

Moore commandments: A graven image

by [Martin E. Marty](#) in the [September 20, 2003](#) issue

The graven image of the Ten Commandments, as well as the name of its sponsor, Judge Roy Moore, will a) fade into history or b) get enshrined somewhere in Alabama. But the debates prompted by Moore's placement of this icon in the Alabama Supreme Court building may continue. At the time I write, my search engine turns up only two Web citations of a most important point: that Moore's granite analogue to the Golden Calf, before which supporters were seen bowing, lists 11, not ten, commandments.

The idea of counting to 11 has occurred to people before this. School superintendent Robert Hooker in Scott County, Indiana, redrafted the Ten Commandments into Eleven Precepts. No go, said the courts. More recently "Philologus," a columnist in the weekly Jewish paper *Forward* (July 18), headlined a piece, "Decalogue or Eleven-alogue?" The subject deserves more notice. Philologus, unlike the rest of us, looked at the televised or printed images of the 5,280-pound monument and observed, "You can count them from top to bottom or bottom to top, left to right or right to left, they still come out to . . . Eleven."

First, he notes, Christians and Jews do not agree on the texts. Second, as the U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals in Atlanta observed, "Jewish, Catholic, Lutheran, and Eastern Orthodox faiths use different parts of their holy texts as the authoritative Ten Commandments." And Moore, not wanting to shatter the vaunted Judeo-Christian tradition, fused two (of many) reckonings of the text. Philologus points out that the Hebrew *dibrot* means "utterances," not "commandments." If they are "utterances," you begin where Jews do, where God announces God's self.

Because Christians call them commandments they have to begin with a "Thou shalt . . ." To come out with ten commandments, they have to divide one or another of the remaining nine. We Lutherans, evidently because we have lust on our minds, join some other Christians in devoting two to "Thou shalt not covet." The Alabamans

chopped in two “Thou shalt have no other gods before me” and “Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image.” We Catholic-Lutherans skip the latter, because we love graven images as much as Judge Moore does. The Reformed, uneasy about iconography, like to preserve the no-graven-image utterance.

Corrupted as I am by Martin Luther’s extension of the idea of honoring parents to showing respect for the state, I was disturbed to hear the judge trashing our Fourth, his Sixth, Commandment. And bad-mouthing the judges who disagree with his interpretations. Whatever happened to his Ninth Commandment, “Thou shalt not bear false witness”?

Since I have introduced Luther I may as well go further and quote his “Explanation” of his Eighth, Moore’s Ninth: “Thou shalt not bear false witness.” We Lutheran kids had to memorize that not only should we not “destroy the reputation” of neighbors, but “are to come to their defense, speak well of them, and interpret everything they do in the best possible light.” Since that marvelous and moving gloss is in Luther’s not Moses’ Commandments, I am not breaking a divine command or defying a divine utterance when I do not come to Moore’s defense.