

A response to David Engelsma

Being a critique of a review by David Engelsma of David Gay's book
'Grace not Law'.

Introduction

The context

'Grace, Not Law! The answer to antinomianism', by David H J Gay, Brachus, (2013).

Reviewed by David J Engelsma in 'Protestant Reformed Theological Journal', Volume 48, November 2014, Number 1, p89

The position of this writer

Regarding David Engelsma

I used to hold David Engelsma in great esteem as a consistent Calvinist in a world of corrupt or compromised Calvinists, and I read many of his works. Sadly, I had to severely criticise his cultic ecclesiology expressed in his book called, 'Bound to join', which he never rebutted (even though we had previously corresponded and though he was sent a copy). This was a reflection of cultic practices in his denomination, where ministers had often urged Christians to leave their churches, homes, towns, counties and even countries to join a PRC church, implying that there was safety nowhere else.¹ To this Engelsma added that, if necessary, a man should also leave his wife and family to do so. There is no doubt that this is cultic.

Since then I have been thanked by current and ex-PRC members who confirmed my views, along with many pastors who had long considered the PRC as cultic. One poor man, who had been considering relocating thousands of miles to the PRC church in Northern Ireland, expressed enormous relief and confirmed that my paper was the answer to many hours of fervent prayer. That Engelsma's book put people under such bondage illustrates its deep error. A former leading ally of the PRC left the movement and re-published my paper to scores of people.

I have noted that since this time Engelsma's writings have had much less weight than in the past and he seems to be slipping. This review is no exception.

Regarding David H J Gay

I count David Gay as a friend even though we have never met. We have corresponded and I have even reviewed a draft of one of his pieces before finalisation. However, I do not believe everything that David teaches and differ from him on the Free Offer, though I too publish the Gospel freely and indiscriminately.

Neither am I a signed up member of the New Covenant Theology movement, which is disparate, containing good and bad. However, I do hold a similar view to David on law, grace and the New Covenant; a view I have held since the early 1970s.

¹ They do not say that salvation is only in their denomination, but in practice they come very close.

For the record I am a historic, consistent Calvinist on matters of grace and salvation. On ecclesiology I am independent not Presbyterian. I am not a Charismatic. I am not a mystic. However, the Reformed² are not all in agreement regarding the matter of law and grace after conversion and it is folly to suggest that they are. Yet the Three Forms of Unity (submitted to by Engelsma) would teach that the Mosaic Law, especially the Ten Commandments, are the standard of Christian living. Whether this is Biblical or not is the crux of the matter here.

As both parties have the same forename, I will use surnames to distinguish them in this paper.

General matters

A weak and superficial critique

How are the mighty fallen! Engelsma, who was once a great writer, preacher and debater, has here presented an extremely weak case. I'd go so far as to call it superficial. It is poorly written and not forensic at all, relying on old shibboleths.

In fact, at one point Engelsma is guilty of sheer sophistry. To avoid the Biblical conclusion (pointed out by Gay) that believers are, '**not under the law**', Engelsma says that the Reformed never say that they are (they do), and affirms that Christians are not under the law but must act *according to* the law (p92)!

If this isn't sophistry then I don't know what is.

If a person must act according to a law, then he is under that law. That is just simple English. To suggest that there is a difference is sophistry.³ One is either above the law (like the Queen of England is above British law); or one is outside the law (an outlaw), or one is under the law. [We will later see that in Christ there is a fourth alternative.] If you live according to the law, you are under that law.

In fact, the Bible commands us not to walk according to law but, '**according to the Spirit**' (Rm 8:4). Paul also tells us that salvation is not of the law because, '**the law brings about wrath; therefore it is of faith that it might be according to grace**' (Rm 4:15-16). Salvation is about grace and faith; therefore we do not go to the law after being saved. Salvation is not about the Mosaic Law. How can something that brings about wrath be something that we must follow after conversion?

The NT does not command believers to live according to the law ever. The only time that phrase appears is of unbelievers (e.g. Acts 23:3) or a reference to a Christian's godliness as it appears to Jews (Ananias; Acts 22:12).

The key issue

As with many Reformed writers, Engelsma fails to see that the word 'law' has multiple meanings and must be understood carefully in context. Failing to discriminate between Eternal Moral law, Mosaic Law and the Law of Christ leads to errors in theology.

² Here I include Reformed Baptists and Reformed Congregationalists, as well as Reformed Presbyterians, Dutch or otherwise.

³ The use of fallacious arguments, especially with the intention of deceiving; often by twisting words.

Engelsma's position is that he contends that a Christian is under the Mosaic Law, particularly the Ten Commandments found in the Mosaic Law. He states this openly (e.g. p95).

There is so much wrong with this that a thorough critique would require a whole book.

The newness of the New Covenant

The first problem is that this denies the newness of the New Covenant. The NT goes out of its way to delineate twelve items of newness, such as a New Covenant, a new commandment, a new man, a new creation, a New Jerusalem, and 'all things new'. Failure to understand this results in failure to understand the New Covenant completely.

The Mosaic Law was a shadow

Paul makes this very clear (Col 2:16-17; Heb 8:4-5, 10:1). Christ is the reality of God's purpose and the law was merely a shadow until Christ came as the reality. Why would Christians go to the shadow when they have Christ? Early church believers that sought to do this under the influence of Judaizers were told that they had been bewitched (Gal 3:1).

The Mosaic Covenant was temporary

Engelsma clearly has not read Scriptures, which affirm that the Mosaic Covenant was merely a temporary institution.

For all the prophets and the law prophesied until John. Matt 11:13

The law and the prophets *were* until John. Since that time the kingdom of God has been preached. Lk 16:16

What purpose then *does* the law *serve*? It was added because of transgressions, till⁴ the Seed should come. Gal 3:19

Paul also shows us that the Mosaic Law was ended when Christ came (Rm 10:4).

The law (that is the Mosaic Law operative before the cross) stopped after John the Baptist when Christ came. Paul makes this sure when he states that it only lasted until the Seed should come, which is Christ the Seed of Abraham. Technically, the dispensation of the law finished at the cross, resurrection and ascension of the Lord Jesus Christ. That is why the gift of the Spirit was only poured out on the elect in fullness after these events (Jn 7:39).

How could the Mosaic Law continue when its only purpose was to show that man needed Christ and to point to Christ?⁵

The Mosaic Covenant is gone

Engelsma puts believers under the Old Covenant, which is identified with the Mosaic Covenant in Scripture. But believers are not under the Mosaic Covenant. In fact, the Mosaic Covenant has been cancelled (Heb 8:13). How can believers be under that which God has cancelled?

⁴ **a;cri** *achri* or **a;crij** *achris* meaning: until, unto.

⁵ What about Matt 5:18-19; 'For assuredly, I say to you, till heaven and earth pass away, one jot or one tittle will by no means pass from the law till all is fulfilled. Whoever therefore breaks one of the least of these commandments, and teaches men so, shall be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever does and teaches them, he shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven'. Jesus was the fulfiller of the law. In him the moral law continues as the Law of Christ. Clearly the change to the fourth commandment shows that the Mosaic form of the law changed with Christ. Christ is now the focus and standard of moral behaviour not the Law of Moses.

The Mosaic Covenant was for sinners only

Then again, the Mosaic Law was for sinners and to magnify sin (Rm 3:19-20, 5:20). Why would believers want to put themselves under a 'ministry of death' that magnifies sin and brings despair and wrath (Rm 4:15; 2 Cor 3:7)? Why do teachers tell believers to submit to the reign of something designed to bring wrath, despair, death and the magnification of sin?

Growth in grace

The argument is about what rule believers follow to live a life of repentance following Christ. It is about growth in grace; growth in spiritual life. When a person is converted they are regenerated as a little baby and the rest of their lives they are to grow in grace to become fully mature, as a spiritual man;

Till we all come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a perfect man, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ; that we should no longer be children. Eph 4:13-14

Do believers follow the Ten Commandments to grow in grace and life? No they do not. The apostles never teach this anywhere.

What do believers follow then? They follow the Holy Spirit; the one that sanctifies.

It is the Spirit who gives life; the flesh profits nothing. The words that I speak to you are spirit, and they are life. Jn 6:63

The Law of Moses does not give life; the Ten Commandments do not give life; only the Holy Spirit gives life.

That is why believers must live according to the Spirit.

For those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those *who live* according to the Spirit, the things of the Spirit. For to be carnally minded *is* death, but to be spiritually minded *is* life and peace. Rm 8:5-6

In Romans 8 Paul categorically sets living in the Spirit against following the law. He even states, in very clear terms, that the spiritual believer fulfils the moral law by walking according to the Spirit. This is fulfilling the Law of Christ.

That the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us who do not walk according to the flesh but according to the Spirit. Rm 8:4

Thus ministers of the New Covenant do not teach the letter of the written law but the inner sanctifying ministry of the Spirit who gives life.

[God] who also made us sufficient as ministers of the new covenant, not of the letter but of the Spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life. 2 Cor 3:6

Antinomianism

Engelsma charges Gay with antinomianism; yet Gay specially wrote to condemn such a thing. Since Gay upholds the law of Christ for the believer, how could he be antinomian (without law or opposed to law)? Technically, Engelsma should charge Gay with neonomianism if anything. But since the law appealed to by Gay is the Law of Christ, he is entirely Biblical to do so.

What Gay is against, if I understand him correctly, is the use of the Mosaic Law as the standard of a believer's life. Engelsma affirms that the Mosaic Law is this standard because he appeals to the Ten Commandments as the rule.

Yet the Ten Commandments cannot be the rule because they contain a law which all Reformed believers disobey. They constantly break the fourth law, that of the Saturday Sabbath.

Now you cannot make a case from the NT that Sunday is a 'Sabbath'. The NT clearly teaches that the Sabbath is the rest of God which New Covenant believers enter into spiritually (Heb c.3-4). Nowhere does the NT tell us that the saints met on a material Sabbath after the church became properly instituted; in fact it calls the day of meeting, 'The Lord's Day'.

There were two reasons for this. The first is that the change in the day of worship and gathering was to celebrate the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, the central tenet of the Christian faith. Gathering on the eighth day of the week (i.e. the first of a new week or the day of resurrection) was entirely appropriate. The second was to show the disconnection with the Old Covenant. The Ten Commandments and the Mosaic Covenant could not be transferred to the New Covenant. Since no one can take away from God's word, no one can suddenly make the Ten Commandments the Nine Commandments.

The New Covenant emphasises that the Old Covenant, in all its forms is dead. What counts is only what is of Christ.

The Moral Law

The Mosaic Law is a single unit embedded in the Old Covenant, which Israel said it would obey and failed. It is impossible (as the Reformed has constantly done) to split the Mosaic Law into three parts (civil, moral, and ceremonial). The law itself never does this and who has the right to split bits of verses up? Often the three parts are involved within a single verse.

The Mosaic Law had moral sanctity because it was a temporary written expression of the eternal Moral Law as the duty of man, which had been known for centuries. Abraham, Isaac and Jacob never needed the Ten Commandments, as they only appeared 430 years after the promise to Abraham.

The sinners in the flood died according to the Moral Law of God. They knew that law, promulgated since it was taught to Adam, and died because they disobeyed it. The Mosaic Law was merely a temporary written form of the Moral Law specifically for Israel and no one else. Moses, the psalmists and the prophets told Israel this (Deut 4:7-8, 14, 32-34; Ps 147:19-20; Amos 3:2). The NT confirms it (Rm 3:1-2; Eph 2:12). The Mosaic Law (including the Ten Commandments) was not universal; the eternal Moral Law was. The law of the Sabbath was included in the Ten Commandments to show that this covenant was for Israel alone.

Sinners today who have no knowledge of the Mosaic Law will be judged by the eternal Moral Law which God has placed knowledge of the works of in man's heart.

The New Covenant also has embedded within it the Moral Law of God. The teaching of the NT is an exposition of this moral law, which is opened up far more than the expression in the Old Covenant. Inner attitudes are judged more severely, and exposed more fully, in the NT expression of the Moral Law than in the Mosaic Law.

People who obey the New Covenant are not antinomian, they follow God's eternal Moral Law because it is the teaching of Christ as expressed in apostolic doctrine. They are not without law, but they are without the Mosaic Law.

Christ - the New Man and the Spirit

The big difference between the Mosaic Law and the New Covenant is a question of power. The Mosaic Law had no power to enable men to live righteously. But amazingly, the New Covenant brings power to the believer through the Spirit working in the new man. This should inspire worship in all believers. The New Covenant not only shows what is required, but, in Christ, gives power to put on the new man and live righteously.

Look to Christ not the law

The objective that the believer must concentrate upon is a clue to whether the Mosaic Law is the standard of Christian living. Never are believers told to look to the law but they are constantly told to be 'looking unto Jesus' (Heb 12:2; 2 Tim 4:8; Titus 2:13; Jude 1:21).

The focus of the Christian life is not the Mosaic Law but Christ.

That in all things He may have the pre-eminence. Col 1:18

Engelsma comes close to committing sin when he disparages Gay for suggesting that people look to Christ. He dismisses this as mere emotionalism (p95). This is a disgrace.

Right at the beginning of Christ's ministry, as recorded by John, the symbolism of the Cana miracle is a visual illustration of what John has just said about the ministry of the Logos on earth – 'the law was given through Moses, but grace and truth came through Jesus Christ', (Jn 1:17). The jars of purification water (used for ritual washing of hands) refer to the Mosaic Law, which could only ever be external. The new wine that comes by a spiritual miracle is internal and brings healing and gladness. The Mosaic Law does not bring grace; only Christ brings grace. Thus the growth in grace of the believer cannot be by Mosaic Law (which does not impart grace) but has to be by the Spirit of Christ. The law is not the standard of Christian living.

The believer is in Christ

I mentioned earlier that there is a fourth alternative regarding law. The apostle Paul tells us that we are in-lawed to Christ (1 Cor 9:20-21⁶). This is never brought out in the English translations but it is there in the Greek.⁷ We are not under law (under the domination and penalty of law) but are in-lawed in Christ.

What this means is that when believers were made a New Creation, at the baptism in the Spirit and united with Christ, they were in-lawed to the law of God. By being in Christ a believer is 'in-law'. He is not outside the law, he is not above the law, he is not under the

⁶ 'To the Jews I became as a Jew, that I might win Jews; to those who are under the law, as under the law, that I might win those who are under the law; to those who are without law, as without law (not being without law toward God, but under law toward Christ), that I might win those who are without law.'

⁷ Robertson's Word Pictures: '1Co 9:21 - To them that are without law (toij anomoj). The heathen, those outside the Mosaic law (Ro 2:14), not lawless (Lu 22:37; Ac 2:23; 1Ti 1:9). See how Paul bore himself with the pagans (Ac 14:15; 17:23; 24:25), and how he quoted heathen poets. "Not being an outlaw of God, but an inlaw of Christ" (Evans, Estius has it *exlex, inlex*, mh wn anomoj qeou(allV ennomoj Cristou). The genitive case of qeou and Cristou (specifying case) comes out better thus, for it seems unusual with anomoj and ennomoj, both old and regular adjectives.'

law, he is 'in-law'. By walking in the Spirit, by abiding in Christ, by putting on the new man, the believer fulfils the moral law of God. The believer abiding in Christ obeys the law.

Thus the believer does not look to the law but looks to Christ. The believer does not rely upon the Mosaic Law (which has no power) but relies upon the power of the Spirit in the New Man. As he walks in the Spirit he fulfils the law by the power of God.

Thus Paul constantly commands us to put on the new man. He does not command us to obey the Mosaic Law, in fact he tells us that we are dead to it because it only applies to the old man not the new man, but tells us to put on Christ.

Failing to understand this puts a Christian into an appalling and weak condition with no spiritual power. This is why many Reformed churches have such little life. They are legalist tombs following the Mosaic Law instead of vibrant places of innumerable, inexpressible joy in Christ (1 Pt 1:8⁸).

Concise analysis of Engelsma's review

Introduction

His introduction is irrelevant, being reminiscences of things that have nothing to do with the topic of Gay's book.

'An Antinomian book'

His next section, on charging Gay with antinomianism, centres on the "*third use of the law*", that is, *the use of the law as teaching the standard or rule of the thankful Christian life*'. First note that, by any measurement, the law as a 'rule of the Christian life' implies obedience to or being under the law; something Engelsma later denies. Hence his position is contradictory.

Engelsma gives no NT support for this historic Reformed claim that the law is the rule of the Christian life – because there is none. Indeed, the believer is told to put on Christ, put on the new man, put on the armour of God (which is Christ), abide in Christ, walk in the Spirit, be filled with the Spirit, and so on. The NT does not send believers in Christ to the law for sanctification but to the Spirit of Christ.

Paul commends people to the word of God's grace for sanctification (Acts 20:32); which John tells us has nothing to do with the law (Jn 1:17). Peter tells us that sanctification is of the Spirit not the law (1 Pt 1:2). Nowhere does the NT command believers to look to the law for sanctification.

Engelsma also fails to do justice to Gay's claim to oppose antinomianism; which indeed is set within the book's title. Engelsma does this by utterly failing to understand that Gay's charge to centre on Christ also includes within it a walking in the Moral Law of God. He who walks in the Spirit will obey God's law. Engelsma doesn't understand this. Instead he charges Gay with deception on this matter (p90). Thus when Gay exhorts believers to look to Christ and to preach Christ, Engelsma claims that this is a deception. This is a very serious charge which, if false, is bearing false witness, which will have hazardous ramifications for Engelsma.

⁸ 'Whom having not seen you love. Though now you do not see *Him*, yet believing, you rejoice with joy inexpressible and full of glory.'

Engelsma's constant mistake in this section is to confuse Gay's cancelling of the Mosaic Law with a supposed cancelling of any sort of law at all. This is deliberately ignoring Gay's urging to follow the law of Christ; an apostolic exhortation (Gal 6:2).

'What Antinomianism truly is'

Gay is again repeatedly accused of deception in this section (p90) and also of being a '*raging antinomian*' and a heretic.

Engelsma denies Gay's definition of antinomianism as not having any law to govern him by saying that it rather means a rejection of the Ten Commandments as the rule of the Christian life. This is a narrow definition. The very word 'antinomianism' means 'against law' and most theological dictionaries define it in at least two ways, one of which is being against all law. So this is a false charge by Engelsma.

By the way, if Engelsma is correct, then all Reformed believers are sinning week by week by failing to obey the fourth commandment.⁹

Engelsma is also being duplicitous since he elsewhere notes that Gay exhorts believers to obey Christ's law, which obviously includes the Ten Commandments but with a change to the fourth being the rest of God.

Engelsma needs to show where '*the Christian is commanded by God to obey the Ten Commandments*' (p91). There is no such text. Israelites were commanded to obey them, not Christians. Israelites were also commanded in this same covenant to kill bulls, goats and sheep, not eat pork, not mix cloths and to stone rebels. You cannot omit the parts of the Mosaic Covenant that you don't like and keep the bits you do. They are a cohesive whole.

'Under the law'

Here (p92) he argues that, '*being under the law is not the same as according to law*'; which we have already covered. It is sophistry.

Engelsma, with the Reformed in general, believes that '*To be under the law, as the Bible teaches being under the law, is to be required to keep the law for righteousness with God*' (p92). But the Bible does not teach that this was God's purpose in giving the law. The demand was to 'do this and live', but the purpose was to show that no man can do this and live; the purpose was to magnify sin and show the need of a deliverer, of grace. The divine objective was to foster faith in a heavenly deliverer because man could not achieve righteousness. The Mosaic Law cannot save.

Thus the Reformed, in general, say that the Old Covenant was to obey the (Mosaic) law for justification and this is cancelled, but the New Covenant says to obey the law for sanctification. But being under the law is being under it to seek justification [*'keep the law for righteousness with God'*] **and failing and thus being condemned**. The general Reformed view is not Biblical theology; the Mosaic Law could never justify. The Bible does not teach that being under the law was ever a means of justification but was a demonstration of failure and condemnation. There is no such thing as a covenant of works that had a viable prospect of salvation; not even in pre-fall Adam. Righteousness is only every achieved through faith in Christ, whether under the Old Covenant or the New Covenant.

⁹ The logical repercussion of Engelsma's demand to follow the Ten Commandments is that there is no defence to Seventh Day Adventists.

‘Law and sanctification’

In this section he discusses Gay’s claim that the Reformed seek sanctification by works of the law after being justified by faith (p92-93).

Engelsma claims that grace liberates, *‘the believer from the power of sin in order that the believer can and will now obey the Ten Commandments of the law of God’* (p93). There is truth in this but it does not go far enough to be apostolic doctrine; it is a facile statement.

The position above implies that with the dominion of sin gone, the believer ‘will’ obey the law of God. But experience shows us that this is just not true. The NT shows us that this is not true. Believers sin, and often sin seriously.

Grace has put us into the position of being able to choose. The Christian now has two natures, the old and the new, and must choose daily which to put on. This is the fight of faith and this is where we must defeat temptation on a daily basis. The power in obeying God’s law is not in us as a redeemed people, but in the Spirit. If we are filled with the Spirit we will be sanctified and choose correctly; if we ignore the Spirit we will fail, despite being justified by faith.

The believer who looks to Christ, who puts on the new man, who lives by faith and who trusts in the Spirit, will automatically live according to the Moral Law of God. He will obey the commandments of Christ and will follow the law of Christ. The Mosaic Law, the Ten Commandments, have nothing to do with this. However, as the believer walks in the Spirit he will obey all God’s laws, including all the moral laws implied in the Ten Commandments.

Those who just look to the Ten Commandments as a redeemed person will not obey all God’s law. Indeed, the Ten Commandments go nowhere near as far as the commandments of Christ which reach to the inner motivations of man and demand things far above the Mosaic Law (such as loving one’s enemies).

‘The lawlessness of Antinomianism’

Engelsma here suggests that Gay’s position gives no reason to live, *‘thankfully to God his Saviour’*. This is a grave slander; Gay demonstrates such thankfulness in his writings.

Engelsma then goes on to say that Antinomianism results in immoral behaviour (p94). Curious this, as he earlier criticised Gay for saying this in his definition (p91, column 2). What can we say when a man contradicts himself within four pages!

Oddly, Engelsma castigates Gay for exhorting people to live as Jesus lived, deriding this as mere emotionalism (p95). Indeed he says that this stance is, *‘useless and destructive of the Christian life’* (p95). He then adopts straw man arguments to attribute to Gay things he would not condone in an unrighteous specious manner. Then he uses literalistic arguments (e.g. spending 40 days and nights in a desert) when he knows that Gay means following the mores of Jesus not his actions.

When answering the questions about what are we to do to please God, Engelsma uses an OT quotation from Isaiah, *‘to the law and to the testimony’*, failing to use a NT quotation, such as *‘looking unto him’*. However, even Isaiah tells us to look to the testimony – which for us is Christ and all he said. Gay is following such advice. Isaiah could not expound apostolic teaching on grace because he longed to see that which only came with the incarnation and atonement of Christ. This is a cheap trick by Engelsma.

Conclusion

Engelsma utterly fails to give an apostolic argument in his review and ends up with human legalism, following external regulations that the NT says have been rescinded. Sanctification is not an external matter, it is walking in the Spirit so that we walk in Christ and bear the fruit of the Spirit, which is the character of Christ.

Gay sought to explain this to encourage believers in their walk with God so that they could be fruitful and not live wasted, fleshly lives. Engelsma failed to understand Gay's arguments (or mine) and thus relies on straw men and shibboleths to erect a house built on sand.

Worse than that he used very strong language in vilifying Gay. I believe that Engelsma owes Gay a public apology. Failure to do this will necessarily lead to having to give an account to God on the Last Day for damaging a brother.

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