

Mangers and Monuments

By David Feddes

Once upon a time Christmas was illegal. It was against the law to celebrate Christmas. Who came up with these anti-Christmas laws? Was it an atheist dictator? Was it a secular judge who issued an anti-Christmas ruling? No, the people who made Christmas illegal were not atheist or secular. They were some of the most zealous Christians who ever lived.

Nowadays if someone objects to a manger scene on government property, many Christians see it as an attack on their faith. If a judge bans a manger scene, many see it as an attack on their faith. If a public school insists that teachers say “Happy Holidays” instead of “Merry Christmas,” many see it as an attack on faith in Christ. And in some cases, it probably is. Still, there was a time when some strongly anti-Christmas people were also some of the most committed Christians.

The anti-Christmas legislation enforced by those Christians was more strict than any of today’s limits. Some courts nowadays don’t permit depictions of manger scenes with the baby Jesus on government property, but back then it involved much more than government property. You weren’t allowed to have manger scenes even in your own home or your church. You were not allowed to celebrate Christmas—period. You weren’t allowed to skip work or stay home from school on Christmas.

Why would any Christians make such strict laws against Christmas? Well, they didn’t intend any disrespect for Jesus. In fact, their ban on Christmas was their way of showing loyalty to Jesus and to the total authority of the Bible. They saw that Christmas was often an excuse for greed, gluttony, and drunken parties, not for honoring Jesus. They also noticed that there’s no command in the Bible to celebrate Christmas, and these anti-Christmas Christians were very strict about not allowing anything except what the Bible commanded. Since the Bible doesn’t require us to celebrate Jesus’ birth annually, they figured it was required not to celebrate.

The people who outlawed Christmas were Puritans, sincere but sometimes overly strict Christians. In 1644 the Puritan-controlled government of Britain passed an Act of Parliament prohibiting celebration of Christmas, Easter, and other religious holy days. They sent sheriffs out on Christmas Day to make sure no shops were closed and everybody was working and selling as usual. The anti-Christmas law was revoked a few years later when the Puritans lost control of the British government.

Some of the Puritans immigrated to America. The Pilgrims who sailed on the Mayflower were Puritans. They wanted to set up a godly society in the New World. At first they didn’t make any law against Christmas. They simply didn’t celebrate it or make it a public holiday. Workers who wouldn’t work on Christmas could be fined or fired. In 1659, a few decades after the Pilgrims first arrived in New England, the Massachusetts Bay colony went beyond treating Christmas as an ordinary working day and actually banned any celebration of Christmas. The law stated, “Whoever shall be found observing any such days as Christmas or the like, either by forbearing labor, feasting, or any other way.... shall pay for every such offense five shillings as a fine to the country.” The law was repealed in 1681, but for a long time after that, Christmas was not widely celebrated in New England. As late as 1870, a child skipping school on Christmas Day could be punished or expelled.

In an ironic twist of history, some evangelical heirs of the Puritans are as eager for government to sponsor Christmas displays as the Puritans were for government to prohibit all celebration of Christmas, public or private. Nowadays many Christians like to say, “Jesus is the

reason for the season” and want manger scenes on public property and monuments of the Ten Commandments on public property as symbols of Christian society. Well, the Puritans were more serious than almost anyone else in history about establishing a Christian society, but they used government authority not to set up manger scenes but to outlaw Christmas. Modern heirs of the Puritans often speak of “putting Christ back into Christmas,” but the Puritans wanted to get Christmas out of Christianity. They wanted to keep Christ separate from Christmas because they believed that Christmas was against Christ. They thought people were just using Jesus’ birth as an excuse for a pagan party.

Contrary to stereotypes, the Puritans were not all grinchy and grouchy. Many were warmhearted, joyful followers of Jesus. Their courage, their love for God, their emphasis on the Bible’s authority, and their strong family life would put many of us to shame. I have grown spiritually from reading outstanding Puritan writers and others who have been influenced by Puritan thinking. The Puritans deserve respect, but they had flaws. Some were too quick to judge Christians who saw things differently and too quick to use government power to force their views on others.

The Puritans had some sound reasons for not wanting to celebrate Christmas. The Puritans were right to dislike drunken excess. They were right that many people used Christmas as an occasion for greed, not godliness. They were right that it’s more important to honor Christ every day than to observe special holidays in his honor. They were right that the Bible does not require a special day each year to celebrate Jesus’ birth. But they were wrong to think that because some people misused Christmas, therefore all people should be banned from celebrating it. The Puritans had the right not to celebrate Christmas themselves, but they were wrong to force others not to celebrate, and they were wrong to judge that anyone who observed Christmas as a special day must be dishonoring Jesus.

It’s possible to honor Jesus while treating Christmas as just one more day of the year, as the Puritans did. But it’s also possible to honor Jesus by treating Christmas as a special celebration. The New Testament permits but does not require us to single out holidays to honor the Lord in a special way. Romans 15:5 says, “One man considers one day more sacred than another; another man considers every day alike. Each should be fully convinced in his own mind” (Romans 15:5). Be true to your convictions but don’t force them on others. Sometimes two different approaches to honoring Jesus can both be right. One side should not be quick to judge the other.

Roy’s Rock

Most Christians are free to celebrate Christmas, or not to do so, according to their own choice. Some, however, want to go beyond praising Jesus in their homes and churches, and they want Jesus to be honored in the public square by means of manger scenes on government property. In a similar vein, they want God’s law to be honored in the public square by posting the Ten Commandments on public property. Why do they want mangers and monuments in public places? To show that their community and society recognizes the supremacy of Jesus Christ and honors God as the supreme lawgiver. If the vast majority of people in a community believe in Jesus as the Son of God, why not show it by having manger scenes at Christmas time? If most people see the Ten Commandments as God-given standards of moral conduct, why not show it by placing monuments in government buildings?

In the United States, Alabama Chief Justice Roy Moore caused a stir by placing a granite monument of the Ten Commandments in the state Supreme Court building. The monument

became known as Roy's Rock. Most people in his home state supported him, but a federal judge ordered the monument removed. Roy Moore defied the order and refused to remove the monument. He was then suspended from his duties, and the monument was removed. But the controversy didn't go away.

Some Christians favored Roy's Rock and supported Justice Moore's refusal to obey the federal court. A good case could be made that the federal court went beyond its jurisdiction and that the monument was a matter for the state government to decide for itself. An even stronger case could be made that a government which is not accountable to any higher law will find that its own laws get little respect. So I have a lot of sympathy for those who support Roy's Rock.

But I still have mixed feelings about this monument and other monuments of the Ten Commandments in government space. I don't have mixed feelings about the Ten Commandments themselves. I prize them as the Word of God, the superb summary of God's will for his people, written in stone by God himself. But I do have mixed feelings about church people wanting such monuments on government property when most churches do not even have a monument of the Ten Commandments in their own building, when many churches seldom or never read the Ten Commandments as part of public worship, when many church people do not post the Commandments in their own homes, and when far too many church people are as likely to violate the Lord's Day, commit adultery, lie, or covet, as many of their non-churched neighbors.

The most important thing Christians can do to promote the Ten Commandments is to memorize them, cherish them, and obey them joyfully and faithfully. God first gave these commandments by writing them on stone tablets which he gave to Moses, but God says of the new covenant that comes with Jesus, "I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts" (Jeremiah 31:33). The New Testament tells Christians, "You are a letter from Christ... written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts" (2 Corinthians 3:3). If we want a culture shaped by the Ten Commandments, we don't need Roy's Rock nearly as much as we need people who are letters from Christ, whose hearts and lives are scripted by the Holy Spirit of the living God.

Empty Symbols

Symbols and monuments can be valuable reminders if they are signs of a living reality, but they cannot substitute for the reality. Manger scenes of the baby Jesus are no substitute for a relationship with the living Jesus. Monuments of the Ten Commandments are no substitute for obeying the Lord.

Is there any point in a government monument of the Ten Commandments if a government does not uphold the commandments? Even if the state of Alabama posted the Ten Commandments in every public building, it would not enforce those commandments. The federal government of the United States does not enforce the Ten Commandments. The government of Canada does not enforce the Ten Commandments at national or provincial or local level. Nigeria does not enforce the Ten Commandments. Does any government anywhere enforce even half of the Ten Commandments? So what's the point of government-sponsored monuments to God's law if the government does not uphold that law? Are such monuments signs of commitment to God's law, or empty symbols?

How many of the Ten Commandments does government actually insist on? The commands against murder, stealing, and false testimony are sometimes enforced—though even some forms of murder, such as abortion and euthanasia, are being transformed from terrible

crimes to basic rights. As for other commandments, there's not even a pretense to make them part of government law.

Some governments used to prohibit misusing the Lord's name, but if every thoughtless exclamation of "O My God!" were prosecuted, if every irreverent use of Jesus' name were punished, many church people would be in deep trouble. Many of them use such language, and they spend most of their spare time watching movies and TV shows that use such language. In Canada you can get into bigger trouble for quoting bible verses prohibiting homosexuality than for blaspheming God.

Some governments once enforced the Sabbath commandment by prohibiting work on Sunday, but not anymore. Even much of the church no longer objects to working on the Lord's Day. Church people work Sundays in non-emergency occupations, they shop on Sundays in stores where others are working, and they eat in restaurants on Sunday as someone works to serve them. Do they really want to honor the Lord's Day by not working and by not making others work, or would they rather just have monuments of the Ten Commandments in various public places? That way they can feel quite godly without actually doing what God says.

Some governments used to prohibit adultery, but in many places nowadays adultery is considered a basic human right. You can get into more trouble for not fastening a seat belt or for smoking a cigarette in a public restaurant than for betraying your spouse and abandoning your family.

Even most people who favor Roy's Rock and similar monuments would not want the Ten Commandments really to be the law of the land. Many of the commands are not enforced in any way, and by the time we reach the tenth commandment, we find a law that is quite simply unenforceable by any earthly government. Even Moses and the ancient Israelites did not try to enforce the commandment, "Thou shalt not covet." Coveting is a matter of the heart. It can't be detected from outside a person, and therefore it cannot be prosecuted or punished by any earthly authority. Only God knows for sure when we are coveting. No government in the world has a law against coveting. On the contrary, it might be true to say that many nations have economies built on greed and coveting. Even people who know coveting is wrong have never tried to pass legislation against it or punish those who covet.

Why do many church people still want Roy's Rock and other public monuments to the Ten Commandments? Some have a true loyalty to God and a genuine desire for their nation and society to honor God and obey his commands. I have great respect for those who make this their goal. I won't judge any individual who supports this cause, but I would caution against the danger of hypocrisy. Do we really want monuments to give the impression that we as a people are living under God's law when in fact we are breaking the commandments constantly and when the government does not even try to enforce most of them?

The sad truth is that courts now allow public displays of the commandments only if the display is judged to be a historic relic or just one item among many. For example, a sculpture of Moses and the commandments is visible to all on the Supreme Court building of the United States. How can the Supreme Court of the U.S. post the Ten Commandments but not the Alabama court of Roy Moore? Well, Justice Moore's monument makes the Commandments central, while in the U.S. Supreme Court, Moses is just one among many lawgivers from various cultures. Hammurabi of Babylon, Solon of Greece, Confucius of China, and others are portrayed along with Moses. The Ten Commandments are treated as just one legal code among many in the historic process of developing the rule of law.

Now, is that the way to honor God's law—by making it just one code among many? Does God want us to honor the symbol without upholding the content? Does God want his law engraved on our monuments but not written on our hearts? Under current law, the only way to legally display God's law on public property is if we take God's name in vain. The displays are allowed only if they are not taken as the living Word of the living God, only if they are seen as another human effort to regulate behavior.

This is true of many aspects of American civil religion that are still permitted by courts. It's okay for money to say, "In God we trust," so long as we don't really trust him or say which god we mean. It's okay to speak of the nation being "under God" as long as we don't really place our laws under God's law and don't say which god we're under. A leader may take an oath of office with the words, "So help me God," as long as he doesn't count on God's help or doesn't define which god he expects to help him. The moment a government official speaks of God and really means it, a lot of people think he's a dangerous fanatic. Something is amiss when it's legal to use God's name only when we mean nothing by it. God is dishonored less by silence about him than by using hollow words and setting up empty symbols.

What Do Mangers Mean?

Government-sponsored manger scenes can also be empty symbols. In fact, courts have ruled that manger scenes are legal on public property if and only if they are empty symbols. If Jesus is only a sentimental memory of a baby in a manger, he is legal, but if he is a living Lord, he is not allowed on government property. If Jesus is one religion among many, a manger scene is okay, but if Jesus is the only way to be right with God, he is not allowed on government property. If Jesus is just one decoration among holiday clutter, he may stay in place, but if he claims to reign supreme, he is not allowed on government property. This is what judicial precedent has stated.

In one prominent case, a judge upheld the right of a local government to have a manger scene and denied the petition of those trying to ban the manger. The judge reasoned that manger displays were okay because they had become nothing more than symbols of the holidays, much like Santa Claus. Jesus and Santa are both just characters in a commercialized fun fest—that was the judge's basic point. The manger was legal because it was just one more hunk of holiday paraphernalia.

In related rulings, judges have said that a manger scene is okay on government property if the display includes symbols of other religions, such as a menorah and a crescent and statues of idols from eastern religions. It's okay to display a symbol of Christ, as long as the display leaves the impression that there are also many other roads that lead to God.

Still others argue that mangers are simply a matter of highlighting a historical root for Christmas. Even Christians have made this point in court, saying the manger should be allowed as a nod to the history of the holiday, not necessarily as a call to follow Christ.

But Jesus is not just a historical artifact; he reigns right now on his heavenly throne. Jesus is not just one Savior among many; he is the only one who can free us from sin and give eternal life. Jesus is not just another Christmas ornament in the pile of trappings and wrappings; he is God with us, the ruler of nations who calls for our love and absolute loyalty. Any manger scene that sends any other message than that is denying the gospel and defying Jesus' claim on us.

A manger scene is valuable only if it points you to the living Jesus. On the night of Jesus' birth, an angel announced, "A Savior has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord. This will be a

sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger” (Luke 2:11-12). The manger is the sign of the Savior, or it is nothing.

If you favor manger scenes and Ten Commandments monuments on public property, you may have good reasons. But beware of wrong reasons. Beware of substituting symbols for reality. Don't just ask government to set up monuments of the Ten Commandments; live by the morality of the Ten Commandments yourself. Don't just support manger scenes; seek a relationship with the living Jesus. Trust in him as your Savior, and ask him to wash away your sins by his blood. Honor him as your Lord, and obey his leading. Enjoy him as your friend, and relate to him in love. Then, whether you make a big deal of the Christmas holiday or ignore it as the Puritans used to do, you will experience the true significance of Jesus and enjoy his blessing.

And remember to share your faith with others. Don't count on monuments and mangers to lead people to Jesus. Non-Christians are more likely to be offended by government sponsorship of religious symbols than to be led to Christ by such things. When our powers of persuasion fail, it's tempting to use powers of coercion. When churches and Christian families and individuals are not transforming society so that people want to honor Christ voluntarily, some Christians want government to make people acknowledge Christ involuntarily. They want government to do what the church has failed to do. But it is probably no wiser to force Christian symbols into public places than it was for the Puritans to ban Christmas from private places.

Jesus does not need government aid to change lives. Two thousand years ago Jesus did not force his way into the halls of power; he lay down in a manger. But his coming has changed the world and shifted the structure of the entire universe. Today he rules from heaven's throne.

So if you are one of Jesus' followers, don't feel embattled or desperate if your government won't put up mangers and monuments to honor him. Make your life a testimony to his saving power. That will do more to honor him and to change other people than any symbol could do.