

A Simple Paper on Law

Do Christians follow the Law of Moses or the Law of Christ?

Reams of paper have been written on this matter which has confused the Lord's people for centuries. Inevitably the subject becomes complex, especially since the word 'law' is used in several different ways in scripture. For a detailed analysis of this subject, the reader is referred to my book, *The believer's relationship to the Law*. Here I want to simply focus on key issues in a catechism format.

What is the claim of most conservative Reformed people?

It is that the Law of Moses, primarily the 10 Commandments, is the rule of life for believers. Sanctification follows obedience to these laws, helped by the Spirit. The attention of believers is primarily set upon the moral law contained in the Law of Moses.

Why is this?

This is mainly due to the influence of Covenant Theology, which avers that the unifying principle of the scriptures (what unites the OT & NT) is the Covenant of Grace. Since this leads to the conclusion that all earthly covenants are merely the outworking of the single Covenant of Grace, it claims that the Mosaic Law is but an administration of the Covenant of Grace and was not substantially changed by the introduction of the New Covenant, apart from a fuller influence of the Holy Spirit.

Do you agree with this?

No. Covenant is an important Biblical doctrine that must be set within the confines of its use by scripture and not forced into an arbitrary construct of men. There is no Biblical phrase, 'Covenant of Grace', nor of 'Covenant of Redemption' (the foundation of the Covenant of Grace in eternity). Neither is there any Biblical basis for another important aspect of this scheme, the Covenant of Works.

The manifest unifying principle of scripture is the eternal purpose of God, the counsel of God, or the decree of God, which is summarised in the message of the Gospel. The good news of salvation is worked out first as promise in the Old Covenant, then as fulfilment in the New. The cross is a clear dividing line between these. After the cross, everything is said to be new (2 Cor 5:17); comprising a new creation, new covenant, new commandment, new man, etc. and the law is fulfilled, completed and ended in that Old Covenant, Mosaic form by Christ (Rm 10:4).

The chief principle of the Old Covenant is law and the Mosaic Law summarises the Old Covenant. Law is said to be in opposition to the New Covenant brought in by Christ's work (Jn 1:17). The active principle of the New Covenant is not Mosaic Law but the work of the Spirit of Christ (Rm 8:2). Sanctification is no longer by faithful observation of law but obedience and submission to the internal working of the Spirit. This work is based upon the standard of Christ as a man, sometimes called, 'The Law of Christ' (Gal 6:2); Christ himself has replaced the objective law. Thus we are not being changed by following objective regulations but changed by degrees to be like Christ (2 Cor 3:18) For this reason we are dead to law but alive to Christ (Rm 7:4, 6).

Do all Reformed theologians agree with the principles of Covenant (Federal) theology?

No, many throughout church history have not, and even some that were in denominations that theoretically supported Covenant Theology, wrote against it, or stated that the theory needed to be reworked (such as John Murray, EF Kevan). Some Reformed denominations object to parts of it but uphold other aspects (such as the *Protestant Reformed Churches* who deny the Covenant of Works).

Was Calvin a supporter of Covenant Theology?

No, the system was gradually worked out, chiefly by Dutch theologians, in the 150 years after his death. Calvin touched on the germ of the idea but did not teach all the principles of it; though the covenant was an important doctrine to him. Henry Bullinger did more to lay the foundations of it than Calvin did.

Are New Covenant believers ever told to follow the Mosaic Law?

No they are not, but they are repeatedly told that this is dead to them in that objective form.

So, do believers not follow any law at all?

No, this is the sin of antinomianism, or rejecting all forms of law; this is a serious heresy. Many have tried to teach that the law is dead to believers, but failed to see the importance of commandments and the Law of Christ. They often fall into Antinomianism. There is grace in the Old Covenant and commandments in the New Covenant.

Moral law

Believers of all ages are expected to obey the moral law. This is essentially the will of God for man that was revealed to Adam and the patriarchs so that they knew how to worship God and live righteously. Enoch obeyed this law to the degree that God translated him to heaven without dying.

Mosaic Law

The Mosaic Law was later introduced as a temporary measure (Gal 3:24-25) in order to demonstrate the true depths of the sinfulness of man (Rm 3:20) and point out the need for the Messiah/Deliverer, the true Seed of Abraham. The Ten Commandments were the chief summary within the Mosaic Law of the original, eternal moral law of God.

Christ fulfils and completes the Mosaic Law

When Christ came, he was the fulfilment of all that the Mosaic Law pointed to; the man that righteously obeyed God in thought, word and deed. Salvation came through his atonement that, by the baptism of the Spirit (1 Cor 12:13), unites the elect with Christ. This union with Christ makes believers a new creation – they are no longer human. The Mosaic Law was only intended for Adamic men, not new creations in Christ. Christians have thus died to the law; it doesn't touch them as new men (Rm 7:6).

The law for new creations, the new humanity (those with a new nature Gal 6:15), is Christ himself or 'The Law of Christ'. This is worked out in believers through the progressive work of the Holy Spirit. Of course, this standard of righteousness that is Christ incorporates all the moral law of God that has been in evidence since man's creation. Nothing is left out. Thus all the moral principles of the Mosaic Law (i.e. the moral law) are to be evidenced in believers who are submitted to the Spirit.

However, the Law of Christ mediated by the Spirit is far deeper and thorough than the Mosaic Law; inner motivations are judged as well as outward actions. Thus hate as well as murder is condemned; lust as well as fornication (Matt 5:21-22, 27-28, 43-44).

So what is God's standard for Christians?

It is Christ himself (Rm 2:16, 3:21-22 Acts 17:31), the firstborn of a new creation. We are growing up into Christ, to become a mature man in him (Gal 2:19-20; Eph 4:13). We do not follow an external, objective set of regulations, but follow Christ. The Spirit leads us into this truth (Jn 16:13). The external code of laws has been cancelled (Eph 2:15; Col 2:14; Heb 8:13) since it represented the shadow of Christ and not Christ himself (Heb 10:1). It contained helpful features to teach us but could not lead us into the fulness of Christ. The Old Covenant allowed hate of enemies (Ps 101:3, 119:113, 139:21-22) but Christ commands us to love them (Matt 5:43-44). This alone shows the nature of the change between law and grace.

Proof that the standard for man has changed from law to Christ will be the fact that the word of Christ is man's judge at the last day, not the Law of Moses (Jn 5:22, 12:48; Acts 10:42, 17:31; 2 Tim 4:1).

Why did the Mosaic Law fail?

Because its purpose was not to save but to condemn (2 Cor 3:9); it emphasised the sinfulness of sin (Rm 5:20). It was the ministry of death not life (Rm 7:5; 2 Cor 3:7). Something that ministers death and leads to condemnation cannot be the rule for believers to follow.

The believer is under grace not law (Rm 6:14). This means that he walks in the Spirit, the bringer of grace and does not merely follow external regulations but obeys the conviction of the Spirit. The believer also lives by faith (Rm 1:17), and thus does not look to external written features, but trusts in what he doesn't see with his eyes – the Spirit of Christ; the law is not of faith (Gal 3:12; Heb 11:1). The Spirit guides the believer into obeying the commandments of Christ, which fulfil and exceed the Ten Commandments. The Spirit does this by revelation through scripture, education, discipline, fellowship, and suffering.

The Mosaic Law only speaks to the old Adamic nature, which Christians are to consider dead (Rm 6:6, 11; Col 3:9); it condemns sin in it. Christians are to put that nature off and put on the new man in Christ, where law does not reign (Eph 4:22-24). The motivation and ability to perform righteousness is God's Spirit working in us (Phil 2:13). Sanctification is the whole Trinity working for us, not law (Isa 26:12; Heb 13:20-21; 2 Cor 3:5; 2 Thess 1:11, 2:13).

The law cannot speak on many matters of modern life, but the Spirit does. The law does not lead us but the Spirit does (Rm 8:14; Gal 5:18); just as Jesus was led (Matt 4:1; Lk 4:1). Knowing God's will comes not by law but by the spiritual renewing of the mind (Rm 12:2)

How do Reformed teachers avoid the fact that the NT clearly states that the law has been cancelled?

They do this by an arbitrary division of the law into three sections: moral, ceremonial and civil. They then claim that the ceremonial and civil aspects were cancelled but not the moral.

This is utterly unbiblical. There is not the least shred of evidence for this claim. Furthermore, every Jew understood that the law was a whole. The Bible frequently unites ceremonial and civil law within the moral law; many verses have bits of each within them.

In fact, the 10 Commandments are never isolated in scripture as the moral law, but form the essential bedrock of the Old Covenant (Ex 34:28; Deut 4:13), thus they were placed in the Ark as the symbol of the Old Covenant. If the Old Covenant is abolished and replaced by the New, then the 10 Commandments are included in this abrogation and are replaced by the Law of Christ (Gal 3:23-24; Heb 8:7,13, 9:10, 10:9; 2 Cor 3:11-13).

Another method is by claiming that controversial verses in the NT about sanctification are about justification, and thus mean that the law does not justify. It is true that the law was never meant to justify. However, careful examination shows that that the verses usually claimed to be about justification, are really about the Christian walk, and thus are teaching that the law does not sanctify and is not the focus of our walk. For example: Rm 6:14; Gal 5:18.

What are some contrasts between Mosaic Law / Old Covenant and the New Covenant / Gospel?

- The Mosaic Law was temporary; there is now a new and living way (Gal 3:19, 25; Col 2:14; Heb 7:18, 10:9, 10:18-19).
- The Mosaic Law had faults - i.e. it could not change men's hearts (Heb 8:7, Heb 9:9-10). The Gospel gives men a new heart.
- The Mosaic Law is contrasted with the Abrahamic Covenant, which leads to the Gospel in the one seed - Christ (Gal 3:18).
- The Mosaic Law was the shadow to the reality in Christ (Col 2:16-17; Heb 8:4-5, Heb 10:1). We receive Christ himself in the Gospel.
- The New Covenant has a better sacrifice (Heb 9:22-23) and a better hope (Heb 7:19).
- The Mosaic Law / Old Covenant passed away and was cancelled (2 Cor 3:11-13 Eph 2:14-15; Col 2:13-14; Heb 7:18, 8:13).
- The priesthood of the Mosaic Law was Levitical; the priesthood of the New Covenant is of the order of Melchizedek (Ps 110:4; Heb 5:6, 10, 6:20, 7:11, 15, 17, 21). [Notice that there are eight references to this. Eight is the Biblical number of resurrection, new beginnings.]
- The power of the New Covenant is eternal life, the strength of the Mosaic Law was the fleshly command (Heb 7:16).
- The Mosaic Law could not cleanse the conscience, could make nothing perfect, only the blood of Christ in the new Covenant can (Heb 7:19, 10:1).
- The Mosaic Law exposes sin, brings wrath and cannot make alive (Rm 3:20, 4:15, 7:7; Gal 3:19; 1 Tim 1:9). The New Covenant brings life (Gal 3:21, 5:18).
- The Mosaic Law is primarily external (though it seeks to improve motivations), the New Covenant is internal (Heb 8:10, 10:16) and amends behaviour by spiritual power and grace (Jn 1:17; Rm 7:6, 8:2; Gal 5:18). The New Covenant deals with thoughts as well as actions (2 Cor 10:5).
- God now speaks through his Son, not through the Law (Heb 1:1-2).

What is New Covenant Theology?

This is a recent theological development in America that is in formation and is varied amongst its supposed proponents. NCT is not really a new theology, but an interpretation of Biblical doctrine regarding the eternal purpose of God that seeks to be scripturally consistent, avoiding concomitant problems that arise from Federal (Covenant) Theology. Some teach along similar lines to this paper, but others have introduced erroneous elements and founded teaching on wrong exegesis. It is not the purpose of this paper to evaluate this one way or the other. Believers do not need to join a theological movement

but to find the Biblical truth out for themselves. Joining a theological group has inherent dangers, especially if it is in flux.

Is Calvin opposed to the view defended here?

While Calvin is appealed to as a supporter of the traditional Covenant Theology view, and while he emphasised the Ten Commandments as vital in the Christian life, he made many comments that differ from the traditional view, and appeared to be in two minds. For instance:

- As soon as the Law presents itself before us, the curse of God falls upon our heads. [*Four Last Books of Moses*; III:197]
- The perpetuity of the Law is grounded in Christ. [*Acts* II:30]
- Under the Law was shadowed forth only in rude and imperfect lines what is under the Gospel set forth in living colours. [*Hebrews* 222]
- The Law was the grammar of theology, which, after carrying its scholars a short way, handed them over to faith. [*Galatians* 108]
- If the Law is separated from Christ, it is a dead letter; Christ alone gives life. [*Ezekiel* II: 176-177]
- Moses had no other intention than to invite all men to go straight to Christ. [*John* I:217]
- Christ chose to become liable to keep the Law, that exemption from it might obtained for us. [*Galatians* 118-119]

Can we resolve this controversy?

It is likely that there will be no agreement on this matter this side of glory, since the controversy has not been resolved throughout church history, as Jonathan Edwards makes clear. In 1749 he wrote:

There is perhaps no part of divinity attended with so much intricacy, and wherein orthodox divines do so much differ as stating the precise agreement and difference between the two dispensations of Moses and Christ.

‘Inquiry Concerning Qualifications for Communion’; *Works*, Leavitt & Allen (1858), Vol. 1, p160.

Conclusion

The key is to understand that the promise of the Gospel (based on divine decree and fulfilled in Christ), announced most clearly in the OT to Abraham (before the law formally appeared), is the unifying feature of salvation history, not the law. The Mosaic Law (Ten Commandments) heightens our understanding of God’s desire for behaviour and condemns man’s failure to reach it.

After the cross, Christ is the standard of human perfection of behaviour, not a system of written regulations. Through the Gospel believers receive grace to be justified by faith and are definitively sanctified so that they are able to stand holy in heaven as saints; the law has no part in this. On Earth they are progressively sanctified by the work of the Spirit and are made like Christ by degrees. The law has no positive part in this either. However, as with all aspects of the Old Covenant that point to Christ, there is much to be learned by studying the law since it illustrates the person and work of the Messiah.

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