

the letters to the editor. Adults do not believe other sections of the paper, although occasionally we notice teenagers who do not know any better. We are so used to the atmosphere of lying and deception which permeates our society that we rarely even remark on it.

Usually the victims do not even protest. When a Denver paper reported that a governor of Colorado had told an audience of older citizens, "You have a duty to die," the governor objected, explaining that he was talking about the extravagant costs of run-away medical technology and that he had actually said, "We all have a duty to die." The paper, quite unusually, apologized, but years go by and the local Boulder paper warned the governor this summer that his comments were liable to be misinterpreted and "divisive," when in fact they had been misreported. The Vice-President of the United States makes a speech on Negro illegitimacy. The press tells us that the speech was about a television show. The Vice-President does not object. He goes along with the misrepresentation.

Sometimes known truths are hidden. After the evidence for Martin Luther King's plagiarism was published, it turned out that every section of the Establishment press had long known about it. "We decide what's news," as an important newspaper executive once said in my presence.

Of course, life could not go on if we did not tell the little lies and avoid the crude truths that would offend and wound to no purpose. "That new hairstyle looks so good on you." "You look great in that fashionable short dress." "Great book review." "Fine sermon." What good would it do to tell the truth? It is a question of prudence, and prudence is a much underrated virtue. Luther tells us that part of not bearing false witness is "to put the best construction on everything." We Americans have developed that hint into the art of advertising. Can we really tell the difference anymore?



"You don't print the truth," Paul Newman tells newspaperwoman Sally Field in *Absence of Malice*. "You print what people say. The truth doesn't just turn up." The search for truth, the effort not to bear false witness, is at bottom a moral effort. Most men are driven by their passions, and, wrote Housman, "the faintest of all human passions is the love of truth." Our society, however, is premised on science and information. The progress we want, the economic growth we feel we need, requires discovery. Discovery requires a self-sacrificing commitment to a reality that, if not exactly outside ourselves, is at least more than ourselves and our own desires and wants and needs. We found that making it up is easier than checking our hypotheses by observation. Soon we lost the ability even to make it up. Then we were reduced to copying. We print what people say. We repeat what people say. We do not check our references. (Most Americans do not know what the last sentence means.) We stop caring that we are setting an example for fellow workers, for students, for our own chil-

dren.

As our society sinks into the hungry quicksand of bankruptcy and ruin, we pretend that there is some technical, political, or social solution. Our situation cannot be due to a moral defect in us. Anyway, we did not make up that story. We are just repeating a joke Jay Leno told last night. If we asked for a reference for the remark, it might look rude. We believe in a kindhearted God. He gives us C's when we deserve F's and awards us A's when our work is barely worth a B. He would not condemn a soul, or a city, or a society because it had ceased to care about truth, because in carelessness or malice it bore false witness against its neighbor. Would He?

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IX. COVETING THY NEIGHBOR'S WIFE

by Harold O.J. Brown

The Decalogue consists of ten commandments, but they are not numbered in the Bible. Several of them contain more than one clause, and it is not always clear where one ends and the next begins. Jews and most Protestant Christians, wishing to underscore the prohibition against images, consider the commandment "Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image" a separate commandment, the second. Roman Catholics and Lutherans, for example, run this prohibition together with the first, "I am the Lord thy God . . . thou shalt have none other gods before me." This leaves them, as they approach the end of the list, one commandment short. Consequently they divide a commandment that the Jews consider one, "Thou shalt not covet," into two, creating a separate ninth commandment, "Thou shalt not covet thy neighbor's wife," and turning the next phrase into the tenth: "Neither shalt thou covet thy neighbor's house, his field, or his manservant, his maidservant, his ox, or his ass, or anything that is his." The short form is usually "Thou shalt not covet thy neighbor's goods." (The first listing of the commandments, in the description of Moses on Mount Sinai in Exodus puts the neighbor's house before his wife, followed by all the other persons, animals, and things, giving a measure of plausibility to the short form that most Protestants call the tenth commandment: "Thou shalt not covet.")

There is a nice symmetry to the Catholic version: the sixth commandment (seventh, in the Jewish counting) forbids the act of adultery, the next one the act of stealing. Then the ninth and tenth forbid the thoughts as well as the deeds, first the thought of adultery, then the thought of robbery. This brings to mind the rather alarming words of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount, "That whosoever looketh on a woman to lust after her hath committed adultery with her already in his heart." These are the words that caused then-presidential candidate Jimmy Carter to admit in his famous *Playboy* interview to having "committed adultery in his heart." Perhaps many readers take comfort in the fact that Jesus does not add the specific warning that he attached to calling one's brother a

fool, namely, the threat of hell fire. Nevertheless, one does not have to have the sensitivity of Jimmy Carter to be troubled by what Jesus says about adultery in the heart, and the Decalogue puts sins of the heart right up with murder, adultery, and robbery.

What does it mean to covet a wife, a house, or goods? What does it mean to “lust after” someone in your heart? Moral theologians are generally agreed that, as Calvin writes in the *Institutes*, “fantasies, flitting aimlessly about the mind and then vanishing, cannot be condemned as instances of covetousness.” (Calvin cites this objection without actually agreeing, and goes on to warn against dallying with the fantasy.) In any event, the temptation alone is not regarded as sinful, until one entertains it, dwells on it, and inwardly assents to it, perhaps held back from the deed only by fear of the consequences.

It is legitimate to marry, and all but the most disagreeable theologians acknowledge that sexual desire between spouses is not merely biblically acceptable but actually commanded (e.g., Proverbs 5:18-19, “rejoice with the wife of thy youth. Let her be as the loving hind and the pleasant roe”). What is meant by coveting the neighbor’s wife? It is not desiring to have a wife, if unmarried, for that is indeed a legitimate desire, but the desire to have someone else’s wife, taking her away from him, a desire that is rendered doubly culpable if one already has a wife. Being charmed or momentarily attracted by another’s spouse does not become coveting in the sense prohibited by the commandment until, in Calvin’s expression, one begins to “rave and revel” in the desire.

Most Christian catechisms—Roman Catholic and Protestant alike—use the commandments against adultery and extramarital coveting to warn against all indulgence in sexual fantasies, but that is not the actual point of the commandments. Both the commandment against adultery and against coveting plainly have sinning with or lusting after a particular person in mind, not the more general desire to have sexual fulfillment. The desire for sexual fulfillment is an appetite, like hunger, and normal enough, but the desire to take another’s wife goes too far. Indeed the sense of the commandments here is plain: both adultery (the act) and coveting (indulgence in the lustful desire) are condemned less for their physical aspect, which in fact does not exist in the case of mere coveting, than because they both violate what is perhaps the most fundamental principle of biblical religion, covenant love.

For both Judaism and Christianity God is not merely a God of love, but the God of covenant love. What this means is that God’s attitude toward us—toward individuals, toward Israel, toward the church, toward mankind in general—is not an attitude of generalized benevolence, but an attitude of love and generosity, which by its very nature demands loyalty and faithfulness in return—in theological terms, covenant love. God wants us to be faithful to Him and gives us opportunities to learn what this means by being faithful to one another.

Sexuality is ordained by God the Creator and is indeed His gift, but a gift that is good and beneficial only within the framework that God intends it: just as the love of God is not a generalized warm fuzziness, but covenant-keeping on both sides, the sexual love that God approves is not mere passion, but passion within the covenant-keeping relationship of marriage.

Because covenant-keeping is an attitude of the heart, not merely an exercise in the letter of the law, coveting another’s

wife is much more serious than one might think: it shows that covenant-keeping is not important to us, and it casts a dark shadow over the covenant that we are supposed to keep with God Himself. The commandments are not there to keep us from enjoying ourselves, but to train us in faithfulness, which is *sine qua non* for fellowship with God—not that one must never lapse, but that one’s relationship to God must be characterized by covenant-keeping rather than covenant-breaking. Adultery is a physical violation of the covenant with one’s spouse, just as idolatry is a physical violation of the covenant with our God. One does not actually have to worship an idol or burn incense before it to break the covenant with God: when one, in one’s heart, begins to prefer Baal or Astarte or some modern equivalent to the God of the Covenant, the covenant is already damaged. Coveting a neighbor’s wife damages the covenant of marriage, even though no overt act has been committed. At least by implication, it places the whole concept of covenant love in jeopardy and implies that we will be no more faithful to God than we were to a spouse. God’s covenant love is the strongest power in the universe and not to be trifled with; our covenant of marriage is but a pale reflection, but it too is important enough to warrant a commandment for its protection.

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X. COVETING THY NEIGHBOR’S PROPERTY

by George Garrett

It seems almost quaint, certainly ironic, to be here and now thinking out loud and in print about some of the contemporary implications of one of the Ten Commandments, presumably for the benefit if not the pleasure of one’s fellow restless inhabitants of these last, dying years of our savage century. It is even more ironic when you pause to consider that this particular society we have created and now have to live in, though overwhelmingly Christian in its actual numbers, has been steadily transformed into a secular institution wherein church and state are not so much separate as they are obdurately antagonistic—or would be if the socially sensitive churches, themselves, had not allowed the Ten Commandments to devolve into Ten Suggestions. The commandments against coveting “thy neighbor’s wife, nor his servant, nor his maid, nor his ox, nor his ass, nor anything that is his”—ought to be a point of conflict, a battlefield between the two. The state, with the secular covenant it at once proclaims and enforces, bases much of its policy, domestic and foreign, and its consumer-driven economy precisely on the constant incitement of the basic covetous impulses of its citizenry. At this late stage of things, it is almost absurd not to covet anything and everything your neighbor happens to possess; and, indeed, current events—as, for example, the recent Los Angeles Looting Days (“95 Looting Days Until Xmas”)—seem to have