

ETHICAL IMPLICATIONS OF EXODUS 20:13-17 AND THE INTEGRITY OF CHURCH LEADERS

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ABSTRACT

The matter of integrity is very critical to Church leadership. Because of the value people generally have for religion and Christianity specifically, Church leaders are usually held in high esteem. The respect both Christians and non-Christians have for Church leaders demands that they live above reproach. Unfortunately, the moral decadence and decline in ethical living standards of the society are increasingly making it difficult for Church leaders to also live right, and as a result, many Christian leaders are messing up in their respective leadership in the family, Church, and society at large. The situation has given a voice to many critics of the Church and her leaders and this menace needs to be quickly addressed. Although the society is deteriorating on daily basis, God's standard for a life of integrity by Christians and especially Christian leaders remains unchanged. The Decalogue contains a lot of these biblical injunctions for an exemplary lifestyle of Church leaders. The authors are of the opinion that, if Church leaders can live right, the society would be better. This work, therefore, using exegetical and hermeneutical tools will critically examine the ethical implications of Exodus 20:13-17 as they relate to the integrity of Church leaders.

Keywords: *Ethics, Integrity, Church, Leadership, Morality*

Introduction

The matter of integrity is one of the most critical elements in Christian leadership. Although integrity is an important virtue in all spheres of leadership, but its relevance to leadership in the Body of Christ cannot be overemphasized. The reason for this is not far-fetched: Christianity itself, in spite of the unceasing criticisms about it, was established on the foundation of integrity. The scriptures attest to the way of life of the disciples of Jesus who took over from Him and established the first church after His ascension that they were people of integrity. The Ananias and Saphira saga in Acts 5 is a good pointer to how the leaders of the first church valued a life of integrity. Interestingly, Christianity being one of the most populous religions of the world (reference) has consistently placed its adherents, and especially leaders in the Church, who because of their positions have become major players in Christian religious practices, on spot lights and have become unhidden to all. As a result, scandals about Christian leaders rarely go unnoticed, and with the power of social media, they become more pathetic and embarrassing. It

is, therefore, necessary to reconsider the issue of integrity as it applies to leaders across Christian denominations in this age where living righteousness itself is becoming increasingly difficult as a result of moral decadence in the society and corruption in all strata – both in the sacred and secular.

It is the purpose of this paper to examine the ethical implications of Exodus 20:13-14 as an instruction for Church leaders for an acceptable norm in the society. The writers believe that an understanding of these biblical injunctions would help Church leaders to place more value on the ethics and morality of their callings and also resolve to stick to them in a way of protecting both their names and the Church of Christ from avoidable ridicule and embarrassments.

CHRISTIAN ETHICS AND THE DECALOGUE

Ethics, as Ozunmba (2008) defines it is a branch of Philosophy which is concerned with what is morally good and bad, and right and wrong. Although the concept of what could be said to be right or wrong is being considered to be relative; relativism itself being one of the major hindrances to ethics. However, actions that are right and those that are wrong in the society are not difficult to identify, and in the Christian Faith, it is easier to know what is good and what is bad because the Bible is clear on these.

Fagothey (1989) had earlier considered ethics as the part of philosophy that studies the person and personal deeds from the point of view of the rightness or wrongness, the goodness and evilness, of the person and the deeds. Christians ethics, however, from the view of the writers is a subject that is deeper than separating actions into two different classes of what is good and that which is bad. This also is clearly seen in the thought of J.K. Ayantayo (2017) when he defines religious ethics (and by implication, Christian ethics) as what religious people (in this context, Christians) ought to do and believe, and how they should conduct themselves in the world.

Therefore, the issue of ethics of the Christian religion is not what Christians and their leaders adjudged to be right or wrong, but what they ought to do and believe, even if they appear contrary to how the leaders themselves feel or would like to do. It therefore means that there is a standard that has been set for the Church and her leaders, which they must conform to and live by. Failure they do so, they will be considered as people that lacked integrity by the people outside the Church.

As important as Christian ethics is to Church leaders, it will be difficult to separate it from the Decalogue. Although there are several ethical instructions scattered on the pages of the Bible, the Decalogue has become an all-time legal codes for the Body of Christ. Any time the commandment of God is mentioned, most Christians think of the Ten Commandments. In fact, some do not know any commandments than these instructions of God given to the Israelites through Moses.

The Decalogue contains lots of ethical and legal codes which cover many aspects of man's life and also regulates his behaviours. According to Ayantayo, the Decalogue covers dietary laws, marriage, agriculture, commerce, tourism, finance, worship, sin, in facts all aspects of human endeavours. In addition, the Ten Commandments provide conditions regarding man's relationship with his fellow man.

The laws given in the Decalogue are broadly divided into two: Casuistic and Apodictic Laws (Desmond Alexander and David W. Baker, 2003). Casuistic laws are conditional and are noted for their "if-then" structure...while Apodictic laws are absolute prohibitions of the "thou shall not variety, often concerned with religious or moral issues (p. 174). The passage that is being considered in this paper is categorized under Apodictic law.

Though the commandment given in the Decalogue were spoken to people at different times and in their peculiar social and cultural circumstances, yet, they are still very much relevant in contemporary times and to contemporary Christians and leaders of the Church. This reason for this is because Christ had summarized these commandments into two: love for God and love for fellow humans and interestingly, the virtues of love alongside justice and mercy are unchanging ethical standards for all Christians, and Church leaders will need to excel in these respects. Furthermore, the Decalogue also stipulate what is good and what is bad, against what is right and what is wrong. Christian ethics, therefore, generates its ethical teachings from the Ten Commandments of God on which the integrity of Church leaders is based.

EXODUS 20:13-17 AND THE INTEGRITY OF CHURCH LEADERS

Glen Davies (date) gives a hint to the foundation of the very idea of integrity, (though he was not sure of the historical accuracy of the story). According to him:

Thousands of years ago, Roman Centurions would inspect each legionnaire every morning. The soldiers would thump their breastplates over their hearts, the most vital part of the breastplate. As each soldier struck their armour, they would shout “*integritas*”, which means being whole and unbroken. Their commanding officer listened not only to their words but also to the sound of the armour made when struck, for solid armour rings differently than flawed armor. Sometimes this seemed like make-work to the soldiers but the centurion knew that the *integritas* of their armour protected their vital organs. It protected their heart. When they lost their integrity, they will lose their life.

This short story becomes more meaningful when Christian ethics is seen by Church leaders not as mere commandments that are doled out by a master to his slaves (which they are compelled to live by) but as a covenant relationship between them and God, which they must strive to live by, not by coercion and fear, but by the love they have for the Master.

J.W. Marshall in Alexander and Baker work (2013) traces the Decalogue to a covenant between God and his people Israel. According to him, the Decalogue constitutes a covenant (Hebrew, *berit*) between God and Israel (p. 173). Therefore, the integrity of Church leaders begins from their understanding of these ethical stances as a covenant they have with God, which they must keep and not break because of the love they have for God. When Christian ethics has spelled out in Exodus 20:13-17 are understood this way, it becomes easier for church leaders to live lives that are worthy of praise. No one has ever kept instruction or rule by force or coercion, but through love, people have been able to perform beyond expectations. The same goes for keeping the laws of God.

According to W.L. Walker in The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia, the word integrity is the translation of the Hebrew word ~To (tom) or ~M'_tu (tummah). The translation of “tom” is “simplicity”, “soundness”, “completeness”. It is also rendered “upright” or “perfection”. Its original sense appears in the phrase ^{AMétul}. (I Kings 22:34); 2 Chronicles 18:33). In these passages, the word is translated completeness, integrity. The word is also translated “integrity” in Genesis 20:5,6; I Kings 9:4; Psalm 25:21; Proverbs 19:1; 20:7. In all these passages, the word seems to carry the meaning of simplicity of heart and intention, truthfulness, uprightness. The very word (in its plural form, tummim) is one of the words on the breastplate of the high priest as seen in Exodus 28:30; Deuteronomy 33:8; Ezra 2:63; Nehemiah 7:65, which is one of the sacred lots, indicating, perhaps, “innocence” or “integrity”. This makes the matter of integrity a very important to Church leaders especially.

The word “integrity” does not occur in the New Testament, but its equivalents may be seen in “sincerity”, “truth”, the “pure heart”, the “single eye”, and so on. In the above sense of simplicity of intention, it is equivalent to being honest, sincere, genuine, and is fundamental to true character. Since integrity is fundamental to the character formation of church leaders among other leaders, it is important for church leaders to keep their character intact and unbroken.

A critical examination of Exodus 20:13-17 has a list of certain vices which the people of God have to abstain from and church leaders have dual responsibilities of also staying clear from these anomalies and at the same time teach others in the society (especially their followers, the people of God) to also not get themselves involved in them.

THE ETHICAL INJUNCTIONS OF EXODUS 20:13-17

¹³You shall not kill.

¹⁴You shall not commit adultery

¹⁵You shall not steal.

¹⁶You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.

¹⁷You shall not covet your neighbor's house; you shall not covet your neighbor's wife, or his manservant, or his maidservant, or his ox, or his ass or anything that is your neighbor's (Revised Standard Version).

Again, Exodus 20:13-17 is categorized under the apodictic law which is concerned with religious and moral issues and prohibits believers in Yahweh from taking part in actions that are against the law of God and the norm of the society. The instructions here are five, simple and clear prohibitions that should not be heard among Christians and church leaders. Each of these five prohibitions would be considered one after the other as it relates to how church leaders can acquit themselves.

Ethical Injunction One: You shall not kill

One fundamental question one could ask reading the phrase “you shall not kill” is “you shall not kill what?” – animal or man? It can, however, be assumed that killing of man is intended. The original usage of the word translated “kill” in this verse can give more understanding. The Hebrew word translated “kill” in this phrase is $\text{xc}^{\text{b}}\text{r}^{\text{>}}\text{Ti}\text{ä}$, which means “to be crushed”, “to murder”, “to slay”. From this it is clear that man, not animal is meant. Although, there are also instructions in the Pentateuch on how animals should be killed (reference). Joel M. Hoffman (2017), a renowned scholar in the Hebrew Language, in his work “Five Ways Your Bible Translation Distorts the Original Meaning of the Text” argues that the word translated “kill” in RSV and some other translations should have been rendered murder.

Nonetheless, it appears unimaginable for a Christian let alone a Church leader to be involved in a murder case, but reality in today's world has proved to us that this is already happening. Cases of church leaders caught in the act of murdering human beings (even their members) for reasons best known to them have been reported (see Leadership.ng, 23 Feb., 2018; punchng.com, 7 Nov., 2018; pulse.ng, 29 August, 2018; informationng.com, 26 Feb., 2018 et cetera).

Many of the pastor who got their hands soiled and integrity destroyed with such unimaginable acts may not have such notion from onset; it could be that one step led to another and eventually, the deed was done. It is, therefore, necessary for Church leaders to caution themselves and guide against means through which they could get trapped in a murder cases.

In the Beatitudes, Jesus employed a teaching style where he placed some Old Testament (OT) law with what Michael O. Ajibola (2009) called an amplified version of the law so as to give the OT law a deeper meaning. A critical examination of these teachings unveils what to avoid in order not to break the particular Old Testament instruction that was being considered. By implication, if Christ new instruction stated in the form “you have heard as it was said to the people of old...But I say to you” could be obeyed, the believer will succeed in keeping the law eventually. Concerning the command not to murder Christ said in Matthew 5:21-22 that:

“You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, ‘You shall not murder’; and ‘whoever murders shall be liable to judgement.’ But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to the council; and if you say, ‘You fool,’ you will be liable to the hell of fire.”

In these verses and the verses that follow, Jesus engages the Ten Commandments and other aspects of Mosaic law. His teaching unveils the reasons God gave the commandments and through this, Jesus furthers tells what not to do in order to avoid breaking the bigger commandment. To avoid being a murderer then, a Church leader needs to guide against anger and every kind of unwholesome talk that lacks grace.

As it was earlier stated, a Church leader won't just go all out to murder, but when he is giving to excessive and uncontrollable anger that leads to unbridled tongue murder may be knocking at the door. Cain did not just killed Abel his brother, he was first of all angry (Gen. 4:5). At the root of every act of murder is anger. Unfortunately, ministers of God and church leaders in general would experience situation that may continually put them under tension and arouse anger in them, it behooves on them, nonetheless, to be a master of their anger in such situation (Eph. 4:26).

Another vice that could lead to murder is stated in James 4:1-2, which is evil passions/ungodly desires/lusting after the things of the world. It could be that many church leaders who were charged with one murder case or the other became so as a result of their desires to become famous, rich, have large congregations or to acquire some spiritual powers to perform miracles. All these things are capable of destroying the integrity of church leaders and they need to desist from such.

Ethical Injunction Two: You shall not commit adultery.

Unlike murdering, adultery is more rampant among church leaders - destroying their lives, marriages, and in many cases, their ministries. Sexual related sins, which are generally referred to as “sexual impurities” have always been some of the perils of Christian leadership and church leaders are usually been warned to shun such. According to J.A. Ilori (2006), the minister of the Gospel should keep his hands off the women and girls in his congregation” (p. 277). He also continued that “the minister of the Gospel should keep his hands off the women and girls in his congregation because many ministers have lost their influence and respect as a result of their conduct toward the people of opposite sex” (p. 277). Ilori is one of the so many writers who reminded church leaders about the ethics of their calling.

The Hebrew word used for adultery in the Decalogue is זָנָה which means “adultery” while זָנָה is to commit adultery. Adultery, according to Easton’s Bible Dictionary is simply “conjugal infidelity.” An adulterer was a man who had illicit intercourse with a married or betrothed woman, and such a woman was an adulteress. In Wayne Jackson’s (2019) work on adultery, it is concluded that adultery had to do with a sexual violation of marriage. By implication, it could be said that by giving a law that prohibits adultery, Yahweh has the marriage of Christians, and in this context, church leaders in mind. In fact, marital fidelity expressed in monogamy is one of Apostle’s Paul requirements for Church leadership (I Timothy 3:2). When a church leader upholds the sanctity of marriage, he will be able to go far in Christian leadership. Although the modern dictionary of adultery differs from fornication, but in the Old Testament, all sexual sin was forbidden by the Mosaic Law and Jewish custom. The Greek word translated “fornication” is *porneia*, which includes adultery and incest. *Porneia* comes from another Greek word that includes indulging in any kind of unlawful lust, which would include homosexuality. From this analysis, it could be inferred that any form of sexual-related exercise by a church leader with any woman or man or item (in the case of pornography) is unethical and should be avoided. Jesus’ provision in the Beatitude to avoid adultery and all form of sexual related sins is to shun lust (Matthew 5:27-28). To avoid adultery, therefore, church leaders need to apply Job’s principle of not looking lustfully at a woman (Job 31:1).

Ethical Injunction Three: You shall not steal

Stealing in the Decalogue has traditionally been interpreted by Jewish commentaries to refer to the stealing of an actual human being, that is, to kidnapping, including human trafficking (The Jewish Study Bible, 2004, p. 150). With this understanding, a contextual translation of the commandment in Jewish tradition would more accurately be rendered as “You shall not kidnap”.

In non-Jewish traditions however, the command not to steal has come to be interpreted as the unauthorized taking of private property (stealing of theft). Although kidnapping, as the writers believe, is not a common vice carried out by church leaders, but the unauthorized taking of private property is much more pronounced among church leaders. One of the ways church leaders take things unlawfully from people is through manipulation, which is an abuse of their offices as church leaders.

Through manipulation, especially in the area of prophetic deliveries, many church members have lost valuable possessions like money, landed properties, houses et cetera to “men of God” which in turn have been used by these church leaders to enrich themselves at the detriment of the gullible masses. One of the commonest practices in some churches in recent times is the “sowing of seeds”. This action in itself is not bad as it is a way of steering up the people to take steps of faith, but the motive behind many of these “seed-sowing exercises” are questionable. The “man of God” explains to the members that the proceeds of the “seeds” are for kingdom projects only to divert everything collected for his personal gains. Sadly, some church leaders take tithes and offerings meant for the church to themselves; they have not been able to separate their purses from that of the church purse but take both as common purse. This practice is becoming very common in contemporary churches, especially private ministries as against the orthodox and mainline churches.

Richard Baxtex in his work "The Reformed Pastor" that was republished in 2005 traces this crave for material gains by church leaders, especially Pastors to lack of contentment (pp.66-67). This is a serious menace among church leaders today and this has really given voice to many critics of the Church and his leaders. Church leaders need to reexamine their lives and ministries and remind themselves that "godliness with contentment is indeed a great gain".

Ethical Injunction Four: You shall not give false testimony against your neighbor

The command not to bear false witness against one's neighbor is the eighth in the Decalogue. Bearing false witness against someone is referred to as perjury and it is in a way differentiated from lying in general. While perjury is prohibited by the law, lying in general according to Parshat Toldot (2018) in explaining some Hebrew traditions, was acknowledged to be, in certain circumstances "permissible or even commendable" when it was done while not under oath, and it was not harmful to someone. Although bearing false witness appears stronger as a sin than lying generally because the destiny of the one who is being tried is at stake (I Kings 21:13), but both are unethical and church leaders should not involve themselves in such.

Although more than one witness was required in criminal cases (Deut. 17:6), but it is obvious that this particular law has its weakness; it can be manipulated to bring to pass what it was meant to avoid. This therefore behooves on Christians generally, and church leaders specifically not to use the weakness in this law to their selfish advantages. The words of church leaders, especially pastors are respected. Because of the sacredness of their office, it is very difficult to take their words to be lies. So when they testify to a case for or against someone, in many quarters their verdicts are taken hook, line and sinker. Church leaders, therefore, need to be people of integrity in this regard. Bearing false testimony for and against someone else could be regarded as favoritism and hatred respectively, and both are unethical to the ministries and callings of church leaders.

Ethical Injunction Five: You shall not covet...

This injunction not to covet is fully expressed as: "You shall not covet your neighbor's house; you shall not covet your neighbor's wife, or his manservant, or his maidservant, or his ox, or his ass or anything that is your neighbor's". The Hebrew word translated "covet" is *chamad* and it also means "desire". Hoffman also argues that the word "covet" as used in the tenth law should be rendered "take", especially as *chamad* (covet, desire) and *lakach* (take) are used simultaneously in some part of the Old Testament (cf: Deut. 7:25). One would understand Hoffman's take on this particular injunction especially when "covet" is just a thought within one and not an action expressed. It is like one desiring something. However, this tenth commandment actually refers to a person's desires instead of a person's actions. This makes this commandment unique among others, because others deal with actions and not thoughts.

Every action carried out by an individual is an offshoot of his or her thought. So, it is no mistake that this commandment is made the last in the Decalogue. This law could be described as a "control device" to the other laws in the Decalogue since none of them could be carried out without first and foremost being processed in their hearts. Church leaders, therefore, need to be mindful of what they think about. Jesus teaches that what defiles a man comes from the man's heart. Matthew 15:19 puts it more succinctly, "For out of the heart come evil thoughts – murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false testimony, slander". This statement is so pointed that one could conclude that the tenth commandment is a control measure that should be taken to all the

ethical injunctions considered in this work (murder, adultery, theft, and false testimony), because they were all mentioned in verse, and to the Decalogue in general.

CONCLUSION

This work has critically examined the Ethical Implications of Exodus 20:13-17 as an aspect of the Decalogue to and the Integrity of Church leaders. Church leaders are first and foremost Christians, but whose callings and positions have made to be highly revered and respected among Christians. Their personalities, words, actions and inactions are closely watched and highly criticized by both their followers and most especially by critics of the Church. The passage that was considered in this work makes certain things unethical to church leaders and prohibits them from engaging in such practices. Vices such as murder, adultery, theft, bearing false witness and coveting have been addressed and church leaders are encouraged to shun these unethical actions that are detrimental both to their personalities and the body of Christ. Steps to be taken to avoid these vices are cited from Christ's teaching in the Beatitudes and other admonitions in the epistles. Above all, it is established that the tenth commandment not to covet someone else's things has to do with the heart and it stands as a control device to other prohibitions in the Decalogue. Church leaders, therefore, are encouraged above everything else to guard their heart diligently for from their hearts the issues of their lives and ministries flow.

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