

God's Law for Modern Man

[Brian Schwertley](#)

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 certain meaning of law which is legitimate in one context would be wrong and even heretical if

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.

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 mixed in such a way that the Jews would not have recognized the different categories. While it is

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).

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 wrought by the Messiah. And they were *temporary*, for as types and shadows they could not

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.

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

Chapter 2: Key Passages on the Law

Matthew 5:17-18

A crucial passage regarding God's law comes from Christ Himself in the Sermon on the Mount. "Do not think that I came to destroy the Law or the Prophets. I did not come to destroy but to fulfill. 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" (Mt. 5:17-18). Jesus Christ in this section of the Sermon on the Mount deals with God's law and righteousness. Christ first sets out to eliminate any misconceptions of His view and teaching regarding the Old Testament Law. "He says that everything He is going to teach is in absolute harmony with the entire teaching of the Old Testament Scriptures."¹⁷ Jesus in no way intends to destroy, abrogate or contradict God's inscripturated word. In verses 19 and following Jesus explains how His teaching is in complete harmony with God's law, while the teaching of the scribes and Pharisees is a perversion of God's law. "They buried the divine oracles under a load of tradition and regarded the doing of the law to be the only way to obtain salvation. Therefore in reality they were the ones who were setting aside the Old Testament. With Jesus, the case was entirely different."¹⁸

In verse 17 Jesus begins His teaching with very strong speech; the Greek means literally, "Do not begin to think." Jesus Christ emphatically forbids people even *to begin to think* that He came to abolish God's law. "The implication is that Christ knew the danger that His hearers or

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

¹⁷ D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Studies on the Sermon on the Mount* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1971), p. 181.

¹⁸ William Hendriksen, *An Exposition of the Gospel of Matthew* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1973), p. 289.

scribal opponents might misunderstand or willfully distort His doctrine of the law, so He commands them not even to start thinking that the Messiah abrogates the law.”¹⁹ The idea that Jesus came to abolish God’s law should be anathema to the Christian. Christ tells us emphatically not to entertain such a foolish thought even for a moment. Thus the idea, now popular in Evangelical seminaries, that the whole Old Testament law comes to an end in Christ, and a new law flows out of Christ, is unbiblical.

Jesus did not come to destroy or abolish God’s law. The Greek word *kataluo* (translated “destroy” in the King James Version and the New King James Version, or “abolish” in the New American Standard Bible, New International Version, and the Revised Standard Version) in first century Greek literature, with regard to civil law, meant to deprive by force, to annul, to abrogate and to disregard. The same verb was used to describe the tearing down, dismantling, destroying and demolition of buildings. Thus, Christ says that He did not come to do away with, annul or repeal the law; on the contrary, He came to fulfill it.

The expression “the law and the prophets” is repeatedly used in the New Testament to denote the whole Old Testament (e.g., Mt. 7:12; 11:13; 22:40; Lk. 16:16; 24:44; Rom. 3:21). When used in conjunction with the prophets, the law generally refers to the five books of Moses. Thus, when Jesus says “the law,” He means the entire law: moral, judicial, and ceremonial. Although in Matthew 5:21ff, Jesus focuses His attention on the moral law, given the broad terminology noted above, one should not restrict verse 17 to the moral law alone. Since in the whole section, from verse 18 through verse 48, Jesus concerns Himself with God’s commandments, His use of the word “prophets” probably refers to the prophetic exposition of the law. The prophets called people back to obedience to the law. “The concern of Matthew 5:17 is Christ’s *doctrine* as it bears upon Theonomy (God’s Law). While ‘Law or Prophets’ broadly denotes the Older Testament Scriptures, Jesus’ stress is upon the ethical content, the commandments of the Older Testament.”²⁰

Jesus said concerning the law: “I did not come to destroy, annul, or abrogate the law but to fulfill it.” What did Jesus mean when He said *fulfill*? The most popular interpretation of this word among Evangelicals reflects a total misunderstanding of the word. They propose that Christ came to finish or bring an end to the law. Although the Greek verb *plerao* (to *fulfill*) can mean to bring to an end in certain contexts, it would be absurd to give it that meaning in this context. Christ wants to eliminate any idea that He came to destroy or abrogate the law. Would He accomplish this by saying, “Do not think that I came to abrogate the Law or the Prophets. I did not come to annul the law but to bring it to an end?” Not only are such words self-contradictory, but if that had been Christ’s meaning, His audience would have expressed shock and outrage.

Another popular interpretation is that Christ came to replace the Old Testament law with a new law—“the law of Christ.” The Old Testament law flows into Christ and is fulfilled in Him; then Jesus establishes His own law. “The phrase can be viewed as a way of stating the new code of conduct applicable to New covenant believers. As the O.T. had its Law of Moses, so the N.T. has its Law of Christ.”²¹ Some who hold this position argue that Jesus has replaced the Old Testament law with the law of the Spirit. A favorite proof text is Galatians 5:18: “If you are led by the Spirit you are not under the law.” But, this interpretation is unscriptural for a number of

¹⁹ Bahnsen, *Theonomy in Christian Ethics*, p. 47.

²⁰ *Ibid*, p. 51.

²¹ Douglas J. Moo, “The Law of Moses or The Law of Christ” in John S. Feinberg, ed., *Continuity and Discontinuity: Perspective on the Relationship Between the Old and New Testaments* (Westchester, Ill.: Crossway Books, 1988), p. 208.

reasons. First, the verb *to fulfill* never means “to replace” in the New Testament. Second, the idea of Christ replacing the law suffers from the same objections noted above regarding Jesus coming to abrogate the law. To replace the law is to ‘end’ it or ‘annul’ it. Furthermore, Galatians 5:18 teaches that Christians are not under the law *as a way of justification*; however, they are under the law *as a way of life and sanctification*. R. J. Rushdoony writes, “In Galatians 2:21, the contrast is between justification by law and justification by the grace of God through Jesus Christ; in the use of law as a means of justification, no righteousness can be gained. 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 the misuse of the law as a way of justification.”²²

Another view is that Christ came to perfect the law; that is, Christ supplements it and adds an internal aspect to it. This view is based on a misunderstanding of God’s Old Testament law. The idea that the Old Testament was concerned with only external behavior is simply not true. For example, the tenth commandment covers unlawful lust in all its parameters. The command, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself” (Gal. 5:14) comes from Leviticus 19:18. Even Jesus’ command to “love your enemies” (Mt. 5:44), is an application of the Old Testament laws which teach the proper treatment of strangers and sojourners. The Old Testament emphasized the need for inward heart obedience and repeatedly condemned the Jewish people’s sinful drift toward externalism and ritualism. David said, “Behold, You desire truth in the inward parts, and in the hidden part You make me to know wisdom.... Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me.... The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit, a broken and a contrite heart” (Ps. 51:6, 10, 17; cf. Ps. 40:8; 119:10-11; Hos. 6:6; Pr. 16:18-19; Mic. 2:1; Job 31:1; etc.). Jesus was not subjecting His disciples to a new, higher ethical standard but was countering the perversion of the scribes and Pharisees who externalized the law and rendered it void by their additions.

If Jesus added to the law, either in His own teaching or through His apostles after the ascension, one would expect to find new ethical standards in the New Testament. There are no new ethical standards in the New Testament. The difference in the New covenant is not a new ethical standard but Christ’s completed work and His sending the Holy Spirit to empower and enable believers to more faithfully obey God’s law. “Neither are the aforementioned uses of the law contrary to the grace of the Gospel, but do sweetly comply with it: the Spirit of Christ subduing and enabling the will of man to do that freely and cheerfully, which the will of God, revealed in the law, requireth to be done.”²³

Thus far consideration has been given to interpretations of *fulfill* that are unbiblical and outside the pale of classical Reformed interpretation. The next four views of *fulfill* in Matthew 5:17 reflect other New Testament teachings on the law and are common among Reformed interpreters. The first view is that Christ came to obey the law. The second view is that Christ came to confirm or uphold the law in exhaustive detail. The third view combines other views. For example, Christ came to fulfill prophecy, to perfectly obey the law and to uphold or confirm all of its precepts. The fourth view is that Christ came to uphold or confirm the moral law.

An excellent representative of the first view is D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones: “The real meaning of the word *fulfill* is to carry out, to *fulfill* in the sense of giving full obedience to it, literally carrying out everything that has been said and stated in the law and the prophets.... There

²² R. J. Rushdoony, *The Institutes of Biblical Law*, p. 738.

²³ *Westminster Confession of Faith*, Chap. XXI, sec. 3.

we see the central claim which is made by our Lord. It is, in other words, that all the law and all the prophets point to Him and will be fulfilled in Him down to the smallest detail. Everything that is in the law and the prophets culminates in Christ, and He is the fulfillment of them.”²⁴ Is it true that Jesus Christ perfectly obeyed the law? Yes, absolutely: “For He made Him who knew no sin to be sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him” (2 Cor. 5:21). “For we do not have a High Priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but was in all points tempted as we are, yet without sin” (Heb. 4:15). “Christ also suffered for us...Who committed no sin, nor was guile found in His mouth” (1 Pet. 2:21-22); “And you know that He was manifested to take away our sins, and in Him there is no sin” (1 Jn. 3:5). Did Jesus Christ perfectly fulfill the prophecies regarding the Messiah given in the Old Testament? Yes, He was both God and man (Isa. 9:6). He was born of a virgin (Isa. 7:14), in Bethlehem (Mic. 5:12), and so on. Although this interpretation is in harmony with the New Testament, the immediate context favors the second view.

Christ came not to abolish the law but to confirm or establish the law. “The meaning is, that ‘not so much as the smallest loss of authority or vitality shall ever come over the law.’ The expression, ‘till all be fulfilled,’ is much the same in meaning as ‘it *shall* be had in undiminished and enduring honour, from its greatest to its least requirements.’”²⁵ Matthew Henry concurs: “The rule which Christ came to establish exactly agreed with the Scriptures of the Old Testament.... ‘Let not the pious Jews, who have an affection for the law and the prophets, *fear* that I come to destroy them....’ He asserts the perpetuity of it: that not only he designed not the abrogation of it, but that it should never be abrogated (v. 18).”²⁶ *Fulfill* refers not to Christ’s perfect obedience but to His *teaching* or doctrine regarding the law.

There are a number of indicators within the context which support this interpretation. First, “the context of Matthew 5:17 indicates that *plerao* (fulfill) refers to Jesus’ work as a *teacher*. There are no allusions to predictions of the Older Testament and the question of Jesus’ good works, or of His own ethical holiness in behavior, so they are not really at stake in this passage. But the issues of moral *authority*, pronouncement, and direction *are* prominent. The teaching of Jesus, not His doing of the law, is decisive here; the context speaks of Jesus’ doctrine, not His life.”²⁷ Second, the word *fulfill* is set in direct opposition to the words “destroy” or “abrogate.” One does not annul, abrogate or destroy the law by breaking it. The person who transgresses the law destroys himself, not the law. “Whoever commits adultery with a woman lacks understanding; he who does so destroys his own soul” (Pr. 6:32). The natural antithesis to abrogating the law is upholding the law. Jesus allays the fear of the Jews that the messianic advent meant an abrogation of the Old Testament law. Third, in verse 18 Jesus says that not “one jot or one tittle” of the law’s *content* or teaching will pass away. “In connection, then, with the immediately preceding verse, in which Jesus had said that he had not come to set aside the law or the prophets but to fulfill them, he now, sharply contradicting what the opponents must have been saying about his attitude, reaffirms his complete loyalty to the sacred oracles.”²⁸ Fourth, in verse 19, Jesus warns “his disciples, carefully to preserve the law, and shows them the danger of the neglect and contempt of it.”²⁹ Whoever shall loose or annul the authority or obligation of the

²⁴ D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Studies in the Sermon on the Mount*, pp. 186-187.

²⁵ David Brown, *The Four Gospels: A Commentary, Critical, Experimental and Practical* (Carlisle, PA: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1976 [1864]), p. 31.

²⁶ Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible* (McLean, VA: MacDonald Publishing Co., n.d.), 5:55-56.

²⁷ Bahnsen, *Theonomy in Christian Ethics*, pp. 60-61.

²⁸ William Hendriksen, *Matthew*, p. 293.

²⁹ Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible*, 5:56.

least of the commandments of the Old Testament law “shall be called least in the kingdom of heaven” (Mt 5:19). “It follows from verse 19 that keeping the law and teaching it to others in the manner in which it should be taught is very important.”³⁰

In the rest of chapter 5, Jesus “proceeds to expound the law in some particular instances, and to vindicate it from the corrupt glosses which those expositors [i.e., the Pharisees] had put upon it. He adds not anything new, only limits and restrains some permissions which had been abused: and so as to the precepts, shows the breadth, strictness, and spiritual nature of them, adding explanatory statutes that made them more clear, and tended much toward the perfecting of our obedience to them.”³¹ Given all these considerations, *plerao* (fulfill) is best understood in the sense of *establish* or *confirm*. “Jesus says in Matthew 5:17 that He came to confirm and restore the full measure, intent, and purpose of the Older Testamental law. He sees the whole process of revelation deposited in the Older Testament as finding its validation in Him—its actual embodiment.... *Plerao* is subject to the norm of both literal Older Testamental wording and the meaning of salvation manifested in Jesus Christ. Therefore, *plerao* should be taken to mean ‘confirm and restore in full measure.’”³²

Any view of Matthew 5:17-18 which says that Christ came to abolish or replace the Old Testament law must be rejected as unbiblical. Such a view has Christ saying, “I came not to abrogate the law but to eliminate it.” Would Christ contradict Himself in the same sentence? No. Jesus Christ is a friend and champion of the law. He commands strict obedience to the law, and He commends those who faithfully teach the law to others.

What about the interpretation of *fulfill* that gives the word multiple meanings? It is common among some of the older commentaries to discuss three or four different senses of *fulfill* when discussing verse 17. For example, Christ came to fulfill prophecy, to fulfill Old Testament types, to establish the law, and to enable the elect to have greater obedience to the law through His redemptive work. Although all of those things are true, one should not read back into a text more meanings than were intended by the author. “You may not avoid or alter the *linguistic meaning* of a text by looking at *other* biblical teachings out of the corner of your eye. You may import whatever theological distinctions and qualifications which are appropriate into the matter as an interpreter and preacher of the text, but you *may not* read them *into* that text (in the name of ‘exegesis’), reading them out.”³³ While there is nothing wrong with discussing the different ways Christ fulfills the Old Testament as an *application* of a text, giving a word multiple meanings at the same time defies both logic and normal word usage. One must avoid importing preconceived ideas into a text, even when these preconceived ideas are biblical and taught in other parts of the New Testament.

A biblical understanding of Matthew 5:17-19 is crucial if believers are going to have a proper understanding of God’s Old Testament law. If Jesus Christ came to completely abolish

³⁰ William Hendriksen, *Matthew*, p. 293.

³¹ Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible*, 5:57.

³² Bahnsen, *Theonomy in Christian Ethics*, p. 64. Bahnsen in response to critics who argue that “confirm or establish” is a novel or unusual interpretation, points out that many excellent scholars hold the same view, such as B.H. Branscomb, W.H.P. Hatch, G. Dalmen, Robin Nixon, David Wenham, and John Murray. “The idea that in Matthew 5 Jesus was confirming or establishing the law in its full measure, thus upholding the validity of the Old Testament commandments, can be found (despite differences of response or application) in a wide variety of scholars: Calvin, Bolton, Plumer, Fairbairn, George Campbell, David Brown, J. P. Lange, Hans Vindisch, J. A. Alexander, B. B. Warfield, Ernest Kevan, Carl Henry, John Stott, G. S. Sloyan, W. C. Allen, Alfred Plummer, William Hendriksen, Herman Ridderbos” etc. (*No Other Standard*, pp. 318-319).

³³ Bahnsen, *No Other Standard*, footnote, pp. 273-74.

the Old Testament law, then only what is repeated in the New Testament can be applied to Christians and society. But if Jesus Christ explicitly taught the binding validity of God's Old Testament law for the New covenant era, then one must presume the continuity of the Old Testament law.

An obvious objection to the interpretation that Christ did not come to destroy the law but to uphold, confirm, and establish the law is that the New Testament modifies and sets aside certain laws. The New Testament has clearly altered laws related to the land of Israel's inheritance (1 Pet. 1:3-5; Heb. 11:16; 13:12-14) and the identity of God's people³⁴ (Mt. 21:43; Gal. 3:7, 29; Eph. 1:13-14). Furthermore, the ceremonial laws have been put away by Christ and His perfect redemption (Acts 10; Gal. 3:9, 10; Col. 2:16; Heb 9-10). Although this appears to be a problem, the fact that certain laws were typological and were *never* intended to continue in their Old covenant form does not contradict Christ's assertion.

The Bible refers to ceremonial laws as "shadows" (Heb. 10:1; 8:4-5), "inferior" (Heb. 9:11-15), "obsolete" (Heb. 8:13), "symbolic" (Heb. 9:9), "ineffectual" (Heb. 10:4), and as "weak and beggarly elements" (Gal. 4:9-11). The ceremonial laws were never meant to stand on their own. A type must have an anti-type. When the reality comes, it takes the place of the shadow. Thus, the ceremonial laws that pointed to the person and work of Christ are upheld and continue in principle in Him. Therefore, the person who believes in Jesus Christ (the anti-type) has obeyed the ceremonies in Him. "In Him you were circumcised with the circumcision made without hands" (Col. 2:11). A person who rejects Jesus Christ yet keeps the ceremonial laws violates the ceremonial law because the reality has come. "Calvin points out that the meaning of the ceremonies is eternal, while their outward form and use are temporal; consequently Christ confirms even the ceremonial law. 'That man does not break ceremonies who omits what is shadowy, but retains their effect.'... These ceremonial laws are organically connected with Christ and His work in salvation history. The truth depicted in these ritual commands is embodied in Christ and is valid yet today. Only the pre-incarnation *use* of these ceremonial procedures is removed for the Christian in the New covenant—because they were observed once for all by and in the person and work of Christ. The principle involved in these particular ordinances is confirmed, not repealed in Christ's coming."³⁵

Another interpretation is that Christ came to establish or uphold *the moral law*. This interpretation avoids the need to explain how Jesus upholds the whole law in exhaustive detail while in a sense abrogating a large portion of the law by His sacrificial death. This interpretation is based on the immediate context and the analogy of Scripture. After Christ states His position on the law in verses 17 to 19, He discusses the need for righteousness and refutes the scribes' and Pharisees' false interpretation of the moral law. He tells His disciples that their righteousness

³⁴ A common argument used against the obligation of modern nations to obey the moral case laws contained in the judicial law is that Israel was a church-state; that membership in the state and church was coextensive and that no separation of powers existed between the religious and political spheres of life. But now that the international church has replaced Israel in the New covenant era, all laws dealing with state law and penology are thought to have ceased and been carried out only by spiritual means alone (i.e., church discipline, resulting ultimately in excommunication). Such a view is based on a false understanding of the Old Testament theocracy. Israel was not a church-state like modern Iran; it had a clear demarcation between responsibilities in the political and priestly spheres. The king was not a priest: King Uzziah was struck with leprosy for intruding into the priestly office (2 Chr. 26:16-21). Furthermore, "membership of the state was not coextensive with the membership of the religious body (for example, the sojourners in Israel)" (Bahnsen, *By This Standard*, p. 331). If nations are not obligated to follow God's law, then what standard do they have?

³⁵ Bahnsen, *Theonomy in Christian Ethics*, p. 49.

must surpass that of the scribes and Pharisees (v. 20) and He refutes His opponents' false interpretation of the sixth commandment (vs. 21-26), the seventh commandment (vs. 27-32), the law regarding oaths (vs. 33-37), the law of retaliation (vs. 38-42) and the law of love (vs. 43-48). Our Lord concerns Himself not with ceremonial ordinances but with specific abuses of the Ten Commandments and certain moral case laws. Does this interpretation refute the central thesis of Theonomy? No. It does not. If in Matthew 5:17ff. Jesus was arguing for the continuance of the Ten Commandments and all the moral case laws into the New covenant era, then Theonomy is thoroughly scriptural for that is the Theonomic position.

Some Christians have used a variation of this argument to assert that Christ was teaching that only the Ten Commandments continue into the New covenant era. This teaching must be rejected for the following reasons. First, Jesus did not restrict His discussion to the Ten Commandments but also discussed the laws regarding oaths and retaliation. Second, the Ten Commandments are not the whole moral law but are a *summary* of the whole moral law including all the moral case laws. Third, those who want to restrict Jesus' teaching to the Ten Commandments need to explain how laws regarding homosexuality, rape, incest, bestiality, theft, the protection of life, aiding the poor and so on are not moral but positivistic. It is obvious that many civil laws are moral applications of the Ten Commandments. Thus, they cannot be set aside without setting aside the Ten Commandments themselves. Fourth, long after Christ preached the sermon on the mount He rebuked the Pharisees and scribes for disregarding the moral case law concerning incorrigible, young adults (cf. Mt. 15:14; Deut. 21:18-20; Ex. 21:15). The omniscient, sinless Son of God certainly would not contradict His own teaching regarding God's law.

Matthew 5:17-19 teaches that Christians should assume the continuity of the Old Testament laws into the New covenant era unless there are clear theological and exegetical reasons otherwise. There are no New Testament texts which (when understood biblically) can be used to disregard the whole Old Testament law. The assumption of a radical discontinuity between the Testaments is unscriptural and is primarily the legacy of Dispensationalism. When Christians simplistically argue "against applying an Old Testament command because it comes from the Old Testament (i.e., was intended for Israel, was part of the theocracy, is not revealed in the New covenant, comes from the era of law and not grace, is too horrible to follow today, etc.), he is"³⁶ violating Matthew 5:17-19, covenant theology and biblical hermeneutics.

Galatians and the Law

A number of passages in Galatians have been used by Dispensational scholars to argue that the Old Testament law has been abrogated by the coming of Jesus Christ. A brief consideration of some of these passages is necessary in order to have an understanding of God's law as it applies to the present day. In order to understand these passages, one must first consider the historical context of the book.

Paul wrote the epistle to the Galatians to deal with certain Judaizers in the church. "I marvel that you are turning away so soon from Him who called you in the grace of Christ, to a different gospel, which is not another; but there are some who trouble you and want to pervert the gospel of Christ" (Gal. 1:6-7). The Judaizers believed that in order for Gentiles to be justified by God, they first had to be circumcised and become Jews. These are the same type of false

³⁶ Bahnsen, *No Other Standard*, p. 274.

teachers described in the book of Acts.³⁷ “And certain men came down from Judea and taught the brethren, ‘Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved’.... some of the sect of the Pharisees who believed rose up, saying, ‘It is necessary to circumcise them and to command them to keep the law of Moses’” (Acts 15:1, 5).

In interpreting Galatians, one must keep in mind that the Judaizers were unbiblical in two different ways. First, they asserted that in order for a Gentile to become a Christian he must first become a Jew in the Old covenant sense; that is, he must submit to circumcision and the whole Mosaic law, including the ceremonial laws. Second, the Judaizers taught that believers must keep the law in order to be saved. They taught a system of human merit, of works righteousness *in addition to faith in Christ* in order to be justified before God. These heretics believed the Pharisaical lie of salvation by law. In the book of Galatians Paul dealt with these two unbiblical views. Paul wanted the Galatian believers to have a proper understanding of salvation and the true purpose of the Old Testament law.

Justification

The paramount issue in this epistle is justification by faith alone. Paul says: “Knowing that a man is not justified by the works of the law but by faith in Jesus Christ, even we have believed in Christ Jesus, that we might be justified by faith in Christ and not by the works of the law; for by the works of the law no flesh shall be justified” (Gal. 2:16). Paul refutes the pharisaical notion that man can become right before God by obedience to the law. Thus, when Paul says, “For I through the law died to the law that I might live to God” (Gal. 2:19), he does not mean that the law as a moral guide to life is dead, but rather that the law has shown me that I am dead, that I cannot save myself through the law. The law demands absolute moral perfection in thought, word, and deed. Hendricksen writes,

That standard Paul had been unable to meet. In fact, he had missed the target *by far*. In the meantime, moreover, the law had not relaxed its demands, nor its threats of punishment, nor its actual flagellations. It had not given Paul the peace with God which he so ardently desired. It had scourged him until, by the marvelous grace of God, he had found Christ (because Christ had first sought and found him!) and peace in Him. Thus, through the law he had died to the law. Through the law he had discovered what a great sinner he was, and how utterly incapable in himself of extricating himself from his position of despair and ruin (cf. Rom. 3:20; 7:7). Thus the law had been his custodian to conduct him to Christ (Gal. 3:24). And when by Christ he had been made alive, the law, viewed as being in and by itself a means unto salvation and as a cruel taskmaster who assigns tasks impossible of fulfillment and who lays down rules and regulations endless in their ramifications, had left him cold, dead like a corpse, without any response whatever.³⁸

Paul emphasizes that it is Christ who saves and not the law: “I do not set aside the grace of God, for if righteousness comes through the law, Christ died in vain” (Gal. 2:21). In other

³⁷ When the apostle Paul preached in the synagogue at Antioch in Pisidia, he explicitly refuted Jewish notions of justification by law: “Therefore let it be known to you, brethren, that through this Man is preached to you the forgiveness of sins; and by Him everyone who believes is justified from all things from which you could not be justified by the law of Moses” (Ac. 13:38-39).

³⁸ William Hendriksen, *Exposition of Galatians* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1968), pp. 101-102.

words, if it were possible to attain to a perfect righteousness by which one could stand in God's presence, then Christ did not have to die in order to bring men unto God.

Some commentators have attempted to show that Paul's concern in the book of Galatians was not justification by law, but sanctification by law. This false interpretation is based upon Galatians 3:2-3: "Did you receive the Spirit by the works of the law, or by the hearing of faith? Are you so foolish? Having begun in the Spirit, are you now being made perfect by the flesh?" Dispensationalists have argued that Paul is saying that the Old Testament law has no place in the sanctification of believers. The Dispensational approach to this passage is unscriptural and, thankfully, quite rare. In verse 2, Paul teaches that becoming a Christian and receiving the Holy Spirit can only occur through faith in Jesus Christ. Remember that elsewhere Paul teaches that baptism in the Holy Spirit and becoming a Christian are coterminous (1 Cor. 12:13; Rom. 8:9). No one, Paul says, has ever received the Holy Spirit through works of righteousness. Paul then sets up a contrast between the Spirit and the flesh. He points out the absurdity of the Judaizer's position. If faith in Jesus Christ alone results in the baptism in the Holy Spirit, why, then, were the Galatians seeking perfection through personal merit? The Galatians were no longer looking solely to the merits of Christ for salvation but were trusting in the flesh, in works of righteousness, in circumcision, in ceremonies, and so on. The idea that perfection before God can come in any way apart from Christ is insanity. Paul calls it foolishness. "If one bases his hope for this life or the next upon anything apart from Christ he is placing confidence in *flesh*."³⁹ The idea that Paul is arguing against the use of the Old Testament moral laws as a guide for sanctification is not taught in Galatians or anywhere else. If we do not use the moral law as a guide for conduct and sanctification, how, then, are we to even identify sin? Paul says, "for by law is knowledge of sin" (Rom. 3:20). "We know that the law is good if one uses it lawfully" (1 Tim. 1:8).

The Law as a Tutor

Those who teach that God's Old Testament law has been completely abrogated by Christ use Galatians 3:23-25 as a proof text for their assertion: "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." In order to understand this passage one must answer two questions. First, what does Paul mean by the term *law*? Second, what does he mean when he says we are no longer under a tutor? In order to properly answer these questions, one must keep in mind the historical context of the book and the specific problems that Paul was dealing with. The Judaizers had two serious doctrinal errors. They believed in salvation through Christ *and* human merit. And they wanted Gentiles to become Jews in order to become Christians; that is, they expected Gentiles to completely follow the Mosaic ceremonial laws. This second error is clearly in Paul's mind when he condemns circumcision (Gal. 5:2-3) and when he refers to the rudiments or elements in Galatians 4:3, 9. "But now after you have known God, or rather are known by God, how is it that you turn again to the weak and beggarly elements, to which you desire again to be in bondage? You observe days and months and seasons and years. I am afraid for you, lest I have labored for you in vain" (Gal. 4:9-11). Since Paul is concerned with counteracting the Judaizers' view that Gentiles are obligated to keep the whole system of Jewish ceremonial laws, it is clear that he is speaking of law as the Mosaic administration of God's covenant with the

³⁹ Ibid, p. 114.

Jews. Paul is focusing upon what is distinctive to the Mosaic administration. He is telling the Galatians why it is no longer necessary to follow the ceremonial laws of the Old covenant.

This view of law is supported by Galatians 4:21-31 where Paul contrasts the two covenants. “For these things are the two covenants: the one from Mount Sinai which gives birth to bondage, which is Hagar—for this Hagar is Mount Sinai in Arabia, and corresponds to Jerusalem which now is, and is in bondage with her children—but the Jerusalem above is free, which is the mother of us all” (Gal. 4:24-26). When Paul speaks about the “Jerusalem which now is, and is in bondage,” he probably has in mind more than bondage of the ceremonial law. This bondage could include the false pharisaical notions regarding salvation by law current at that time in Jerusalem. The apostle says that the true Christian church is free from the bondage of the ceremonial law. Christians are free from the Old covenant administration with its types, shadows and ceremonies. Furthermore, Christians are not under bondage to the false notions regarding the law as a source of human merit unto salvation, as taught by the religious leaders in Jerusalem. “The church of the Gentiles was not typified in Hagar but in Sarah; from whence the scope of the apostle is to conclude, that we are not under the law, obliged to Judaical observances, but are freed from them, and are justified by faith in Christ alone, not by works of the law.”⁴⁰

What, then, does Paul mean when he says that those who have come to Christ are no longer under a tutor? Given the meaning of law discussed above, Paul is saying that the ceremonial law served as an instructor in salvation by grace. It taught the Old covenant people of God about the perfect redemptive work of the coming Messiah through types. But since Christ has come and offered Himself as a perfect sacrifice “once for all” (Heb. 10:10), the tutor is no longer needed. Under the old administration, the Jews were saved by faith in the coming Messiah, not by their works. But the Old covenant administration with its types, shadows and ceremonies was *inferior* to the New covenant. Paul compares the Old covenant administration to the immature life of slavery under a tutor. But New covenant believers are described as sons, as those who receive the full rights of adoption (Gal. 4:1-7). John Calvin writes,

A schoolmaster is not appointed for the whole life, but only for childhood, as etymology of the Greek word [*paidagogos*] implies. Besides, in training a child, the object is to prepare him, by the instructions of childhood, for maturer years. The comparison applies in both respects to the law, for its authority was limited to a particular age, and its whole object was to prepare its scholars in such a manner, that when its elementary instructions were closed, they might make progress worthy of manhood. And so he adds, that it was our schoolmaster [*eis Christon*] unto Christ. The grammarian, when he is trained as a boy, delivers him into the hands of another, who conducts him through the higher branches of a finished education. In like manner, the law was the grammar of theology, which, after carrying its scholars a short way, handed them over to *faith* to be completed. Thus, Paul compares the Jews to children, and us to advanced youth.⁴¹

The Law as a Covenant

Dispensationalists have misunderstood this passage in Galatians because they fail to recognize the distinction between the law as a covenant and the rule of law. After the fall of man in the garden of Eden, God has *always* dealt with man on the basis of the covenant of grace.⁴²

⁴⁰ Matthew Poole, *Commentary on the Holy Bible*, (Carlisle, PA: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1963 [1685]), 3:655.

⁴¹ John Calvin, *Galatians and Ephesians* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1981), p. 108.

⁴² In the garden of Eden, God made a covenant with Adam (the covenant of works) in which He promised Adam (and in Adam his posterity) eternal life if he personally and perfectly obeyed God’s command not to eat of the tree

That is, from the fall of Adam until the second coming, anyone who is saved, is saved by grace through faith. No one, from the fall to the consummation, can be saved by his own works of righteousness. Even the sacrifices of animals under the Old covenant did not really save; “for it is not possible that the blood of bulls and goats could take away sins” (Heb. 10:4). The sacrifices were types that pointed to Jesus Christ who “by one offering has perfected forever those who are being sanctified” (Heb 10:14). Galatians 3:21 teaches that the law of God is not against the promise. The law as a covenant was an expression of the covenant of grace. The shadows, type and ceremonies pointed to Jesus Christ and taught the people to trust in the shed blood of the coming Messiah (Isa. 53:3-12), “[t]he lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world” (Jn. 1:29). The law as a covenant (the Mosaic administration) ended with the coming of Christ and the New covenant because it served its purpose and was no longer needed. The shadows, ceremonies and types are replaced by the reality, Jesus Christ. A sailor who is given a model of a ship to learn from, no longer needs the model when the ship is in port. The covenant of law is now ended, but the rule of law is eternal.⁴³

The Law as a Curse

Another manner in which believers are no longer under the law is that believers are not under the *curse* of the law. “Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law, having become a curse for us (for it is written, ‘cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree’), that the blessings of Abraham might come upon the Gentiles in Christ Jesus, that we might receive the promise of the Spirit through faith” (Gal. 3:13-14). Paul says that by Christ’s death on the cross, believers are set free from the curse or penalty of the law. Anyone who commits sin is under a curse. God said, “The soul who sins shall die” (Ezek. 18:4). John the Baptist declared that “he who does not believe the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God abides on him” (Jn. 3:36). Paul said that the “law brings about wrath” (Rom. 4:15). “Having shown the absolute demand of God upon a man’s life, having defined what sin is, having convicted man of sin and shown him the nature of sinful

of the knowledge of good and evil (Gen. 2:17). Adam disobeyed God’s command and cast himself and the whole human race into sin, misery and death. God, in His mercy, immediately instituted a second covenant, commonly called the covenant of grace. According to the covenant of grace sinners are saved solely by the sinless life and sacrificial death of Jesus Christ. While there is only one covenant of grace there are a number of different covenantal administrations (e.g., Noah, Abraham, Moses and David). Paul wrote, “For all the promises of God in Him are Yes, and in Him Amen, to the glory of God through us” (2 Cor. 1:20). From the promise of a seed that would crush the serpent (Gen. 3:15) to the covenant with Abraham (Gen. 15:6ff), and even the Mosaic administration, faith in the blood, the sinless substitute Jesus Christ was paramount. From Genesis to Revelation salvation is only through the Lamb of God. The different administrations of the covenant of grace in the Old Testament built on the earlier administrations; that is, the promise of the coming Redeemer became enlarged and clearer as divine revelation progressed. The Dispensational approach which sets the “dispensations” in opposition to each other ignores the common Old Testament theme of the *promise* and the need for *blood atonement*, and pictures God as incompetent (i.e., going from plan *a* to *b* to *c* because each plan fails).

⁴³ The division of the covenant into the Old and the New is a difference not in the way of salvation but in administration. “There can be no doubt that the spiritually minded Israelites did not rest in the sacrifices or sacraments themselves, but by faith really experienced Christ in them, as does the Christian” (Ernest Kevan, *Moral Law*, p. 67). This is obvious from the fact that the promise made to Old Testament Israel (Acts 7:17; 13:32), is explicitly referred to by Paul as the gospel (Rom. 1:2; 10:14-16). Furthermore, Paul mentions Abraham and David as examples of justification by faith (Rom. 4:1-12), and the author of Hebrews points believers to the examples of the faith of Abel, Enoch, Abraham, Sarah, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, David, Samuel, and so on (cf. Heb. 11). Paul says that the Israelites enjoyed the same spiritual reality and blessing in their sacraments as those of which the Christian partakes (1 Cor. 10).

rebellion, the law pronounces the just condemnation of God upon the sinner. The law shuts up all men under sin and seals off any escape to life for them in their own strength (Gal. 3:22). The sinner finds himself lost and sold under sin; the magnitude of his dilemma is revealed in the words, 'It stands written that accursed is everyone who does not continue in all things having been written in the law-book to do them' (Gal. 3:10).⁴⁴ Jesus Christ bore the guilt and the penalty for the sins of His people on the cross at Calvary. The wrath of God that we deserved for our sins was placed upon Christ. But the fact that Christ bore the judgment that we deserved does *not* mean that believers are no longer under law as a guide for daily living and sanctification. Such a view "is antinomianism, and alien to St. Paul. St. Paul attacked man-made laws, and man-made interpretations of the law, as the way of justification; the law can never justify; it does sanctify, and there is no sanctification by lawlessness."⁴⁵

The Law Convicts Man of Sin

Christians are not under law as a covenant, nor are they under law as a curse. A third way in which Christians are no longer under law is as a means of conviction to lead us to Christ. Paul says: "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. Therefore, by the deeds of the law no flesh will be justified in His sight, for by the law is the knowledge of sin" (Rom. 3:19-20). It is a mistake to argue that God's law is evil, bad or harsh. The law is not the problem; man is the problem. Man has an evil heart that loves sin. One of the reasons God has given the law is to expose sin, to convict rebellious hearts. "What shall we say then? Is the law sin? Certainly not! On the contrary, I would not have known sin except through the law. For I would not have known covetousness unless the law had said 'You shall not covet.' But sin, taking opportunity by the commandment, produced in me all manner of evil desire. For apart from the law sin was dead. I was once without the law, but when the commandment came, sin revived and I died. And the commandment, which was to bring life, I found to bring death. For sin, taking occasion by the commandment, deceived me, and by it killed me. Therefore, the law is holy, and the commandment holy and just and good" (Rom. 7:7-12).

From his own personal experience Paul knew that "the law convicted him of his sin and sinfulness."⁴⁶ As a Pharisee, Paul was taught that law-keeping was an external matter, something achievable by man. He says, "I was alive apart from the law" (v. 9). That is, apart from a biblical understanding of the internal aspect of law-keeping, Paul was self-deceived, self-righteous and self-complacent. But when the command "Thou shalt not covet" (v. 7) came into his consciousness, Paul's complacent self-assurance came to an end. "And the commandment, which was unto life, this was found by me to be unto death." The reference is to the original purpose of the law. "The purpose of law in man's original estate was not to give occasion to sin, but to direct and regulate man's life in the path of righteousness and, therefore, to guard and promote life. By reason of sin, however, that same law promotes death, in that it gives occasion to sin. 'And the wages of sin is death.' The more law is registered in our consciousness, the more sin is aroused to action, and law as law, can exercise no restraining or remedial effect."⁴⁷

⁴⁴ Bahnsen, *Theonomy in Christian Ethics*, p. 271.

⁴⁵ R. J. Rushdoony, *The Institutes of Biblical Law*, p. 674.

⁴⁶ John Murray, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 2:249.

⁴⁷ *Ibid*, p. 252.

Paul the Pharisee was truly a pitiful creature. He expected salvation through the law, but the law cannot change unregenerate hearts. He expected happiness and holiness through the law, but instead he descended into the despair of guilt, condemnation, misery, wrath, and the displeasure of a righteous, just and holy God. "Sin, taking occasion by the commandment, deceived me, and by it killed me" (Rom. 7:11). Sin deceived Paul. All of Paul's hopes and dreams of self-righteous bliss were dashed on the rocks of sin and inner corruption. What Paul the Pharisee wanted the law to do, it could not do. Not because the law was defective, or because the law was evil, but because the law (in the post-fall world) was not designed by God to secure our salvation. "Such is the experience of every believer, in the ordinary progress of his inward life. He first turns to the law, to his own self-righteousness and strength, but he soon finds that all the law can do is only to aggravate his guilt and misery."⁴⁸ God uses the law to plow the furrows of man's heart. Once he knows his guilt, once he knows that he cannot obey the law, he is brought to despair and, then he runs to the cross of Christ. The awful burden of guilt is washed away by Christ's blood and His perfect righteousness. His perfect law-keeping is given to us as a gift.

Although the law cannot save, it prepares the elect for salvation. Many commentators argue that Paul's reference to the law as a tutor or guardian which leads one to Christ that one might be justified by faith (Gal. 3:24) refers to this function of the law. Before one can receive the Lord Jesus Christ he must be shown what sin is and how helpless he is. The law exposes many areas of one's life which would not have otherwise been recognized as sins. "It arouses sin, increasing its power, and making it, both in itself and in our consciousness, exceedingly sinful.... Before the gospel can be embraced as a means of deliverance from sin, we must feel that we are involved in corruption and misery."⁴⁹ "It is essential to declare the commandments in order to show the sinner his heart of hatred toward God and enmity toward men. Only then will he flee to the grace of God in Jesus Christ to provide him with righteousness and love.... When you see that men have been wounded by the law, then it is time to pour in the balm of Gospel oil. It is the sharp needle of the law that makes way for the scarlet thread of the Gospel."⁵⁰

Chapter 3: Natural Law vs. Biblical Law

The idea that civil governments are obligated to apply the Bible's moral case laws to modern society is viewed with alarm and disdain by the vast majority of Bible-believing Christians. Those who reject the abiding validity of the Old Testament moral case laws need to do two things. First, they must offer a biblical explanation as to why the moral case laws are no longer binding. Second, they must provide a biblical alternative. If a massive revival of Christianity occurred in America, and most of the people and political leaders were converted to Christ, how would America's judicial system be affected? How would America develop a biblical system of law without the guidance of the Old Testament moral case laws? A brief examination of some of the options offered by those who reject the Old Testament civil laws will show that those who reject these laws have not yet offered a biblical alternative.

⁴⁸ Charles Hodge, *Romans* (Carlisle, PA: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1972 [1835]), p. 225.

⁴⁹ *Ibid*, p. 226.

⁵⁰ Walter Chantry, *Today's Gospel: Authentic or Synthetic?* (Carlisle, PA: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1970), pp. 42-43.

One popular strategy is basically to ignore the whole question. Ultra-Dispensationalists teach that the earth and the nations therein belong to Satan. The earth is becoming progressively more evil over time, and the secret rapture is going to occur at any moment. Thus, the whole question of Christian civil government is irrelevant. Since the nations of the earth will never be converted to Christ and disciplined by His word, why waste time even discussing godly rule? This option must be rejected as unscriptural because it ignores Christ's great commission (Matt. 28:18ff.), and Christ's kingship over the nations (cf. Ps. 2). Christ commanded His church to disciple all *nations*. Through the preaching of the Gospel and the teaching of God's word, all nations are to be progressively brought under Christ's rule. Theologian A. A. Hodge reminds us of our responsibility as Christians: "It is our duty as far as lies in our power, immediately to organize human society and all its institutions and organs upon a distinctly Christian basis. Indifference or impartiality here between the law of the kingdom and the law of the world, or of its prince, the devil, is utter treason to the King of Righteousness. The Bible, the great statute-book of the kingdom, explicitly lays down principles which, when candidly applied, will regulate the action of every human being in all relations. There can be no compromise. The King said, with regard to all descriptions of moral agents in all spheres of activity, 'He that is not with me is against me.' If the national life in general is organized upon non-Christian principles, the churches which are embraced within the universal assimilating power of that nation will not be able to preserve their integrity."⁵¹

The hyper-Dispensational answer to civil government and social problems is a flight from biblical responsibility and a rejection of the dominion mandate. "It is a modern heresy that holds that the law of God has no meaning nor any binding force for man today. It is an aspect of the influence of humanistic and evolutionary thought on the church, and it posits an evolving, developing god. This 'dispensational' god expressed himself in law in an earlier age, then later expressed himself by grace alone, and is now perhaps to express himself in still another way. But this is not the God of Scripture, whose grace and law remain the same in every age, because He, as the sovereign and absolute Lord, changes not, nor does He need to change."⁵²

Christians who reject the Old Testament judicial law (including the moral case laws) and yet believe in the abiding validity of the Ten Commandments could attempt to develop a system of case laws based on the Decalogue. This raises the obvious question: which system of moral case laws is superior, that which is divinely inspired, perfect, just, and infallible, or that which is developed by sinful men and thus contains guesswork, errors, injustices and so on? The answer is obvious. This fact may explain why those who reject the judicial law as binding, yet embrace the Decalogue, have not even attempted to develop a detailed system of Christian civil law. This may also explain why those authors (e.g., Charles Colson) who are hostile to God's judicial law system keep dipping into it for judicial ideas. There is no other place to go that *clearly* and *infallibly* reveals God's will in these areas. The problem today is that Christians want to pick and choose from the judicial laws as they see fit. If a person likes a certain law (e.g., restitution), that law is accepted and discussed, but if a law or penalty appears harsh (i.e., death penalty for incorrigible teenagers) that law is rejected as for another time and place. Selective Dispensationalism is arbitrary and sinful. Only God has the authority to repeal His law. Therefore, if any judicial (civil) law is rejected, there must be clear exegetical reasons for its rejection.

⁵¹ A. A. Hodge, *Evangelical Theology: Lectures on Doctrine* (Carlisle, PA: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1990 [1890]), p. 37.

⁵² R. J. Rushdoony, *The Institutes of Biblical Law*, p. 2.

The most popular option for those who reject the validity of the Old Testament judicial laws is to fall back on some sort of Christian natural law theory. Christian natural law theory proposes that God created in man and in the universe ethical principles which can be known by man. These principles are universal and binding on all men. Thus, general revelation and God's common grace are all that nations need to rule justly. The idea that natural revelation *apart* from God's judicial law is the standard for the civil laws of nations is unbiblical and irrational for several reasons.

First, it implies that God has two ethical systems that are separate and distinct from each other. In reality, the Bible teaches that God has only *one* ethical standard. "The fact is that all of the Mosaic laws (in their moral demands, in distinction from their redemptive provisions) are reflected in general revelation; to put it another way, the moral obligations communicated through both means of divine communication are *identical* (Rom. 1:18-21, 25, 32; 2:14-15; 3:9, 19-20, 23). Scripture never suggests that God has *two sets* of ethical standards or two moral codes, the one (for Gentiles) being an abridgement of the other (for Jews). Rather, He has one set of commandments which are communicated to men in *two ways*: through Scripture and through nature (Ps. 19, cf. vs. 2-3 with 8-9). Accordingly, the Gentile nations (and rulers) are repeatedly condemned in Scripture for transgressing the moral standards which we find revealed in the law of Moses—and not simply the summary commands of the decalogue, but their case-law applications and details as well (e.g., Mk. 6:18)."⁵³ "The first principle of the Shema Israel is thus, one God, one law. It is the declaration of an absolute moral order to which man must conform.... Because God is one, and truth is one, the one law has an inner coherence.... Instead of being strata of diverse origins and utility, the law of God is essentially one word, a unified whole."⁵⁴ Therefore, the natural revelation of God's law should never be set in opposition to the special revelation of God's law. John Calvin, John Knox, the early Presbyterians and the Puritans all believed that God's law revealed in nature and in special revelation was one and the same law. But because of the effects of the fall upon both man and creation, these men focused their attention on special revelation as the only infallible way to understand the natural creation.

Second, it presupposes that general revelation was intended by God to function separately from special revelation. Even before the fall (before sin affected his consciousness and the natural revelation that appeared around him), Adam was still dependent upon God's special revelation. Adam was a covenant being who communicated with God on a daily basis before the fall. Van Til writes,

The revelation of the covenant to man in paradise was supernaturally mediated. This was naturally the case inasmuch as it pertained to man's historical task. Thus, the sense of obedience or disobedience involved in Adam's consciousness of himself, covenant-consciousness, envelopes creature-consciousness. In paradise Adam knew that as a creature of God it was natural and proper that he should keep the covenant that God had made with him. In this way it appears that man's proper self-consciousness depended even in paradise, upon his being in contact with both supernatural and natural revelation. God's natural revelation was within man as well as about him. Man's very constitution as a rational and moral being is itself revelational to man as the ethically responsible reactor to revelation. And natural revelation is itself incomplete. It needed from the outset to be supplemented with supernatural revelation about

⁵³ Greg Bahnsen, *Theonomy: An Informed Response*, Gary North, ed. (Tyler, TX: Institute for Christian Economics, 1991), p. 102.

⁵⁴ R. J. Rushdoony, *The Institutes of Biblical Law*, p. 18.

man's future. Thus the very idea of supernatural revelation is correlatively embodied in the idea of man's proper self-consciousness.⁵⁵

Third, it ignores the effect of the fall upon the creation and man's nature. Man is even more dependent upon supernatural revelation after the fall than he was before. Jones writes,

Biblically, man's reason cannot autonomously discover law because man's reason has been damaged by the Fall, in that man's heart, the control center of his being which guides his reason, is in rebellion against his Creator (Rom. 1). Man since the Fall, is radically affected by Original Sin, which is nothing less than the desire to be his own god, determining good and evil for himself (Gen. 3); this, in the absence of regeneration (and even after regeneration not fully healed in this life), is the ruling motivation of his life. Moreover, nature itself is fallen and imperfect (Rom. 8:22); hence, even if man's reason were autonomous he could not hope to derive perfect laws from a fallen nature. But the problem in the real world is compounded by the fact that both man's reason and nature itself are fallen, realities which destroy his pretensions to know and proclaim naturally available principles of law.⁵⁶

How is mankind supposed to develop a unified, coherent, just system of law from a fallen world? Without the word of God as a guide to define sin, crime, justice, evil and so on, how is man to decide what in nature is normative and what in nature is a perversion as a result of the fall? "The difficulty concerns how we are to select those aspects of natural behavior or those laws of nature (in the descriptive sense) which can legitimately serve as guides to moral behavior. For it is idle to pretend that we can extract a uniform message from nature. Are we, for instance, to model ourselves upon the peaceful habits of sheep or upon the internecine conflicts of ants? Is the egalitarianism of the beaver or the hierarchical life of the bee the proper exemplar for human society? Should we imitate the widespread polygamy of the animal kingdom, or is there some higher regularity of which this is no more than a misleading instance? In the light of these and similar questions, it becomes impossible to regard the maxim 'follow nature' as a substantive guide to conduct. Moreover, although these discrepancies in nature considerably reduce the value of natural-law doctrine from an epistemological point of view, the damage they do to it as a logical theory would seem fatal, for the nature in terms of which the norms of justice are defined turns out to be internally inconsistent."⁵⁷ The "natural" order after the fall says one thing to St. Thomas Aquinas and quite another thing to the Marquis de Sade. Apart from divine revelation and an understanding of the fall's effect upon the created order, "nature" can be used to justify murder, fornication, theft, rape, aggressive warfare, homosexuality, anarchy, totalitarianism and so on.

Since man is both a covenant creature and a fallen creature, there can be in principle no ethical neutrality between regenerate and unregenerate man. While it is true that unregenerate men have a true knowledge of God (Rom. 1:18), it is a *suppressed* knowledge. It is also true that unsaved men have the *work* of the law written on their hearts (Rom. 2:15), but this does not mean that unbelievers *love* God's law as a whole. Jones writes,

⁵⁵ Cornelius Van Til, *The Defense of the Faith* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1980 [1955]), pp. 90-91.

⁵⁶ Archie P. Jones, "Natural Law and Christian Resistance to Tyranny" in Gary North, ed., *Christianity and Civilization 2: The Theology of Christian Resistance* (Tyler, TX: Geneva Divinity School, 1983), p. 114.

⁵⁷ Paul Edwards, ed., *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (New York, NY: MacMillan and the Free Press, 1967), 5:451.

The Bible is clear that men have two basic religious philosophies: one, anti-Christian and worldly, and the other Christian and anti-worldly. These two religious philosophies take diametrically opposite views of God and His word. The worldly tradition of unbelievers makes them enemies of God, who see God's word as utter foolishness and will not be subject to it. The Christian view fears God, sees Christ as the source of all wisdom and knowledge, and seeks to make every thought captive to Him.... The Bible condemns the ideas of autonomous reason, neutral or impartial thinking, and intellectual-moral common ground between Christians and pagans, and the acquisition and advocacy of Truth by pagans. This is not to say that pagans can learn nothing, or that Christians can learn nothing from pagans. The mind that seeks to replace God's law with man's law may admit the truth of *some* of God's laws, but its enmity against the Lord, and its desire to be its own lord, will never let it admit the goodness and justice either of God's law as a whole or of God's law in its details.⁵⁸

Thus the call by Christian scholars to reject God's judicial Old Testament laws in favor of natural law is an implicit surrender to a pagan law order. There is no neutrality. Man cannot serve two diametrically opposed law systems at the same time. If Christians, in the name of neutrality, adopt natural law instead of biblical law, they will end up with pagan law. "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.*"⁵⁹

Fourth, those who advocate independent natural law are giving it a role in society that Scripture does not sanction. When the apostle Paul discusses what unbelievers do by "nature," he does not set forth some sort of natural law theory by which to formulate civil laws for society. He simply sets out to *condemn*, to render guilty before God, Gentiles who do not have special revelation. Paul says, "For there is no partiality with God. For as many as have sinned without law will also perish without law, and as many as have sinned in the law will be judged by the law" (Rom. 2:11-12). Paul answers the question: How are Gentiles, who do not have the *written* law, guilty? Paul argues that Gentiles, who though fallen, are created in the image of God and still have enough of the works of the law upon their heart and conscience to render them guilty before God. Paul does *not* argue that every detail of the law is discernible through natural revelation. Paul is not setting forth a method of social ethics apart from special revelation. In fact, Paul is careful to qualify his statement regarding the law that unbelievers do have. Note, that Paul says the "*work* of the law is written in their hearts" (Rom. 2:15). Murray writes, "Paul does not say that the law is written upon their hearts. He refrains from this form of a statement apparently for the same reason as in verse 14 he had said that the Gentiles 'do the things of the law' and not that they did or fulfilled the law. Such expressions as 'fulfilling the law' and 'the law written upon the heart' are reserved for a state of heart and mind far beyond that predicated of unbelieving Gentiles."⁶⁰

⁵⁸ Archie P. Jones, "Natural Law and Christian Resistance to Tyranny," p. 115.

⁵⁹ Gary North, *Political Polytheism: The Myth of Pluralism* (Tyler, TX: Institute for Christian Economics, 1989), p. 640.

⁶⁰ John Murray, *The Epistle to the Romans*, pp. 74-75. Christian scholar John W. Robbins concurs: "Paul also says that men suppress the truth in unrighteousness; they refuse to glorify God; they are ingrates, fools, and do not like to retain God in their knowledge. He is describing the Gentiles, i.e., the natural law theorists among others. Now of course men do know some rudimentary principles of the law of God—the 'work of the law;' Paul teaches this in the second chapter of Romans. In fact, we may say on the basis of 1 Corinthians 11:7 that men can only lose the *imago*

To argue that this passage teaches that unbelievers can develop a detailed, just, comprehensive judicial law system by simply following their conscience is not warranted. The Jews are guilty because they have broken God's detailed written law, and the Gentiles are guilty for breaking the broad unwritten law that remains within. Paul goes on to say that Jews have a great advantage over Gentiles because "to them were committed the oracles of God" (Rom. 3:2). Why do Christian scholars argue that the detailed, perspicuous written law must be ignored in order that nations can develop a system of judicial law from a sin-fogged, piecemeal version of the same law? Could it be that Christians are embarrassed by God's law? Many scholars are simply using natural law theory as an excuse to preserve human autonomy. Many Christians have been so influenced by Dispensational thinking and the myth of religious pluralism that given the choice between God's law and man's law, they choose the latter. Gary North concurs: "What Paul taught was this: all men have been given sufficient internal revelation of God—the image of God in man—to *condemn* them eternally. 'Know thyself' gets you into hell, not heaven. This light of internal revelation, through God's restraining grace ('common grace'), enables human society to function in history. God does not allow men to become totally consistent with their own covenant-breaking presuppositions. But to the extent that men become consistent with their covenant-breaking religions, they depart from this testimony of God's ethical standards. Thus, natural law theory as a concept separated from the biblical revelation is like every other doctrine separated from revelation: wrong. The outline of autonomous law is wrong; the judicial content is also wrong."⁶¹

Fifth, the death blow to natural law theory as an independent system of judicial law for nations comes from the clear teaching of the Bible: that all nations are obligated to obey God's written law. Although the written law was primarily addressed to God's covenant people, all nations are obligated to obey God's moral law and the moral case laws. "You shall have the *same* law for the stranger and for one from your own country; for I am the LORD your God" (Lev. 24:22). The command to have the same law is given in the midst of judicial laws (in the very next verse a man is executed for blasphemy). "Let us hear the conclusion of the whole matter: fear God and keep His commandments, for this is the whole duty of man" (Ecc. 12:13).

Moses, in his sermon to the people before they entered the promised land, tells the people to carefully observe all of God's law. Why? Because Israel was to be an example to the surrounding pagan nations. "Therefore be careful to observe them; for this is your wisdom and your understanding in the sight of the peoples who will hear all these statutes, and say, 'Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people.' For what great nation is there that has God so near to it, as the LORD our God is to us, for whatever reason we may call upon Him? 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?" (Deut. 4:6-8). Calvin says regarding verse 8,

dei by ceasing to be men. As long as they are men and are the *imago dei*, they are responsible for their actions. Men cannot, however, construct [biblical] theories upon this rudimentary knowledge, for their intellects are depraved. The carnal mind is enmity against God, for it is not subject to the law of God, neither indeed can be (Romans 8:7). Could there be a better refutation of natural law theory than that? The Gentiles, Paul says, *performed* some of the deeds of the law, almost, as it were, by accident... While the Gentiles may perform the law, rather, some of the things commanded by the law, Paul does not say—he says the opposite—that they can expound the law." ("Some Problems with Natural Law," in Gary North, ed., *The Journal of Christian Reconstruction Symposium on Biblical Law*, [Vallecito, CA: Chalcedon, winter, 1975], 2:20).

⁶¹ Gary North, *Political Polytheism: The Myth of Pluralism*, pp. 301-302.

And for proof thereof, what is the cause that the heathen are so hardened in their own dotages [febleness]? It is for that [because] they never knew God's law, and therefore they never compared the truth with the untruth. But when God's law cometh in place, then doth it appear that all the rest is but smoke: in so much that they which took themselves to be marvelous[ly] witty, are found to have been no better than besotted in their own beastliness. This is apparent. Wherefore let us mark well, that to discern that there is nothing but vanity in all worldly devises, we must know the Laws and ordinances of God. But if we rest upon men's laws, surely it is not possible for us to judge rightly. Then must we needs go first [need to go first] to God's school, and that will show us that when we have once profited under him, it will be enough. This is all our perfection. And on the other side we may despise all that is ever invented by man, seeing there is nothing but fondness and uncertainty in them. And that is the cause why Moses termeth them *rightful ordinances*. As if he should say, it is true indeed that other people have store[s] of ceremonies, store[s] of rules, and store[s] of Laws: but there is no right at all in them, all is awry, all is crooked. True it is that they perceive it not: and what is the cause thereof, but for that it is not possible for them to discern good from evil, without God's word which is the truth? Howsoever we fare, we cannot do the thing that is just or right, except we have first learned it at God's hand. And if we have been so far overseen as to allow our own doings, let us not go on still, for God will disallow every whit of it, because we must take all our rightness at his truth. In this case it is not for every man to bring his own weights and his own balance [Calvin here is referring to justice]: but we must hold ourselves to that which God hath uttered and doth utter.⁶²

This statement is an unequivocal rejection of the medieval doctrine of natural law. Calvin says that if the heathen are to have right laws they must *first* go to God's word and think His thoughts after Him.

The fact that Israel received special revelation (i.e., the written law) from God proves the vast superiority of their law and justice system to those of the surrounding pagan nations. Because Israel received an infallible, precious, written revelation of God's law, they would be considered (if obedient) "a wise and understanding people" (Deut. 4:6) by the Gentiles. Why? Because the best that the Gentiles could hope to achieve through natural revelation would be a hit-or-miss, sin-obscured edition of the law revealed in Scripture. Thus, the whole idea of the written law being *only* for Israel, while the Gentile nations must look to natural law is unbiblical. As Isaiah the prophet says, "Listen to Me, My people; and give ear to Me, O My nation: for law will proceed from Me, and I will make My justice rest as a light of the peoples" (Isa. 51:4). If God had intended that the Gentile nations should receive their laws from nature after the coming of Christ (instead of from the written law), then surely God would have required the Gentile nations to do the same under the Old covenant. Yet the exact opposite is the case. God's law,

⁶² John Calvin, *Sermons on Deuteronomy: Facsimile of 1583 Edition* (Carlisle, PA: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1987), p. 123. It should be noted that Calvin has made a number of statements that appear to contradict what he says regarding Israel's law in Deuteronomy. In his *Institutes* he writes, "I would have preferred to pass over this matter in utter silence if I were not aware that here many dangerously go astray. For there are some who deny that a commonwealth is duly framed which neglects the political system of Moses, and is ruled by the common law of nations. Let other men consider how perilous and seditious this notion is; it will be enough for me to have proved it false and foolish" (IV, XX, 14). Calvin says that the moral law is nothing else than a testimony of natural law and that various civil laws may be in accord with natural law yet contradict the Jewish law and each other (cf. IV, XX, 16). François Wendel writes, "One could cite numerous instances of this persistence of humanist tendencies. Whatever has since been said of it, Calvin retained the notion of natural law that he had acquired from the Stoics, and did no more than accommodate it to Christian principles" (*Calvin: Origins and Development of His Religious Thought* [Grand Rapids, MI: Baker 1997 (1950)] p. 33).

including the judicial law, is repeatedly set forth as a light to the Gentile nations. Furthermore, as noted above, the attempt to place the law revealed in Scripture and the law revealed in nature in separate categories (one for Israel and one for Gentiles) assumes that God has two separate laws, when, in fact, there is only one law. “Such a blessed lamp as God’s law (cf. Prov. 6:23) should not be put under a bushel but allowed to shine into the world so that other men would come to glorify God and serve Him. Consequently, the norm of the law should be seen as applying to those living outside the borders of Israel; otherwise God would be represented as having a double standard of judgment—something which He clearly forbids in His people and their judges (Deut. 25:13-16; Lev. 19:35-37).”⁶³

Sixth, the moral case laws that are a part of Israel’s judicial law are used by God as a guide to judge the heathen nations. If these laws applied *only* to Israel and not to the surrounding nations, why are whole nations destroyed by God for the violation of these laws? In Leviticus chapter 18, after a whole series of moral case laws dealing with sexual immorality, God declares: “Do not defile yourselves with any of these things; for by all these the nations are defiled, which I am casting out before you. For the land is defiled; therefore I visit the punishment of its iniquity upon it, and the land vomits out its inhabitants. You shall therefore keep My statutes and My judgments, and shall not commit any of these abominations, either any of your own nation or any stranger who sojourns among you, for all these abominations the men of the land have done, who were before you, and thus the land is defiled” (Lev. 18:24-27). If the pagan nations were judged by the moral case laws found in the judicial law, then those nations were subject to that law, for God obviously cannot judge a people for violating laws that do not apply to them.

The judgment of Sodom by God is further evidence that the moral case laws are universally binding on all nations at all times. Hundreds of years before the written law of God was given to Israel, Sodom was completely destroyed for violating God’s law. Which law? Sodom was destroyed for violating what eventually would be classified as a moral case law: the prohibition against homosexuality (Lev. 18:22; 20:13). Thus, the heathen nations are just as obligated to keep the moral laws as they are the Ten Commandments, for “if there had been no binding laws, there could have been no sin and hence no justified vengeance of God against the Sodomites.”⁶⁴

Although it is true that the prohibition against homosexuality is repeated in the New Testament (as are a number of other case laws), that does not mean such cases are binding *only* because they are repeated. The apostles used the moral case laws to illustrate and prove various ethical points that needed to be made. That they freely used the moral case laws proves their abiding validity. Bahnsen writes,

In endorsing the Old Testament law, the New Testament never stops to make a special exception for the judicial laws. Indeed, when Jesus summarized the entire law, He quoted not from the ten commandments, but from two laws about love outside the decalogue (Matt. 22:37-39; cf. Deut. 6:5; Lev. 19:18), *Laws outside the decalogue were quoted as on a par with the ten commandments* (Mark 10:19). Even the lighter demands of the law were not to be left undone, said Jesus (Luke 11:42). Consequently, Jesus condemned the setting aside of the death penalty for incorrigible children (Matt. 15:4-5). 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). James applied the judicial law about prompt payment of one’s employees (5:4). The important New Testament injunctions about not avenging oneself,

⁶³ Bahnsen, *Theonomy in Christian Ethics*, p. 342.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 354.

about going to an offending brother, and about caring for one's enemies are all taken from the judicial laws of the Old Testament (Rom. 12:19; Matt. 18:15; Rom. 12:20; Matt. 5:44). You see, the New Testament cites the judicial laws of the Old Testament too often, and without apology or disclaimer, to accept at face value the bald claim of theonomic critics that these laws have been abolished by the work of Christ or the coming of the Holy Spirit. "Not one jot or tittle will pass away from the law until heaven and earth pass away" (Matt. 5:18).⁶⁵

The common idea among Evangelicals that only those laws that are repeated in the New Testament are binding is arbitrary, for nowhere in the Bible are we told to *only* obey laws that are repeated in the New Testament. It is also absurd, for a number of important moral case laws are not repeated. Is bestiality permissible in the New covenant era? Of course not! "Righteousness exalts a nation, but sin is a reproach to any people" (Prov. 14:34).

Seventh, natural revelation is clearly inadequate for a detailed system of judicial law because there are further categories and distinctions that cannot be derived from nature. The Bible makes a distinction between sins that are not crimes (e.g., lust, not caring for the poor, getting drunk, lying that does not involve fraud, coveting, etc.) and sins that are crimes (e.g., homosexual behavior, adultery, bestiality, theft, rape, murder, manslaughter, fraud, etc.). Although nature is adequate to render people guilty before God, it cannot tell us what sins the state should punish with penal sanctions and what sins the state should ignore. One of the main reasons the rejection of biblical law and the embracing of secular humanism has resulted in statism is the simple fact that the state seeks to punish many activities (e.g., smoking, accidentally hurting kangaroo rats, etc.) that are, according to the Bible, outside the parameter of criminal law.

Another aspect of judicial law that cannot be derived from nature is penology. Although it is fairly obvious that certain crimes are more heinous than others (e.g., murder is worse than theft), how are civil authorities to determine equitable punishments for all the various crimes, apart from the details of the Bible's civil law-code? Does nature teach restitution, a prison system or a system of physical torture? Can the conscience discern the penalty for manslaughter or fraud, or the seduction of an unmarried virgin? The result of rejecting the moral case laws and the specific penalties found in the civil law has been judicial chaos. History has proven that without the specific judicial guidelines for punishment found in the Old Testament law, civil magistrates have been arbitrary in both defining what constitutes a crime and meting out the punishment for various offenses. During the Middle Ages, punishment was often unduly harsh. Torturing and disemboweling a peasant for hunting in the king's forest is sadistic and not befitting the crime. In our day, many murderers are paroled after five years in prison. The idea that sinful men can decide for themselves what is a crime and what is a proper punishment for that crime is a recipe for societal disaster and statist tyranny. Gary North concurs:

In the modern world, we have experienced a huge increase in criminal activity. This has been the inevitable result of the West's steady abandonment of biblical penal sanctions. Western society has been in revolt against God's penal sanctions for many centuries. From the beginning, the West substituted public torture followed by capital punishment by an executioner in place of the Old Testament's requirement of execution by public stoning. Second, it substituted imprisonment for restitution to victims. Third, in the 1820's, the United States began to substitute the centralized state prison systems for local jails and public flogging, and these new institutions became the penal models for the whole Western world. Fourth, civil courts

⁶⁵ Bahnsen, *No Other Standard*, p. 99.

substituted life imprisonment for capital punishment. Fifth, judges substituted parole for the life imprisonment. By the early 1970's, for example, the median time served in prison for homicide in the State of Massachusetts was under three years. Step by step, the West began to subsidize the criminals at the expense of the victims, and all in the name of compassion.⁶⁶

If Christians are going to be serious about discipling the nations, they must reject unscriptural natural law theories and learn to apply the Old Testament moral case laws to modern society. The current hostility of many within Reformed churches toward adopting the moral case laws for the nations⁶⁷ is not based on sound exegesis, but rather on an acceptance of political polytheism. Natural law theory has been used as an *excuse* to avoid God's judicial law. By default most professing Christians have turned the making of civil law over to the humanists. "You would be surprised how many Christians still believe something dangerously close to Marcionism: not a two-god view, exactly, but a 'God-who-changed-all-His-rules' sort of view. They begin with accurate teaching that the ceremonial laws of the Old Testament were fulfilled by Christ, and therefore that the *unchanging principles* of worship are *applied differently* in the New Testament, but then they erroneously conclude that the whole Old Testament system of civil law was dropped by God, and *nothing biblical was put in its place*. In other words, God created a sort of vacuum for State law."⁶⁸ In the current debate regarding God's law, natural law is simply a smokescreen for autonomous law.

Chapter 4: Sanctification and the Law

Before discussing sanctification and the law, one must first define sanctification. The *Westminster Shorter Catechism* says: "Sanctification is the work of God's free grace, whereby we are renewed in the whole man after the image of God, and are enabled more and more to die unto sin, and live unto righteousness."⁶⁹ Berkhof defines sanctification "as that gracious and continuous operation of the Holy Spirit, by which He delivers the justified sinner from the pollution of sin, renews his whole nature in the image of God, and enables him to perform good works."⁷⁰ In justification, the sinner who believes in Jesus is declared righteous before God solely on the merits of Jesus Christ. The guilt of sin is removed by the sacrificial death of Christ and the sinner is clothed with Christ's perfect righteousness (His sinless life). But once the believer is justified by God, then *immediately* begins the lifelong process of sanctification.

Sanctification cannot be separated from justification. Why? Because the person who believes in Jesus Christ receives Him as Lord (Acts 16:31; Col. 2:6). The idea that Jesus Christ

⁶⁶ Gary North, *Victims' Rights: The Biblical View of Civil Justice* (Tyler, TX: Institute for Christian Economics, 1970), p. 7.

⁶⁷ "First comes personal faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior (not just Savior). Second comes Church renewal. There can be no successful reformation of society without first beginning a reformation of the Church. Third comes family renewal. This involves pulling your children out of public schools. Fourth comes local politics.... From there we go to state and national politics." (Gary North, *Political Polytheism*, p. 559). "Furthermore, it should be observed that these studies do not advocate the imposition of God's law *by force* upon a society, as though that would be a way to 'bring in the kingdom'. God's kingdom advances by means of the Great Commission—evangelism, preaching, and nurture in the word of God—and in the power of God's regenerating and sanctifying Spirit" (Bahnsen, *By This Standard*, p. 9).

⁶⁸ Gary North, *Political Polytheism: The Myth of Pluralism*, p. 591.

⁶⁹ *Shorter Catechism*, Question 35.

⁷⁰ Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1939), p. 532.

lived a sinless life and suffered humiliation and an excruciating death on the cross to satisfy the righteous demands of God's holy law, so that Christians could live a life of sin and loose morals, is unbiblical and perverse. Second, Christians are united with Jesus Christ in His death and resurrection: therefore, Christ breaks the power of sin for all believers. "For if we have been united together in the likeness of His death, certainly we also shall be in the likeness of His resurrection, knowing this, that our old man was crucified with Him, that the body of sin might be done away with, that we should no longer be slaves of sin. For he who has died has been freed from sin" (Rom. 6:5-7). "If we have become identified with Christ in his death and if the ethical and spiritual efficacy accruing from his death pertains to us, then we must also derive from his resurrection the ethical and spiritual virtue which our being identified with him in his resurrection implies. These implications for us of union with Christ make impossible the inference that we may continue in sin that grace may abound."⁷¹ Third, Christians receive the Holy Spirit when they believe in Christ (Rom. 8:9; 1 Cor. 12:3). "The Holy Spirit is called holy not only because He is to be distinguished from all other spirits, and in particular from *unclean* spirits, but also because He is the source of all holiness.... The holiness of God's people that results from their sanctification by the Holy Spirit must be attributed entirely to Him as He works through His word. The 'fruit' of the Spirit is just that: it is the *result* of His work."⁷² All the saving graces flow forth from Christ's atoning death. Jesus Christ as the exalted King sent His Holy Spirit unto the church. Therefore, those for whom Christ died *will* be sanctified. Sanctification does not contribute one iota to one's salvation or justification before God. But those who are justified will be sanctified. "Pursue peace with all men, and holiness [sanctification], without which no one will see the Lord" (Heb. 12:14).

Sanctification begins in regeneration when God implants "a new spiritual nature in the subject of His grace."⁷³ Sanctification is definitive in the sense that it was secured by our union with Christ. It is progressive in the sense that it is a lifelong process whereby the Holy Spirit subdues sin and increases our personal righteousness over time. The Bible teaches that no Christian can achieve ethical perfection in this life (1 Kg. 8:46; Prov. 20:9; Rom. 3:10, 12; Jas. 3:2; 1 Jn. 1:8). Since sanctification involves the whole man, both body and soul, final sanctification does not occur until believers are resurrected and receive glorified bodies. Sanctification as a process consists of two parts. First, sin is subdued in the believer. Sinful lusts and habits are progressively removed from the believer's life. Second, the believer becomes more righteous and godly in his personal life. Thus, sanctification is both negative and positive in character and these two aspects of sanctification occur simultaneously. "The old structure of sin is gradually torn down, and a new structure of God is reared in its stead.... Thank God, the gradual erection of the new building need not wait until the old one is completely demolished. If it had to wait for that, it could never begin in this life."⁷⁴

Sanctification is a work of God *in* the believer. In sanctification the Holy Spirit works upon man in both a mediate and immediate way. In regeneration, the Holy Spirit works immediately; He works directly upon man's soul implanting a new spiritual nature. The working of the Holy Spirit directly upon the Christian's heart is beyond our comprehension and is encompassed with mystery. The Holy Spirit also works mediately or through means. He works upon the conscious life of man through the word of God. He employs the *means* of grace such as

⁷¹ John Murray, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 1:219.

⁷² Jay Adams, *The Christian Counselor's Manual* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1973), p. 6.

⁷³ A. A. Hodge, *The Confession of Faith* (Carlisle, PA: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1992 [1869]), p. 195.

⁷⁴ Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, p. 533.

the word of God and the preached word, (i.e., by public worship [Jn. 17:17, 19; 1 Pet. 1:22; 2:2]; by partaking of the sacraments [Matt. 3:11; 1 Cor. 12:13; 1 Pet. 3:21]; by communion with God in prayer [Jn. 14:13-14]; and by practicing good works [Jn. 15:2; Rom. 5:3-4; Heb. 12:5-11]). “Thus, while sanctification is a grace, it is also a duty; and the soul is both bound and encouraged to use with diligence, in dependence upon the Holy Spirit, all the means for its spiritual renovation, and to form those habits of resisting evil and of right action in which sanctification so largely consists.... An action to be good must have its origin in a holy principle in the heart, and must be conformed to the law of God. Although not the ground of our acceptance, good works are absolutely essential to salvation, as the necessary consequences of a gracious state of soul and perpetual requirement of the divine law.”⁷⁵

The Holy Spirit uses the word of God to sanctify believers. “Sanctify them by Your truth. Your word is truth” (Jn. 17:17). “You have purified your souls in obeying the truth through the Spirit...” (1 Pet. 1:22). “As newborn babes, desire the pure milk of the word, that you may grow thereby...” (1 Pet. 2:2). The whole Bible is our law-word unto sanctification. Christians learn and grow by the Bible’s precepts, history, examples and so on. Since sanctification is concerned with spiritual growth and ethical conformity to God’s word, it is proper to focus on God’s moral law as a means of sanctification. It is the law that defines sin and tells us what behavior must be removed from our lives. It is God’s law which tells us what is good. Christians need the law in order to die unto sin and to live unto righteousness. Thus, the Psalmist said, “How can a young man cleanse his way? By taking heed according to Your word.... Your word I have hidden in my heart, that I might not sin against You.... I will meditate on Your precepts, and contemplate Your ways. I will delight myself in Your statutes; I will not forget your word.... Teach me, O LORD, the way of Your statutes, and I shall keep it to the end. Give me understanding, and I shall keep Your law; indeed I will observe it with my whole heart” (Ps. 119:9, 11, 15-16, 33-34). Furthermore, all the means of grace are dependent upon and subordinate to God’s law-word. The word defines prayer; it tells believers how to pray and even what to pray. Apart from the word, the sacraments are meaningless rituals, thus the Lord’s supper is part of public worship and always accompanies the word of God preached.

The idea that the Holy Spirit uses God’s law as a means of sanctification is anathema to many Fundamentalist and Evangelical believers. Because they regard the law as something bad or something belonging to a former dispensation, they attempt to replace the law as a means of sanctification with another source of authority. Thus, in our day, one finds a plethora of bizarre, heretical theories of “Christian” ethics being promulgated by professing believers. One such idea states that Christians are led mystically by the Holy Spirit apart from the word of God. This view is especially popular among charismatic believers. Instead of carefully studying God’s word and meditating on God’s law as a guide for daily decisions, many follow what they believe is the inward guidance of the Holy Spirit. One often hears phrases such as: “The Spirit led me to do this” or “I was led by God to do that.” Such practice is antinomian and subjective. “An amazing irony is to be found in the fact many such ‘spiritualistic’ groups boast in being preachers of God’s word and adamant opposers of modernism while, in point of fact, they have a *great deal* in common with liberal theology as regards ethics; the post-Kantian theologian is ear-marked by his making *religious experience*, not the revealed word, his authority (this is variously labeled as insight, piety, intuition, practical reason, mystical rapport, valuation, spiritual vitality, guiding light, etc.).”⁷⁶ How is one to judge these mystical feelings and inner promptings apart from

⁷⁵ A. A. Hodge, *The Confession of Faith*, p. 196.

⁷⁶ Bahnsen, *Theonomy in Christian Ethics*, p. 169.

God's word? The truth is that if people follow their feelings apart from God's word, they are nothing more than "Christian" relativists. Thankfully, most professing Christians who adhere to such nonsense have enough sense not to blatantly contradict God's word in their promptings.

Does the Bible teach that the Holy Spirit mystically leads Christians into a sanctified life apart from God's law? What does Paul mean when he says: "Walk in the Spirit, and you shall not fulfill the lusts of the flesh" (Gal. 5:16)? Doesn't Paul say that "if you are led by the Spirit you are not under the law" (Gal. 5:18)? To walk in the Spirit means to live or conduct one's behavior according to the Holy Spirit. Paul is not opposing the law as a rule for life; he is telling the believer that sanctification and victory over sin can only occur in those who are saved and have the Holy Spirit dwelling in them. The word of God apart from the power of the Holy Spirit cannot save and cannot sanctify. "Not that we are sufficient of ourselves, but our sufficiency is from 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. 3:5-6). The law proves that we are sinners and under a curse; thus Paul says the letter kills. The law apart from the Holy Spirit cannot impart the power to obey. *The problem is not that the law is bad and must be eliminated, but that people have sinful natures that are in rebellion against God.* When Paul says, "For what the law could not do in that it was weak through the flesh" (Rom. 8:3), he means that our *depravity* renders the law weak and unable to save. Christians are governed by the Holy Spirit; therefore, they will by no means fulfill the desires of the flesh. Paul is not giving a command but describing a reality.

When Paul says "If you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law" (Gal. 5:18), or "Sin shall not have dominion over you, for you are not under the law but under grace" (Rom. 6:14), he is telling believers they are not under law as a condition of salvation or as a curse. Thus, they are free. "Stand fast therefore in the liberty by which Christ has made us free, and do not be entangled again with a yoke of bondage. Indeed I, Paul, say to you that if you become circumcised, Christ will profit you nothing. And I testify again to every man who becomes circumcised that he is a debtor to keep the whole law. You have become estranged from Christ, you who attempt to be justified by law; you have fallen from grace" (Gal. 5:1-4). "As no man is free from sin, as no man can perfectly keep the commandments of God, every man who rests upon his personal conformity to the law, as the ground of his acceptance with God, must be condemned. We are not under law in this sense, but under grace; that is, under a system of gratuitous justification. We are justified by grace, without works."⁷⁷ Dispensationalists have taken passages which teach that Christians are not slaves to the law as a means of salvation, that the indwelling Holy Spirit proves that believers are justified and freed from bondage, and turned them into proof texts against the law itself, as if the law and not our sinful behavior were the enemy. "Galatians 5:18-23 explains that to be *led by the Spirit* is not to be under the curse, bondage, impotence, and death of the law (which had been described in the preceding sections of Galatians); the demand of the law remains [for sanctification], but now the *power* needed to obey is provided by the Spirit of God. The law could not be against those who walk by the Spirit, for they are fulfilling the law (see vs. 14, 23). Far from *detracting* from the law, the Spirit enables us to *observe* the law as we should. Instead of being condemned and held in bondage by the old *letter* of the law, we now serve in the newness of the Holy *Spirit* (Rom. 7:6); we are released from guilt and set free to obedience. The letter of the law without the power of God's Holy Spirit is a word of condemnation and death to us, but the Spirit gives life and ethical ability."⁷⁸ The law

⁷⁷ Charles Hodge, *Romans*, p. 206.

⁷⁸ Bahnsen, *Theonomy in Christian Ethics*, p. 171.

does not save, regenerate, quicken or enable; only the Holy Spirit can change a man's heart. But, once a man is saved, the Holy Spirit uses God's law to show the believer his sins and bring him to daily repentance and growth in holiness.

The rejection of God's law in sanctification for individuals, institutions and cultures has led to an unbiblical form of pietism. Pietism, in the negative sense, refers to the practice of defining holiness in terms of emotionalism, subjective experience and asceticism rather than obedience to God's revealed law. The result has been a man-centered faith. "Moreover, pietism's history has been marked by doctrinal waywardness, because the emphasis on personal experience tends to take priority over God's word and faithfulness thereto."⁷⁹ Unbiblical pietism leads Christians to a retreatist, escapist mentality. The focus is on revivalism and the salvation of individuals to the exclusion of the biblical reformation of society and culture. Pietism has led to a mentality of compartmentalization among many professing Christians. God's word is something for private devotions; it is something relegated to church buildings on Sunday mornings and Wednesday evenings. The idea that God's word is to be applied to all areas of life and that nations must submit to the *Lord* Jesus Christ and obey His law is hated by most present-day believers. "What we find in our day is that Christians despise biblical law almost as much as humanists do.... The modern anti-nomian Christian and the modern power-seeking statist want to break God's judicial chain, His revealed law. The result is the victimization of the judicially innocent and the expansion of the messianic state."⁸⁰ The modern Christian maxim is "meet, eat, retreat," and "don't polish brass on a sinking ship." Pietism leads to an ethical vacuum in individuals, churches and society. Pietism leads to legalism, for the only alternative to rule by God's law is some form of man-made law. Thus, one can find the Fundamentalist pastor who orders men in his congregation to wear white shirts and ties; and chews out the deacon who didn't have time to shave; yet, who does absolutely nothing to stop the advance of statism, abortion on demand, sodomite rights, and so on, in society.

Because many of the leaders in modern Evangelicalism do not understand the relationship between God's law and sanctification, churches have become antinomian. Such thinking comes primarily from Dispensationalism which teaches that God's holy law is itself opposed to grace. In their zeal to protect their concept of grace, they have discarded the law. The result has been a disaster for the Evangelical churches. Most Christians cannot recite the Ten Commandments. Many Christian businessmen and contractors are no more trustworthy than their pagan counterparts. Polls taken at several Evangelical Christian colleges have indicated that professing Christians at these schools practiced almost the same amount of sexual immorality as found among their non-Christian counterparts. One study indicated that only 4% of Evangelicals tithed. Modern churches rarely discipline members who are involved in gross immorality. Many churches will gladly accept people under discipline from other churches. Excommunication is rare. Most churches simply remove people from their rolls rather than discipline them.

An unbiblical view of God's law and sanctification has even perverted the doctrine of justification itself. If the law itself is considered bad, and is relegated to a former dispensation, then it seems rather unreasonable that Christ had to die to satisfy that same law. "Justification sustains the law of God: it does not nullify it or displace it. If the law were subject to change or replacement, then it was futile for Christ to die if the law given to Moses had no permanently binding character. Where the law is denied, justification is eventually denied, because an

⁷⁹ R. J. Rushdoony, *Systematic Theology* (Vallecito, CA: Ross House Books, 1994), 1:538.

⁸⁰ Gary North, *Tools of Dominion: The Case Laws of Exodus* (Tyler, TX: Institute for Christian Economics, 1990), pp. 43, 315.

antinomian religion has no need of a judicial act of God to effect salvation.... An antinomian religion will tend to by-pass or under-play the word *justify* in favor of *saved*, i.e., to look at the results rather than the only way to those results. Instead of answering, ‘I know I am saved, because Christ died for my sins, and, apart from any good thing in me, or faith in me, by His sovereign grace pardoned my sins and redeemed me,’ the Arminian or antinomian will say, ‘I know I am saved, because I believe in Jesus Christ as my personal Lord and Savior.’ The *ground* of salvation is made the personal choice of an autonomous man who has appropriated another resource in order to achieve his happiness or final good.”⁸¹

As antinomianism leads to subjectivism in sanctification, it also leads to a subjective view of salvation as a whole. Ask the average sixteenth-, seventeenth-, or eighteenth-century Protestant how one becomes right before God and one would likely be told about the objective work of Jesus Christ, that He achieved the justification of sinners through His sacrificial death and perfect sinless life. He would argue that God declares a person justified because Christ met the demands of the law and paid the price for man’s disobedience to that law with His own death and blood. He would say that a person must appropriate the objective work of Christ through faith. Now ask the same question of a modern Evangelical. The most common response will be something like: “accept Jesus as your personal savior,” or, “ask Jesus to come into your heart.” The Bible does not tell unbelievers to ask Christ into their heart, but to trust in Him and His completed work. Furthermore, Jesus Christ, the divine-human mediator, is in heaven at the right hand of God the Father. It is the Holy Spirit who enters one’s heart the moment one places his trust in the objective work of Christ. “The Christian religion is unique in that it is the only historical religion; i.e., it proclaims a salvation that is based on concrete historical events: the life, death and resurrection of Christ. It is not centered in the worshiper’s own experience but in the saving acts of God in Christ—historical acts that were accomplished outside, above and beyond the sinner’s own life. The gospel message is therefore an objective reality.”⁸² Only Jesus Christ can save sinners. The just demands of the law cannot be met by believers. The law could only be satisfied outside the sinner in a sinless substitute, the divine-human Son of God.

The importance of God’s law-word for sanctification must be emphasized today because of the popularity of mysticism, subjectivism, existentialism, antinomianism and escapist pietism. “If God does not direct Christians through His law, then mysticism, antinomian intuition, and inner voices remain to provide uniquely ‘Christian’ guidance.”⁸³ Christians who believe that sanctification can occur apart from God’s law are deceived. If one desires to be more holy, one must study, memorize, meditate on, and love God’s holy law. “Teach me, O Lord, the way of Your statutes, and I shall keep it to the end.... Oh, how I love Your law! It is my meditation all the day” (Ps. 119:33, 97).

⁸¹ R. J. Rushdoony, *Salvation and Godly Rule* (Vallecito, CA: Ross House Books, 1983), p. 272.

⁸² Robert D. Brinsmead, *Present Truth: Subjectivism and the Everlasting Gospel* (Fallbrook, CA, 1975), p. 5. “But the history of the church has demonstrated that the cursed tendency of human nature is to reverse the order until the *existential* is elevated above the *historical*. (Or to say it another way, the *in you* is elevated above *for you*.) When the *historical* element of Christianity is eclipsed, the essential genius of the Christian message is lost, and Christianity is reduced to everything else in the world that offers you a glorious experience. And when religious experience itself is preached as the gospel, it is the very anti-Christ itself. For when the *existential* is placed above the *historical*, the divine order is reversed. This really means that man is placed above God” (Robert D. Brinsmead, *Present Truth: Anti-Christ*, 1975, [Fallbrook, CA], vol. 4, No. 2, p. 19).

⁸³ Gary North, *Tools of Dominion: The Case Laws of Exodus* (Tyler, TX: Institute for Christian Economics, 1990), p. 17.

Trust and Obey

If one had to summarize the message of the Bible, one could do so by saying, “trust and obey” or “believe in Christ and repent.” The *Larger Catechism* put it this way: “What do the Scriptures principally teach? The Scriptures principally teach what man is to *believe* concerning God, and what *duty* God requires of man.”⁸⁴ Believers are not only required to believe in the whole counsel of God (i.e., the Bible), but they are required to be obedient to all its precepts. The main purpose of Christ’s ministry through Paul was “to make the Gentiles *obedient*” (Rom. 15:18). Paul received his apostleship “for *obedience* to the faith among all nations” (Rom. 1:5; cf. 16:25-26). Paul wrote to the Corinthian believers to see whether they were “*obedient* in all things” (2 Cor. 2:9). Christians are saved in order to *obey* God. “For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them” (Eph. 2:10). “To the pilgrims of the Dispersion...elect according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, in sanctification of the Spirit, for *obedience* and sprinkling of the blood of Jesus...” (1 Pet. 1:2). When Israel affirmed the covenant with God they said, “All that the LORD has said we will do, and be *obedient*” (Ex. 24:7). Since God requires a perfect and perpetual obedience to His holy law, we must examine the meaning, nature and motivation of this obedience.

The word “obey” means that one submits to a command or does as one is directed. One does what one is told to do and thus obeys. There are different Greek words for “obey” in the New Testament, with different nuances. The most common word is *upskouo*. It simply means to obey or to submit and is related to the idea of hearing. In English, if someone asks a person to do something at times the response is: “I hear you,” which means, “yes, I will obey your command.” The verb *upskouo* and the noun *upskoa* (obedience, compliance, submission), when used in the context of biblical faith, refers to those who hear God’s word and then act upon it. They obey what God has said and submit to God’s authority. Another word for obedience, *peitharcheiu*, is rarely used in the New Testament. “This is the special term for the obedience which one owes to authority. It occurs four times in the New Testament: Acts v. 29, 32; xxvii. 21; Tit. iii. 1; and in every case, of obedience to established authority, either of God or of magistrates.”⁸⁵ The verb *peitho*, which is usually translated “to persuade,” can in certain contexts mean to obey, listen, comply or yield to. This verb is used in Acts 5:36 of the men who followed Theudas. These men *obeyed* him as a result of persuasion.

Faith and Obedience

One of the most dangerous and widespread heresies of the twentieth century is the idea that obedience to God’s word is optional for believers. People are told to accept Christ as Savior and then, when it suits them, they can accept Christ as Lord. Therefore, an examination of the relationship between faith and obedience is necessary. The Bible teaches that true faith always leads to obedience to God’s precepts. Put another way, one could say that faith always leads to repentance. The regenerated heart which now has a new, loving attitude for God, Christ and the word of God *will* repent. Those who believe in Christ, but have not repented of their sins, do not

⁸⁴ *Larger Catechism*, Question 5.

⁸⁵ Marvin R. Vincent, *Word Studies in the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, [1887] 1946), 1:471.

have a biblical faith, but a mere intellectual assent to some historical propositions. This does not mean that Christians never sin. They clearly do (cf. 1 Jn. 1:8), but they do not live a sinful lifestyle. They stumble, but do not wallow in the mire. Their lives are characterized by obedience.

The relation of faith to obedience or good works is discussed at length in the epistle of James: “What does it profit, my brethren, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can faith save him? If a brother or sister is naked and destitute of daily food, and one of you says to them, ‘Depart in peace, be warmed and filled,’ but you do not give them the things which are needed for the body, what does it profit? Thus also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead. But someone will say, ‘You have faith, and I have works.’ Show me your faith without your works, and I will show you my faith by my works. You believe that there is one God. You do well. Even the demons believe—and tremble! But do you want to know, O foolish man, that faith without works is dead?... For as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is dead also” (Jas. 2:14-20, 26). James is dealing with professing Christians who give an assent to the truths of the gospel, yet whose lives have changed little, if at all. “James is specific. He says, ‘if a man claims to have faith.’ He does not write ‘if a man has faith.’ James intimates that the faith of this particular person is not a genuine trust in Jesus Christ. In fact, that man’s claim to faith is hollow.... True faith results in works that show a distinctive Christian lifestyle, and demonstrates that the believer stands in a saving relationship to God.”⁸⁶

Is James saying that works or obedience contribute to one’s salvation? No, not at all. He is simply pointing out that real faith which comes from a regenerate heart will result in obedience. Faith without obedience is dead, worthless, counterfeit. The body that does not have the spirit is a corpse. The professing believer who treats obedience as an option, who views sin as a light thing or a trifle, is unregenerate. Jesus said, “Even so, every good tree bears good fruit, but a bad tree bears bad fruit. A good tree *cannot* bear bad fruit, nor can a bad tree bear good fruit. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. Therefore, by their fruits you will know them” (Matt 7:16-20). Obedience and good works are the fruit, the effect, and the sign of a genuine, vibrant, living faith.

Does this mean that real Christians can never backslide and fall into grievous sins? No. There is the example of King David who, although regenerate, did serve his lusts for a season. But, the lesson one learns from David’s fall is *not* that Christians can go out and have fun with the pleasures of sin for a season and then repent in time to escape hell. The lesson is that real believers who serve sin are miserable in their sins; the joy and peace of salvation are gone. The intimate fellowship with God is sorely missed. The burden of guilt and the displeasure of God are continually pricking the regenerate heart. Did not David say, “my sin is ever before me” (Ps. 51:3)? Did he not plead, “Do not cast me away from Your presence and do not take your Holy Spirit from me. Restore me to the joy of Your salvation...” (Ps. 51:11-12)? Why do professing Christians who are truly regenerate always repent from their backsliding ways? Because the regenerate heart is tortured by sin and *cannot* continue in it. “There is no soundness in my flesh because of Your anger, nor is there any health in my bones because of my sin. For my iniquities have gone over my head; like a heavy burden they are too heavy for me. My wounds are foul and festering because of my foolishness. I am troubled, I am bowed down greatly; I go mourning all the day long. For my loins are full of inflammation, and there is no soundness in my flesh. I am feeble and severely broken; I groan because of the turmoil of my heart” (Ps. 38:3-8). How many

⁸⁶ Simon J. Kistemaker, *New Testament Commentary: Exposition of the Epistle of James and of the Epistle of John* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1986), pp. 88-89.

false professors are there, who have made a decision for Christ, who have walked an aisle, who have signed a card, who have prayed a prayer, but yet are still in their sins? A living faith must issue forth unto obedience; otherwise, it is dead and worthless.

Another passage which sets forth the relation of faith and obedience (or the lack of faith and disobedience) is in the book of Hebrews. “Beware, brethren, lest there be in any of you an evil heart of unbelief in departing from the living God; but exhort one another daily, while it is called ‘Today,’ lest any of you be hardened through the deceitfulness of sin. For we have become partakers of Christ if we hold the beginning of our confidence steadfast to the end, while it is said: ‘Today,’ if you will hear His voice, do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion. For who, having heard, rebelled? Indeed, was it not all who came out of Egypt, led by Moses? Now with whom was He angry forty years? Was it not with those who sinned, whose corpses fell in the wilderness? And to whom did He swear that they would not enter His rest, but to those who did not obey? So we see that they could not enter in because of unbelief.... For indeed the gospel was preached to us as well as to them; but the word which they heard did not profit them, not being mixed with faith in those who heard it.... Since therefore it remains that some must enter it, and those to whom it was first preached did not enter because of disobedience” (Heb. 3:12-19; 4:2, 6). The experience of rebellious Israel is set forth as a warning for Christians. Why did a whole generation of Israelites (save two persons) die in the desert? Because they rebelled or sinned against God in the wilderness. But why did they rebel against God? Because they did not believe. Disobedience is a direct result of unbelief. “Disobedience is a refusal to hear the voice of God and an obstinate refusal to act in response to that voice. Disobedience is not merely a lack of obedience; rather it is a refusal to obey.”⁸⁷ In verse 19, the writer says they did not enter in because of unbelief; then in Hebrews 4:6 he says they did not enter in because of disobedience. Unbelief and disobedience go hand in hand. Unbelief is the fountain from which spring all sin and rebellion; from Eve in the garden, to Cain in the field, to apostate Israel in the wilderness. “Hence those very persons who through unbelief rejected the possession of the land offered to them, pursued their own obstinacy, now lusting, then murmuring, now committing adultery, then polluting themselves with heathen superstitions, so that their depravity became more fully manifested.”⁸⁸ Those who regard obedience as an option must look upon the bloated, rotting corpses in the wilderness as a monument to all such foolishness. “Blessed are those who do His commandments, that they may have a right to the tree of life, and may enter through the gates of the city” (Rev. 22:14).

The modern, carnal Christian heresy which says that a person can be saved without submitting to Christ as Lord, without repentance and forsaking of sin, is actually an ancient error. The apostle John dealt with a similar heresy in his first epistle. This was the antinomian heresy of the Nicolaitans. The Nicolaitans held to a dualistic view of the believer. They believed the spirit (which was the recipient of God’s grace) was good while the body (i.e., the flesh) was intrinsically evil. Since the flesh or body was evil and there was really nothing one could do about it, and since the spirit was good, no matter how evil the flesh was, then, (according to the Nicolaitans) one could sin as he pleases without any spiritual consequences. Thus, the Nicolaitans were notorious for committing acts of sexual immorality. In Roman and Greek society where all forms of sexual expression were perfectly acceptable (e.g., prostitution and sex

⁸⁷ Simon J. Kistemaker, *New Testament Commentary: Exposition of the Epistle to the Hebrews* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1984), p. 97.

⁸⁸ John Calvin, *Commentary on the Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Hebrews* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1981), p. 92.

orgies), the Nicolaitan heresy became a problem among Gentile believers in the early church. Christ Himself condemns the Nicolaitans twice in the book of Revelation (Rev. 2:6; 3:15). They are compared to the followers of Balaam. It was Balaam who convinced the king of Moab to seduce Israel into idolatry, fornication, and eating meat sacrificed to idols. This type of wicked behavior was such a problem in the early church among Gentiles that fornication and eating meat offered to idols were specifically condemned by the first church council (cf. Acts 15:28-29).

Although the Nicolaitan antinomianism was arrived at in a manner different from modern antinomianism, John's doctrinal discussion of the relationship of obedience and salvation is applicable to modern times. "This is the message which we have heard from Him and declare to you, that God is light and in Him is no darkness at all. If we say that we have fellowship with Him, and walk in darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth. But if we walk in the light as He is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus Christ His Son cleanses us from all sin.... If we say that we have not sinned, we make Him a liar, and His word is not in us" (1 Jn. 1:5-7, 10). John says that God is ethically perfect, infinite in holiness. There is nothing impure, evil or sinful whatsoever in God's nature. The relationship of man to God is determined by God's nature. Did God who is pure and perfect light save man so that man could walk in darkness? Absolutely not! The person who claims to be a Christian and yet walks in darkness is a liar. Such a person is living in self-deception. His conduct or lifestyle reveals that his mind is in spiritual and doctrinal darkness. Thus, John says they "do not practice the truth." Such people are really following the world. One's walk or behavior reveals one's priority in life; action always follow the mind or heart. One's mind and actions must be focused upon Christ and His kingdom and not on the fulfillment of one's sinful pleasures. "The lamp of the body is the eye. If therefore your eye is good, your whole body will be full of light. But if your eye is bad, your whole body will be full of darkness" (Matt. 6:22-23). "We really show what we are by what we do; we reveal our doctrine in our practice, and those who have not realized the truth about sin, and certainly those who have a wrong idea about it all, cannot be having a real fellowship and communion with God."⁸⁹ "To walk in the light is above all to believe the light, the truth, and then also to obey it in word and in deed. What is in the soul will become manifest in the conduct; this is not a mere claim that contradicts open evidence."⁹⁰

John is not teaching that Christians are ethically perfect or sinless. On the contrary, he says that any believer who claims to be without sin is self-deceived (1 Jn. 1:8). In verse 10 John uses the perfect tense to describe the sin of believers: "If we say that we have not sinned, we make Him a liar, and His word is not in us." The verb with the negative (not sinned) indicates that anyone who looks back at his past life that continues up to the present moment and claims that he has not been sinning calls God a liar, for God says repeatedly in His word that all have sinned and fallen short of what God requires (Rom. 3:23). What sets Christians apart from unbelievers is that Christians are not slaves to their sinful behavior. John sets a clear demarcation between the lifestyle of believers and unbelievers by using the aorist tense (which indicates punctilious rather than continuous action) to describe the sinful behavior of Christians in 1 John 1:8 and 2:1. Christians still have a sinful nature, but it manifests itself in isolated acts of sin, not in a continuance in sin. A Christian businessman may have too much to drink on occasion, but he is not a drunkard. A Christian man may look at a woman in a miniskirt and lust in his heart, but

⁸⁹ D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Fellowship with God* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1993), 1:117.

⁹⁰ R.C. Lenski, *Interpretation of the Epistles of St. Peter, St. John and St. Jude* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg, 1966), p. 388.

he does not frequent strip clubs or porno shops. The Christian sins, but he does not lead a sinful lifestyle.

What John repeatedly condemns in this epistle is the idea that someone can be a Christian yet continue in a sinful lifestyle. “Now by this we know that we know Him, if we keep His commandments. He who says, ‘I know Him,’ and does not keep His commandments, is a liar and the truth is not in him” (1 Jn. 2:3-4). “John teaches that the believer may fall into sin but he will not walk in it.”⁹¹ That is, his sinful behavior is not habitual; it is not a continuing pattern. This truth is clearly brought out in chapter three where John uses present continuous tense verbs five times to describe sinful, non-Christian behavior. “Whoever commits sin, also commits lawlessness...” (1 Jn. 3:4). “Whoever abides in Him does not sin. Whoever sins has neither seen Him nor known Him” (1 Jn. 3:6). “He who sins is of the devil” (1 Jn. 3:8). “Whoever has been born of God does not sin, for His seed remains in Him” (1 Jn. 3:9). John says that the person who continually walks in sin is lawless; does not have a relationship to Christ; is of the devil; and, has not been born again.

In contrast, real Christians continuously practice righteousness. “He who practices righteousness is righteous, just as He is righteous” (1 Jn. 3:7). “Whoever does not practice righteousness is not of God...” (1 Jn. 3:10). One’s behavior reveals one’s true nature. The man or woman who is righteous will live a righteous life. “[T]he one who is not righteous shows it by not living a righteous life. That is where his reference to the devil is significant—‘He that committeth sin is of the devil; for the devil sinneth from the beginning.’ That is his characteristic, his nature, his habit; that is his way of living. That is the thing that is so true of the devil: he sins from the beginning; he *goes on sinning*. ‘And the man,’ John says, ‘who goes on sinning is, therefore, the man who is proclaiming that he has the kind of nature that the devil has. He does not have the new nature that the Christian has.’”⁹²

One’s actions reveal one’s true nature. Do biker groups, such as the Hell’s Angels, enjoy public worship? Do pagan college students like to spend Friday and Saturday evenings reading a good theology book? Would a true believer enjoy a night at the local crack house, getting stoned and listening to gangsta rap? Do real believers like to spend their evenings at drunken parties with whore-mongers in dark, smoke-filled rooms? True Christians want to serve the Lord Jesus Christ. “Therefore whoever hears these sayings of Mine, and does them, I will liken him to a wise man who built his house on the rock: and the rain descended, the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house; and it did not fall, for it was founded on the rock. But everyone who hears these sayings of Mine, and does not do them, will be like a foolish man who built his house on the sand: and the rain descended, the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house; and it fell. And great was its fall” (Matt. 7:24-27). “By this we know that we love the children of God, when we love God and keep His commandments. For this is the love of God, that we keep His commandments. And His commandments are not burdensome. For whatever is born of God overcomes the world. And this is the victory that has overcome the world—our faith” (1 Jn. 5:2-4).

⁹¹ David Smith, W. Robertson Nicoll, *Expositor’s Greek Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1983), 5:184.

⁹² D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Children of God* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1993), 3:76.

Chapter 5: Societal Sanctification

Many believers have a very limited view of the effects of the redemption achieved by Christ upon society. Redemption is viewed as something that affects individual Christians but has little or no impact on the world and society. The Bible teaches that salvation by Christ is comprehensive. The salvation wrought by Jesus will affect the whole world. It will extend to all nations. Men are not regenerated and saved just to go to church and Bible conferences. God saves men to restore them to a right relationship with Himself. Then they are to serve God by exercising godly dominion over the earth. The task of godly dominion to which Adam was called before the fall was restored by Jesus Christ, the second Adam. “For if by the one man’s offense death reigned through the one, much more those who receive abundance of grace and of the gift of righteousness will reign in life through the One, Jesus Christ” (Rom. 5:17). “Christ’s redemption means man’s reign in time and in eternity.... To defer the fact of reigning to the other world is a Manichaeian separation of the world into two alien realms, one (the material) surrendered to one God, and the other (spiritual) reserved for the other God. The hostility of many to the idea of victory in the material world is evidence of Manichaeian leanings. St. Paul is emphatic: we ‘reign in life.’ The biblical doctrine of salvation requires it.”⁹³

Godly Dominion

When God created Adam and Eve in His image, He commanded them to have dominion over the whole earth (cf. Gen. 1:26-30). God’s intended purpose for man before the fall was to develop a worldwide godly culture where the Lord is honored and glorified. All of man’s activities and pursuits were to be done to glorify God. All the accumulated labors of mankind over time: music, art, science, medicine, architecture and economics would reflect unfallen man’s love of God and man. If Adam had obeyed the covenant of works and the dominion mandate, the result would have been a worldwide, obedient, theocentric civilization. This was God’s original plan for mankind before the fall. But Adam’s sin, the eating of the forbidden fruit (the breaking of the covenant of works), necessitated the work of a savior. God, in His kindness and mercy, instituted the covenant of grace. The entrance of sin into the world did not eliminate the Lord’s plan for a worldwide godly civilization. However, now God’s plan could only be accomplished through a redeemer—the Lord Jesus Christ.

What Adam could not do because of sin, Christ made possible when He established the judicial foundation for godly dominion by His sacrificial death and sinless life. After His resurrection the victorious Christ gave the Great Commission: “All authority has been given unto Me in heaven and on earth. Go, therefore, and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age. Amen” (Matt. 28:18-20). The Great Commission is our Lord’s command to build a worldwide Christian civilization; it is the dominion mandate for the new creation. Because of His completed redemptive work and resurrection victory the whole earth (i.e., *every* nation) has been definitively sanctified or set apart by Christ.

Most professing Christians have misinterpreted or ignored the significance of the Great Commission. Christ could have instructed the apostles to disciple all individuals or all men, but

⁹³ R. J. Rushdoony, *Salvation and Godly Rule*, p. 487.

He told them to disciple all *nations*. “Nations,” according to Scripture (cf. Acts 17:26, Rev. 7:9, and particularly in the Great Commission) refers to large groups of people that are distinct from other groups in various ways, such as language, customs, heritage, culture and geographic location. The significance of Christ’s choice of “nations” rather than “men” is that the church’s goal is to disciple whole cultures and bring entire societies, including civil governments, under the subjection of Christ. Therefore, the church must not be satisfied with a few scattered individuals submitting to Christ, but must strive to bring all institutions under His feet (cf. Ps. 2:7-12).

The Church

The church’s task is to progressively bring to pass (by the power of the Holy Spirit) what Christ has already achieved at the cross: the salvation of all nations. The church is central in bringing about God’s kingdom and godly dominion because the church has the means of grace: the preaching of the word of God, the sacraments, etc. The starting point for godly dominion is *not* political action or reform, but the gospel and regeneration. This involves much more than preaching the gospel; it includes teaching the entire Bible, including God’s righteous law. People must be taught to obey God’s law and apply it to every area of life: agriculture, business, science, education, the arts, civil government and so on. Thus, the kingdom of God is like leaven. The parable of the leaven teaches that the gospel will spread throughout the world until the whole world is thoroughly leavened. There will be an incredible development of Christianity in the world. Christ’s glorious gospel will have a sanctifying effect upon men, institutions, cultures and even civil governments. The Old Testament prophets described this discipling process as the nations going up to Zion to learn God’s holy law. “Now it shall come to pass in the latter days that the mountain of the LORD’s house shall be established on the top of the mountains, and shall be exalted above the hills; and all nations shall flow to it. Many people shall come and say, ‘Come, and let us go up to the mountain of the LORD, to the house of the God of Jacob; He will teach us His ways, and we shall walk in His paths.’ For out of Zion shall go forth the law, and the word of the LORD from Jerusalem” (Is. 2:2-3). In the New Testament “Mount Zion” (cf. Heb. 12:22) is spiritualized to mean the church. The church, because of its important job of discipling the nations, is seen by the prophet to be prominent in world affairs. The church teaches the nations the word of God and submission to God’s holy law.

Such a view is a far cry from modern Fundamentalism, which presents the gospel as little more than a fire escape from hell. The Fundamentalist’s gospel will have no visible impact on the nations, so the church’s only hope is the rapture. They regard the idea of godly rule and dominion through discipleship as a theological perversion. “What fundamentalists want is a watered-down gospel message suitable for children, and only for children. The problem is children grow up. What do you tell a newly converted adult when he asks the question, ‘All right, I have accepted Jesus as my Lord and Savior. Now what do I do?’ The modern fundamentalist says all he has to do is tell someone else about what just happened to him. Then that person can tell another, and so on, until the Rapture ends the whole process. Modern fundamentalism looks at the gospel as if it were some kind of gigantic chain letter scheme. Nothing is of value in God’s sight, they say, except keeping the chain letter alive. But the gospel is not a chain letter. It is the good news that Jesus has overcome the world. It is our job to

demonstrate this victory in our lives, meaning every aspect of our lives. We are to exercise dominion. We should do this as Church members first, but in all other realms.”⁹⁴

Through teaching the word, administering the sacraments, and exercising discipline the church is used by God to sanctify nations. This does not mean that the church and civil government are one, or that the church is an extension of the state. It simply means that discipleship by the church will have an effect on individuals, families and civil governments, which will lead to godly dominion. The church achieves dominion, in a sense, indirectly. Why? Because the task of dominion is predominantly economic, agricultural, scientific, etc.; these spheres of activity are accomplished by individuals and families. The teaching elder does not have time to develop new strains of wheat or new types of medical equipment because he is devoted to expounding the word of God and to prayer. But, if these tasks are to be done to God’s glory in accordance with the Christian worldview and God’s law, then it is absolutely essential that the businessman, scientist, farmer and so on be church members in good standing who look to and stand on God’s word in all their endeavors. “In Thy light we see light” (Ps. 36:6).

This point is a fundamental aspect of biblical Christianity. Yet many professing Christians limit the application of God’s word to church affairs and personal piety. They have accepted the myth that many areas of life (e.g., science, economics, education, etc.) are religiously neutral, or that Satan will control the earth until the second coming. Many believers think that the Bible has little or nothing to say regarding issues outside individual behavior. But the church must not forsake the application of God’s word to every area of life. “As Paul puts it, ‘Whether you eat, or drink, or whatsoever you do, do all to the glory of God’ (1 Cor. 10:31). The reign of Christ is not restricted to internal matters of the heart—to prayer, meditations, and piety. That is only the beginning. The kingdom of God ‘brings forth fruit’ (see Matt. 13:23; 21:43) such that by means of the visible quality of a person’s life his inner state of heart can be discerned: ‘by their fruits you shall know them’ (Matt. 7:16-21). So then, even eating and drinking as external activities are included within the Messiah’s reign. The inward reign of the Savior must become manifest in *public* righteousness: genuine hearing of the word, genuine religion, and genuine faith are seen in faithful doing of the law, outward helping of the oppressed, and practical aid of the afflicted (James 1:22-2:26). To restrict the reign of Christ to inward matters is to lose touch with the true character of submission to the King.”⁹⁵

Christ said the church is to act as salt and light in society. Salt penetrates meat and thus preserves it from corruption. If the church does not do its job, society decays; it rots. Therefore, when liberalism captured the mainline denominations, and Fundamentalism adopted Dispensationalism and unbiblical pietism, American society and culture began to rot. Secular humanists were happy to fill the void when Christians apostatized and abandoned their task of dominion through discipleship.

Since the church has the means of grace and the responsibility to teach God’s word to all peoples, individuals and families must become church members and place themselves under the authority of elders in Reformed Churches that teach the whole counsel of God. “Dominion requires a knowledge of God’s law; without such knowledge, no dominion is possible. To disregard the laws of God is to forfeit dominion.”⁹⁶ Christians must be church members in order

⁹⁴ Gary North, Foreword to Kenneth L. Gentry, Jr., *The Greatness of The Great Commission* (Tyler, TX: Institute for Christian Economics, 1990), p. xi.

⁹⁵ Bahnsen, “This World and The Kingdom of God,” in Gary DeMar and Peter Leithart, *The Reduction of Christianity* (Co-published by Fort Worth, TX: Dominion Press & Atlanta, GA: American Vision, 1988), p. 356.

⁹⁶ R. J. Rushdoony, *Salvation and Godly Rule*, p. 35.

to be under God's lawful church courts, to worship God publicly on the Lord's day as a covenanted body of believers, to systematically learn God's word under a divinely-called teacher; to partake of the Lord's supper as a member of Christ's body, and to serve Christ under the guidance and direction of godly elders (Heb. 13:7, 17). God commands believers to worship Him every week with His people. "And let us consider one another in order to stir up love and good works, not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as is the manner of some, but exhorting one another, and so much more as you see the Day approaching" (Heb. 10:24-25). How can one have an impact on and be used by God to extend His kingdom in the world? One must believe in Christ, submit to Him as Lord, become a member of Christ's church, and regularly attend the means of grace. This is fundamental; it is primary. Yet many professing believers think it is optional. It is not optional! In order to receive the Lord's blessing, one must begin with the fundamentals. "The piecemeal Christian faith so widespread today does not measure up to the calling of discipling toward a Christian culture (Matt. 28:19). The church should actively train people to submit to Christ's authority (Matt 28:18) and work (Matt. 28:19-20). As a leading officer in the church, Paul was concerned to promote 'the whole counsel of God' (Acts 20:27)."⁹⁷

The Family

The dominion mandate was originally given to a family: Adam and Eve. Because of the fall and sin, the church has become the primary administrator of the Great Commission since *godly* dominion can only be achieved through the preaching of the gospel and the discipling of the nations. The covenant of grace is dependent upon the preaching of God's grace. The family unit exists on earth, while the church, God's spiritual family, extends throughout eternity. Although the Great Commission was given specifically by Christ to His church, Christian families are still very prominent in achieving godly dominion.

There are a number of reasons why the Christian family is crucial to godly dominion. First, the family is the nursery of both church and state. God has always dealt with families covenantally. The children of believers are members of God's covenant. God wants believers to think in terms of the future, to think generationally. The Christian discipline and self-government taught in the home will have a tremendous impact on the future of both the church and society. Secular humanists and statisticians are aware of the importance of controlling children. Thus, state schools are adept at making children "good" citizens of the state. Children are taught to look to the messianic state as savior and lord of society. Whoever controls the children controls the future. For worldwide dominion to occur, it must extend and expand into the future. Second, private property, economic activity and scientific progress rest not with the church or the state, but with the family. The church has the means of grace and the state bears the sword of justice, but neither is responsible for direct economic and scientific progress. The church may own meeting places and theological schools, but it is not an economic or scientific organization. The state, being responsible for civil defense, has a scientific and economic interest in weapons systems and military training institutes, but the state has no biblical mandate to engage in economic activity and own property outside of the limited parameters of civil justice and defense. "The earth is indeed the Lord's as is all dominion, but God has chosen to give dominion

⁹⁷ Kenneth L. Gentry, Jr., *The Greatness of the Great Commission* (Tyler, TX: Institute for Christian Economics, 1990), p. 114.

over the earth to man, subject to His law-word, and property is a central aspect of that dominion. The absolute and transcendental title to property is the Lord's; the present and historical title to property is man's. The ownership of property does not leave this world when it is denied to man; it is simply transferred to the state."⁹⁸

Families are to diligently train their children for godly dominion into the future. The next generation of businessmen, ministers, scientists, farmers, and civil leaders must be taught self-control and discipline, and how to apply the word of God to all areas of life. Those children who apostatize from the faith must be disinherited as Christ-denying covenant-breakers. "The biblical economic goal is to increase the dominion of Christians, not families as such; the institutional focus is on the kingdom rather than the family. Thus, parents should normally leave their wealth to believing children, *assuming* that the children are economically competent and faithful to the external requirements of the covenant. If they are not, then parents should consider setting up trusts governed by competent church members."⁹⁹ The church primarily consists of and is supported by families. While the family carries on dominion through labor, technology, and science, etc., the family's priority in life is the local church and not economic endeavor. The son who has apostatized, who has a Ph.D. in engineering, should be disinherited and his portion should be given to the son who is a faithful believer yet may be a plumber or electrician. If all the children have apostatized, the money should go to the church and not to unbelievers. Spiritual brotherhood takes *priority* over unbelieving blood brotherhood.¹⁰⁰ Furthermore, finding and attending a true Reformed church should take priority over one's economic career. Moving to an area that does not have a truly Reformed church should not even be considered. The church has a responsibility to support Christian families (teaching, counseling, discipline, fellowship, charity, etc.) and Christian families have a responsibility to support the church (e.g., church membership, regular attendance, cheerful giving, etc.).

Since the family is the training institute of the next generation, the primary property owner of society and the spearhead of economic growth and science, etc., the head of a Christian household must take seriously his role as the leader in family worship, Bible training, doctrinal instruction and prayer. Parents are also responsible for their children's economic and intellectual training as well. Sadly, it is common for Evangelicals to send their children to anti-Christian state schools and to let them watch pagan nonsense on TV for several hours each day. This is not only unbiblical, but amounts to generational spiritual suicide. It is one of the main reasons that Evangelicalism is so impotent and saltless in our day. God's law-word is to be learned and integrated into every area of life throughout each and every day.

"Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one! You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your strength. And these words which I command you today shall be in your heart. You shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, when you walk by the way, when you lie down, and when you rise up. You shall bind them as a sign on your hand, and they shall be as frontlets between your eyes. You shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates" (Deut. 6:4-9). Although this passage addresses all believers, it especially speaks to Christian parents. Parents who are new to the faith must first diligently begin with themselves and then earnestly, frequently and consistently teach their family. What a dreadful, foolish and disobedient thing it is for parents to be slothful and neglectful in such an important God-given

⁹⁸ R. J. Rushdoony, *The Institutes of Biblical Law*, p. 471.

⁹⁹ Gary North, *Tools of Dominion*, 1990, p. 271.

¹⁰⁰ Christian children still have an obligation to honor and support unbelieving parents in their old age, etc.

task. What a sad day it will be on the day of judgment for those parents who delegated their responsibility of godly dominion through child-rearing to Hollywood and the pagan state. “If there be any compassion to the souls of them under your care, if any regard of you being found faithful in the day of Christ, if any respect to future generations, labour to sow these seeds of knowledge, which may grow up in after-times.”¹⁰¹

The State

Of the three God-ordained governmental spheres (the family, the church and the state), the civil government has the least important role to play in godly dominion. Why? Because the state plays a primarily negative role in God’s plan. That is, the state has been given the task of protecting the family and the church from visible attack. The state is to provide a law-abiding atmosphere in which Christian churches and families can flourish. The civil government’s job is to punish evildoers who commit those sins which God has designated in His word as crimes. The state is to implement negative sanctions against criminals (biblically defined) and to protect the people from foreign invasion or attack. Thus, any system of civil law which denies the penal sanctions of the Old Testament civil law is unbiblical, defective and even dangerous to society. Biblical law provides a framework in which to protect private property (thus enabling dominion through economic growth and science to flourish), the family (by discouraging divorce and driving deviant sexual behavior underground) and the church (by forcing non-Christian religions and cults underground).

The state’s role is to restrain evil. Paul says, “For rulers are not a terror to good works, but to evil. Do you want to be unafraid of the authority? Do what is good, and you will have praise from the same. For he is God’s minister to you for good. But if you do evil, be afraid; for he does not bear the sword in vain; for he is God’s minister, an avenger to execute wrath on him who practices evil” (Rom. 13:3-4). When the civil government stops punishing behavior that God says is criminal and attempts to be both savior and parent to its citizens, it will eventually collide with both church and family. Communism, socialism and welfare statism are all the result of the state going beyond its proper domain. Statists believe in salvation by regulation—that proper legislation will eliminate poverty and ignorance and bring world peace. Such programs have failed and will continue to fail and cannot lead to godly behavior and dominion. Why? Because, “while a man can be *restrained* by strict law and order, he cannot be *changed* by law; he cannot be saved by law. Man can only be saved by the grace of God through Jesus Christ.”¹⁰² The law is good if one uses it lawfully (1 Tim. 1:8). All attempts to regulate mankind into a millennial paradise by civil governments have ended in failure. The arbitrary and often absurd laws devised by statist bureaucrats have only served to help enslave the masses while impeding economic growth.

The state (compared to the church and family) has a very minor role to play in godly dominion. Although the state has the right to enforce God’s law by punishing criminals (biblically defined), it does not have the authority to preach the gospel or compel (i.e., use force) people to become Christians. Biblical dominion starts from the bottom up in a decentralized manner. The gospel leavens society when individuals and families are converted, become church members and then apply the Christian worldview to their own particular spheres of influence

¹⁰¹ Thomas Manton, *To The Christian Reader, Especially Heads of Families* p. 6.

¹⁰² R. J. Rushdoony, *Law and Liberty* (Vallecito, CA: Ross House Books, 1984), p. 3.

economically, scientifically and socially. The civil government will become Christian, covenant with Christ, submit explicitly to Christ as king and adopt His law-code *only* after society has first been leavened by the gospel and the majority of people have become Christians. This scenario presupposes that most people have adopted a biblical form of Christianity (i.e., Reformed Christianity); and that people accept God's sovereignty, Christ's lordship over all, God's holy law, and biblical worship. If the majority of Americans were to adopt modern Evangelicalism (with its denial of most of God's law, its unbiblical pietism, its acceptance of pluralism, its focus on entertainment, its Arminian theology, etc.), then America (with its abortion, pornography, corrupt leadership and so on) would probably not change at all. (Perhaps the leadership would change from being liberal secular humanists to conservative secular humanists.) Thus, the importance of fulfilling the Great Commission and teaching the *whole* counsel of God to the nations cannot be overemphasized. The church conquers the world with the sword of the Spirit—the word of God. The victory of Christ's kingdom is certain. "For from the rising of the sun, even to its going down, My name shall be great among the Gentiles; in every place incense shall be offered to My name, and a pure offering; for My name shall be great among the nations, says the LORD of hosts" (Mal. 1:11). Political action, without the solid foundation of the true Reformed Christian religion, is at best a holding action, and at worst the implicit acceptance of right wing secular humanism (e.g., Rush Limbaugh, Pat Buchanan, Bill Buckley, etc.) and unbiblical ecumenism.

Although the state's role is limited, its role is not unimportant. The state that does not abide by God's law hinders godly dominion through anti-Christian and anti-family legislation. In countries that have abandoned the Christian worldview in favor of secular humanism there has been an erosion of biblical law in favor of positivistic (man-made) law. Humanists reject the transcendent, ontological God of the Bible who gives man absolute, unchanging law. Therefore, humanists have implicitly declared themselves to be God and the sole determiner of what is good or bad for society. "Modern humanism, the religion of the state, locates laws in the state and thus makes the state, or the people as they find expression in the state, the God of the system. As Mao-Tse-Tung has said, 'Our God is none other than the masses of the Chinese people.' In Western culture, law has steadily moved away from God to the people (or the state) as its source...."¹⁰³ As R. J. Rushdoony has noted, "*the source* of law [in a society] is the god of that society."¹⁰⁴ Since the secular humanists, who have come to a dominant position in our civil government, do not believe that anything exists above them to appeal to, to limit their legislative agendas, they have rejected the rule of law. "Everyone did what was right in his own eyes" (Jdg. 17:6). Thus, they seek jurisdiction over every area of man's life, including the family, private property, the economy and the church. Any religion or worldview which seeks to limit the role of the civil government is seen as a threat to the messianic state. Biblical Christianity is the greatest threat to the humanistic state because it proclaims that Christ is Lord over *all*, that everyone (including the state) must submit to Christ and His law. The Bible teaches that salvation comes *only* through Jesus Christ and not through state action.

The church plays a central role in societal sanctification because it proclaims God's word to individuals, families, institutions and governments. But a church that does not proclaim the whole counsel of God (or that refuses to apply God's word to civil government) is not truly discipling the nations. The church is responsible to teach *all* that Christ has commanded, including the validity of the Old Testament moral case laws (Matt. 5:17ff). Christianity is not

¹⁰³ R. J. Rushdoony, *The Institutes of Biblical Law*, p. 5.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid*, p. 4.

just a message for individuals to escape hell, but a religion that speaks to every area of life. Christ did not come to have dominion only inside the four walls of a church building, but over all the earth. The church must resume its responsibility to be salt and light to the nations. “The wicked shall be turned into hell, and all the nations that forget God.” (Ps. 9:17)

Chapter 6: The Old Testament Penalties

Once a person is convinced that the moral case laws within the judicial law are still binding he often will ask: what about the penalties? Should modern nations follow the Old Testament penal system? It is the Old Testament *penalties* that cause the most vocal opposition to Theonomy. One even hears Christians describe the penalties given in the law as cruel, harsh and barbaric. The idea that God who is perfectly holy, righteous and just could write penalties that are cruel, unfair or barbaric is totally unscriptural. There are Reformed Christians who (following Calvin) argue that the moral law (i.e., the Ten Commandments) has abiding validity for modern nations but the penalties (except for murder) do not have abiding validity.¹⁰⁵ The modern civil magistrate (according to this view) is not obligated to follow the penalties set forth in God’s law. A ruler can make the penalties more severe or more lenient as he deems necessary for his own societal situation. Al Hembd writes, “Thus the magistrate may find in his particular nation that it is necessary to punish some offenses more severely than the Judicial Law would. At other times or in other places the magistrate may find himself compelled to punish more leniently than would the Judicial Law. Calvin does allow for either. In some nations, adultery was punished more leniently than the Judicial Law punished it. In other nations robbery was punished by exacting two-fold of that which was taken, which is a more lenient punishment than that of the Judicial Law. Yet in other nations, where robbery and slaughter are pandemic, it may become necessary to punish both with immediate death”.¹⁰⁶ This view regards the penalties given in the law as positivistic.¹⁰⁷ The moral law reflects God’s nature and character and, therefore, is

¹⁰⁵ An example of this view is given in an essay by Al Hembd. Hembd writes, “The penalties for infractions against the Moral Law can and may be adapted to the specific situations of a given culture. The Judicial Law given to Israel is just such an adaptation, given by Jehovah God of Israel to address its specific culture. Specific penalties for infractions of the Moral Law can be adapted to a specific culture. The Judicial Law addressed the state of Israel as it existed *at that time*. Of course, due consideration must be given by the present-day magistrate to the penalties assigned in the Judicial Law. The Judicial Law was a law given by the All-wise God, and it could well be argued that, in some instances at least, some of the punishments have an abiding permanence. The death penalty for murder would be one example, since that particular penalty was given prior to and apart from the Judicial Law of Israel. Yet however one might change the penalties of the Judicial Law, one *cannot* change the Moral Law without changing the very standard of right and wrong *by that act*” (“Josiah, Erastianism, and National Covenanting, Part Two” in *The Blue Banner*, Vol. 6, Issue 3, [Rowlett, TX: First Presbyterian Church, Rowlett, TX, July/Sept., 1997], p. 2). Hembd does a fine job of exegeting Calvin, but offers no scriptural proof for his assertions.

¹⁰⁶ Al Hembd, “Josiah, Erastianism, and National Covenanting, Part Two” in *The Blue Banner* Vol. 1, Issue 3, (Rowlett, TX: First Presbyterian Church, Rowlett, TX, July/Sept., 1997), p. 4.

¹⁰⁷ Positive law refers to those commands of God which are grounded solely on the fact that God says that man must obey them. An example of a positive law is the command to Adam and Eve not to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil (Gen. 2:17). There was nothing intrinsically evil regarding the forbidden fruit; it was wrong *solely* because God said it was wrong. How Calvin and certain Paleopresbyterians can regard the penalties as positivistic when they are obviously related to the seriousness of the various crimes is beyond my comprehension. If they want to argue that certain penalties are positivistic and others are not then tell us what is and what is not positivistic and explain why. After reading the relevant portions of Calvin’s *Institutes* and listening to the arguments of certain Paleopresbyterians it appears that some people accept what Calvin says simply because Calvin said it.

binding on civil magistrates but the penalties are not binding; they argue if a civil magistrate desires, adulterers, homosexuals and people who commit bestiality could be fined fifty dollars and sent home while a thief convicted for a first offense (stealing a car) could be executed.

The view that the penalties set forth in God's word are not binding and that civil magistrates are free to make up their own penalties is unscriptural for a number of reasons. First, God says that the law *including the penalties* cuts across all social and cultural distinctions. The Gentile who resided in Israel was not required to keep the ceremonial law yet was bound by the Judicial law and its penalties. "You shall have the same law for the stranger and for one from your own country" (Lev. 24:22).

Second, Jehovah has made it very clear that Israel's justice system (including the penalties) was to be the model for all nations. Why? Because nothing devised by sinful man (i.e., as a complete body of law) is as righteous and just as what God has revealed in His word: "this is your wisdom and your understanding in the sight of the peoples, who shall hear all these statutes, and say, 'Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people.'... 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" (Deut. 4:6, 8). "[N]o other nation possesses a body of law in itself so *righteous*, i.e., so conformable to the requirements of justice and right, and consequently so adapted to command the admiration of mankind at large, as Israel has."¹⁰⁸ The words "statutes and judgments" are often used together in Deuteronomy. "Although the two terms are in Deuteronomy indistinguishable and used comprehensively for the whole law...they originally had different connotations. The effect of Deuteronomy's generalizing of the terms for law so that they are practically synonymous is to bring civil and criminal law into the general context of religious instruction and teaching."¹⁰⁹ John Gill writes regarding verse 8: "Founded in justice and equity, and so agreeable to right reason, and so well calculated and adapted to lead persons in the ways of righteousness and truth, and keep them from doing any injury to each other's personal property, and to maintain good order, peace, and concord among them: *as all this law which I set before you this day?* which he then repeated, afresh declared, explained and instructed them in; for otherwise it had been delivered to them near 40 years ago. Now there was not any nation then in being, nor any since, to be compared with the nation of the Jews, for the wise and wholesome laws given unto them; no, not the more cultivated and civilized nations, as the Grecians and Romans, who had the advantage of such wise lawgivers as they were accounted, as Solon, Lycurgus, Numa, and others; and indeed the best laws that they had seem to be borrowed from the Jews."¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁸ S. R. Driver, *Deuteronomy* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1986 [1895]), p. 65.

¹⁰⁹ A. D. H. Mayes, *Deuteronomy* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1979), p. 149. Matthew Henry says of verse 8, "Observe, First, that all these statutes and judgments of the divine law are infinitely just and righteous, above the statutes and judgements of any of the nations. The law of God is far more excellent than the judgments of any of the nations. No law so consonant to natural equity and the unprejudiced dictates of right reason, so consistent with itself in all the parts of it, and so conducive to the welfare and interest of mankind, as the scripture-law is, Ps. cxix. 128. *Secondly*, The having of these statutes and judgments set before them is the true and transcendent greatness of any nation or people. See Ps. cxlvii. 19, 20. It is an honour to us that we have the Bible in reputation and power among us. It is an evidence of a peoples' being high in the favour of God, and a means of making them high among the nations. Those that magnify the law shall be magnified by it," (*Commentary on the Whole Bible*, 1:744; see also Matthew Poole, *A Commentary on the Holy Bible* [Carlisle, PA: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1963 (1685)], 1:345; and Keil and Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Old Testament* [Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1981], 1:310).

¹¹⁰ John Gill, *An Exposition of the Old Testament*, (Streamwood, IL: Primitive Baptist Library, 1979 [1810], 2:18). Moshe Weinfeld says of verse 8, 'The Mesopotamian kings boasted that by their profound wisdom they established "just laws (*dinat misarim*)"; cf. the Code of Hammurabi 4:9-10; 24:1-5, 26-31. Is it not possible that by using the

Third, the idea that the penalties are positivistic and nonbinding on civil magistrates ignores the explicit teaching of Scripture, that the penalties are indeed expressions of justice. They are not arbitrary. The Bible teaches the judicial principle known as the *lex talionis* (the law of retaliation). This principle is stated in Exodus 21:23-25; “But if any lasting harm follows, then you shall give life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot, burn for burn, wound for wound, stripe for stripe” (cf. Lev 24:18ff.; Deut. 29:21). The whole point of the *lex talionis* is that the punishment “must fit the crime; it must be proportionate to the offense, neither lesser nor greater.”¹¹¹ “Where physical damage can be determined objectively, the criminal must pay on an ‘eye for eye’ basis.... The punishment must fit the magnitude of the violation; the violation is assessed in terms of the damages inflicted.”¹¹²

There is disagreement among scholars as to whether the *lex talionis* was meant by God to be enforced literally (e.g., amputation of a limb). The context permits the substitution of a non-literal penalty (cf. Ex. 21:26-27) at least in some instances. There are crimes in which God permits no substitution, such as first and second degree murder (cf. Num. 35:31). Jewish Midrash and Jewish medieval scholars such as Nachmanides (thirteenth century) taught that the *lex talionis* referred to a just monetary recompense to a victim for a damaged eye or limb. Some scholars regard the amputation of a limb for a victim’s limb as referring to the *maximum* penalty allowed. However, the victim, not the state is the one who decides whether or not to accept monetary compensation. (This debate is beyond the purview of this essay.) Although scholars may disagree on exactly how the *lex talionis* is to be enforced, the meaning of the *lex talionis* cannot be denied. The Bible teaches that penalties must be just; and it is God’s law that defines justice. Justice is not relative. It is not affected or changed by time, culture or social considerations. To argue that it is *equally* just to execute a person for theft in one country while in another country a thief should only pay restitution is to argue a blatant contradiction. Bahnsen writes,

The main underlying principle of penology (whether civic or eternal) is not reformation or deterrence, but *justice*. The outstanding characteristic of theonomic punishment is the principle of *equity*; no crime receives a penalty which it does not warrant. The punishment for a violation of God’s law is always appropriate for the nature of the offense; ‘an eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth.’ Here is the most blessed standard of *social* retribution that man’s civilization has ever seen. That the Old Testament laws set forth humane and just punishments for crimes is immediately apparent when one compares it with the legal codes of the nations around Israel. God’s penal sanctions are not overweighted, cruel, unusual, or excessive; a criminal receives what he deserves: no more, no less.... None of God’s penalties are excessive or lenient; hence the Older Testament does not detail *arbitrary* punishments for crimes...but the punishment was made to correspond to the social heinousness of the offense so that the culprit receives what his public disobedience merits (e.g., Deut. 19:19).¹¹³

exceptional expression ‘just laws (*mispatim saddiqim*)’ the author of Deuteronomy employs a polemical note against the Hammurabi Code? This code was well known and copied in the schools of the ancient Near East for a thousand years. Thus, in opposition to ‘the wise’ Babylonian king who established as it were, ‘just laws,’ Deuteronomy takes pride in the ‘just laws’ observed by ‘the wise’ and discerning people of Israel” (*Deuteronomy* [New York, NY: Doubleday, 1991], p. 202).

¹¹¹ R. J. Rushdoony, *The Institutes of Biblical Law*, p. 229.

¹¹² Gary North, *Victim’s Rights: The Biblical View of Civil Justice* (Tyler, TX: Institute for Christian Economics, 1990), p 99.

¹¹³ Bahnsen, *Theonomy*, pp. 437-438.

God's law restricts the state's authority to impose vengeance "[B]iblical law restrains the officers of the State by imposing strict limitations on their enforcement of law. It is God's law that must be enforced, and this law establishes criteria of evidence and a standard of justice. This standard is 'an eye for an eye'. A popular slogan in the modern world permits a parallel judicial principle: 'the punishment should fit the crime....' Biblical law restrains the arbitrariness of the State's officers. If the punishment must fit the crime, then the judges do not have the authority to impose lighter judgments or heavier judgments on the criminal".¹¹⁴ The idea that the State can lawfully determine its own penalties apart from God's word is an implicit denial of the justness of the Bible's Spirit inspired penalties. It is judicial relativism and statism. Justice is objective. God revealed to Israel a just justice system so that arbitrary and unjust penalties would not be inflicted upon people as was commonly done in the surrounding pagan nations. "[C]an the state be God's servant and by-pass God's law? And if the state 'must exercise justice', how is justice defined, by the nations, or by God?... 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."¹¹⁵

The fact that the judges and officers in Israel are commanded to judge "the people with just judgment" presupposes an objective standard of justice. "You shall appoint judges and officers in all your gates, which the LORD your God gives you, according to your tribes and they shall judge the people with just judgment. You shall not pervert justice; you shall not show partiality, nor take a bribe, for a bribe blinds the eyes of the wise and twists the words of the righteous. You shall follow what is altogether just, that you may live and inherit the land the LORD your God is giving you" (Deut. 16:18-20). Craigie writes,

Both the people and the officers of law were to *pursue justice, and justice alone*, rather than pervert justice (v. 19). The pursuit of *justice alone* provided a basis for the execution of the law that was not merely human, whereas perverting justice reduced the execution of the law to a human basis in which unjust criteria became operative. Justice, the principle underlying the law, was not man-made or conceived, but found its source and authority in God. Hence justice was the only sure and authoritative basis for law. The pursuit of justice and the execution of the law in justice could alone lead to prosperity, namely, life and the possession of the promised land (v. 20b).¹¹⁶

In modern society most secular humanists would agree that murder, rape, and bestiality are immoral activities. But, when secular humanists discuss the civil penalties for such activities they usually deny biblical justice. The penalty rarely fits the crime. Even most unbelievers acknowledge that the American justice system often dispenses injustice. One reads of child molesters and rapists who spend six months in jail and murderers being paroled after seven years, etc. Those who argue that the moral law is binding while the penalties are positivistic cannot consistently make a case against the judicial atrocities being committed in most countries today. If as Hembd asserts the state can lawfully execute a thief if it deems it necessary for the greater good of society then the state can execute anyone for any crime. The Bible condemns such thinking. Civil magistrates are to render "true justice" or literally "righteous judgment" (*mispat sedeq*). "Justice does not follow man's needs, but man follows justice. Justice is God-

¹¹⁴ Ibid, pp. 254, 257.

¹¹⁵ R. J. Rushdoony, *The Institutes of Biblical Law*, p. 10.

¹¹⁶ P. C. Craigie, *The Book of Deuteronomy* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1976), p. 248.

centered, not man-centered. Modern law is not in touch with reality, because it seeks to be man-centered and defines the Rule of Law in terms of man and the will of man.”¹¹⁷

Biblical justice is not the opinion of the civil magistrate but is the application of God’s righteousness to specific acts. Biblical justice is individualistic in the sense that (contrary to Hembd’s assertion) social circumstances are irrelevant in determining the penalty. Murder, kidnapping, rape, and theft are just as evil and offensive to God in 1st century Palestine as in 18th century England or 20th century Brazil. The vengeance of God toward these crimes is the same. The justness or righteousness of the penalty also remains the same. “The Bible knows only one kind of justice or righteousness, God’s justice as set forth in His law. Thus, whether justice or righteousness in Scripture is ascribed to God, or to man and man’s dealings, the reference is to the same fact. Man is righteous when he is in obedience to God’s law.”¹¹⁸

Those who argue that God’s penalties against crime are positivistic have not only contradicted Scripture but also right reason. They are simply following Calvin’s irrational notions regarding natural law. Calvin wrote, “It is a fact that the law of God which we call the moral law is nothing else than a testimony of natural law and of that conscience which God has engraved upon the minds of men. Consequently, the entire scheme of this equity of which we are now speaking has been prescribed in it. Hence, this equity alone must be the goal and rule and limit of all laws. What ever laws shall be framed to that rule, directed to that goal, bound by that limit, *there is no reason why we should disapprove of them, however they may differ from the Jewish laws, or among themselves.*”¹¹⁹ Calvin argues that natural law testifies to the moral law; that nations who depend on natural law and equity to determine penalties can have just laws that *differ* from the Old Testament legislation and each other. Calvin then proceeds to give examples of different punishments for the same offences. According to Calvin one country may execute thieves, another may whip them and another fine them and yet they are all still following the same natural law and equity. This assertion is utter nonsense. Calvin apparently believes that justice is served as long as a criminal is punished in some manner for a crime. Yet, the amount of punishment is irrelevant to the question of justice. Calvin jettisons the whole judicial law of Moses with no scriptural argumentation and then asserts that magistrates can arbitrarily determine penalties. If as Scripture teaches, the penalty must fit the crime, then Calvin’s view must be rejected. It is simply irrational to assert that executing an adulterer and fining an adulterer fifty dollars are both just. Either one is too harsh or one is too lenient.¹²⁰ “The *lex talionis* should not be dismissed as some sort of peculiar judicial testament of a long-defunct primitive agricultural society. What the Bible spells out as judicially binding is vastly superior to anything offered by modern humanism in the name of civic justice.”¹²¹

¹¹⁷ R. J. Rushdoony, *Law and Society* (Vallecito, CA: Ross House, 1982), p. 521.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid*, p. 585.

¹¹⁹ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeil, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster, 1960), IV. XX. 16, 2:1504, *emphasis added*.

¹²⁰ “The Israelites expected God’s justice to be fair because it issued from God who was a righteous Judge (Ps. 7:11, 9:8, 119:137, 145:17). Those who were appointed to the office of judge (*dayyan* or *sopet*) or magistrate were expected to reflect God’s holy nature (Ex. 18:21). Consequently, when executing justice, the judges (*sopetim*) were to be absolutely fair, realizing that they were acting as agents or deputies of the Holy God (Deut. 1:16-17; cf. Ex. 18:21-23)” (Temba L. J. Mafico, “*Just, Justice*” in *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, ed. David N. Freedman [New York, NY: Doubleday, 1992] 3:1128).

¹²¹ Gary North, *Victim’s Rights*, p. 135. “A system of just restitution would eliminate taxpayer support of criminals, rid society of a major breeding and training ground for criminals, and justly reimburse crime victims” (Kenneth L. Gentry, Jr., *God’s Law in the Modern World* [Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1993], pp. 62-63).

One of the great lessons of human history is that civil magistrates cannot be trusted to make just penalties for crimes. Throughout history the penalties have either been much too harsh (e.g., a thief being cut open and having his intestines set on fire, etc.) or much too lenient (e.g., six months in jail for rape and battery). Even Christian magistrates were often guilty of imposing arbitrary unjust penalties. If the penalties are positivistic then how are we supposed to determine which penalties in a given country are too harsh or too lenient. How can citizens complain against the unjust penalties of a tyrant if penalties are positivistic? A common argument against the abiding validity of the penal sanctions is that the penalties given to Israel were designed only for their specific society and culture and therefore are not binding on other nations. Those Christians who use this argument need to explain how cultural and social conditions affect or alter the proper penalty for rape, theft, manslaughter, fraud, incest, adultery, fornication, etc. Why should a rapist be treated differently in Polynesia than in Sweden? Does the climate, language, dress, food or means of earning a living make rape somehow less reprehensible? Is adultery less evil in a industrialized nation than in an agricultural society? Is bestiality less or more of a crime in a nation of sheep herders than in a high tech society? It is obvious that specific evil acts that are defined as crimes in the Bible are not rendered less evil because of culture. Furthermore, God teaches how evil He regards particular crimes by the severity of the penalty that He attaches to them. The Bible says that the magistrate is “an avenger to execute wrath on him who practices evil” (Rom. 13:4). The wrath spoken of does not refer to the ruler’s wrath but God’s. “[T]he magistrate is the avenger in executing the judgment that accrues to the evil doer from the wrath of God.”¹²²

The only reliable method for determining the proper wrath or penal sanction that God desires for a particular crime is to examine the Spirit inspired penalties in God’s law. Those who reject the penal sanctions have abandoned biblical justice for penal relativism. They have replaced God’s wrath for the wrath of an earthly ruler. Those writers who consider the idea that civil magistrates should impose the penal sanctions in God’s law as heretical and dangerous need to explain how a *penalty instituted by God* is dangerous or unjust. If a change in time, climate, clothing, methods of industry etc., renders a past just penalty to now be unjust then explain how and why; give examples. Christians who argue that natural law or general revelation must be the sole guide for nations must explain how general and special revelation can contradict one another. A return to the biblical system of penal justice is the *only* way to avoid the tyranny of the state and the tyranny of criminals. When Christians abandon what God has said regarding justice and teach that sinful men can determine justice autonomously, they implicitly hand society over to injustice and oppression.¹²³

¹²² John Murray, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 2:153.

¹²³ John Calvin’s views regarding the Mosaic penalties leads to *immediate injustice* regarding civil penalties. Rutherford held the same unscriptural view: “No man but sees the punishment of theft is of common moral equity, and obligeth all nations, but the manner or degree of punishment is more positive: as to punish theft by restoring four oxen for the stealing of one ox, doth not so oblige all nations, but some other bodily punishment, as whipping, may be used against thieves” (*A Free Disputation Against Pretended Liberty of Conscience*, [(London: R. I. for Andrew Cook, 1649), p. 299]). According to Calvin, Rutherford and others, whipping can replace restitution as a just penal sanction against theft. But, replacing biblical restitution with whipping is a *denial* of biblical justice. A central aspect of biblical penology is restitution and victim’s rights. Calvin’s view is totally compatible with the penal system of Western nations in which victims do *not* receive restitution and are *not* permitted to impose the maximum biblical penalty allowed.

John 8:1-11

A portion of Scripture that is often used as a proof text against the abiding validity of the Mosaic penalties is John 8:1-11 (the woman taken in adultery). A brief examination of this section in John will prove that when Christ dealt with the adulterous woman He was not setting aside the mosaic penalties as a whole or even in part.

Before enumerating the reasons why the anti-Theonomist interpretation of this passage must be rejected one should first note the unsavory circumstances in which the question “What do you say?” was asked.

First, note that the scribes and Pharisees were not at all concerned for the law of Moses but merely were seeking a way to entrap Jesus. The Bible says that they caught the woman in adultery, in the very act (8:4). The act of adultery involves at a minimum two individuals. Yet the Jews brought the woman to Jesus and permitted the man to escape. The law specifically says in Leviticus 20:10 and Deuteronomy 22:22 that the man as well as the woman must be put to death. The witnesses of such a crime do not have the biblical option of prosecuting only one of the guilty parties. “Since the woman was taken in the very act there should have been two sinners, not one, before Jesus.”¹²⁴ The fact that the woman was caught “in the very act” indicates the strong probability that either the adulterous situation was brought about by a premeditated plan on the part of the Jews, or that the Jews took advantage of a well-known adulterous relationship which they ignored in the past but now decided to use solely for the purpose of trapping Christ. If Jesus had permitted the Jews to execute the adulterous woman He would have been guilty of violating not only Leviticus 20:10 and Deuteronomy 22:22, but also Exodus 23:1, “Do not put your hand with the wicked to be an unrighteous witness.”

Second, in order to properly interpret Jesus’ answer to the scribes and Pharisees one must understand the nature of the trap which they set before Jesus. The Jews’ question was carefully designed so that Jesus would be forced either to contradict the law of Rome or the law of Moses. Because the Jewish nation was under the authority of Rome the Jewish magistrates did not have the authority to impose the death penalty.¹²⁵ “The Jews said to him [Pilate], ‘It is not lawful for us to put anyone to death’” (Jn. 18:31). If Jesus had told the crowd to stone the woman and she was killed by the mob, then Jesus could have been arrested by the Roman authorities for violating their law. If Christ told the people not to stone her, then the Jews could accuse Jesus of annulling the law of Moses. They could present Christ to the people as an enemy of the Mosaic law “and as one that usurped an authority to correct and control it, and would confirm that prejudice against him which his enemies were so industrious to propagate, that he came to *destroy the law and the prophets.*”¹²⁶ Godet concurs, “If Jesus answered: ‘Moses is right; stone her!’ they would have gone to Pilate and accused Jesus of infringing upon the rights of the

¹²⁴ Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to John* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1971), p. 885.

¹²⁵ If the scribes and Pharisees really wanted have the adulterous woman executed they could have sought a conviction by the Sanhedrin. The Sanhedrin would then have had to send representatives to Pilate to argue that her crime merited a Roman execution. The Jews knew that an appeal to Pilate for an execution would have failed for a number of reasons. First, at that time adultery was not a death-penalty offense according to Roman law. Second, the Jews themselves had not sought the death penalty for adultery for several decades. They had substituted divorce for adultery. Because of their situation under Roman rule they had no other choice. Third, the circumstances surrounding the woman’s arrest were unsavory and possibly involved illegal entrapment. Pilate would not have viewed the Jew’s case favorably.

¹²⁶ Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible*, 5:981.

Roman authority, which had reserved to itself the *jus gladii* here, as in all conquered countries. If He answered: ‘Do not stone her!’ they would have decried Him before the people and would even have accused Him before the Sanhedrin as a false Messiah; for the Messiah must maintain or restore the sovereignty of the law.”¹²⁷

Jesus, in order to avoid the trap set for Him by the Jews, had to answer in such a manner that honored the law of Moses yet did not permit the mob to kill the woman (Jesus’ answer also implicitly dealt with the unsavory circumstances surrounding her capture). “So when they continued asking Him, He raised Himself up and said to them, ‘He who is without sin among you, let him throw a stone at her first’” (v. 7). “This solemn and weighty sentence is a striking example of our Lord’s perfect wisdom.”¹²⁸ William Hendriksen writes, “He did not make light of her sin. Neither did he expressly or by implication abolish the seventh commandment. He did not even in so many words set aside the law which demanded the death-penalty for offenses such as these. On the contrary, without in any way implying that he personally desired her death, he proceeded upon their *presumed assumption*, as if the law of Moses were to be literally applied in this given case—which even they themselves, of course, did not *really* want—; but then he showed them that they were not fit to execute the very law which *ostensibly* they were so eager to carry out!”¹²⁹

Having examined the circumstances surrounding this case we will proceed to prove that Christ did not relax or abolish the Mosaic penalties in His answer. First, note that Jesus’ answer upheld the Mosaic penalty. He specifically said, “[T]hrow a stone” (v. 7). But, because of the unbiblical nature of the case before Him (the man was set free and the woman was likely entrapped), and, the situation with Rome (it would have been a civil crime to kill her), He set a condition upon this group of evil witnesses that He knew they could not meet. “The skill of this answer consists in disarming the improvised judges of this woman, without however infringing in the least upon the ordinance of Moses. On one side, the words: *let him cast the stone*, sustain the code, but on the other, the words: *without sin*, disarm any one who would desire to apply it.”¹³⁰ Those who argue that Jesus was abolishing the Mosaic penalties in this passage should consider the fact that if Christ was making a universal pronouncement against the Mosaic penalties He would be a total anarchist, for if sinless perfection is required to impose a civil penalty no one could be penalized for any crime. Only Jesus Christ is without sin and He is now in heaven. Furthermore, if Christ was setting aside the Mosaic penalties why then did He rebuke the Pharisees for circumventing the law which required the execution of a rebellious son (cf. Mt. 15:3-6; Deut. 21:18-20; Ex. 21:15)?

Second, Jesus did not come to earth to serve as a civil judge. As in the matter of contested estate (Lu. 12:13-14) Jesus refused “to have the office of judge thrust upon Him.”¹³¹ Jesus spoke to the woman not as an earthly judge but as the divine-human Messiah. Furthermore, even if Christ had been speaking as a civil judge He could not have had the woman executed for the

¹²⁷ Frederic Louis Godet, *Commentary on John’s Gospel*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel, 1978 [1886]), p. 647.

¹²⁸ J. C. Ryle, *Expository Thoughts on the Gospels*, (Cambridge: James Clark & Co, 1976 [1869]), 2:80.

¹²⁹ William Hendriksen, *The Gospel of John*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1953), 2:38.

¹³⁰ Frederic Louis Godet, *Commentary on John’s Gospel*, pp. 648-649. A number of commentators (Matthew Henry, Alfred Plummer, J. C. Ryle, Matthew Poole, George Hutcheson) argue that the phrase, “he who is without sin” refers not to all sin but particularly to the sin of adultery. If this interpretation is true, Jesus would in effect be saying, “can you convict this woman without also convicting yourselves?” Whether Jesus is referring to all sin or to the particular sin of adultery does not affect the arguments set forth in this section against the anti-Theonomic interpretation.

¹³¹ Alfred Plummer, *The Gospel According to St. John* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1981 [1882]), p. 185.

hypocritical witnesses had all vanished. Calvin concurs, “He said this according to the custom of the Law; for God commanded that the witnesses should with their own hands, put malefactors to death, according to the sentence which had been pronounced on them; that greater caution might be used in bearing testimony (Deut. xvii. 7).”¹³² Also, note that Christ was not speaking to a lawfully assembled court but to a mob. “He is contending not against punishment being inflicted by human law [i.e., lawful courts], but against men taking the law into their own hands.”¹³³

Third, Jesus Christ is God and has the authority to forgive sin and remit penalties that earthly judges do not possess. In Numbers 35:31 the law explicitly says that persons guilty of murder must be put to death. No ransom is ever to be accepted for the life of a murderer. Yet, in 2 Samuel 12:13 God forgives King David for adultery and premeditated murder and also remits the civil penalty.¹³⁴ Does 2 Samuel 12:13 teach that God has eliminated the civil penalties of the Mosaic law? No, of course not! Thus, there is no reason to believe that Christ has altered the penalties by not condemning the adulterous woman. Furthermore, the idea that Christ was abolishing the judicial penalties in John 8:1-11 is contradicted by the passages which teach that a change in the law occurred with Christ’s sacrificial death (cf. Eph. 2:14-16; Heb. 7:26-9:15). Thus the argument that Jesus is abolishing the Mosaic penalties in this portion of Scripture is both poor exegesis and chronologically premature.

Has the New Testament Substituted Divorce for the Death Penalty?

Those who are against the continuance of the Mosaic penalties not only use the case of the woman taken in adultery but also point to other passages which indicate that death was not required for the offense of adultery. One such passage is Matthew 1:19, “Then Joseph, her husband, being a just man, and not wanting to make her a public example, was minded to put her away secretly.” It is important to note that this passage does not shed light upon a *supposed* different system of law for the New covenant era, for it refers to the time before Jesus Christ was even born. What it does do is help us understand the Old Testament law.

Joseph and Mary were betrothed. Among the Jews betrothal was considered much more serious than our modern engagements. The Old Testament law places having sex with “a virgin betrothed to a husband” in the same category as adultery. It is a death-penalty offense (cf.

¹³² John Calvin, *Commentary on the Gospel According to John* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1981), 1:320.

¹³³ Alfred Plummer, *The Gospel According to St. John*, p. 185. Robert L. Dabney said of this passage: “The law of Moses, therefore, very properly made adultery a capital crime; nor does our Saviour...repeal that statute, or disallow its justice”; modern legislation which ignores the Mosaic stipulation is “drawn rather from the grossness of Pagan sources” (*Lectures in Systematic Theology*, [Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1972 (1872)], p. 407).

¹³⁴ There is actually no evidence within the passage that the woman repented or that Christ forgave her sins. She does refer to Christ as Lord (*kurie*), but this could just be a polite form of address meaning *sir*. Christ did not condemn the woman because of the reasons given above. Calvin writes, “We are not told that Christ absolutely acquitted the woman, but that he allowed her to go at liberty. Nor is this wonderful, for he did not wish to undertake anything that did not belong to his office, He had been sent by the Father to gather *the lost sheep*, (Matth. x. 6) and, therefore, mindful of His calling, He exhorts the woman to repentance, and comforts her with a promise of grace. They who infer from this that adultery ought not to be punished with death, must, for the same reason, admit that inheritances ought not to be divided, because Christ refused to arbitrate in that matter between two brothers, (Luke xii. 13). Indeed, there will be no crime whatever that shall not be exempted from the penalties of the law, if adultery be not punished; for then the door will be thrown open for any kind of treachery, and for poisoning, and murder, and robbery” (*Commentary on the Gospel According to John*, 1:323). “Bengel remarks that Jesus does not say: ‘Go in peace: thy sins are forgiven thee.’ For the sinful woman who is in question here did not come to Jesus by reason of a movement of repentance and faith” (Godet, *Commentary on John’s Gospel*, p. 649).

Deuteronomy 22:23-24). “According to Philo and Maimonides, a betrothed woman possessed all the rights of a wife, and could only be repudiated with the same formalities.”¹³⁵ On the one hand God’s law says specifically that the penalty for adultery is death and on the other hand the Bible calls Joseph a just man even though he decides not to prosecute Mary in civil court but “to put her away privately;” that is, without the public spectacle of a trial at the gate. (Keep in mind that Joseph at this time is an Old Testament saint. There is no question that at this time the Old Testament law had not been abrogated). What does this mean? Does the Bible contradict itself?

This passage indicates that the victim of a crime (i.e., at least *certain* crimes of a private nature) does not have to take full advantage of the law against the guilty party. Joseph who loved Mary and knew of her past righteous conduct had the biblical right to extend mercy to her. Because Joseph loved justice he did condemn the crime of which he thought she was guilty (i.e., he did plan to put her away);¹³⁶ but, because he loved her he refused to press charges in the civil court. James Morison writes, “While the law invested a man who had entered into an engagement of betrothal with power to visit his unfaithful spouse with the severest penalties (Deut. xxii. 23-27), yet of course it did not constrain him to avail himself of his power. If he felt that he could be satisfied without a public prosecution and judicial conviction and execution, then as a private member of society he had an unchallengeable *right* to dispense with his *rights*. Private members of society are not bound always to exact, though they are bound always to discharge, all their dues. There would probably be something so pure, and sweet, and elevated in the character of Mary, that Joseph, even under the influence of irritation and the deepest disappointment, would feel himself unable to entertain the idea of proceeding against her to the utmost extremity of the law.”¹³⁷ Joseph could repudiate Mary as prescribed in the Mosaic law (cf. Deut. 24:1) by giving her a bill of divorcement and sending her out.¹³⁸ Even if Joseph had proceeded against Mary judicially before the elders it would not have resulted in the death penalty for the Jews by their accretions to the law had eliminated that possibility. Note, the passage says he wanted to protect her from public shame. Execution is not even considered as a possibility.

This passage teaches that the *victim* of certain crimes does not have to prosecute his or her case before the civil magistrates but can extend mercy and impose a lighter sentence than that which is permitted by the law. This principle applies to the victim not the civil magistrate. To illustrate this principle consider a typical modern occurrence of a crime. An eleven year old boy steals a bike from a person’s open garage and it comes to the attention of the head of that household. According to this principle the victim can ask for his bike back and request privately that the boy be punished in some manner by his father for the offense. Old Testament law does not demand that the victim have the boy arrested and detained for trial.

A portion of Scripture which some opponents of Theonomy consider to be “the clearest evidence that Jesus was altering even the civil application of the law”¹³⁹ is Matthew 5:31-32. “Furthermore it has been said, ‘Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of

¹³⁵ Joseph Addison Alexander, *The Gospel According to Matthew* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1980 [1860]), p. 12.

¹³⁶ “As a truly religious Jew, Joseph could not think of consummating his marriage with Mary under the present circumstances” (R. C. H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew’s Gospel* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg, 1964 [1943]), p. 43.

¹³⁷ James Morison, *A Practical Commentary on the Gospel According to St. Matthew* (Minneapolis, MN: Klock & Klock, 1981 [1884]), pp. 8-9.

¹³⁸ “Letters of divorce were both private and legal, needing no publication before a court” (R. C. H. Lenski, *Matthew*, p. 43).

¹³⁹ *Theonomy and the Confession of Faith*, 1997, a study conducted by the Free Church of Scotland, n.p.

divorce'. But I say to you that whoever divorces his wife for any reason except sexual immorality causes her to commit adultery; and whoever marries a woman who is divorced commits adultery." The authors of a Free Church of Scotland report against Theonomy wrote, "John Murray (*Divorce*, p. 27) demonstrates that Jesus authoritatively replaced the death penalty for adultery in the Mosaic code with divorce. 'Here then is something novel and it implies that the requirement of death for adultery is abrogated in the economy Jesus Himself inaugurated. Here are accordingly two provisions which our Lord instituted, one negative and the other positive. He abrogated the Mosaic penalty for adultery and he legitimated divorce for adultery.... On the one hand, the abrogation of the death penalty for adultery and the substitution of divorce as the legitimate resort for the innocent husband indicate a relaxative amendment of the penal sanction attached to adultery.'"¹⁴⁰

There are a number of reasons why this passage (Mt. 5:32) does *not* teach that Christ has replaced the death penalty with divorce. First, if in this verse Christ is setting aside a portion of the Mosaic law and replacing it with new legislation then the sermon on the mount contains a blatant self-contradiction. In Matthew 5:17 Jesus said, "Do not think that I came to destroy the Law or the Prophets. I did not come to destroy but to fulfill." He also said "Whosoever therefore breaks one of the least of these commandments, and teaches men so, shall be called least in the kingdom of heaven. For I say to you, that unless your righteousness exceeds the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, you will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven" (vs. 19-20). Then in verses 21 through 48 Christ expounds upon the subject of His upholding and honoring the Law of Moses. Jesus gives six examples in which He contrasts the true meaning of God's law with the perverse interpretations and additions to the law of the scribes and Pharisees. The Lord introduces each new subject with the formula "You have heard that it was said" or "it has been said" and then He introduces His exposition with the phrase, "but I say to you." Remember, Jesus is not correcting the law of Moses but the false interpretation of it by the scribes and Pharisees. D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones writes,

Bearing all this in mind, let us also remember that in these six contrasts which our Lord draws, He is comparing not the law of Moses, as such, with His own teaching, but rather the false interpretation of this law by the Pharisees and scribes. Our Lord obviously does not say that He had come to correct the law of Moses, because it was God's law, given by God Himself to Moses. No, our Lord's purpose was to correct the perversion, the false interpretation of the law which was being taught to the people by the Pharisees and scribes. He is therefore honoring the law of Moses and displaying it in its great fullness and glory. That, of course, is precisely what He does with regard to the question of divorce. He is especially concerned to expose the false teaching of the Pharisees and scribes with regard to this important matter.¹⁴¹

Those who argue that this passage teaches that Christ abrogated the death penalty and replaced it with something totally new (i.e., divorce), have Christ saying in the same sermon: "I didn't come to destroy or get rid of the law but to fulfill it. If anyone teaches people not to obey any part of the law he shall be the least in the kingdom of heaven. By the way, I'm now abrogating the death penalty for divorce. I'm now teaching you not to observe this particular law of Moses." If (as the Free Church of Scotland asserts) this was what Christ was teaching would not Christ's enemies have seized the opportunity of accusing Jesus of contradicting the law of Moses? Furthermore, if Jesus was substituting divorce for the death penalty then Matthew 5:32 would contradict John

¹⁴⁰ Ibid.

¹⁴¹ D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Studies in the Sermon on the Mount* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1982 [1959]), 1:253.

8:1-11. John 8:1-11 occurs after the sermon on the mount. Yet in the passage in John's gospel Jesus upholds the death penalty provision.

Second, Christ (in v. 32) did not take issue with the scribes' doctrine regarding the death penalty but rather refuted their lax notion regarding the *grounds* of divorce. Jesus refuted their interpretation of Deuteronomy 24:1.¹⁴² The majority of Jews followed the teaching of Rabbi Hillel who had a very broad understanding of the word "unseemly" or "indecent thing" in Deuteronomy 24:1. They believed that a man could divorce "his wife for any cause whatsoever." If a man's wife put on a little weight, made a bad cup of coffee or burnt the toast she was "unseemly" and could be divorced. Jesus rejected this false interpretation of Deuteronomy 24:1 by giving the correct interpretation. Shearer writes, "Moses and Christ agree that sin only, and the same sin, may justify divorce. Moses says, 'Because he has found some uncleanness in her.' the original may be rendered 'Matter of nakedness.' This is a technical term to indicate some form of lewdness, and there is no reference to ceremonial and ritual uncleanness. It can only mean uncleanness in the marriage relation, sexual sin.... Christ expounded this only 'cause' of Moses to be fornication or adultery—sin in the marriage relation."¹⁴³ Since Jesus did not speak to the issue of the civil penalty for adultery but rather gave His interpretation of a specific passage from the Mosaic law, there is absolutely no reason to conclude that He abolished the death penalty unless the passage in question (Deut. 24:1) also abolished the penalty. That of course would be absurd. Remember, Jesus expounded the true meaning of the Mosaic law against the Pharisees and scribes. He did not issue new legislation.

Third, the interpretation that Jesus was implicitly setting aside the death penalty for divorce, by allowing divorce in the case of fornication assumes that the Old Testament law (and the Jewish courts in the days of Christ) always required the death penalty for fornication or adultery. This assumption (by the Free Church of Scotland and others) has no foundation in Scripture at all. Before Jesus was even born Joseph was going to put Mary away privately because he thought she was guilty of fornication. Does the Bible condemn Joseph for not dragging Mary before the authorities to have her executed? No, it says he was a just or righteous man. The victim has the right (in accordance with Deuteronomy 24:1) to divorce his spouse without a civil trial by giving her a certificate of divorce and sending her out of the house. Furthermore, "different circumstances involved in the adultery, its discovery, and its recompense

¹⁴² "N. B. Stonehouse offers a good paraphrase of the first part of the antitheses in the Sermon on the Mount: 'Ye have heard of the appeal of Jewish teachers to Deuteronomy 24:1 in the interest of substantiating a policy which permits husbands freely at their own pleasure to divorce their wives—simply by providing them with a duly attested document of the transaction'" (John R. W. Stott, *Christian Counter Culture: The Message of the Sermon on the Mount* [Downers Grove, IL: Inter Varsity Press, 1978], p. 97).

¹⁴³ J. B. Shearer, *The Sermon on the Mount: A Study*, (Richmond, VA: Presbyterian Committee of Publications, 1906), pp. 63-64. Alfred Plummer writes, "The stricter Rabbis taught that the 'unseemly' things (*impudicum negotium*, Tertullian) which justified divorce (Deut. xxiv. 1) were adultery: and according to Matthew, Christ said the same thing. Nothing short of adultery justified divorce, but adultery did justify it" (*An Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to St. Matthew* [Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1982 (1915)] pp. 81-82). R. V. G. Tasker writes, "Fornication renders *porneia*, which is a general term for 'unchastity', the word by which RSV here translates it.... [I]t must be supposed that Jesus favoured the interpretation put on Deuteronomy xxiv. 1 by the stricter school of Jewish interpreters" (*The Gospel According to St. Matthew*, [Grand Rapids, MI: 1961], p. 69). Arthur Pink writes, "Here Christ refutes the corrupt interpretation of the scribes and Pharisees, and positively affirms that divorce is permissible only in the case of that sin which in God's sight disannuls the marriage covenant, and even then is only allowed, and not commanded" (*An Exposition of the Sermon on the Mount* [Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1982 (1950)], p. 93).

were countenanced by the Old Testament (e.g., Num. 5:11-31). The law did not have one exclusive pattern for handling instances of adultery.”¹⁴⁴

In each of the six sub-points of this section of Christ’s sermon, Jesus refuted specific abuses of the Old Testament law by the scribes and Pharisees. Were the Jews in Jesus day guilty of abusing the death penalty? Were people being executed unfairly? No. The Jews had abandoned the death penalty for adultery many years before Jesus started His ministry. Because of their subjugation to Rome the Jewish authorities were forbidden to impose the death penalty (cf. Jn. 18:31). Those who argue that Christ was abolishing the death penalty for adultery must ignore the Old Testament teaching regarding the different circumstances and methods of handling unfaithfulness, the historical context in which Jesus sermon was preached (the death penalty for adultery was not an issue) and the fact that Jesus was refuting Jewish perversions of the law not the law itself.

Fourth, Jesus in His earthly ministry came to obey the law. He did not come as a judge (cf. Luke 12:13-14) or a legislator. Shearer writes, “It is necessary here, again, to emphasize the fact that Christ in the flesh was under the law, and was in no sense a lawgiver. James enunciates this same great fact in Chapter iv. 11, 12. He teaches that to judge the law, and to do the law, are incompatible. Christ in the flesh was a doer of the law, and was in no sense a judge or lawgiver. It follows, therefore, that Christ and Moses taught exactly the same thing, if they are rightly interpreted, while the Pharisees made the law void by their traditions; and they had so defiled the land with their vicious divorces that it was nearly ready to vomit them out.”¹⁴⁵ The idea that Christ was abrogating the Mosaic law and giving forth new legislation while He was the humble servant, while He was fulfilling the law in exhaustive detail for His people, is a contradiction of His earthly mission.

Hendriksen summarizes Jesus’ teaching in Matthew 5:31-32 as follows: “The more we study Christ’s teaching as presented to us in this passage the more we begin to appreciate it. Here, by means of a few simple words, Jesus discourages divorce, refutes the rabbinical misinterpretation of the law, reaffirms the law’s true meaning (cf. Mt. 5:17-18), censures the guilty party, defends the innocent, and throughout it all upholds the sacredness and inviolability of the marriage bond as ordained by God!”¹⁴⁶ Those Christians who are seeking scriptural proof that the penal sanctions of the Mosaic law are abrogated cannot find it in Mt. 5:31-32. Pastors and scholars who use this passage as a proof text against the abiding validity of the Mosaic penalties are guilty of letting their anti-Theonomic presuppositions guide their analysis of this text. Such a procedure is commonly referred to as eisegesis.

¹⁴⁴ Greg L. Bahnsen, *Theonomy in Christian Ethics*, pp. 113-114.

¹⁴⁵ J. B. Shearer, *The Sermon on the Mount*, p. 63.

¹⁴⁶ William Hendriksen, *The Gospel of Matthew*, p. 306. “In opposition to this prevalent perversion of a merciful provision in the law, our Savior teaches that so far from making divorce easier, he intended to forbid it altogether as the law did, with the single exception of those cases where the contract had already been annulled by the conduct of one party, i.e., by desertion (1 Cor. 7, 15) or adultery” (Joseph Addison Alexander, *The Gospel According to Matthew* [Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1980 (1860)], p. 145). “The Law and the Prophets, by Jesus’ own authority, point to the necessity of absolute purity and must not be trivialized by sophistries which seek to escape that purity” (D. A. Carson, *An Evangelical Exposition of Matthew 5-7* [Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1978], p. 46).

The Jesus-Didn't-Prosecute Argument

Another argument commonly used against the abiding validity of the Mosaic penalties is that if Christ and the apostles believed that the Mosaic penalties were still in force, then, why did they not turn prostitutes and criminals over to the state for prosecution? The authors of the Free Church of Scotland report against Theonomy write, "The fact that he [Jesus] refused to condemn [the adulterous woman (John 8:1-11)], shows that he views the Mosaic penalty as no longer valid. This is completely in line with his general attitude. He mixed with tax-collectors and sinners like the Samaritan woman (John 4) and at no time indicated that they should be dealt with by the civil authorities. He even commended prostitutes (Matthew 21:31, 32) for repenting at the preaching of John the Baptist (under the Mosaic code, prostitution was a capital offense). The Apostle Paul clearly followed the Lord Jesus in this. In 1 Corinthians 5 he does not command execution for the member of their fellowship guilty of incest, but excommunication."¹⁴⁷

The argument that Jesus and the apostles were implicitly rejecting the Mosaic penalties by their treatment of sinners in their ministries must be rejected for a number of reasons. First, this whole argument is based on a faulty understanding of the Mosaic law. The law says that a person is to be condemned for *specific acts* on the basis of the testimony of two or more witnesses. The witnesses of the act (if a capital offense) must participate in the execution of the criminal. The Bible does not permit the state to round up suspected homosexuals and prostitutes for execution. There must be eye witnesses to an offense who are willing to testify. The idea that the Old Testament law requires church officers to turn over to the state for execution anyone who in their past committed a capital offense is unscriptural and absurd. In the Old Testament Rahab the harlot repented of her wicked behavior and was received into the Old covenant church. In fact she is an ancestor of Jesus Christ!

Second, those who teach that Christ's kind treatment of prostitutes and adulterers entails a rejection of the Old Testament penal sanctions have chosen an interpretation that logically leads to the total legalization of adultery, incest (cf. 1 Cor. 5) and prostitution. They like to point out that Christ did not turn prostitutes and adulterers over to be executed, but, it should also be noted that *He did not have them prosecuted in any way*. If Jesus' actions are to be taken as giving forth new legislation regarding penal matters, then in the New covenant era Christian nations should totally legalize prostitution and adultery. Also, if the church at Corinth was making a statement against the Mosaic penalties by not turning the man guilty of incest over to the Roman authorities then incest should be legalized in Christian countries. It is obvious that Jesus was not altering the Mosaic penalties by His kind treatment of sinners. Such an argument proves too much and therefore is worthless.

Third, (as noted above) Jesus in His earthly ministry did not come to judge or alter the law of Moses but to perfectly obey it. Whenever Christ confronted the scribes and Pharisees He acted as a champion of the law; He upheld the law of Moses and condemned false interpretations and additions to it. If Christ (as many assert) was abrogating certain parts of the law of Moses, His opponents were certainly unaware of it; for if He had, they would have accused Him of such at His trial. Jesus was condemned by the Sanhedrin not for opposing the law of Moses but for claiming to be God (cf. Mt. 26:64-65; Lk 22:70-71).

¹⁴⁷ *Theonomy and the Confession of Faith.*

But, what about 1 Cor. 5:1-7? This occurred after Jesus had ascended. Doesn't this passage teach that the death penalty has been replaced with excommunication? No, not at all! First, (as noted above) such an argument would lead logically to the legalization of incest. There is no indication that the church had him punished by the state at all (unless one holds to the interpretation that having the man turned over "to Satan for the destruction of the flesh" (v. 5) refers somehow to the death penalty; such an interpretation is unlikely.) Second, the church at Corinth lived in a society in which incest was not a death-penalty offense. This historical situation renders the whole argument against the death penalty from 1 Cor. 5 irrelevant. When a church finds itself in a nation which does not follow God's law it must obey God's law to the best of its ability but it cannot take up the sword. That function is the sole prerogative of the civil magistrate. In heathen nations often all that the church can do in such situations is excommunicate the sinning member and work to protect what's left of the family (e.g., if a Theonomic church excommunicated an adulterer in modern America and then attempted to have him prosecuted for adultery by the state, the state officials would do absolutely nothing).

Other Arguments Considered

There are a number of other arguments against the continuance of the penalties (indeed the whole judicial law) that should be considered. One argument is that Old Testament Israel was a unique redemptive covenantal nation; therefore, it had a special body of judicial laws to preserve its uniqueness; no nation except Old Testament Israel is obligated to follow those laws. It is true that Old Testament Israel was a unique nation ("being: (1) a type of Christ's redemptive kingdom and (2) a holy nation set apart by God's electing love."¹⁴⁸). However, it does not *necessarily* follow that its judicial laws were not binding on other nations. This argument *assumes, without any scriptural support*, that Israel's uniqueness as a holy nation renders the whole judicial law as non-binding on the Gentile nations. The Bible teaches that Israel was a unique special nation; but, it also teaches that: (1. God's moral and judicial law is a guide for Gentile nations (Deut. 4:6, 8); (2. The Old Testament judicial laws are righteous and just (Deut. 4:8; 16:18; Ex. 21:23-25); therefore, the principles they teach are applicable to all nations and cultures; (3. Unlike the ceremonial laws, the judicial laws were binding on Gentiles dwelling within Israel (Lev. 18:26; 20:2); (4. God destroyed nations and cities that violated those judicial laws (e.g., the Canaanites); (5. The prophets foretold of a time when nations will come to Zion to learn God's law (Isa. 2:2-4); and (6. Jesus said He did not come to abolish the law (Mt. 5:17-19). Bahnsen writes, "The notion that God has a double standard of justice is not only ethical nonsense, it is reprehensible in light of everything the Bible tells us of His character and actions."¹⁴⁹

Another argument against the judicial law is based on a particular interpretation of Ephesians 2:15. It is argued that this passage teaches that by His death Christ abolished the ceremonial *and the judicial law*. The Free Church of Scotland report against Theonomy says, "Before the coming of Christ the Gentiles were excluded from citizenship in Israel (v. 12). This means that they were not part of the theocratic state of Israel with all its duties as well as its privileges. What excluded them was: 'the law with its commandments and regulations'—that is 'the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility.' It is particularly the law considered as that which

¹⁴⁸ Greg L. Bahnsen, *No Other Standard* (Tyler, TX: Institute For Christian Economics, 1991), p. 118.

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid*, pp. 120-121.

made Israel distinctive that is in view. It was not the fact that they had a moral code that made Israel distinctive as a nation—all the nations had the law written on their heart (Rom. 2:14, 15). It was the fact that Israel was a theocratic state government by distinctive civil and ceremonial laws. Circumcision, the food laws, the marriage laws, the ceremonial laws and the judicial laws all excluded the Gentiles from citizenship in the state of Israel. It is the law thus considered that Christ abolished in his flesh.”¹⁵⁰

Does Ephesians 2:15 teach that Jesus Christ abolished the judicial law of Israel? No, it does not. The standard Protestant interpretation of this passage is that the wall of division refers *solely* to the ceremonial law.¹⁵¹ Did the civil laws against adultery, murder, homosexuality, etc. keep the Jews and Gentiles apart? Did the judicial laws cause enmity between Jew and Gentile? No, it was the ceremonial laws: circumcision, dietary laws, laws regarding purification and so on. The Gentile sojourner living in Israel was required to keep the civil law but was forbidden to offer sacrifice or partake of the ceremonial rituals. “Since the return from the exile the Jewish religion had become formalistic to a very great extent. Obedience to traditional ordinances was

¹⁵⁰ *Theonomy and the Confession of Faith*.

¹⁵¹ Out of 15 commentaries checked on Ephesians 2:14-15 *not one* said that this passage refers to the ceremonial *and* the civil laws. Two commentators said the passage refers to the whole law fulfilled as a condition of justification. One commentator said it refers to the law as a condition of justification and the ceremonial types. Twelve commentators said it referred to the ceremonial law. The interpretation that this passage refers to the ceremonial *and* civil laws of Israel is indeed very rare. Some notable commentators who regard this verse as referring to the ceremonial law are as follows: John Calvin wrote, “Ceremonial observations were afterwards added, which, like walls, enclosed the inheritance of God, preventing it from being open to all or mixed with other possessions, and thus excluded the Gentiles from the kingdom of God.... What has been metaphorically understood by the word *wall* is now more plainly expressed. The ceremonies, by which the distinction was declared, have been abolished through Christ” (*Commentary on the Epistle to the Ephesians* [Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1981], pp. 236-237). Matthew Poole wrote, “The ceremonies had their accomplishment in Christ, and so their abolishment by him. *The enmity*, by a metonymy he calls the ceremonies, which were the cause of enmity between Jew and Gentile; the Jews hated the Gentiles as uncircumcised, and the Gentiles despised the Jews for being circumcised” (*A Commentary on the Holy Bible*, 3:668). Matthew Henry wrote, “*He broke down the middle wall of partition*, the ceremonial law, that made the great feud, and was the badge of the Jews’ peculiarity.... By his sufferings in the flesh, he took away the binding power of the ceremonial law.... *The legal ceremonies were abrogated by Christ, having their accomplishment in him*” (*Commentary on the Whole Bible*, 6:694). John Gill wrote, “*and hath broken down the middle wall of partition between us*; the ceremonial law, which was made up of many hard and intolerable commands, and distinguished, and divided, and kept up a division between Jews and Gentiles.” (*Exposition of the New Testament* [Streamwood, IL: Primitive Baptist Library, 1979 (1809)], 9:75). Charles Hodge wrote, “But...as Christ abolished the law as a covenant of works fulfilling its conditions, so he abolished the Mosaic law by fulfilling all its types and shadows” (*Ephesians* [Carlisle, PA: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1964 (1856)], pp. 86-87). D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones wrote, “God gave them [the Jews] special laws, these ‘laws of commandments in ordinances,’ as Paul describes them. He means the ceremonial law, the law about burnt offerings and sacrifices, the meal offerings, and all the which you read about in the book of Leviticus and elsewhere” (*God’s Way of Reconciliation: An Exposition of Ephesians 2* [Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1972], p. 208). William Hendriksen wrote, “While according to many, the apostle here in verse 15, also refers to this satisfaction rendered by Christ, which opinion I believe to be correct, I agree with Grosheide (op. cit., p. 45) that Paul was thinking *especially* of the ceremonial law. The very wording ‘the law of commandments with its requirements’ points in that direction. So, and very clearly, does the parallel passage, Col. 2:14 (in the light of Col. 2:11, 16, 17)” (*Galatians and Ephesians* [Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1979], p. 2:135). Gordon Clark wrote, “...the enmity or wall of partition was not so much the moral law or the Ten Commandments—though the Gentiles were not exemplary in obeying them—but that the ceremonial law and especially circumcision, plus the now increasing Pharisaic and Talmudic intricacies which Jesus referred to in Matthew 15:2-9, produce animosity on both sides” (*Ephesians*, [Jefferson, MD: Trinity Foundation, 1985], p. 85). John Eadie says that the interpretation that this verse refers to, the ceremonial law, was held by Theodoret, Calvin, Bucer, Grotius, Meier, Holzhausen, Olshausen, and Conybeare (see *A Commentary on the Greek Text of the Epistle of Paul to the Ephesians* [Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1979], 2:135).

stressed. Now it was this very emphasis on ceremonial stipulations, even those stipulations contained in the law of Moses, that formed the dividing wall between Jews and Gentile.”¹⁵² The ceremonial laws should have been used to teach the Gentile nations about the holiness of God, the Savior to come and the way of salvation, but instead were used as a badge of superiority. The Jews would say, “We, and we alone, are the people, and those others are dogs, they are scarcely human beings at all.”¹⁵³ Even the apostle Peter had to be told by God that the Gentiles should no longer be considered “unclean” before he would preach to a Gentile audience and accept them into the Church (cf. Acts 10:9-16). Furthermore, “in Paul’s day there was no independent Jewish nation; the laws of Solomon and Rehoboam, or even Ezra and Nehemiah, or more to the point the Mosaic civil laws in Leviticus, were not in force [i.e., they were not strictly followed by the Jewish civil authorities]. None of these was a factor in the enmity, and the context gives no hint that Paul had civil law in mind.”¹⁵⁴

If Christ’s death removed not just the ceremonial law but also the civil law then why did the apostle Paul rebuke Ananias for violating a judicial law when he had Paul struck on the mouth? Paul said, “do you command me to be struck contrary to the law?” (Ac. 23:3) Why then did Paul say that a proper design of the law is to restrain: “murderers of father and murderers of mothers, for manslayers, for fornicators, for sodomites, for kidnappers” etc. (1 Tim. 1:9-10)? (“Although [*nomos*] is here without the article, there seems no reason why it should not be understood of the law of God as revealed in the Old Testament Scriptures, rather than, with some, of law generally.”¹⁵⁵) “Furthermore, that some, indeed most, of the sins stated in aggravated forms leads one to Ex. 21:15ff. (and elsewhere), where the commandments of Exodus 20 are specifically applied and worked out, where we have reference to striking of parents (v. 15), where there is a clear indication that ‘you shall not kill’ is meant to prohibit murder (vs. 12-14), and where one of the forms of stealing is kidnapping (v. 16). By using these aggravated forms from Exodus 21, Paul may be showing the false teachers and the church that when the O.T. applied and worked out the principles of the law, it did so in this very specific way of dealing with people’s sins.”¹⁵⁶ In other words, Paul sets forth the moral case laws within the judicial law as the biblical and proper method for subduing the evil doers of society. Bahnsen gives several examples in the New Testament where the moral case laws within the judicial law is taken for granted as binding: “Isn’t condemning a man without a hearing of a civil matter (John 7:51)? Isn’t murder and its judgment a ‘reference to’ the civil aspect of the law (Matt. 5:21)? Isn’t ‘an eye for an eye’ a civil aspect of the law (Matt. 5:38)? Isn’t the execution of incorrigible delinquents a civil aspect of the law (Matt. 15:4)? Aren’t things ‘worthy of death’ charged by the Jews a reference to civil aspects of the law (Acts 25:7-8, 11)? Isn’t theft a civil matter (Rom. 13:9), extortion (1 Cor. 5:10, 6:10), defrauding of a salary (Jas. 5:4)? Isn’t submission to civil rulers a ‘civil aspect’ of God’s law (1 Pet. 2:13-17)? Our examples could go on and on, but the point should be made by now.”¹⁵⁷ The use of Ephesians 2:15 as a proof text against the civil laws of Israel must be rejected not only because the vast majority of orthodox Protestant interpreters reject such an interpretation but also because such an interpretation contradicts other New Testament passages.

¹⁵² William Hendriksen, *Galatians and Ephesians*, p. 2:135.

¹⁵³ D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *God’s Way of Reconciliation: An Exposition of Ephesians 2*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1972), p. 209.

¹⁵⁴ Gordon H. Clark, *Ephesians* (Jefferson, MD: The Trinity Foundation, 1985), p. 85.

¹⁵⁵ Patrick Fairbairn, *Commentary on the Pastoral Epistles* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1956 [1874]), p. 86.

¹⁵⁶ George W. Knight III, *The Pastoral Epistles* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1992), p. 83.

¹⁵⁷ Bahnsen, *No Other Standard*, p. 129.

Another common argument against the judicial law is based on the book of Galatians. The authors of the Free Church of Scotland report against Theonomy write, “Paul’s letter to the Galatians is one of the most complete refutations of Theonomy in the Bible. Of course, this is denied by Theonomist writers who understand Paul to be speaking only of the ceremonial law and the fact that we are justified by faith not by keeping the ceremonial law. However, the context makes it clear that it is the whole law, the whole legal covenant made at Sinai, that is being considered.... The fact that circumcision is now no longer necessary shows that there is no obligation to keep the Sinaitic covenant. Christ has redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us (Galatians 3:13). Interestingly, the expression ‘the Book of the Law’ (Galatians 3:10) is used in Deuteronomy of the whole book of Deuteronomy itself which, of course, includes civil regulations as well as ceremonial. This is ‘the whole law’ which the circumcised are obliged to keep, but from which the Christian is free.”¹⁵⁸

The authors of the Free Church of Scotland report, in their zeal to refute Theonomy, have unwittingly adopted a Dispensational interpretation of Galatians. In the book of Galatians Paul is refuting the notion that a Gentile must become a Jew and keep the law of Moses in order to be saved. Paul teaches that Jesus Christ gives believers a righteousness that cannot be obtained through the law (cf. Gal. 2:21), that men are “justified by faith not the works of the law” (Gal. 2:16), that Christ “redeemed us from the curse of the law” (Gal. 4:5). Thus Christians are free from the whole *law as a means of justification*. If (as the Free Church seemingly asserts) Christians are free from the *whole* law as a means of sanctification then Paul abrogated not only the judicial law but also the moral law including the Ten Commandments. When Paul condemns the Judaizer’s influence on church practice he is condemning the use of the ceremonial law in the New covenant assembly. The Judaizers wanted Gentiles to become Jews and keep all the ceremonial laws in order to join the church. Paul teaches that justification has eliminated the typological-ceremonial aspect of the Mosaic law for both Jews and Gentiles. “I said to Peter before them all, ‘If you, being a Jew, live in the manner of Gentiles and not as the Jews, why do you compel Gentiles to live as Jews?’” (Gal. 2:14). When the Jews were around Peter had changed his eating practices. This refers to ceremonial dietary laws. Paul condemns the use of circumcision (Gal. 5:1-3). He says that circumcision is worthless, what people need is regeneration (Gal. 6:15). While it is true that no aspect of the law can contribute to a person’s justification before God, Paul never condemns the moral or judicial law as a guide for personal or social ethics. However, he does repeatedly condemn the use of the ceremonial laws (cf. Gal. 2:3, 4, 11-15, 4:9-10; 5:2-3, 6, 11, 6:12-13, 15). If one is going to use the book of Galatians as a refutation of Theonomy then one must logically argue that Christians are free from the *whole* Old Testament law (including the Ten Commandments) as a rule for sanctification; and, are only obligated to obey the moral precepts that are repeated in the New Testament. That view is Dispensational to the core.

¹⁵⁸ When the Free Church says that Christians are free from the whole law (“the whole book of Deuteronomy itself”) they never make it clear whether they are discussing justification or sanctification. If they mean justification then their whole argument against Theonomy from Galatians is worthless for the Ten Commandments do not contribute to a person’s justification one iota. If they mean sanctification then they have adopted Dispensationalism, for the book of Deuteronomy contains the Ten Commandments (cf. Deut. 5:6-21). There is simply no way that a person can use Galatians against Theonomy without becoming an implicit Dispensationalist. Every variation of the Galatians argument against Theonomy the author has seen falls into the same antinomian quagmire.

Conclusion

The different arguments offered against the abiding validity of the moral case laws contained in the judicial law and the accompanying penal sanctions have not even come close to refuting the Theonomic position. It is this author's opinion that the current hostility towards Theonomy among Presbyterian and Reformed denominations arose not from a careful consideration of Scripture but from: a) the sloppy thinking of some of our spiritual forefathers on civil matters (e.g., natural law was viewed by many as an independent and superior source of societal ethics than the Mosaic law.); b) the acceptance and popularity of religious pluralism (i.e., political polytheism) in Europe and America; c) the subtle influence of Dispensationalism on Reformed denominations; d) the bizarre, unbiblical and dangerous teachings on hermeneutics, the Sabbath, worship and holy days that can be found in some Reconstructionist writings.¹⁵⁹ Christians who dislike the central thesis of Theonomy and who particularly dislike the biblical penology should keep in mind that God, not Moses wrote the law and the penalties. Thus they are expressions of justice.

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¹⁵⁹ Read: Kevin Reed, *Canterbury Tales* (Dallas, TX: Presbyterian Heritage Publications); Brian M. Schwertley, *The Regulative Principle of Worship and Christmas* (Southfield, MI: Reformed Witness, 1996); *The Christian Sabbath: Examined, Proved, Applied* (Southfield, MI: Reformed Witness, 1995, 1996). Many of the leaders of what is called the Christian reconstruction movement have advocated a number of unbiblical views and therefore it is necessary for confessional Presbyterians to distance themselves from the movement to a degree while supporting the central thesis of Theonomy. The areas over which truly Reformed believers should part company with the Reconstructionist movement are as follows. (1. Some Reconstructionist writers have openly attacked biblical worship (e.g., David Chilton, James Jordon, Steve Schlissel). The regulative principle of worship has been rejected in favor of an Episcopalian or Lutheran concept of worship. Some Reconstructionist writers have advocated high church worship with incense, cathedrals and other popish trash. (2. Some Reconstructionist writers have opposed biblical church government (i.e., Presbyterianism) in favor of Episcopal church government or a modified independency. (3. Others (e.g., Gary North) have rejected the abiding validity of the 4th commandment. (4. James Jordon has advocated "interpretative maximalism" (the idea that every symbol, at every place in the Scriptures, must always be given the same meanings that it has at every other place in the Scriptures). Such a sloppy hermeneutic allows one to prove virtually anything from the Scriptures. (5. Some Reconstructionist writers have attempted to impose a five-fold covenant structure on virtually every section of Scriptures. (6. A number of Reconstructionists have a very weak view of the church. (7. Reconstructionist writers tend to have a very lopsided view of God's law. The first table (which is obviously more controversial) is generally ignored while the second table receives detailed analysis. (8. Among some Reconstructionists there is an antinomian pragmatic methodology regarding the task of dominion. Arminian and Charismatic heretics are often embraced as the great hope for recapturing society. Although I believe that R. J. Rushdoony and Gary North have greatly benefited Christ's church by their writings one must separate the wheat from the chaff when reading their books. Further, young believers need to be warned of the deviant opinions of some Reconstructionist writers. At present the Christian Reconstructionist movement contains within it the seeds of its own destruction (i.e., antinomianism and will-worship). We must advocate a distinctly Reformed and Presbyterian Theonomy.