that Moses gives the commandments in order of importance. This means that Luther expressly excludes the first three, which have to do directly with one's relation to God, from any discussion of obedience to parents or others in authority. For someone who had to defy pope and emperor and whose fellow Christians had even perished for confessing the gospel, this is no small matter. “If God’s Word and will are placed first and are observed, noth-
ing ought to be considered more important than the will and word of our parents, provided that these, too, are subordinated to God and are not set in opposition to the preceding commandments."

Second, Luther realizes that, despite Moses' silence, he must say something about parental responsibilities for children (and governmental responsibilities for their subjects). Even though his brief paraphrase of the Fourth Commandment in the Small Catechism omits such material, his preface to that work mentions such responsibilities expressly, as does the Large Catechism. Luther has good authority to go on; Paul himself did the same thing in Ephesians. Moreover, every chance he gets to talk about such matters, Luther urges all authorities to support the education of children—something we could easily apply directly to our own day.

**Moses' loquacity and Luther's silence**

Luther does not always say as much as his text does about certain sins. In the Small Catechism, his explanations of both the First Commandment and the Sixth break the normal paraphrastic nature of the work. Here are two negative commandments ("No other gods!" and "No adultery!") that receive only positive explanations: "We are to fear, love, and trust in God above all things" and "We are to fear and love God so that we lead chaste and decent lives, and each love and honor his or her spouse."

The Large Catechism makes clear that Luther had plenty to say about the breaking of the First Commandment. However, the explanation of the Sixth contains very few specifics. Luther first generalizes the command to mean (explicitly) the dishonoring of another person's marriage partner. He points out that Moses particularly mentions adultery because the Jewish people married young, virginity was not commended, and prostitution and lewdness were not tolerated. After complaining about the "shameless mess and cesspool of all sorts of immorality and indecency," he points out that this commandment forbids not only outward acts but "every kind of cause, provocation and means." He immediately points out that sins against this commandment include not helping one's neighbor in preventing unchastity. What he does not do is provide descriptions of such activity. For Christians in a society bombarded with implicit and explicit talk about sex, Luther's reserve may come as a breath of fresh air.

31. The woodcuts for these two commandments do demonstrate the breaking of these commandments: the Israelites and the Golden Calf and David and Bathsheba.
The commandments and “self-chosen spirituality”  

For Luther, the commandments are important not only for what they say but also for what they do not say. When he comes to translate Paul’s strictures against certain kinds of pious (and misguided) behavior in the congregation at Colossae, Luther renders their problem in Col 2:23 “self-chosen spirituality,” an expression particularly pertinent for a society infected by new-age religion. Against such stuff (Luther had in mind especially the monks), Luther placed the Ten Commandments and other portions of Scripture that give us a much better idea of what God has in mind for humanity.

In contrast to modern attempts to bless or condemn the status quo, Luther describes as good works those things that have good biblical precedent. Otherwise, without a Word of God, as in the case of how one receives communion or other such matters, the conscience would remain uncertain. Luther is properly suspicious of folks who think they can soothe peoples’ consciences by their own authority. When their last day comes, the devil will laugh at them if they say, “Well, Dr. Luther told me this was all right.” Of course, the devil is also not impressed when someone says, “They did it this way in Moses’ day.” Certainty comes from the sure encounter with God’s Word in the real world, where all the hard decisions arise out of God’s Word for the sake of the conscience.

Equality in the Sixth Commandment  

One of the most surprising things about Luther’s explanation of the Sixth Commandment is the equality that Luther implies throughout. Despite his use of texts from Genesis 3 and Ephesians 5 in his marriage service (where even there he tones them down through his use of the promises in Genesis 1–2) and from Colossians 3 and 1 Peter in the so-called “Table of Duties” (Household Chart, where his point is to prevent women from being fearful), Luther never mentions any inequality in his exposition of this commandment. Even his paraphrastic explanation in the Small Catechism seems to imply (for both the 1959 and the 2000 editions of English translations of The Book of Concord) that he had men and women equally in mind.

This outspoken equality was no small feat for a thinker whose entire social life was marked by inequalities. However, for Luther such inequalities have nothing to do with the marriage bed. Here the man and woman get to fulfill God’s blessing of the first couple. Rather than read inequality into the text (and thereby interpret Moses using [deutero-] Paul), Luther follows the lead of Paul in 1 Corinthians 7 (a passage he had interpreted at length in 1523) and looks equally to the partners in a marriage.

33. On occasion, such as in his sermon on the wedding at Cana, he rails against certain sourpusses who want to forbid people having fun at weddings. If it is not a sin to sit or to walk, it is not a sin to dance. At this point in the text, a pious editor noted that in Luther’s day dances were not as lascivious as they are now. See Dr. Martin Luthers sämtliche Schriften, ed. Georg Walch, 2d ed., 23 vols. (St. Louis: Concordia, 1892–1910), 11:467–68. Clearly, the editor had not seen Bruegel’s late-sixteenth-century paintings of peasants dancing at a wedding.

34. See, especially, his Invocavit Sermons of March 1522, LW 51:79–80.

35. See Luther’s attack on Andreas Karlstadt in Against the Heavenly Prophets, 1525 (LW 40: 84–90).


37. Luther’s Works 28:1–56.
Whatever else they are, sexual relations are not an invitation to exploitation.

Thus God wants to guard and protect every husband or wife through this commandment against anyone who would violate them. However, because this commandment is directed specifically toward marriage as a walk of life and gives occasion to speak of it, you should carefully note, first, how highly God honors and praises this walk of life, endorsing and protecting it by his commandment. . . . [God] has established [marriage] before all others as the first of all institutions, and he created man and woman differently (as is evident) not for indecency but to be true to each other, to be fruitful, to beget children, and to nurture and bring them up to the glory of God. God has therefore blessed this walk of life most richly, above all others, and, in addition, has supplied and endowed it with everything in the world in order that this walk of life might be richly provided for. Married life is no matter for jest or idle curiosity, but it is a glorious institution and an object of God's serious concern.

Luther concludes his remarks on this commandment by stressing mutual cherishing and love in marriage:

[T]his commandment requires all people not only to live chastely in deed, word, and thought in their particular situation (that is, especially in marriage as a walk of life), but also to love and cherish the spouse whom God has given them. Wherever marital chastity is to be maintained, above all it is essential that husband and wife live together in love and harmony, cherishing each other wholeheartedly and with perfect fidelity. . . . Under such conditions chastity always follows spontaneously without any command.

In between this positive assessment, Luther takes direct aim at the "self-chosen" spirituality of monastic and clerical celibacy. Men and women of all walks of life, who have been created for it, shall be found in marriage. While allowing for some God-given exceptions (unsuitability or the gift of chastity outside marriage), Luther insists that the rest cannot resist these "natural inclinations and stimulations" of their own flesh and blood. This he contrasts, in no uncertain terms, to the "papal crowd" of monks, priests, and nuns who, while abstaining from acts of fornication, have hearts filled with unchaste thoughts and evil desires. "In this regard, even if the monastic life were godly, still it is not in their power to maintain chastity." His reason for giving such warnings, Luther states, is to foster a desire for marriage among the young and thereby lessen the "filthy, dissolve, disorderly conduct that is now so rampant everywhere." And Luther had never been to a rock concert or subscribed to HBO!

An ought never implies a can
Why does Luther spend half the text of the Large Catechism talking about the commandments? Part of the reason may have to do with the proto-antinomian talk of his former student, John Agricola. However, Luther also provides an even more important answer to that question in the rest of the Large Catechism. The chief function of the law is not to show us an easy way to heaven, which (with a little hard work) we can reach, but to show us our sin—how infinitely far we are from heaven, God, and our neighbor (who is Christ in our midst).

The Christian life, like Baptism, goes from drowning to rising, from death to resurrection, from confession of sin to for-
giveness. Thus, Luther writes against those who think the commandments are easy and who therefore think they have time to fulfill God's counsels.

They fail to see, these miserable, blind fools, that no one is able to keep even one of the Ten Commandments as it ought to be kept. Both the Creed and the Lord's Prayer must come to our aid, as we shall hear later. Through them we must seek and pray for help and receive it continually. 42

Whatever else we do with the Ten Commandments, we can do nothing worse than to ignore their main function: to put us to death by showing our sin and driving us to the one place where there is help: the gospel. It is in Jesus Christ alone, who is the mirror of the Father's heart and whom the Holy Spirit reveals to us by faith alone, that we have our hope. This is not a matter of declaring a wrong right or of telling others to buck up and try harder. This is a matter of the gospel alone, that Good News of forgiveness, life, and salvation that comes to us freely, as God's gracious word in Christ.

This brings us back to the beginning, to the heart. Luther begins and ends the commandments with their clear demand for faith. He finds the commandments' fulfillment only in the work of the Holy Spirit who through the Word gives faith in Christ and thus, in him, fulfills all the commandments. The commandments—all of them—keep their rightful place in Christian theology only when they are in first place, that is, as the Word of death that drives us inexorably to our crucified and risen Lord Jesus. Perhaps, whatever else we say about sexuality in the coming years, we need most of all to remind one another of this.

42. Luther, The Large Catechism, Ten Commandments, par. 316, in The Book of Concord, 428. See also The Large Catechism, the Creed, par. 1–3, and the Lord's Prayer, par. 2, in The Book of Concord, 440–41, 431.