



*The Ten Commandments Ancient Code*, Karim Alwali

## Taking Another Look at the Big 10

BY LOUISE VAN POLL

As we move into the upcoming PW/*Horizons* Bible study on the Ten Commandments, perhaps it is appropriate to look at what we already know, or think we know, about these iconic rules.

Bible study author Eugenia Gamble told attendees of the 2018 PW Churchwide Gathering that her study, *Love Carved in Stone: A Fresh Look at the Ten Commandments*, is a love story. “Let us fall in love anew with our God,” she said. “We will look at what we think we know versus what the commandments actually say.”

Several Presbyterian women shared their perspectives on the “Big Ten,” and one truth stood out among the many memories and beliefs: the Ten Commandments are not stagnant or dead, but a source of ongoing study and understanding as we age and mature.

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### Great Guidelines

When asked about their earliest memory of the Ten Commandments, most of the respondents said they learned about them in Sunday school or religious school. Hyon O'Brien was the exception. Hyon, 71, was born in Wonju, South Korea. She grew up in a family of 12 with no religion, but her strong spiritual hunger led her to be baptized at 18 and to become a Presbyterian in 1980. “I was 18 when I read the Commandments in the Bible. I thought they were great guidelines,” she said.

Patty Protzeller, 63, of Renton, Washington, who has lived her entire life in the Puget Sound area, said the Ten Commandments are a moral code that everyone should follow. Patty was raised Presbyterian, but during the school year her mother took her five daughters to the Disciples of Christ church. “The closest Presbyterian church was next to the University of Washington and mom didn't want us going there with all the ‘hippies and other undesirables.’”

Charlotte Henley added that she watched *The Ten Commandments* (starring Charlton Heston) annually. “It was a family thing and made me very aware of them,” said Charlotte who grew up in New York City and then lived for 30 years in Canada. Raised in the Catholic Church, she attended parochial school, but she began distancing herself from that faith at the age of seven. After being without a church home for many years, she became a Presbyterian four years ago.

And Melissa Worthey, 52, hails from Tennessee, although she grew up in Texas and has lived all over the globe with her Navy husband. “I remember thinking how incredible it was that this old man, Moses, carried heavy stone tablets with a message from God. The sheer weight of the tablets conveyed a sense of the importance of their subject matter to me.” Melissa is descended from a long line of Presbyterians. “I laugh and say I am a prenatal Presbyterian. My grandfather was a Presbyterian minister.”

### Even When We Fall Short

Another respondent, who attended a Presbyterian-related elementary school, remembers having homework on the Ten Commandments. Said 34-year-old Danilie Hilerio Villanueva of Puerto Rico: “We had puzzles and riddles about them. I mostly thought they made total sense. If I could follow these rules, I could go through life without messing up my neighbor's life or mine.”

Lisa Gogolin, a 32-year-old from South Dakota, responded, “I recall thinking they were the laws that perfect Christians followed, but we sinners had to bend the rules because we would never be perfect.” She grew up Lutheran but spent much of her teen and young adult years lacking a close relationship with Jesus. She began attending a Presbyterian church after her marriage in 2010, but didn't join until 2016.

But a Florida woman summed up the consensus when she said, “They are a set of rules for holy living, but they are hard to live up to.” Sandy Weil is 77 and the daughter of a minister. She joined the Presbyterian Church in 1972 after visiting several other denominations. “I was looking for something special and found it in the Presbyterian Church.”

### Brought to Life

Each woman was asked to share a memorable encounter that helped her understand the “Big Ten” in a new way.

For Charlotte, it was her minister's sermons. “He gave a great explanation on ‘Thou Shalt Not Kill.’ It

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opened my mind to look at many more behaviors besides the physical, such as to kill a reputation or someone’s joy. I now have more awareness and sense of responsibility for that commandment. My negative thoughts could be the seed for negative, dehumanizing behavior, which could then make it easier for me or others to vilify other people or groups. We need to remember that all people are made in the image of God, and to kill them is to kill God.”

Lisa’s encounter came when she was teaching the Ten Commandments to children. She felt she was unqualified to teach the commandments because she was still confused by them. “But teaching them to little kids, reading about them in a children’s Bible, made them feel much less intimidating.”

At 18, Melissa traveled to Caracas, Venezuela. “It was there that I first witnessed abject poverty adjacent to opulence. I began to question the spiritual impact on both sides of this disparity. I realized greedy thoughts and actions could come not

only in desiring my neighbor’s possessions, but in hoarding my own without a care for my neighbor.”

After failing at some and learning from Bible studies, Sandy realized that God was trying to show us a better way of living.

Danilie thought the Ten Commandments could save us so much trouble if we followed them. “As I grew older I thought that many of our social and political issues are rooted in a dismissal, misinterpretation or non-Reformed interpretation of the Commandments.”

For Patty, realizing that the Ten Commandments create good citizens was her lightbulb moment. But, she also cited the two commandments from Jesus that work in tandem with “the Ten”—“Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul and mind” and “Love your neighbor as yourself.”

### Living with Grace

When asked how her understanding of the Ten Commandments has changed from childhood to adulthood, Hyon said, “As I have placed God first in my life, I’ve discovered that my inner person has been transformed radically by the Holy Spirit, and the Ten Commandments have become easy to understand—especially the one that tells us not to have any gods but God.”

Sandy explained that her understanding has changed dramatically, mostly because she has become less rigid. “I realize nobody’s perfect and we all need the Commandments and the God who gave them to us.”

Patty had a similar story to share. “I give people more leeway and grace because I don’t know their story. I am more flexible and understanding. I try to find common ground and build relationships.”

Melissa’s thoughts echoed some of these views, saying that as a child she thought she had to live out the Big Ten perfectly or God would not love her. “As my understanding of the Lord and His word grew, so did my understanding of His commandments and grace. I have learned that following the rules perfectly on my own is impossible. Thankfully, I am a forgiven sinner.”

### Ever-expanding Understanding

According to Danilie, she now understands the commandments as a broader explanation of the two commandments Jesus shared with us. “The Ten Commandments seem to be broader than what is textually written and lead us to live faithfully to God, our neighbors, in our communities, both local and global. These Ten Commandments could reshape our policies through a reform-based perspective, being a proclamation of justice, human rights, healthy living, etc.”

Charlotte noted that the more life experiences we have, the more meaningful the Commandments become. It is an ongoing growth and understanding.

And for Lisa, who is so new in her journey, it is the feeling of awe as God works in her life. “Perhaps this

is on purpose, but the timing for this article about the Ten Commandments falls right when my pastor is doing a sermon series on them. And our women's Bible class did a five-week study on the Sabbath, and now we are in the midst of an eight-week study on idolatry. I'd say my understanding of the Big Ten is expanding greatly, right now!"

### Timeless Words for Every Day

The last question posed to the participants was, "How do the Ten Commandments inform and shape your daily life as a Christian?"

"Some are easy," said Lisa. "It's easy to skip out on murdering and adultery, though I do understand that's not true for everyone. But my studies on Sabbath and idolatry have pointed out some pretty strong needs for change in my life. I am terrible at resting. And I certainly have some modern-day idols. No golden calves

in my house, but darn it if the housework doesn't too often take priority. It's been very heart-searching to call myself out on these things, but how rewarding to get to a point where you *see* and *feel* God at work in you," she concluded.

According to Melissa, the Ten Commandments are a rudder to steer her heart, mind, actions and life. They are "how-to" instructions for love—loving God and one another. "I often use the Ten Commandments as a part of my prayer time. As I reflect on each day, I prayerfully ask the Lord to show me those moments where I have acted and failed to act as God willed."

Charlotte pointed out that the Commandments—or "Words" as Eugenia calls them in the study—live within us. When sin comes along, there is a pause and a moment of reflection. "They are a guide for a way of being and living," she said.

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Patty agreed, saying, "The Ten are a code of ethics that underline everything, but I don't dwell on them because I have internalized them."

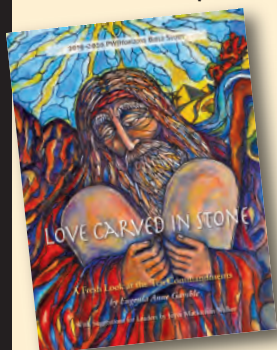
### Faithful Living

For Danilie, the Big Ten and the two "greatest commandments" allow us to experience loving God and our neighbor as we undertake a life of authentic faithful living.

Sandy believes the Ten talk about more than just how we act today, but how we treat those around us. "The Ten Commandments are talking about feeding the hungry, welcoming the stranger and loving others as God loves us all."



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For Hyon, they are a reminder and checklist to stay faithful to God. “However, loving God with all our hearts, and mind and soul is the utmost important thing. And loving others, also. They are the greatest commandments. All the other laws are secondary,” she said. “It’s natural for us to desire to obey God if we love God.”

Patty agreed, saying, “They are the underlying code of conduct in our fiber. But we should concentrate on Jesus and his teaching of the two ‘greatest commandments.’”

Sandy pointed out that in a perfect world, the commandments would not be needed. “I look forward to Christ’s coming when there will be a new heaven and a new earth, because everything will be perfect then.”

And Charlotte summed up what everyone who was interviewed believes when she stated, “The study of the meaning and relevance of the Ten never stops. There is always more to learn.”

Danilie added that as we read and reread the Ten Commandments, we need tools to faithfully reinterpret them and to include them as we interact with the world.

Which is why Presbyterian women around the world are eagerly awaiting Eugenia Gamble’s study.

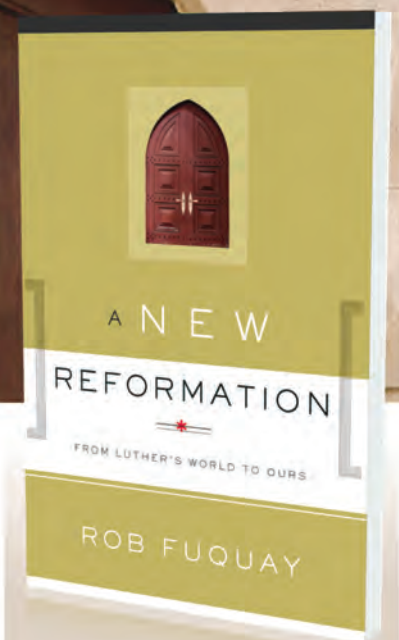
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Louise Van Poll is a freelance writer for *Horizons*.

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