

God's Law for Modern Man

Chapter 1: The Categories of Old Testament Law

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Introduction

The biblical teaching regarding God's law has been perverted and neglected by many churches during the twentieth century. The law has been treated as if it were the enemy of mankind. The reasons for this are manifold. The theological system called Dispensationalism has dominated Fundamentalist and Evangelical churches for over a generation. Dispensationalism teaches that all of the Old Testament law (including the moral and civil law) has been put away by Christ. The law, it is said, belongs to a former dispensation. Thus, the motto of Dispensationalism is that "we are not under law, but under grace" (what Paul meant by this phrase will be dealt with below). Modern (post D. L. Moody) revivalism has replaced the older (biblical) methods of preaching the gospel (which emphasized God's holiness, law, repentance, His wrath and judgment against sin, along with the cross) with a focus on the love of God and the attainment of personal peace and happiness ("God has a wonderful plan for your life—accept Jesus"). Thus an antinomian (i.e., anti-law) theology has produced an antinomian gospel, a gospel in which true repentance is not required. One cannot comprehend the true gospel without understanding God's nature *and* law. "If we cease to present the law as the divine requirement for human conduct and life, we cease to present the message of salvation through Jesus Christ as it should be presented."¹

By rejecting God's righteous requirements for both men and nations, most churches have retreated to a form of unbiblical pietism which emphasizes saving individual souls, not nations and cultures. Since many churches do not believe that God has given mankind a blueprint to run society, they leave culture in Satan's grasp while they build new basketball courts and plan the next prophecy conference. The church has ceased to be salt and light to the surrounding culture. "The increasing breakdown of law and order must first of all be attributed to the churches and their persistent antinomianism. If the churches are lax with respect to the law, will not the people follow suit? And civil law cannot be separated from biblical law, for the biblical doctrine of law includes all law, civil, ecclesiastical, societal, familial, and all other forms of law. The social order which despises God's law places itself on death row: it is marked for judgment."² The goal of this study is that Christians would return to a biblical view of God's holy law and thus teach the whole counsel of God. If the nations are to be made disciples for Christ (Mt. 28:18ff.), nothing less will do.

Defining Terms

One of the major reasons that unbiblical views of the law are prevalent in churches today is a failure to carefully define terms. The word law in the Bible is used in many different ways. A

¹ Harold J. Brokke, *The Law Is Holy* (Minneapolis, MN: Bethany Fellowship, 1963), p. 17.

² R. J. Rushdoony, *The Institutes of Biblical Law* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1973, 77), p. 4.

certain meaning of law which is legitimate in one context would be wrong and even heretical if applied to a passage where a different meaning is intended. Thus, to avoid confusion, the following is a summary of the biblical usage of the word law. One very broad usage of the word law is Torah. Torah is much more than just a legal code, for it includes the covenant between God and Israel. Everything Israel was to know and do, as well as God's covenant promises, together with the covenant stipulations (the curses and blessings, etc.) is Torah. Thus, Torah is an all-encompassing way of life, a covenant document between God and His people. When the Old Testament prophets preached against the apostasy, declension and wickedness of Israel, they brought a covenant lawsuit against the people.

The word "law" has several meanings in the New Testament. The law can mean the Decalogue or Ten Commandments (Rom. 13:8ff; 7:7). It can refer to an individual law (Rom. 7:2, 3). It can refer to divine revelation or to the whole Old Testament. In 1 Corinthians 14:21, Paul says, "In the law it is written" and then quotes Isaiah the prophet (Isa. 28:11-12); in Romans 3:19, after quoting several Psalm portions and Isaiah, Paul says, "Now we know that whatever the law says." "Here he uses the word 'law' as synonymous with the Old Testament."³ The expression "the law and the prophets" also refers to the whole Old Testament (Matt. 5:17; 7:12; 11:13; 22:40; Lk. 16:16; 24:44; Rom. 3:21). The word law is even used to denote a rule or principle. Paul speaks of the "law of faith" (Rom. 3:27), and James the "law of liberty" (Jas. 1:25). Paul says, "I find then a law, that evil is present" (Rom. 7:21). He discusses the "law in my members," "the law of my mind," and "the law of sin" (Rom. 7:23). The author of Hebrews uses law to denote the ceremonial law (Heb. 9:22; 10:1). Paul sometimes uses the word law to denote the legal indictment or sentence of death that the law brings (Gal. 2:19; Rom. 7:4). Thus, Paul can say that believers are "dead to the law" as a legal sentence of death and then, in the same epistle, urge believers to obey the law as a guide for godly living and sanctification (e.g., Rom. 13:8-10; Gal. 5:14, 19-21). If one does not carefully consider the contextual meaning and use of the word law in the New Testament, then the meaning attributed will be inaccurate, arbitrary, and unscriptural.

Chapter 1: The Categories of Old Testament Law

In order to have a proper understanding of God's law it is necessary to discuss the categories of Old Testament law. Theologians have recognized a distinction between moral and ceremonial laws within the Old Testament since at least the third century.⁴ "The recognition of a ceremonial category of laws in the Old Testament is commonplace among theologians (from Thomas Aquinas to Charles Hodge)."⁵ The Old Testament law has traditionally been divided into moral, civil and ceremonial categories. Some scholars reject the distinction between ceremonial and moral law as an artificial construct imposed upon the law. They assert that the laws are

³ John Murray, *Epistle to the Romans* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1959), 1:105. Jesus Christ in John 10:34 quotes Psalm 82:6. Before Christ quotes the Psalm portion, He says, "Is it not written in your *law*?" Here, Jesus Christ, like Paul, uses the word "law" to refer to the whole Old Testament.

⁴ Greg L. Bahnsen, *Theonomy in Christian Ethics* (Nutley, NJ: Craig Press, 1977), p. 214. Bahnsen points out that the early third century church document *Didascalia Apostolorum* clearly distinguished between the Decalogue and the temporary ceremonies.

⁵ Greg L. Bahnsen, *No Other Standard: Theonomy and Its Critics* (Tyler, TX: Institute for Christian Economics, 1991), p. 95. "The law is either the *moral* or the *ceremonial* law" (John Owen, *The Works of John Owen* [Carlisle, PA: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1965], 5:30).

mixed in such a way that the Jews would not have recognized the different categories. While it is true that the Old Testament laws are not laid out systematically in separate categories, the distinction between ceremonial and moral law is clearly taught in both testaments. A number of passages indicate that both God and Israel clearly recognized the distinction between moral laws and those which were ceremonial. In fact, several passages would be incomprehensible without such a distinction. “Has the LORD as great delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices, as in obeying the voice of the LORD?” (1 Sam 15:22) “*To obey is better than sacrifice*, because obedience to God is a moral duty, constantly and indispensably necessary; but sacrifice is but a ceremonial institution, sometimes unnecessary, as it was in the wilderness; and sometimes sinful, when it is offered by a polluted hand, or in an irregular manner; therefore their gross disobedience to God’s express command is not to be compensated with sacrifice.”⁶ The ceremonial rituals apart from faith and repentance accomplished nothing except arousing the anger of a holy God. “A *category distinction* is unmistakable in God’s declaration, ‘I desire faithful love, not sacrifice’ (Hos. 6:6). That statement would have made no sense whatsoever if Israel could not have told the difference between the laws demanding sacrifice (which we call ceremonial) and the laws demanding faithful love (which we call moral and civil). Are we to believe that the ancient Israelites lacked the mental acumen to catch the contrast between laws which bound Jews and Gentiles *alike* (e.g., the death penalty for murder, Lev. 24:21-22) and those which bound Jews but *not* Gentiles (e.g., the prohibition of eating animals that died of themselves, Deut. 14:21)? Whether they used the verbal labels of ‘moral’ (civil) and ‘ceremonial’ (as we do) is beside the point.”⁷ The New Testament also recognizes the ceremonial distinction. In fact, the book of Hebrews is incomprehensible without such a distinction (cf. Heb. 7:11-12, 18-19). Although violating a ceremonial law under the Old covenant would be immoral (i.e., a sin), because any violation of God’s revealed will is sinful, nevertheless the distinction between moral and ceremonial is biblical and must be maintained.

Ceremonial Law

The ceremonial laws are those ordinances which typify Jesus Christ and His work of redemption. These laws were shadows which pointed to Jesus Christ who is the reality, the substance, and the perfect. “What were the tabernacle and temple? What was the holy place with the utensils of it? What was the oracle, the ark, the cherubim, the mercy-seat, placed therein? What was the high priest in all his vestments and administration? What were the sacrifices and annual sprinkling of blood in the most holy place? What was the whole system of their religious [temple] worship? Were they anything but representations of Christ in the glory of His person and His office? They were a shadow, and the body represented by that shadow was Christ.”⁸ The ceremonial laws refer to the sacrificial rituals (the temple cultus): the priesthood, the sacrifices, the Levitical holy days (i.e., the feasts), the temple, the music, the utensils, circumcision, ritual washings, and so on. The ceremonial laws strengthened the faith of the Jews in the coming Messiah, by typifying both Him and the redemption from sin that He would bring. The ceremonial laws were directed to those in Israel. They were *restorative*, for they reflected God’s mercy and salvation. They were *anticipatory*, for they looked ahead to the perfect, final salvation

⁶ Matthew Poole, *A Commentary on the Whole Bible* (Carlisle, PA: The Banner of Truth Trust 1962, [1865]), 1:550.

⁷ Bahnsen, *No Other Standard*, p. 97-98.

⁸ John Owen, *Works*, 1:348.

wrought by the Messiah. And they were *temporary*, for as types and shadows they could not really remove the guilt of sin and bring perfection. God always intended to supersede the whole ceremonial system by Jesus Christ. Hodge writes,

That the ceremonial law introduced by Moses was typical of Christ and His work is taught throughout the New Testament, and especially in the Epistle to the Hebrews. It is declared to be a ‘shadow of things to come, but the body is of Christ.’ The tabernacle and its services were ‘patterns of things in the heavens,’ and figures, anti-types, of the true tabernacle, into which Christ has now entered for us. Col. ii. 17; Heb. ix. 23, 24. Christ is said to have effected our salvation by offering Himself as a sacrifice and by acting as our high priest. Eph. v. 2; Heb. ix. 11, 12, 26, 28; xiii. 11, 12. That the coming of Christ has superseded and forever done away with the ceremonial law is also evident from the very fact just stated that ceremonies were types of Him, that they were the shadows of which He was the substance. Their whole purpose and design were evidently discharged as soon as His real work of satisfaction was accomplished; and therefore it is not only a truth taught in Scripture (Heb. x. 1-14; Col. ii. 14-17; Eph. ii. 15, 16), but an undeniable historical fact, that the priestly work of Christ immediately and definitely superseded the work of the Levitical priest. The instant of Christ’s death, the veil separating the throne of God from the approach of men ‘was rent in twain from the top to the bottom’ (Matt. xxvii. 50, 51), thus throwing the way open to all, and dispensing with priests and their ceremonies forever.⁹

The ceremonial law also included laws designed to teach Israel about their religious, ethical and covenantal separation from the surrounding pagan nations. There were ceremonial laws which forbade the covenant people to: mix “different kinds of seeds” when planting crops (Deut. 22:9); plow with two different types of animals such as an ox and a donkey (Deut. 22:10); wear garments made of two different types of cloth such as linen and wool (Deut. 22:11). God also prohibited the Israelites from eating unclean animals (Lev. 11:1-47; 20:22-26; Deut. 14:1-21). These laws illustrated that the Gentile nations were unclean before the coming of Christ (cf. Acts 10:9-43; Gal. 2:12). In the Old covenant era, Gentiles who came to believe in the God of Israel had to become Jews (e.g., Ruth). These laws acted as a wall of division between Jews and Gentiles (cf. Eph. 2:11-22). But now that Christ has accomplished a perfect redemption, people of all nations who believe in Christ are made holy and are part of God’s covenant people with full rights as adopted sons. Although these ceremonial laws do not apply to New covenant believers, the principles they teach do apply. Christians are to be holy and separate from the pagan mindset and lifestyle of sin and unbelief and are not to be unequally yoked with unbelievers (2 Cor. 6:14-7:1).

The Moral Law

The moral laws of God are those laws which are based on God’s nature. God Himself is the absolute standard of righteousness. Since the moral laws reflect His nature and character,

⁹ A. A. Hodge, *The Confession of Faith: A Handbook of Christian Doctrine Expounding the Westminster Confession* (London: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1992), pp. 255-256. “The sacrificial and ceremonial law set forth the fact of salvation through the atoning act of a God-given substitute, an animal whose innocence typified the innocence of the one to come. The Messiah, the Lamb of God, having come, the old, typical laws of sacrifice and their priesthood and ceremonies were succeeded by the atoning work of Christ, the great High Priest [Heb. 7]” (R. J. Rushdoony, *The Institutes of Biblical Law*, p. 304).

they are “immutable and irrevocable even by God Himself.”¹⁰ Since God’s moral nature does not and cannot change (Ex. 3:14; Isa. 41:4; Heb. 1:11, 12), the laws which are based on that nature are absolute. They are perfect, universally binding, and everlasting. Any idea that God’s moral law is arbitrary or based upon something outside of God Himself is unbiblical. We know that God’s moral law is based on His moral character, for the attributes of God are applied to that law. The Bible says that God is perfect (Deut. 32:4; Mt. 5:48). It declares that “the law of the LORD is perfect” (Ps. 19:7). Jesus said that “God alone is good” (Mk. 10:18). Paul said, “we know that the law is good” (Rom. 7:12). The Scriptures teach that God “alone is holy” (Rev. 7:12). Paul states in Romans that “the law is holy” (Rom. 7:12). “The law is *spiritual*” (Rom. 7:14) and as such is from the Spirit of God (Jn. 4:24), and bears the imprints of His character.... Because the Lord is *righteous* (Ps. 116:5, 129:5; 145:17; Ezra 9:15; Jer. 12:1; Lam. 1:18; Dan. 9:7, 14), He instructs sinners in the way and loves righteous deeds (Ps. 11:7; 25:8).... Further attributes of God which are applied to the law are *justice* (Ps. 25:8-10; Prov. 28:4-5; Zech. 7:9-12), *truth* (Ps. 25:10; 119:142, 151; Rev. 15:3), *faithfulness* (Ps. 93:5; 111:7; 119:86), and *purity* (Ps. 119:140).¹¹ Since God’s moral law is based on His perfect unchanging attributes, any idea that it is for Israel only or for a former dispensation is unbiblical.

The moral law of God is summarized in the Ten Commandments (the Decalogue). The number ten in Scripture indicates fullness or completeness. Thus, the Ten Commandments represent God’s entire ethical standard given to mankind throughout the Bible. The early Presbyterian and Puritan practice of categorizing the various ethical stipulations and case laws under different commandments as expressions of each commandment is indeed biblical. In Exodus 32:15 we are told that the tablets of stone were written on both sides. Although God did not give a complete revelation to man, by giving ten commands and writing on both sides of the tablets, He made it very clear to His people that nothing was to be added by man unto His moral law. As a summary representing the whole, the Ten Commandments are perfect and complete.

We do not know why the Ten Commandments were written on two tablets of stone. The older commentators believed that the first table sets forth man’s duty toward God while the second table prescribes man’s duty toward other men. Because recent discoveries regarding ancient middle eastern law-covenants have revealed that two copies of law-codes were made, one for the king and one for the people, some modern commentators believe that each table contained a complete copy of the Ten Commandments. Exodus 32:16 records that the tablets and the writing on the tablets were the work of God. The Bible says they were written by the finger of God (Ex. 31:18). God emphasized the fact that He is the foundation and author of the moral law. The fact that God wrote the law with His own finger in stone teaches that the law is perpetual and is meant to instill in us just how seriously God takes His law. “This was probably a symbolical indication that the law could never be wiped out, that the moral law is everlastingly valid.”¹²

The Judicial Law

A third category of biblical law is the judicial law. The judicial or civil laws of the Old Testament contained a body of laws for the ancient nation of Israel. There are civil laws which applied only to the nation of Israel. There are also civil laws which are moral case laws. These

¹⁰ Ibid, p. 249.

¹¹ Bahnsen, *Theonomy in Christian Ethics*, pp. 143-145.

¹² Bahnsen, *No Other Standard*, pp. 99, 102.

case laws are based upon the Ten Commandments and are moral in character, and as such, are binding on all nations, in all ages. Laws that reflect God's moral character are as binding and perpetual as the Ten Commandments themselves. The moral case laws flesh out the Ten Commandments. They apply the various commandments to different situations. For example, the command "Thou shalt not kill" (Ex. 20:13) involves more than just murder. The moral case laws that apply the sixth commandment to society set forth rules: to protect life from accidental death and injury (Deut. 22:8); to protect society from dangerous, incorrigible criminals (Deut. 21:18-21); to protect citizens from hatred and personal vengeance (Lev. 21:18-21), and so on. These laws are moral; they are applications of the sixth commandment. To ignore the case laws, or to argue that the case laws are no longer binding, is to gut the moral law. It is, in a sense, a severe limiting of the Ten Commandments themselves, for they were always intended by God to be a *summary* of the moral law.

The continuing validity and necessity of the civil laws is plainly seen in the case of sexual immorality. The authors of the New Testament presuppose the continuity of the Old Testament moral case laws when they discuss sexual ethics. "Paul appealed to the extra-Decalogical prohibition against incest (1 Cor. 5:1). The case law against homosexuality was upheld in the New Testament (1 Cor 9:9; 1 Tim. 5:18)... 'Thou shalt not commit adultery' is a generalized requirement of sexual purity which includes, among other things, the duty to avoid incest, homosexuality, and bestiality (cf. Lev. 20:11-16). If the judicial case laws are now set aside, then the New Testament has a conception of sexual purity different from the Old."¹³ The fact that bestiality is *not* condemned anywhere in the New Testament proves that the apostles assumed the continuity of the Old Testament moral case laws. If one argues that bestiality is prohibited by the New Testament injunctions against sexual immorality (i.e., fornication), then one has implicitly accepted the validity of the Old Testament moral case laws, for one is using Old Testament moral case laws to define "sexual immorality." Laws regarding rape, seduction, homosexuality, prostitution, incest, indecent exposure, and so on are carefully delineated in the Old Testament case laws. To disregard these laws is to make it virtually impossible for a modern state to have a just, biblical system of judicial law.

Many Christians believe in the abiding validity of the Ten Commandments yet reject all the civil laws of Israel—even the moral case laws. This recognition of the Decalogue and rejection of the judicial laws is based on a false inference about the unique manner in which the Ten Commandments were given. For example, Ernest Kevan writes, "A consideration of the majestic accompaniments of the promulgation of the moral law will serve to exhibit its outstanding dignity.... It would be right to conclude that God gave the Law in this solemn and impressive manner in order that its authority and majesty might be more readily recognized. This dignity belongs peculiarly to the moral Law in distinction from the judicial and ceremonial; for although the judicial and ceremonial Laws were given at the same time as the moral Law, there is nevertheless a great difference between them."¹⁴ While it is true that the Ten Commandments received special treatment by God (i.e., They were written with God's own finger on tablets of stone, spoken directly to the people and placed in the ark of the covenant.), it is *not* because *only* the Ten Commandments were moral in nature, but because they summarized the *whole* moral law of God. As noted above, the number ten represents wholeness or completeness. Every moral precept in the Bible is summarized in the Decalogue. (A summary of the Decalogue is also given *outside* of the Decalogue "You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ernest Kevan, *Moral Law* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1991), p. 41.

soul and with all your strength” [Deut. 6:5] and “...you shall love your neighbor as yourself” [Lev. 19:18]). The moral case laws contained in Israel’s civil law are an extension of the Ten Commandments. One cannot abrogate the moral case laws without abrogating the Ten Commandments themselves. Furthermore, “[t]he unique features of the decalogue were true of it prior to the establishment of the New covenant. Do the critics conclude, therefore, that only the decalogue was binding at that time, during the Old covenant? Why, then, would those features prove that the decalogue *alone* is binding with the coming of the New covenant? This reasoning makes no sense.”¹⁵

Much of the misunderstanding and refusal to recognize the moral case laws as binding stems from the fact that a number of the judicial laws have indeed been abrogated. The judicial law not only contained case laws that applied the Ten Commandments to the family and society, they also contained some laws that were local and temporal, that were never meant to apply to the nations outside of Israel. For example, the New Testament teaches that the land of Canaan was but a type of the believer’s citizenship in heaven (Heb. 11:8-16). The kingdom of God has been taken away from the Jewish nation and given to the church (Matt. 21:43). Therefore, laws regarding political loyalty to Israel and defending Israel with physical means are not applicable today. Laws which dealt specifically with the land of Israel (e.g., the laws of jubilee, the cities of refuge) also do not continue. The judicial law contained regulations designed to protect the lineage of the coming Messiah (e.g., levirate marriage and the requirement to keep plots of land within family bloodlines); with the coming of Jesus Christ, these laws are no longer necessary. These laws cannot even be applied to modern Israel; the documents proving family lineage and proper succession of family plots were destroyed in A. D. 70 by the Romans. Other aspects of Old Testament Jewish society that were never intended to be binding on the Gentile nations are the Jewish form of civil government, the location of the capitol, the organization of the military and the method of tax collection (many Theonomists include the method of execution). The judicial laws of Israel have ceased, *except* those laws which teach abiding universal moral principles.

Some believers attempt to circumvent the moral case laws by arguing that these laws applied to a culture far different from the one which exists today. While it is true that our culture is different from ancient Israel’s, the moral principles which underlie the case laws can and should be applied to every society. For example, the Israelites were commanded by God to put a parapet or fence on their roofs, “that you may not bring guilt of bloodshed on your household if anyone falls from it” (Deut. 22:8). Few Americans have patios on their rooftops as did the ancient Israelites, but many do have balconies or swimming pools that need to be fenced in the same way. The moral case laws continue, but need to be applied to modern situations. Would Christians argue that it is permissible to leave the railing off balconies in high rise apartments because such a regulation is only discussed in the Old Testament?

The only alternatives to applying the principles of the moral case laws to nations today are: 1.) to argue that all law is relativistic and conditioned by culture; 2.) to assert some sort of natural law theory in which sinful man is free to ignore the clear, inspired precepts of God and instead reason from nature; or 3.) to attempt to derive our own moral case laws from the Ten Commandments and the moral laws repeated in the New Testament. This would mean that the inspired, infallible moral case laws of the Old Testament would be ignored, while fallible sinful men attempt to formulate their own case laws from the general moral commands. History has shown the repeated failure of these alternatives.

¹⁵ Bahnsen, *No Other Standard*, p. 101.

Does God's law apply today? Are civil governments obligated to apply the moral law, including the moral case laws, toward modern society? Are Christians obligated to follow the moral law as a guide to sanctification, or are they simply to follow the Spirit's leading in a subjective, mystical sense? We live in a time when the church (both Evangelical and Reformed) has to a certain extent an arbitrary, schizophrenic view of God's law. Many Fundamentalist churches teach that the whole Old Testament law has been abrogated by Jesus Christ. Yet in the battle against secular humanism, it is not uncommon to hear Fundamentalists quoting from the Old Testament case laws in order to stem the tide of anti-Christian statism. Many of those in Reformed and Presbyterian circles like to think of themselves as anti-Dispensational champions of God's moral law. Yet many, if not most, of those in Bible-believing Presbyterian circles do *not* believe that the moral case laws found in the Old Testament civil law and their accompanying penal sanctions apply to modern nations. Many have also accepted the idea of religious pluralism (i.e., equal status for atheism, Satanism, Buddhism, Islam, Arminianism, etc.), and believe that the civil government does *not* have the right to uphold the first table of the law (i.e., punish open heretics, blasphemers, rank idolaters, etc.). The only way to have a biblical understanding of God's law is to examine the passages of Scripture which discuss the place of God's law in the New covenant, and the relation of Christians to that law. We believe that the Bible teaches that God's moral law and the moral case laws "of the Old Testament are still binding on society in the New Testament era, unless annulled or otherwise transformed by a New Testament teaching, either directly or by implication. In short, *there is judicial and moral continuity between the two testaments.*"¹⁶

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¹⁶ Gary North, preface to Greg L. Bahnsen, *No Other Standard*, p. x.