

(The following column appeared in the *Calvary Herald* (vol. 13, no. 1, 1997), a publication of Calvary Reformed Presbyterian Church in Hampton, Virginia < [www.clearlight.com/~crpc/](http://www.clearlight.com/~crpc/)>.)

## **Necessary Consequence: Manufactured Meaning by C. Michael Holloway**

**T**he Ten Commandments are meaningless. ...  
Now that I have your attention, and before you pick up the phone to charge me with heresy, let me explain. Let's begin with a story.

One of my duties at work is to participate in a group that is developing guidelines for using a certain computer programming language in computer systems that control such things as airplane autopilots. In a meeting of this group last October, we discussed whether the guidelines should contain requirements about what *should* be done, or prohibitions against what *should not* be done. One member of the group, we'll call him Sam, suggested that the guidelines should probably contain both. To support his suggestion, Sam cited the example of the Ten Commandments. He mentioned that the Ten Commandments include both commands about what not to do (Thou shalt not commit adultery), and about what to do (Remember the Sabbath day). He should've stopped there.

But, Sam did not stop there. He went on to suggest that people seem to respond much better to being told what to do than to being told what not to do. "For example," he said, "the command against adultery is one of the most often violated, while the command to remember the Sabbath is the most often obeyed, because almost no one works 7 days a week." To him, each person who takes at least one day a week off from work obeys the fourth commandment, no matter what that person might do on his day off. Although Sam did not say so explicitly, it was clear that he believes that it is possible to obey the fourth commandment and disobey the seventh at the same time.

Sam used the phrase "the Ten Commandments," and he even correctly cited the text of two of them; but had he been citing some obscure passage from the Koran, he would not have been any further away from God's truth than he was. He was far away from the truth, because he *manufactured* his own meaning for the text, instead of *determining* the meaning that God had given to it.

Manufactured meaning is not new. Jesus soundly chastised the religious people of His day for making up their own meanings for many of God's commandments ("You have heard that it was said... But I say to you").

Manufactured meaning is not new, but it is extremely popular today. This popularity is easy to see in the deconstructionist language movement, which asserts that meaning exists only in the eye or ear of the beholder. This popularity is also easy to see in the radical feminist movement, which asserts that not only do words such as chairman, mankind, and person oppress women, but that people come in at least 5 different genders. Finally, this popularity is easy to see among legal theorists who assert that the Constitution means whatever the courts say that it means.

Manufactured meaning is popular in evangelical circles, too. Although we would never claim that *A Tale of Two Cities* was without meaning until we read it, although we could not come up with 5 different genders if our lives depended on it, and although we would never conceive of creating a right to kill unborn children from the Bill of Rights, we will happily talk about what a Scripture passage "means to us." We easily forget that what we think a passage means does not matter one whit, unless it agrees with what God says it means. God has given us much liberty through Christ, but that liberty does not extend to manufacturing meaning for any part of His Word.

To complete the sentence with which I opened this column: The Ten Commandments *are* meaningless ... unless their meaning comes from God Himself, through the Scripture. Consider the two commandments Sam cited in the meeting last October.

Only Scripture can tell us what it means to commit adultery. Some may say that a man commits adultery only if he has sexual relations with someone who is not his wife, but the Scripture says: “whoever looks at a woman to lust for her has already committed adultery with her in his heart” (Matthew 5:28), and “whoever marries a woman who is divorced commits adultery” (Matthew 5:32b).

Only Scripture can tell us what it means to remember the Sabbath day. Refraining from working is certainly a part of it, but it is not the only part, as passages such as Isaiah 58:13, Luke 4:16, and Acts 20:7 make clear.

Of course, this principle applies to all of Scripture, too. Only Scripture can tell us what it means to love our neighbor as ourselves. Only Scripture can tell us what it means to be transformed by the renewing of our minds. Whenever we resort to manufacturing our own meaning, instead of discerning---through the illumination of the Holy Spirit---God’s meaning, “we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us.”

The principles of logic that we’ve studied in previous installments of this column, and the ones we’ll study in future installments, can help us discern God’s meaning, if, and only if, we resist the temptation to manufacture our own meaning for those things we do not like or understand. May God grant us the grace to accept His meaning for His Word.