

The Laws of God

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There were three kinds of law in the Old Testament, and, if we want to understand God's law in the New Testament, we need to begin with these. There was what we call the moral law (the Ten Commandments), the civil law (what the Westminster Confession describes as "sundry judicial laws" given to Israel as "a body politic"), and the ceremonial law (matters pertaining to the sacrificial system anticipating the redemptive work of Christ).

It should be kept in mind that this word "law" in the Bible is not always used, strictly speaking, in the same way. Sometimes, for instance, it refers to the Ten Commandments (Ex. 24:12), sometimes to all the writings of Moses (Lk. 2:23,24), and sometimes to the whole canon of Scripture (as in Ps. 119). There are a few times also when this same word is used in a rather different sense; in Rom. 7:23, for example, it refers to a principle. This should not cause any student of the Bible to stumble, however, because the precise meaning of the word is usually easily understood from the immediate context of that passage where the word is found.

The three laws mentioned above (moral, civil and ceremonial) each have three distinctive features, which, if forgotten or ignored, make the whole concept of biblical law virtually unintelligible. These distinctive features are perpetuity (a quality of lasting forever), inclusiveness (they are to be obeyed inwardly as well as outwardly), and Christ-centeredness (they point ahead to, and proclaim, the person and work of Christ). Because these features are so crucial to all three kinds of law, and because failing to consider them has led so often to perverse misunderstanding, they are the focus of this present paper.

I. THE MORAL LAW

Let us begin our study with the moral law, the Ten Commandments, because this part of the Bible is foundational to our understanding of law in general, because God wrote it with His own finger (yes, as a matter of fact, it was written in stone!), because it declares what God Himself is really like, and because He has given it to us as our rule of life. Though the Lord gave the Ten Commandments to Israel, they are clearly intended for everybody everywhere (Rom. 2:14,15; 3:19,20).

The moral law is perpetually binding. We know that all men are under obligation to obey it, and will be to the end of the world, because every commandment of this law (including the fourth commandment, Heb. 4:9) is repeated, some of them several times, in the New Testament. We know that all men are bound by this law, too, because it is written on the conscience of every man from the creation of the world (Rom. 2:15), and because it will be the standard by which all are judged at the end of the world (Rev. 22:14).

The moral law is also inclusive. Both Old and New Testament alike teach us plainly that it is to be obeyed inwardly as well as outwardly (Deut. 6:5; Mt. 22:37-40). Any attempt to rob this law of its inward part (love) is to destroy the law, to drag it down to the level of blatant hypocrisy (Mk. 7:6,7). Any attempt, on the other hand, to rob it of the outward part (what is expressly stated) is to redefine love and to wrest the scriptures to one's own destruction (Jn. 14:21).

Moreover, the moral law is Christ-centered, which is to say that it takes us to Christ who gives it meaning and purpose. This may not be immediately apparent, but these commandments, holy and just and good, show us our sins (Rom. 3:20), the futility of ever saving ourselves by means of the law (Gal. 3:10; Jas. 2:10), and our desperate and most urgent need, therefore, of seeking and finding refuge in Christ (Jn. 14:6; Acts 4:12).

II. THE CIVIL LAW

We move next to the civil law, consisting of the specific judicial laws and penalties given by God to Israel as a political body, or nation, and we consider this now because it so closely mirrors the moral law, and because it shows us in very practical ways how the governments of men may legislate their own laws to reflect and uphold the Ten Commandments, the basis of a just and God-fearing society. An enduring civilization is established and maintained, after all, not on the shifting sands of an ever-changing social contract, but on the two great pillars of

the supremacy of God and the revelation of His unalterable commands in the moral law (Ex. 20:12).

The civil law had been given to the nation of Israel, as I say, and was never therefore binding on all the nations, nor since the fall of Israel's theocracy is any nation under obligation to enforce these laws and penalties now. As it is so clearly stated in the Westminster Confession (XIX,4), "To them also, as a body politic, He gave sundry judicial laws, which expired together with the State of that people; not obliging any other now, further than the general equity thereof may require." We know that the civil law is not perpetually binding, as is the moral law, because it is not supported by the New Testament. Quite the contrary, the laws of the civil magistrate are now binding unless he commands disobedience to God's revealed will (Rom. 13:1-7; 1 Pet. 2:13-17; Acts 5:29). This is a significant change of administration under the new covenant. When the Church was no longer identified with the nation of Israel, but became an international community of believers (Jews and Gentiles scattered throughout the nations, Mt. 28:19), and when Israel itself ceased to exist, the laws formerly governing that nation lost all political bite. It needs to be remembered, however, as the Westminster Confession points out, that, while these judicial laws and penalties have fallen away, and are not now binding on any state, they continue to trumpet the glory of God and His justice in the moral law. Here is the perpetuity, the foreverness, of the civil law. In that it expresses in the most practical terms what it means to do justly, to love mercy and to walk humbly before God, it will always be, along with every other scripture, "profitable...for instruction in righteousness" (2 Tim. 3:16,17).

Note: It would not be wrong for nations today to adopt the civil code of ancient Israel, of course, but it is not necessary to do so. That is the point. Christian Reconstructionists, as they are called, have insisted that it is necessary, or have seen this as the ideal at least, but the New Testament does not say so, and, as John Calvin tells us, "The statement of some, that the law of God given through Moses is dishonoured when it is abrogated and new laws preferred to it, is utterly vain." (Institutes, IV, XX, 16)

The inclusiveness of the civil law is itself an interesting sidebar in the study of biblical law. As noted above, the civil law is not binding on men and nations now, except as principles of equity, which in turn reveal the justice of God. And yet, for that very reason, we may not simply dismiss it out of hand. This shows a significant difference in emphasis between the Old and New Testament. The Old Testament focuses more on externals (the body, obedience which is outward and visible, discipline by the state to keep the Church in line, etc.), though the internals were very important as well (Deut. 6:8,9). The New Testament, on the other hand, focuses more on internals (the soul, obeying the Lord from the heart, keeping oneself in check, etc.), though externals are not to be missed either (Heb. 8:10). This presents a picture of the Church having 'come of age', as it were, under the new covenant. With the outpouring of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, she has come to an age of greater discretion, and thus more is expected of her, too. This is fully in keeping with child-rearing practices. The young child is disciplined by his parents (spanked, for instance, when he is defiant), so that as a young adult he may have acquired self-discipline (loathing himself for his transgressions, determined to do better than he has), and no longer needs, therefore, as before, the nurture and admonition of his parents. Here, then, is the inclusiveness of the civil law, more outward demand in the Old Testament, more inward demand in the New Testament. The Bible speaks, in fact, of the new covenant Church this way, as a child come of age (Gal. 4), and of discipline as that which "yields the peaceable fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it" (Heb. 12:11). The Church today must still exercise discipline on her members, of course, but the point is that the Church herself is to do this, not the state (1 Cor. 5).

It would be easy to miss the Christ-centeredness of the civil law, but we must not do that. This is the law which speaks (as to its duties) to God's people in every generation of what righteousness is, and of what life will be like with Christ on the new earth where righteousness dwells. It also speaks (regarding its penalties) to the wicked and unbelieving of God's wrath, of His coming judgment, and of how He will by no means clear the guilty. This stands as a warning to government leaders down to our own day. They may have a limited freedom to legislate their own laws, and their citizens are under obligation to God Himself to keep these laws, but still they are responsible to acknowledge the supremacy of God and to maintain the standards of His moral law. Failure here can only result in the most dire and devastating consequences, both for themselves and those whom they are supposed to serve (Ps. 9:17; Ps. 82).

III. THE CEREMONIAL LAW

We come at last to the ceremonial law, to the various rituals which served as types and figures and shadows of the coming Christ. This law was given to the old covenant Church (notice, to Israel as the Church, not as the nation) as a means of prefiguring Christ, His graces, actions, sufferings and benefits. In other words, it helped the saints of the Old Testament to handle things yet unseen, and thus to lay hold of Christ who had still to come, that they might pin all their confidence and hope on Him.

It is surely better to say, not that the ceremonial law has ended, but has been fulfilled in Christ. As with the civil law, so also with the ceremonial law, there are certain aspects of it which continue, and still have something to teach us, even if we no longer engage in those priestly sacrifices or observe those annual feasts. We still have, for instance, the altar (the cross of Calvary); we still have the spotless lamb (the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world); and we still have the priest (our Priest who no longer stands offering sacrifices, but, having offered the one perfect sacrifice, now sits down at the right hand of the Majesty on High). As stated in the Belgic Confession (art. 25), "We believe that the ceremonies and symbols of the law ceased at the coming of Christ, and that all the shadows are accomplished; so that the use of them must be abolished among Christians; yet the truth and substance of them remain with us in Jesus Christ, in whom they have their completion. In the meantime we still use the testimonies taken out of the law and the prophets to confirm us in the doctrine of the gospel, and to regulate our life in all honourableness to the glory of God, according to His will."

May we speak of inclusiveness with regard to the ceremonial law? Indeed, we must. As the Old Testament is more tactile in its emphasis, and the New Testament more spiritual, so the ordinances under the new covenant are fewer, simpler, and exhibit less outward glory than those of the old covenant. Yet the ordinances of both covenants, with the help of the Holy Spirit, are sufficient to confirm to us all the promises of the gospel, and they constrain us to serve God (inwardly, to love Him with all that is within us; outwardly, to present our bodies a living sacrifice unto Him), to the end that we may know Him (Jesus Christ) and know that we have eternal life in Him.

More profoundly than any other law, perhaps, the ceremonial law was Christ-centered and focused on nothing else but Christ and Him crucified. And yet, precisely because it did speak so clearly and boldly of Him who was to come, and of all that He would do, this is the very law we must not go back to now, as if by keeping these same rituals we were still living in the shadows. Let us walk, rather, in the full light of prophecy fulfilled, showing forth Christ's death until He comes again, and believing that He will most certainly appear a second time, not now to make atonement for sins, which He did once, but this time to give the crown of righteousness to all who have looked to Him and longed for His appearing!