

The First Commandment

Chapter 1: Is God's Law Still Binding?

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A biblical understanding of the law of God is crucial if people are going to have a right understanding of doctrine and Christian living (e.g., one's views of God, sin, grace, justification, sanctification, the family and society are all affected by one's understanding of biblical law). In the present generation there is an appalling, widespread ignorance of God's law, a hatred and rejection of biblical law and many heretical (antinomian) views of the law taught in professing Christian churches. The only way to reverse this present trend (which has been a disaster for many churches and society at large) is to examine the validity, meaning and purpose of God's law. In this study we will consider various topics related to the law, then we will examine the Ten Commandments which are a summary of the whole moral law of God.

One of the most dangerous false doctrines to plague "Bible-believing" churches in the modern era is antinomianism. This modern form is usually the old dispensational idea that believers are set free from God's law not only as a means of justification, a legal sentence of death and the curse of the law, but also as a rule for life, a guide to holy living and sanctification. As a modern hymn caricature says: "Free from the law O happy condition. I can sin as I please and still have remission." It is argued that the Old Testament (from Moses onward) is the dispensation of law and the New Testament is the dispensation of grace. The Jews had to keep the law, but (we are told) Christians do not. In order to understand and refute this popular error let us briefly examine and refute the typical antinomian arguments.

One argument is based on a misunderstanding of Paul's statement that believers "have become dead to the law" (Rom. 7:4; cf. Gal. 2:19). When the apostle uses the metaphor of death in relation to the law he never means that Christians are somehow no longer obligated to obey God's moral commandments. Such a thought is absurd given the fact that: (a) Paul endorses God's law by saying: "Therefore the law is holy, and the commandment holy and just and good" (Rom. 7:12); (b) Paul repeatedly appeals to God's law to teach biblical ethics to believers (e.g., Rom. 13:9-10; 1 Cor. 5:9 ff.; 6:9; 9:9; Gal. 5:19ff; Col. 3:9; 1 Tim. 5:18; etc.). (c) The apostle teaches that the law is universal in its application to all men, not just the Jews (e.g., Rom. 3:19). The phrase "dead to the law" means that the believer is no longer under the legal indictment—the curse and penalty of the law (cf., Gal. 3:10, 13). Also, the believer is not obligated to perpetually and perfectly obey every jot and tittle of the law to be justified before God (cf. Lk. 10:28; Rom. 2:13; Gal. 3:12) as the Pharisees falsely taught. Jesus Christ by His perfect obedience to the law and His sacrificial death removes the guilt and penalty of sin and merits eternal life for the believing sinner.

Another argument is based on a misinterpretation of Paul's statement that Christians "are not under law but under grace" (Rom. 6:14). When the apostle tells the Roman believers they are not under law but under grace, he is not tossing aside God's moral law as a guide to holy living. Instead, he is condemning the Jewish error common in his day that people can be saved and sanctified by keeping the law. Paul is teaching that the only way that a person can have the power or dominion of sin broken in a person's life is through grace. That is, by virtue of being united to Christ in His life, death and resurrection (cf. Rom. 7:4-6; Gal. 3:20) a person is

regenerated by the Holy Spirit, given a new heart (Ez. 18:31; 1 Jn. 3:9) and progressively enabled to obey God's law (although imperfectly in this life, cf. 1 Jn. 1:8). Jesus' perfect work of redemption not only justifies the believing sinner in God's court (Rom. 3:24, 28, 30; Gal. 2:16) thereby eliminating the curse of the law (Gal. 3:10, 13), but it also gives the believer victory or power over the inward pollution of sin. Christ is our sanctification (1 Cor. 1:30). "The purpose of Christ's atoning work was to restore man to a position of covenant keeping instead of covenant breaking, to enable man to keep the law by freeing 'from the law of sin and death' (Rom. 8:2), 'that the righteousness of the law might be fulfilled in us' (Rom. 8:4)."¹ Given this truth regarding the comprehensive nature of salvation Paul can say, "Do we then make void the law through faith? Certainly not! On the contrary, we establish the law" (Rom. 3:31). "The law is good if one uses it lawfully" (1 Tim. 1:8). Demar writes: "Our love for Jesus is expressed in terms of law-keeping. Jesus said, 'If you love Me, you will keep My commandments' (John 14:15). Are Jesus' commandments different from those of His Father? No. He came to do the same (Matthew 6:10; 7:21; Luke 22:42; John 4:34). Keeping God's law is God's will."²

A passage that is often appealed to as a proof text that Jesus came to do away with God's law is Matthew 5:17, "Do not think that I came to destroy the Law or the Prophets. I did not come to destroy but to fulfill." This passage is interpreted as teaching that Jesus came to bring an end to the law. There are a number of reasons why such a view must be rejected. First, that interpretation which has Jesus in essence saying, "Don't worry, I did not come to abolish the law, I came rather to eliminate it or bring it to an end" is absurd. Our Lord would not comfort Jewish ears with such contradictory nonsense. Second, the immediate context (vs. 18-19) indicates the perpetuity of the moral law. Disciples in Jesus' kingdom had better teach and obey "these commandments" (v. 19). Third, the broader context (vs. 21-48) exhibits Christ as a champion of the moral law over against the legalism (i.e., the human traditions) of the Pharisees. "God has never repealed a single provision of the moral law. Christ Himself declared that his mission was not to set aside any of its enactments but to fulfill them. And long after Christ's ascension the apostles repeated in various forms the precepts of the decalogue as in full force. This law is unrepealed and unrepealable."³

Another proof text used to argue for the abrogation of the law is Galatians 3:23-25, "But before faith came, we were kept under guard by the law, kept for the faith which would afterward be revealed. Therefore the law was our tutor to bring us to Christ, that we might be justified by faith. But after faith has come, we are no longer under a tutor." What does Paul mean when he says that we are no longer under a tutor? Does he mean that the whole Old Testament law has been annulled by Christ? A careful examination of the book of Galatians reveals that the word tutor refers to the ceremonial law, to the types and shadows of the old covenant administration. There are a number of reasons for this assertion. First, the broad context of the passage indicates that Paul is refuting the Judaizers' doctrine that Gentiles are obligated to keep the whole system of the Mosaic ceremonial laws in order to be a Christian. In the book of Galatians Paul deals with two serious and related doctrinal errors. One is salvation through Christ *and* human merit (keeping the law). The other is that Gentiles must become Jews in order

¹Rousas John Rushdoony, *The Institutes of Biblical Law* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1977 [73]), p. 3.

²Gary North and Gary Demar, *Christian Reconstruction: What It Is, What It Isn't* (Tyler, TX: Institute for Christian Economics, 1991), p. 102.

³William S. Plumer, *The Law of God as Contained in the Ten Commandment, Explained and Enforced* (Harrisburg, VA: Sprinkle Publications, 1996 [1864]), p. 29.

to be Christians. Paul rebukes the Galatians for turning to the weak and beggarly elements (4:9); for observing Jewish holy days (4:10); and warns them by strongly condemning circumcision (5:22ff.). Note, the apostle is focusing upon what is distinctive to the Mosaic administration. This interpretation is supported by Paul's illustration of Mount Sinai which gives birth to bondage (Hagar) and corresponds to the earthly Jerusalem (cf. Gal. 4:24-28). The Jews were still in bondage to the ceremonial law and their heretical notions of salvation by human merit. Christians, however, belong to the heavenly Jerusalem which is free.

Second, the immediate context also points to what was distinctive to the Mosaic economy. Immediately after saying that "after faith [i.e., Christianity] has come, we are no longer under a tutor," Paul says "For you are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus. For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek...for you are all one in Christ Jesus. And if you are Christ's then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise" (Gal. 3:26-29). What separated Jews and Gentiles in the Old Covenant--the ceremonial law, "the middle wall of separation" [Eph. 2:14; cf. 2:11-22]--has been abolished in Christ. There is now one church, one body, one covenant people, all of which are true Jews by faith in Jesus (Gal. 3:29; cf. Eph. 4:4).

Third, the idea that Paul was teaching the abrogation of the whole Old Testament law including the moral law is rendered impossible by the fact that in the book of Galatians itself, the apostle appeals to the Old Testament moral law. He approvingly quotes Leviticus 19:18, "For all the law is fulfilled in one word, even in this: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself'" (Gal. 5:14). He then discusses a number of sins that are all violations of the Old Testament moral law (cf. Gal. 5:19-21). But doesn't Paul say in Galatians 5:18 that, "if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law?" Yes, he does. However, "In Galatians 5:16-18, the contrast is between the way of 'the flesh,' fallen, unaided human nature, and the way of 'the Spirit,' the redeemed and aided new man. The law is associated in this context with 'the flesh,' so that the reference is again clearly to misuse the law as a way of justification."⁴

Another common argument against the continuing validity of the law is that the law was given to Israel and therefore was only meant for the Jewish nation, not the Gentiles. While it is true that there are parts of the law that only applied to the covenant people (e.g., the ceremonial laws and various aspects of the judicial laws [boundaries, political system, laws protecting blood lines--Levirate marriage; etc.]), the Bible clearly teaches that the moral law was and is binding on all nations. In Deuteronomy 4:5-8 Israel is commanded to carefully observe God's law in order to be an example to the pagan nations around them. Such godly behavior would cause the surrounding nations to acknowledge the wisdom of Israel, Israel's close relationship to Jehovah and the superiority of God's law. The Gentiles would say, "And what great nation is there that has such statutes and righteous judgments as are in all this law which I set before you this day?" (Dt. 4:8). This section of Scripture presupposes that the moral laws given to Israel (the "righteous judgments" vs. 8) apply to every nation and peoples of the whole world.

In the Old Testament God repeatedly judges nations for violating His moral law. "When you come into the land which the LORD your God is giving you, you shall not learn to follow the abominations of those nations. There shall not be found among you anyone who makes his son or his daughter pass through the fire, or one who practices witchcraft, or a soothsayer, or one who interprets omens, or a sorcerer, or one who conjures spells, or a medium, or a spiritist, or one who calls up the dead. For all who do these things are an abomination to the LORD, and because of these abominations the LORD your God drives them out from before you" (Dt. 18:9-

⁴R. J. Rushdoony, *Institutes*, p. 738.

12; cf. Dt. 20:17-18; Is. 10:5-11; 19:1; 46:1; Jer. 46:25; 48:35; 50:1, 2, 38; 51:17, 18, 47, 52, etc.). Note also, how Paul argues that all men (even those without written revelation) are under God's law. "For when Gentiles, who do not have the law, by nature do the things in the law, these, although not having the law...who show the work of the law written in their hearts" (Rom. 2:14-15). "Now we know that whatever the law says, it says to those who are under the law, that every mouth may be stopped, and all the world may become guilty before God" (Rom. 3:19).

The binding nature of the Old Testament moral law is taught throughout the New Testament (as noted above—cf. Mt. 5:17ff.; Rom. 2:14-15; 3:19, etc.). Bahnsen writes, "He [Paul] applied God's law to judges (Acts 23:3; cf. Leviticus 19:15). He endorsed God's prohibition of reviling rulers (Acts 23:5; cf. Exodus 22:28). In dealing with social relationships and conditions he appealed to the Mosaic case laws regarding incest (1 Corinthians 5:1; cf. Leviticus 18:8), homosexuality (Romans 1:27, 32; cf. Leviticus 20:13), and fair treatment of slaves (Colossians 4:1; cf. Leviticus 25:43, 53). He endorsed the use of God's law to curb social crimes like killing one's parents, kidnapping, homosexuality, perjury, etc. (1 Timothy 1:8-10). He expected the civil sanctions of God's law to be applied (Acts 25:11), teaching that civil magistrates must pursue their offices as "ministers of God" (Romans 13:1-4). He indicted the emperor for his 'lawlessness' (2 Thessalonians 2:8)."⁵

The leaven of dispensational theology has had many devastatingly negative effects on professing Bible-believing churches throughout the twentieth century. The church's prophetic role as a shining light (Mt. 5:14) and preserving salt (Mt. 13) to society and culture has largely been negated by a theology which denies God's law, its voice in the public square. Without the needed emphasis on God's law as a crucial aspect of a Christian social order, secular humanists, relativists and statists have filled the void. Churches in many ways are directly responsible for the widespread lawlessness of modern American culture. Churches that do not preach the law of God have as a result perverted both the gospel and the doctrine of sanctification. The Reformed emphasis on the doctrine of justification (which is a forensic [i.e., legal-law related] act) has been replaced by a personal subjective experience, "ask Jesus to come and live in your heart." The necessity of sanctification is often denied today; that is, the biblical requirement for Christians to lead a holy life is considered optional or only for believers who decide to make Christ Lord of their life (i.e., the carnal Christian heresy). The persistent antinomianism of modern evangelicalism is demonstrated by the fact that statistically the rates of adultery, fornication, divorce, theft, etc. among professing Christians in America is virtually identical to the surrounding pagan population. Churches that despise God's law are impotent, salt-less and lukewarm. They commit unconditional surrender by neglecting the tools of dominion that God has given them and set themselves up for persecution by handing society over to their enemies.

The Necessity of Biblical Law

In order to emphasize the necessity of biblical law for all areas of life (the family, business, the church and the state) one must recognize the fact that all law is inescapably religious. Once Christians understand this fact, they will no longer accept humanistic law presented under the guise of neutrality, freedom and fairness. Many American Christians have bought into two popular (yet thoroughly unscriptural) concepts of law. One says that a person should not legislate morality. The other states that a nation must remain neutral with respect to

⁵Greg L. Bahnsen, *No Other Standard: Theonomy and Its Critics* (Tyler, TX: The Institute for Christian Economics, 1991), p. 159.

religion when making civil laws. The thinking behind such slogans is that since America is a large nation composed of hundreds of religions, the path toward “liberty for all” involves keeping all religious beliefs out of civil affairs. The state must be totally “secular” in its foundation and outlook.

There are a number of things to note regarding these unbiblical conceptions of law. First, the idea that a civil law can exist that is not based on morality and religion of some type is a myth. Rushdoony writes: “The statement, ‘You can’t legislate morality,’ is a dangerous half-truth and even a lie, because *all* legislation is concerned with morality. Every law on the statute books of every civil government is either an example of enacted morality or it is procedural thereto. Our laws are all moral laws, representing a system of morality. Laws against manslaughter and murder are moral laws; they echo the commandment, ‘Thou shalt not kill.’ Laws against theft are commandments against stealing. Slander and libel laws, perjury laws, enact the moral requirement, ‘Thou shalt not bear false witness.’ Traffic laws are moral laws also: their purpose is to protect life and property; again, they reflect the Ten Commandments. Laws concerning police and court procedures have a moral purpose also, to further justice and to protect law and order. Every law on the statute books is concerned with morality or with the procedures for the enforcement of law, and all law is concerned with morality. We may disagree with the morality of a law, but we cannot deny the moral concern of law. Law is concerned with right and wrong; it punishes and restrains evil and protects the good, and this is exactly what morality is about. It is impossible to have law without having morality behind that law, because all law is simply enacted morality.”⁶ This point does not mean that man can be saved through law or that laws can change people internally making them moral. It simply makes clear what should be obvious to all, that all laws are a reflection of what people consider right or wrong (ethics) and what people consider to be right or wrong is based on a particular world and life view (religion). (A person’s world-view is equivalent to his or her religion because it deals with an ultimate view of reality or an interpretation of the meaning of life).

Second, these unbiblical conceptions of law are rooted in the myth of neutrality. Does the Bible teach that man can somehow transcend himself, his environment and his own presuppositions regarding reality to autonomously discover truth and ethics in the universe? No. Man is a sinful creature who is dependent on God at every single point. While it is true that man is created in the image of God, lives in a God-created and conditional environment, is exposed to natural revelation at every moment and has a knowledge of God (Rom. 1:19ff.) and His law (Rom. 2:14-15), the Bible teaches that this knowledge is continually suppressed in unrighteousness (Rom. 1:18). Natural revelation is enough to condemn man. However, it cannot be used in an autonomous manner to develop a consistent and thorough biblical system of justice. It was never intended by God to be used apart from special revelation. The Bible unequivocally condemns the idea of neutrality in favor of a total allegiance to Jesus Christ and His law word. “The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge” (Pr. 1:7). Believers are told to bring “every thought into captivity to the obedience of Christ” (2 Cor. 10:5). If Jesus is to direct every thought, why and how can this exclude laws directed to families and society? The only way that nations can have real justice is to “kiss the Son” (Ps. 2:12) and become disciples of *all* that He has commanded (Mt. 28:20). Unbelievers who walk in the futility of their mind, who have a darkened understanding (Eph. 4:17-18); who have futile thoughts and foolish darkened hearts (Rom. 1:21) obviously cannot develop a just body of laws apart from thinking God’s thoughts after Him. God’s special revelation is the only place mankind can find a truly just,

⁶Rousas John Rushdoony, *Law and Liberty* (Vallejo, CA: Ross House Books, 1984 [1967]), pp. 1-2.

infallible, reliable, non-arbitrary law-system. “In Your light we see light” (Ps. 36:9). “The commandment is a lamp, and the law a light” (Pr. 6:23). One cannot serve two masters (Mt. 6:24). It is impossible to simultaneously adhere to biblical law (the law of Christ) and heathen law-systems. Although there may be surface points of agreement between a Christian law order and a pagan system (e.g., murder is wrong) at bottom each is fundamentally different for one stands upon the bedrock of Scripture while the other flows from rebellious, sinful human autonomy. “Whoever therefore wants to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God” (Jas. 4:4).

Modern professing Christians who have adopted a position of “neutrality” with regard to civil laws and affairs have themselves adopted a position that is really not neutral at all. They unwittingly have endorsed a position that is hostile to a Christian law order. The results have been predictable. First, society adheres to a quasi-Christian form of natural law. Direct revelation is viewed as an embarrassment to intellectuals and much too specific for civil magistrates. As a result an appeal is made to general revelation, which in a post fall world is vague and malleable. Society at this time is directed in a general manner by the Christian world-view. Second, natural law theory is co-opted by anti-Christian secularists. Men appeal to natural law as something objective, but the transcendent, the supernatural and the divine are rejected for an immanent natural order. The personal God of the Bible and His special revelation are left out of the picture. At this point men pretend to be objective; however, it is their autonomous minds, apart from God’s word, that determine what is true and right. Third, there is a shift among intellectuals toward evolutionary thinking. Law is then considered as something that is non-objective and always changing. This last stage leads directly to legal positivism, pragmatism and secular humanism. Law is simply whatever society says it is. This view says that there are no ethical absolutes.

When Christians accept neutrality (e.g., any non-biblically defined version of natural law) in the civil sphere they sign a peace treaty with those at war with Christ and His people. They open the gates for the Trojan horse of secular humanism and its fruits (statism, abortion on demand, sodomite rights, anti-Christian legislation, etc.). Because law is inescapably religious, believers who adopt a portion of neutrality enable their enemies to disestablish the Christian law order (e.g., as seen in the puritan and colonial eras) and replace it with a godless humanism. “Christian scholars have endlessly asserted the existence of neutral, ‘natural’ laws that can serve as the church’s earthly hope of the ages, an agreeable middle way that will mitigate the conflict in history between the kingdom of God and the kingdom of man. The winner of such a naive quest will always be the kingdom of man. Theoretical neutrality means man’s operational autonomy: men do not have to consider what God requires or threatens in history.”⁷

Third, given the fact that neutrality is impossible, all law systems are founded on a particular world-view or faith commitment. As Rushdoony has pointed out, “It must be recognized that in any culture *the source of law is the god of that society.*”⁸ In a society where laws are determined by majority vote and/or public opinion, one could say that mankind (or a majority of the populace) is the god of that society. In an Islamic society the Koran or the false god taught by Mohammed (or perhaps Mohammed himself) is the god of that society. There are Buddhist, Shinto, Hindu and even animist law orders. This fact does not mean that in the modern world cultures do not pragmatically borrow laws and rules from other cultures; they often do.

⁷Gary North, *Political Polytheism: The Myth of Pluralism* (Tyler, TX: The Institute of Christian Economics, 1989), p. 640.

⁸Rousas John Rushdoony, *The Institutes of Biblical Law*, p. 4.

(e.g., In the nineteenth century Japan, which had a Shinto religious base and an emperor cult, borrowed laws and procedures from the west as a path to power, economically and militarily.) However, it does give us insight regarding any society. One can examine the laws of a particular culture and ask: “Why is it wrong to discriminate against homosexuals?” or even, “Why does your culture outlaw murder?” If one responds, “Well, it is against the law;” then one should ask, “Yes, but *why* is it against the law? Why does your society say that it is wrong (i.e., unethical) to commit murder, or discriminate against sodomites or disallow infanticide (i.e., partial birth abortion).” If one drives the argument, the reasoning, back to its original starting point, then one can discover the faith commitment or presupposition regarding reality behind the laws of a particular culture.

When one applies this process to the American law system it is evident that our society is functioning under a secular humanistic law order with some remaining remnants of a Christian law system (e.g., laws based on biblical ethics which are intended to protect the family). In a Christian nation the state understands its responsibility under Christ to implement biblical law by applying the moral principles of divine revelation to modern culture. Neither government leaders, nor judges nor the people have the right to add or detract from Jehovah’s perfect ethical standard (Dt. 4:2; Pr. 30:6). “Nothing is more deadly or more derelict than the notion that the Christian is at liberty with respect to the kind of law he can have....Neither positive law nor natural law can reflect more than the sin and apostasy of man: *revealed law* is the need and privilege of Christian society.”⁹ However, in modern America laws are made or changed solely based upon the opinion of the people. This law-making process can be by direct vote (the will of the majority), by persons elected by the majority (e.g., the congress and senate), or by declaration of a court (e.g., the Supreme Court). But, what is the standard, foundation or basis of the various decisions by the people, legislature or courts. Is it God’s law, the unchanging standard of righteousness? No. Appeals to the Bible are deemed a violation of church and state. The only decision acceptable is one based on the autonomous choice of the people. Appeals can be made to human reason, utility, fairness, pragmatics, equality and so on. But, by eliminating all appeals to the transcendent and absolute (the unchanging law of God) society is set adrift on an ocean of arbitrary human desires. Such is the essence of humanism—the exaltation and worship of man. It is the religion of the serpent who said to Eve, “you will be like God, knowing good and evil” (Gen. 3:5). In American circles of power, truth is whatever idea wins the latest popularity contest. “Everyone did what was right in his own eyes” (Jdg. 17:6). “There is a way that seems right to a man, but its end is the way of death” (Pr. 14:12).

America’s radical departure from biblical law toward secular humanistic law raises an important question. Why does the majority of professing Christians in this nation ignore or disregard the emergence of an anti-Christian secularism in the schools, courts and legislatures? A major reason is that modern humanism has disguised its hatred of biblical Christianity under the cover of “pluralism.” America, it is argued, is a nation of great diversity that can only exist peacefully under the flag of religious tolerance. Therefore, the humanists have nurtured a two-tiered system. There is the polytheism and pluralism of the masses. But in the important matters of law there is the secular rule of the humanistic elite. One often observes Jewish, Roman Catholic and Protestant politicians on television assuring people not to worry, that their personal religious beliefs have no influence on the manner in which they will vote and determine legislation. In other words, “In my personal life I believe in God but when I enter the public arena I am an operational atheist.” In the name of neutrality and tolerance the humanists have

⁹*Ibid.* pp. 9-10.

taken power with the full consent of a majority of Christians. It is only in the last forty years as the humanists have grossly perverted justice (e.g., the legalization of abortion) and openly expressed its hatred of Christianity that many Christians have become alarmed. Secular humanism is an aggressive religion that is evangelistic and expansive; it seeks total jurisdiction over every area of life. It is the same philosophy that at bottom lies behind Nazism and Marxism.

Christians today must wake up and understand that there are two alternatives for American culture. There is theonomy or autonomy. There is humanistic law or biblical law. There is the tyranny of the secular state that rules by its own decrees and grants or repeals rights as it sees fit; or there is liberty, freedom and justice under God's unchanging, objective, absolute standard. With God's law all men, both rulers and citizens, are under the same objective law-word. The freedom and incredible cultural advances of the West did not happen by accident. As societies place themselves under the rule of Christ and submit to His law they make great advances in godly dominion. When Christians reject the necessity of biblical law for all areas of life (including the public square) they invite rival philosophies to fill the void. We must put into use the tools of dominion. We must conquer by the Word and Spirit or we will be persecuted by a rival religious faith.

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