

# How Christians Should Regard Moses

Sermon by Martin Luther (1)  
August 27, 1525

Dear friends, you have often heard that there has never been a public sermon from heaven except twice. Apart from them God has spoken many times through and with men on earth, as in the case of the holy patriarchs Adam, Noah, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and others, down to Moses. But in none of these cases did he speak with such glorious splendor, visible reality, or public cry and exclamation as he did on those two occasions. Rather God illuminated their heart within and spoke through their mouth, as Luke indicates in the first chapter of his gospel where he says, "As he spoke by the mouth of his holy prophets from of old" [Luke 1:70].

Now the first sermon is in Exodus 19 and 20; by it God caused himself to be heard from heaven with great splendor and might. For the people of Israel heard the trumpets and the voice of God himself.

In the second place God delivered a public sermon through the Holy Spirit on Pentecost [Acts 2:2-4]. On that occasion the Holy Spirit came with great splendor and visible impressiveness, such that there came from heaven the sudden rushing of a mighty wind, and it filled the entire house where the apostles were sitting. And there appeared to them tongues as of fire, distributed and resting on each of them. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to preach and speak in other tongues. This happened with great splendor and glorious might, so that thereafter the apostles preached so powerfully that the sermons which we hear in the world today are hardly a shadow compared to theirs, so far as the visible splendor and substance of their sermons is concerned. For the apostles spoke in all sorts of languages, performed great miracles, etc. Yet through our preachers today the Holy Spirit does not cause himself to be either heard or seen; nothing is coming down openly from heaven. This is why I have said that there are only two such special and public sermons which have been seen and heard from heaven. To be sure, God spoke also to Christ from heaven, when he was baptized in the Jordan [Matt. 3:17], and [at the Transfiguration] on Mount Tabor [Matt. 17:5]. However none of this took place in the presence of the general public.

God wanted to send that second sermon into the world, for it had earlier been announced by the mouth and in the books of the holy prophets. He will no longer speak that way publicly through sermons.

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Instead, in the third place, he will come in person with divine glory, so that all creatures will tremble and quake before him [Luke 21:25-27]; and then he will no longer preach to them, but they will see and handle him himself [Luke 24:39].

Now the first sermon, and doctrine, is the law of God. The second is the gospel. These two sermons are not the same. Therefore we must have a good grasp of the matter in order to know how to differentiate between them. We must know what the law is, and what the gospel is. The law commands and requires us to do certain things. The law is thus directed solely to our behavior and consists in making requirements. For God speaks through the law, saying, "Do this, avoid that, this is what I expect of you." The gospel, however, does not preach what we are to do or to avoid. It sets up no requirements but reverses the approach of the law, does the very opposite, and says, "This is what God has done for you; he has let his Son be made flesh for you, has let him be put to death for your sake." So, then, there are two kinds of doctrine and two kinds of works, those of God and those of men. Just as we and God are separated from one another, so also these two doctrines are widely separated from one another. For the gospel teaches exclusively what has been given us by God, and not - as in the case of the law - what we are to do and give to God.

We now want to see how this first sermon sounded forth and with what splendor God gave the law on Mount Sinai. He selected the place where he wanted to be seen and heard. Not that God actually spoke, for he has no mouth, tongue, teeth, or lips as we do. But he who created and formed the mouth of all men [Exod. 4:11] can also make speech and the voice. For no one would be able to speak a single word unless God first gave it, as the prophet says, "It would be impossible to speak except God first put it in our mouth" [Num. 22:38]. Language, speech, and voice are thus gifts of God like any other gifts, such as the fruit on the trees. Now he who fashioned the mouth and put speech in it can also make and use speech even though there is no mouth present. Now the words which are here written were spoken through an angel. This is not to say that only one angel was there, for there was a great multitude there serving God and preaching to the people of Israel at Mount Sinai. The angel, however, who spoke here and did the talking, spoke just as if God himself were speaking and saying, "I am your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt," etc. [Exod. 20:1], as if Peter or Paul were speaking in God's stead and saying, "I am your God," etc. In his letter to the Galatians [3:19], Paul says that the law was ordained by angels. That is, angels were assigned, in God's behalf, to give the law of God; and Moses, as an

intermediary, received it from the angels. I say this so that you might know who gave the law. He did this to them, however, because he wanted thereby to compel, burden, and press the Jews.

What kind of a voice that was, you may well imagine. It was a voice like the voice of a man, such that it was actually heard. The syllables and letters thus made sounds which the physical ear was able to pick up. But it was a bold, glorious, and great voice. As told in Deuteronomy 4:12, the people heard the voice, but saw no one. They heard a powerful voice, for he spoke in a powerful voice, as if in the dark we should hear a voice from a high tower or roof top, and could see no one but only hear the strong voice of a man. And this is why it is called the voice of God, because it was above a human voice.

Now you will hear how God used this voice in order to arouse his people and make them brave. For he intended to institute the tangible and spiritual government. It was previously stated how, on the advice of Jethro, his father-in-law, Moses had established the temporal government and appointed rulers and judges [Exod. 18:13-26]. Beyond that there is yet a spiritual kingdom in which Christ rules in the hearts of men; this kingdom we cannot see, because it consists only in faith and will continue until the Last Day.

These are two kingdoms: the temporal, which governs with the sword and is visible; and the spiritual, which governs solely with grace and with the forgiveness of sins. Between these two kingdoms still another has been placed in the middle, half spiritual and half temporal. It is constituted by the Jews, with commandments and outward ceremonies which prescribe their conduct toward God and men.

### **The Law of Moses Binds Only the Jews and Not the Gentiles**

Here the law of Moses has its place. It is no longer binding on us because it was given only to the people of Israel. And Israel accepted this law for itself and its descendants, while the Gentiles were excluded. To be sure, the Gentiles have certain laws in common with the Jews, such as these: there is one God, no one is to do wrong to another, no one is to commit adultery or murder or steal, and others like them. This is written by nature into their hearts; they did not hear it straight from heaven as the Jews did. This is why this entire text does not pertain to the Gentiles. I say this on account of the enthusiasts. (2) For you see and hear how they read Moses, extol him, and bring up the way he ruled the people with commandments. They try to be clever, and think they know something more than is

presented in the gospel; so they minimize faith, contrive something new, and boastfully claim that it comes from the Old Testament. They desire to govern people according to the letter of the law of Moses, as if no one had ever read it before.

But we will not have this sort of thing. We would rather not preach again for the rest of our life than to let Moses return and to let Christ be torn out of our hearts. We will not have Moses as ruler or lawgiver any longer. Indeed God himself will not have it either. Moses was an intermediary solely for the Jewish people. It was to them that he gave the law. We must therefore silence the mouths of those factious spirits who say, "Thus says Moses," etc. Here you simply reply: Moses has nothing to do with us. If I were to accept Moses in one commandment, I would have to accept the entire Moses. Thus the consequence would be that if I accept Moses as master, then I must have myself circumcised, (3) wash my clothes in the Jewish way, eat and drink and dress thus and so, and observe all that stuff. So, then, we will neither observe nor accept Moses. Moses is dead. His rule ended when Christ came. He is of no further service.

That Moses does not bind the Gentiles can be proved from Exodus 20:1, where God himself speaks, "I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage." This text makes it clear that even the Ten Commandments do not pertain to us. For God never led us out of Egypt, but only the Jews. The sectarian spirits want to saddle us with Moses and all the commandments. We will just skip that. We will regard Moses as a teacher, but we will not regard him as our lawgiver - unless he agrees with both the New Testament and the natural law. Therefore it is clear enough that Moses is the lawgiver of the Jews and not of the Gentiles. He has given the Jews a sign whereby they should lay hold of God, when they call upon him as the God who brought them out of Egypt. The Christians have a different sign, whereby they conceive of God as the One who gave his Son, etc.

Again one can prove it from the third commandment (4) that Moses does not pertain to Gentiles and Christians. For Paul [Col. 2:16] and the New Testament [Matt. 12:1-12; John 5:16; 7:22-23; 9:14-16] abolish the sabbath, to show us that the sabbath was given to the Jews alone, for whom it is a stern commandment. The prophets referred to it too, that the sabbath of the Jews would be abolished. For Isaiah says in the last chapter, "When the Savior comes, then such will be the time, one sabbath after the other, one month after the other," etc. [Isa. 66:23]. This is as though he were trying to say, "It will be

the sabbath every day, and the people will be such that they make no distinction between days. For in the New Testament the sabbath is annihilated as regards the crude external observance, for every day is a holy day," etc.

Now if anyone confronts you with Moses and his commandments, and wants to compel you to keep them, simply answer, "Go to the Jews with your Moses; I am no Jew. Do not entangle me with Moses. If I accept Moses in one respect [Paul tells the Galatians in chapter 5:3], then I am obligated to keep the entire law." For not one little period in Moses pertains to us.

***Question: Why then do you preach about Moses if he does not pertain to us?***

***Answer to the Question: Three things are to be noted in Moses. I want to keep Moses and not sweep him under the rug, because I find three things in Moses.***

In the first place I dismiss the commandments given to the people of Israel. They neither urge nor compel me. They are dead and gone, except insofar as I gladly and willingly accept something from Moses, as if I said, "This is how Moses ruled, and it seems fine to me, so I will follow him in this or that particular." (5)

I would even be glad if [today's] lords ruled according to the example of Moses. If I were emperor, I would take from Moses a model for [my] statutes; not that Moses should be binding on me, but that I should be free to follow him in ruling as he ruled. For example, tithing is a very fine rule, because with the giving of the tenth all other taxes would be eliminated. For the ordinary man it would also be easier to give a tenth than to pay rents and fees. Suppose I had ten cows; I would then give one. If I had only five, I would give nothing. If my fields were yielding only a little, I would give proportionately little; if much, I would give much. All of this would be in God's providence. But as things are now, I must pay the Gentile tax even if the hail should ruin my entire crop. If I owe a hundred gulden in taxes, I must pay it even though there may be nothing growing in the field. This is also the way the pope decrees and governs. But it would be better if things were so arranged that when I raise much, I give much; and when little, I give little.

Again in Moses it is also stipulated that no man should sell his field into a perpetual estate, but only up to the jubilee year [Lev. 25:8-55].

When that year came, every man returned to the field or possessions which he had sold. In this way the possessions remained in the family relationship. There are also other extraordinarily fine roles in Moses which one should like to accept, use, and put into effect. Not that one should bind or be bound by them, but (as I said earlier) the emperor could here take an example for setting up a good government on the basis of Moses, just as the Romans conducted a good government, and just like the *Sachsenspiegel* (6) by which affairs are ordered in this land of ours. The Gentiles are not obligated to obey Moses. Moses is the *Sachsenspiegel* for the Jews. But if an example of good government were to be taken from Moses, one could adhere to it without obligation as long as one pleased, etc.

Again Moses says, "If a man dies without children, then his brother or closest relative should take the widow into his home and have her to wife, and thus raise up offspring for the deceased brother or relative. The first child thus born was credited to the deceased brother or relative" [Deut. 25:5-6]. So it came about that one man had many wives. Now this is also a very good rule.

When these factious spirits come, however, and say, "Moses has commanded it," then simply drop Moses and reply, "I am not concerned about what Moses commands." "Yes," they say, "he has commanded that we should have one God, that we should trust and believe in him, that we should not swear by his name; that we should honor father and mother; not kill, steal, commit adultery; not bear false witness, and not covet [Exod. 20:3-17]; should we not keep these commandments?" You reply: Nature also has these laws. Nature provides that we should call upon God. The Gentiles attest to this fact. For there never was a Gentile who did not call upon his idols, even though these were not the true God. This also happened among the Jews, for they had their idols as did the Gentiles; only the Jews have received the law. The Gentiles have it written in their heart, and there is no distinction [Rom. 3:22]. As St. Paul also shows in Romans 2:14-15, the Gentiles, who have no law, have the law written in their heart.

But just as the Jews fail, so also do the Gentiles. Therefore it is natural to honor God, not steal, not commit adultery, not bear false witness, not murder; and what Moses commands is nothing new. For what God has given the Jews from heaven, he has also written in the hearts of all men. Thus I keep the commandments which Moses has given, not because Moses gave the commandment, but because they have been implanted in me by nature, and Moses agrees exactly with nature, etc.

But the other commandments of Moses, which are not [implanted in all men] by nature, the Gentiles do not hold. Nor do these pertain to the Gentiles, such as the tithe and others equally fine which I wish we had too. Now this is the first thing that I ought to see in Moses, namely, the commandments to which I am not bound except insofar as they are [implanted in everyone] by nature [and written in everyone's heart].

### **The second thing to notice in Moses**

In the second place I find something in Moses that I do not have from nature: the promises and pledges of God about Christ. (7)

This is the best thing. It is something that is not written naturally into the heart, but comes from heaven. God has promised, for example, that his Son should be born in the flesh. This is what the gospel proclaims. It is not commandments. And it is the most important thing in Moses which pertains to us. The first thing, namely, the commandments, does not pertain to us. I read Moses because such excellent and comforting promises are there recorded, by which I can find strength for my weak faith. For things take place in the kingdom of Christ just as I read in Moses that they will; therein I find also my sure foundation.

In this manner, therefore, I should accept Moses, and not sweep him under the rug: first because he provides fine examples of laws, from which excerpts may be taken. Second, in Moses there are the promises of God which sustain faith. As it is written of Eve in Genesis 3:15, "I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your seed and her seed; he shall bruise your head," etc. Again Abraham was given this promise by God, speaking thus in Genesis 22:18, "In your descendants shall all the nations be blessed"; that is, through Christ the gospel is to arise.

Again in Deuteronomy 18:15-16 Moses says, "The Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among you, from your brethren-him you shall heed; just as you desired of the Lord your God at Horeb on the day of the assembly," etc. Many are these texts in the Old Testament, which the holy apostles quoted and drew upon.

But our factious spirits go ahead and say of everything they find in Moses, "Here God is speaking, no one can deny it; therefore we must keep it." So then the rabble go to it. Whew! If God has said it, who then will say anything against it? Then they are really pressed hard

like pigs at a trough. Our dear prophets have chattered thus into the minds of the people, "Dear people, God has ordered his people to beat Amalek to death" [Exod. 17:8-16; Deut. 25:17-19]. (8) Misery and tribulation have come out of this sort of thing. The peasants have arisen, not knowing the difference, and have been led into this error by those insane factious spirits.

Had there been educated preachers around, they could have stood up to the false prophets and stopped them, and said this to them, "Dear factious spirits, it is true that God commanded this of Moses and spoke thus to the people; but we are not this people. Land, God spoke also to Adam; but that does not make me Adam, God commanded Abraham to put his son to death [Gen. 22:2]; but that does not make me Abraham and obligate me to put my son to death. God spoke also with David. It is all God's word. But let God's word be what it may, I must pay attention and know to whom God's word is addressed. You are still a long way from being the people with whom God spoke." The false prophets say, "You are that people, God is speaking to you." You must prove that to me. With talk like that these factious spirits could have been refuted. But they wanted to be beaten, and so the rabble went to the devil.

One must deal cleanly with the Scriptures. From the very beginning the word has come to us in various ways. It is not enough simply to look and see whether this is God's word, whether God has said it; rather we must look and see to whom it has been spoken, whether it fits us. That makes all the difference between night and day. God said to David, "Out of you shall come the king," etc. [II Sam, 7:13]. But this does not pertain to me, nor has it been spoken to me. He can indeed speak to me if he chooses to do so. You must keep your eye on the word that applies to you, that is spoken to you.

The word in Scripture is of two kinds: the first does not pertain or apply to me, the other kind does. And upon that word which does pertain to me I can boldly trust and rely, as upon a strong rock. But if it does not pertain to me, then I should stand still. The false prophets pitch in and say, "Dear people, this is the word of God," That is true; we cannot deny it. But we are not the people. God has not given us the directive. The factious spirits came in and wanted to stir up something new, saying, "We must keep the Old Testament also..'" So they led the peasants into a sweat and ruined them in wife and child. These insane people imagined that it had been withheld from them, that no one had told them they are supposed to murder. It serves

them right. They would not follow or listen to anybody. I have seen and experienced it myself, how mad, raving, and senseless they were.

Therefore tell this to Moses: Leave Moses and his people together; they have had their day and do not pertain to me. I listen to that word which applies to me. We have the gospel. Christ says, "Go and preach the gospel," not only to the Jews as Moses did, but to "all nations," to "all creatures" [Mark 16:15]. To me it is said, "He who believes and is baptized will be saved" [Mark 16:16]. Again, "Go and do to your neighbor as has been done to you" [cf. Matt. 7:12]. These words strike me too, for I am one of the "all creatures." If Christ had not added, "preach to all creatures," then I would not listen, would not be baptized, just as I now will not listen to Moses because he is given not to me but only to the Jews. However because Christ says: not to one people, nor in this or in that place in the world, but to "all creatures," therefore no one is exempt. Rather all are thereby included; no one should doubt that to him too the gospel is to be preached. And so I believe that word; it does pertain also to me. I too belong under the gospel, in the new covenant. Therefore I put my trust in that word, even if it should cost a hundred thousand lives.

This distinction should be noticed, grasped, and taken to heart by those preachers who would teach others; indeed by all Christians, for everything depends entirely upon it. If the peasants had understood it this way, they would have salvaged much and would not have been so pitifully misled and ruined. And where we understand it differently, there we make sects and factions, slaving among the rabble and into the raving and uncomprehending people without any distinction, saying, "God's word, God's word." But my dear fellow, the question is whether it was said to you. God indeed speaks also to angels, wood, fish, birds, animals, and all creatures, but this does not make it pertain to me. I should pay attention to that which applies to me, that which is said to me, in which God admonishes, drives, and requires something of me.

Here is an illustration. Suppose a housefather had a wife, a daughter, a son, a maid, and a hired man. Now he speaks to the hired man and orders him to hitch up the horses and bring in a load of wood, or drive over to the field, or do some other job. And suppose he tells the maid to milk the cows, churn some butter, and so on. And suppose he tells his wife to take care of the kitchen and his daughter to do some spinning and make the beds. All this would be the words of one master, one housefather. Suppose now the maid decided she wanted to drive the horses and fetch the wood, the hired man sat down and

began milking the cows, the daughter wanted to drive the wagon or plow the field, the wife took a notion to make the beds or spin and so forgot all about the kitchen; and then they all said, "The master has commanded this, these are the housefather's orders!" Then what? Then the housefather would grab a club and knock them all in a heap, and say, "Although it is my command, yet I have not commanded it of you; I gave each of you your instructions, you should have stuck to them."

It is like this with the word of God. Suppose I take up something that God ordered someone else to do, and then I declare, "But you said to do it." God would answer, "Let the devil thank you; I did not tell you to do it." One must distinguish well whether the word pertains to only one or to everybody. If, now, the housefather should say, "On Friday we are going to eat meat," this would be a word common to everybody in the house. Thus what God said to Moses by way of commandment is for the Jews only. But the gospel goes through the whole world in its entirety; it is offered to all creatures without exception. Therefore all the world should accept it, and accept it as if it had been offered to each person individually. The word, "We should love one another" [John 15:12], pertains to me, for it pertains to all who belong to the gospel. Thus we read Moses not because he applies to us, that we must obey him, but because he agrees with the natural law and is conceived better than the Gentiles would ever have been able to do. Thus the Ten Commandments are a mirror of our life, in which we can see wherein we are lacking, etc. The sectarian spirits have misunderstood also with respect to the images; for that too pertains only to the Jews.

Summing up this second part, we read Moses for the sake of the promises about Christ, who belongs not only to the Jews but also to the Gentiles; for through Christ all the Gentiles should have the blessing, as was promised to Abraham [Gen. 12:3].

### **The third thing to be seen in Moses**

In the third place we read Moses for the beautiful examples of faith, of love, and of the cross, as shown in the fathers, Adam, Abel, Noah, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, and all the rest. (9) From them we should learn to trust in God and love him. In turn there are also examples of the godless, how God does not pardon the unfaith of the unbelieving; how he can punish Cain, Ishmael, Esau, the whole world in the flood, Sodom and Gomorrah, etc. Examples like these are necessary. For although I am not Cain, yet if I should act like Cain, I

will receive the same punishment as Cain. Nowhere else do we find such fine examples of both faith and unfaith. Therefore we should not sweep Moses under the rug. Moreover the Old Testament is thus properly understood when we retain from the prophets the beautiful texts about Christ, when we take note of and thoroughly grasp the fine examples, and when we use the laws as we please to our advantage.

### **Conclusion and Summary**

I have stated that all Christians, and especially those who handle the word of God and attempt to teach others, should take heed and learn Moses aright. Thus where he gives the commandments, we are not to follow him except so far as he agrees with the natural law. Moses is a teacher and doctor of the Jews. We have our own master, Christ, and he has set before us what we are to know, observe, do, and leave undone. However it is true that Moses sets down, in addition to the laws, fine examples of faith and unfaith - punishment of the godless, elevation of the righteous and believing - and also the dear and comforting promises concerning Christ which we should accept. The same is true also in the gospel. For example in the account of the ten lepers, that Christ bids them go to the priest and make sacrifice [Luke 17:14] does not pertain to me. The example of their faith, however, does pertain to me; I should believe Christ, as did they.

Enough has now been said of this, and it is to be noted well for it is really crucial. Many great and outstanding people have missed it, while even today many great preachers still stumble over it. They do not know how to preach Moses, nor how properly to regard his books. They are absurd as they rage and fume, chattering to people, "God's word, God's word!" All the while they mislead the poor people and drive them to destruction. Many learned men have not known how far Moses ought to be taught. Origen, Jerome, and others like them, have not shown clearly how far Moses can really serve us. This is what I have attempted, to say in an introduction to Moses how we should regard him, and how he should be understood and received and not simply be swept under the rug. For in Moses there is comprehended such a fine order, that it is a joy, etc.

### **God be praised.**

(1) Martin Luther, "How Christians Should Regard Moses," trans. and ed. by E. Theodore Bachmann, *Luther's Works: Word and Sacrament I*, vol. 35 (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1960), 161-174. This sermon was delivered on August 27, 1525, in Luther's long series of seventy-

seven sermons on Exodus preached from October 2, 1524, to February 2, 1527.

(2) The "enthusiasts" were the Anabaptists or radical reformers (the left wing extreme of the reformation) like Thomas Munzer, who Luther also refers to as "factitious or sectarian spirits" and "false prophets." These radicals should be distinguished from the magisterial reformers like Luther and Calvin. They were known for their millennialism (chiliasm; apocalyptic fanaticism), which led to their insistence of violent measures to bring about a more radical reformation. They were also known as "spiritualists" because they purported to receive direct revelations from the Holy Spirit who was leading them to stir up the masses (peasants) to use all means necessary, even violent rebellion and revolution against authorities, to bring in the new age. Luther was afraid that such preaching would bring massive anarchy throughout the land. Further, they argued that the social laws of the land ought to be replaced by judicial laws of the Mosaic covenant. "Pastor Jacob Strauss at Eisenach and the court preacher Wolfgang Stein at Weimar had brought their considerable influence to bear on the Saxon princes in favor of substituting the more humane laws of the Old Testament for the then current imperial and canon laws. Luther opposed the notion that the Scriptures would be properly exalted if Mosaic precepts were suddenly, as law, to replace laws of the German state and church. He warned that while seemingly honoring the Scriptures, one can actually distort the meaning and intention of the Word of God . . . 'Moses' is not the Word of God in the sense that 'Moses' could be substituted for a piece of human legislation . . . Anyone who, like the enthusiasts, erects Mosaic law as a biblical-divine requirement does injury to the preaching of Christ. Just as the Judaizers of old, who would have required circumcision as an initial requirement, so also the enthusiasts and radicals of this later era do not see that Christ is the end of the Mosaic law. For all the stipulations of that law, insofar as they go beyond the natural law, have been abolished by Christ. The Ten Commandments are binding upon all men only so far as they are implanted in everyone by nature. In this sense Luther declares that 'Moses is dead' . . . Besides, the Jewish assembly of Sinai and of the decalogue has been replaced by the Christian congregation of Pentecost and of the new covenant. The era of Mosaic law extends from Sinai to Pentecost. In this era the Jewish people served its particular purpose, for this people, alone among all the peoples, was during that time span both state and church. It was just one national ethnic group among others on earth, but at the same time it was peculiar people set apart for God as an instrument of his plan for all peoples. So far as 'Moses' is simply the Sachsenspiegel or law code of

the Jewish people as a national ethnic group, it can be listed as just one code of laws among many, features of which may or may not be considered desirable in another age or nation. But so far as the Mosaic law is the law of the Old Testament congregation of God, it has a prophetic and promissory significance comparable to nothing in the laws of other peoples; and it has a continuing relevance not to any people simply as people but only to the post-Pentecost church of God spread among all peoples (from introduction to sermon, pp. 157-159; written by E. Theodore Bachman). This imposition of the Mosaic law upon the state sounds very similar to the modern error of theonomy or Christian reconstruction.

(3) In a letter to Chancellor Bruck of Saxony dated January 13, 1524, Luther wrote that the people of Orlamunde, Karlstadt's parish, would probably circumcise themselves and be wholly Mosaic.

(4) The reformers numbered the commandments differently. Calvin referred to this as the fourth commandment (Inst. 2.8.28).

(5) This is what Luther and Calvin would refer to as the "natural law." Calvin referred to these laws as the "equity" of the Mosaic law (Inst. 4.20.16). Both Calvin and Luther agreed that anything in the Mosaic law that was not "general," "common," or "equitable" to all nations no longer applied to the state, seeing that those specific laws were applicable only to Israel. Calvin argued, "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 laws 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 . . . 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. Whatever 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, howsoever they may differ from the Jewish law, or among themselves . . . For the statement of some, that the law of God given through Moses is dishonored when it is abrogated and new laws preferred to it, is utterly vain. For others are not preferred to it when they are more approved, not by a simple comparison, but with regard to the condition of times, place, and nation; or when that law is abrogated which was never

enacted for us. For the Lord through the hand of Moses did not give that law to be proclaimed among all nations and to be in force everywhere; but when he had taken the Jewish nation into his safekeeping, defense, and protection, he also willed to be a lawgiver especially to it; and -- as became a wise lawgiver -- he had special concern for it in making its laws (Inst. 4.20.14, 16; also see Calvin's comments on Rom. 1:21-27 and 2:14-15).

(6) This "Saxon code of law" was a thirteenth century compilation of the economic and social laws obtaining in and around Magdeburg and Halberstadt; it was influential in the codification of German law until the nineteenth century. The radical Reformers sometimes sought to replace it with the law of Moses or the Sermon on the Mount.

(7) Here Luther refers to gospel given progressively in types and shadows throughout the Old Testament and looking forward to fulfillment in Jesus Christ.

(8) Thomas Munzer in a sermon of July, 1524, at Allstedt demanded that the princes wipe out all the godless, including godless rulers, princes, and monks.

(9) Here Luther argues that we can find many moral illustrations of good and bad behavior throughout the Old Testament.

*This sermon and the accompanying footnotes are copied from [http://hstrial-rlotzer.homestead.com/Papers/Luther\\_on\\_Moses.html](http://hstrial-rlotzer.homestead.com/Papers/Luther_on_Moses.html)*

# Comments on Luther's "How Christians Should Regard Moses"

Peter Ditzel

This article is an attachment to Martin Luther's "How Christians Should Regard Moses." I trust you have read that sermon or will soon read it. I have several points I want to make about Luther's sermon.

There are those who vilify Luther because he did not have a perfect understanding of the law and covenants. But this is rather like looking at a glass in which there is water to the half-way level and saying it is half empty instead of saying that it is half full. As Luther's sermon shows, Luther had a better grasp of the law and covenants than many (probably most) in both his day and ours. And can those who are so critical of Luther say that they now have such a perfect understanding that no one coming after them can vilify them for their lack of perfection?

That being said, it is true that Luther was nothing if he was not inconsistent. Just as, at Worms, Luther accused popes and Councils of contradicting each other, he also contradicted himself (as do all humans at times, including this one). This was especially so as he developed his theology. But his changes as he developed his theology were not always for the better. Notice what James A. Nestingen points out in his article, "Changing Definitions: The Law in Formula VI," that appeared in the July/October 2005 *Concordia Theological Quarterly*.

Speaking of Luther and Melanchthon's early writings, he says,

The first issue is the end of the law, an assertion that emerged early in the Reformation out of Luther and Melanchthon's consideration of Romans 10:4, where Paul states that "Christ is the end [τέλος] of the law, that all who believe may be justified." Luther and Melanchthon both picked up what had generally been either passed over or minimized by the tradition, the sense of termination that is also included in τέλος. In fact, from 1520 to 1530, this became a theme of the Lutheran reformers to the point that in the later Galatians commentary "the end of the law" in the sense of termination became a virtual christological title. Christ is the end of the law just as he is

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Savior and Lord. For Luther the original force of the argument is as much theological<sup>1</sup> as it is exegetical, very much along the lines of Paul's argument in Galatians 2:21, ". . . if justification comes through the law, then Christ died for nothing." The logic is devastatingly simple. Christ Jesus' justification of the godless is the first and therefore the controlling premise in the theological argument. So if Christ saves, the law cannot. If Christ is "the way, the truth, and the life," the law cannot be; if Christ has the last word, the law must fall silent before him. Christ's death and resurrection are, in effect, the first premises in every theological argument....

Nestingen further points out,

One of the most powerful statements of the end of the law in the early Reformation was set out by Melanchthon in the 1521 *Loci Communes*. The bulk of one whole chapter is devoted to what he calls "the Abrogation of the Law," the argument proceeding along the same lines as Luther's. So Melanchthon explicitly states that "...that part of the law called the Decalogue has been abrogated by the New Testament" and then follows with further explanation: "But our freedom consists in this, that every right of accusing and condemning us has been taken away from the law" and "Christ took away the curse of the law and the right it had so that even though you have sinned, even though you now have sin...yet you are saved. Our Samson has shattered the power of death, the power of sin, the gates of hell." What was later termed "the new obedience" properly follows: "Those who have been renewed by the Spirit of Christ now conform voluntarily even without the law to what the law used to command."

But Nestingen quotes the later Luther as writing, "They are altogether ignorant and deceivers of souls who endeavor to abolish the law from the church. For that is not only stupid and impious, but absolutely impossible.... Therefore the law will never in all eternity be abolished, but will remain either to be fulfilled by the damned, or already fulfilled in the blessed." This was obviously a shrinking away from his earlier position, and Melanchthon took off with it.

Nestingen quotes Melanchthon and then adds his own comments:

"We therefore unanimously believe, teach and confess that in its strict sense the law is a divine teaching in which the righteous, unchanging will of God revealed how human beings were created in their nature, thoughts, words and deeds to be pleasing and acceptable to God" (SD V,17). The law is no longer defined functionally in light of the gospel but structurally and cohesively as the definitive expression of God's will....

In effect, law and gospel have traded places. Whereas in the earlier Lutheran argument, the gospel as the ultimate word rendered the law penultimate, now in the Formula [Formula of Concord], the law is set forward as the ultimate expression of God's will....

This downgrade in Luther's theology is certainly dismaying and has caused confusion to this day. Yet God has not put me in a position to judge the man, though I certainly do have a responsibility to determine if what he says agrees with the Bible (Acts 17:11; 1 Corinthians 14:29; 1 John 4:1).

Here are some more of my comments on Luther's sermon, presented in no particular order:

1) Rather than Luther's distinction of the law binding the Jews and not the Gentiles, I prefer to say that the law bound only the Jews under the Old Covenant and binds no one under the New Covenant.

2) It is interesting to note that, unlike today's Christian Reconstructionists or Dominionists, Luther did not believe there was any necessary reason to institute the Law of Moses as the law of the land. He did, however, believe it to be as good a law to run a nation as any other, and with this I disagree. The Law of Moses was not just civil, but also religious. However, Jesus Christ instituted an age that severed the civil and religious. Therefore, the Law of Moses would be a very inappropriate law to run a state today. Reconstructionists should read footnote 5 under Luther's article where even Calvin is quoted as saying that those who want to reinstitute Moses' Law as the law of the land "dangerously go astray." He also said, "For the Lord through the hand of Moses did not give that law to be proclaimed among all nations and to be in force everywhere."

3) I disagree with Luther's teaching on natural law, its origins and effects on man. This is far too complex to deal with here. Lord willing, I will address it in a separate article.

4) I did not write the notes at the end of "How Christians Should Regard Moses." I assume they were written by the translator and editor, E. Theodore Bachmann. Concerning note 2, some of the Radical Reformers were certainly fanatics. But this term does not apply to all or even most of them. In reality, most of the Radical Reformers were sensibly trying to apply the New Covenant and saw that, among other things, it required a believers only church and the separation of church and state. Luther could have learned much from the Radical Reformers. In fact, there is evidence that he did learn much of what he taught from them. It is also true that Luther himself was more radical until his confinement at Wartburg Castle. During that time, he seems to have decided that it was better to pull back the Reformation from its logical and biblical conclusions (such as a church composed of believers only and the separation of church and state). We can only guess why he did this, but likely he felt that without the support of the Elector of Saxony and others (who would never have agreed to a church of believers only and the separation of church and state), the Reformation might be completely crushed (not to mention his neck being on the line). Thus, Luther is known as a Magisterial Reformer. The Radical Reformers saw this move as traitorous. This pulling back of Luther, both in regards to the law and concerning ecclesiology is the major bone of contention I have with Luther. For more information on this point, see Leonard Verduin's three books, *The Anatomy of a Hybrid*, *The Reformers and Their Stepchildren*, and *That First Amendment and the Remnant*.

5) Luther's "Second thing to notice about Moses," that it has the "promises and pledges of God about Christ," is, in my opinion the primary use of the Old Testament for the Christian. Jesus Himself taught this purpose for the Old Testament Scriptures. Speaking to the Jews, He said, "Search the scriptures; for in them ye think ye have eternal life: and they are they which testify of me" (John 5:39). After His resurrection, we read of what Jesus' taught to the two on the road to Emmaus: "And beginning at Moses and all the prophets, he expounded unto them in all the scriptures the things concerning himself" (Luke 24:27). There are many more types, shadows, and prophecies of Jesus Christ in the Old Testament than are explicitly mentioned in the New Testament. But by using the New Testament as an example of how Christians are now to understand the Old Testament, we can find a treasure of such references. Unfortunately,

the Protestant theologians who came after Luther so stressed a strict historical-grammatical interpretation (emphasizing that the Scripture can only mean what the original writer intended) that they put blinders on their eyes and missed much of the richness of the Old Testament. Even worse, many seminaries still follow these blinkered theologians, teaching the strict historical-grammatical interpretation. They even make light of anyone who follows the example of the New Testament writers and even Christ Himself in seeing the Old Testament as a book of types and shadows.

6) Luther hits upon a major problem in the church that continues today when he writes of the "factious spirits" who, "say of everything they find in Moses, 'Here God is speaking, no one can deny it; therefore we must keep it.'" This was, perhaps, the root of the problem in the old Worldwide Church of God when I worked for it under Herbert W. Armstrong. It continues to be a problem in those organizations that still follow Armstrong's teachings. It is a problem in many cults. Sadly, however, it is also a problem in many churches of whatever denomination. This is why there are so many people who tithe, try to keep a Sabbath day, call the church building the "house of God," and generally have an Old Testament mindset. They do not know how to rightly divide the Word of truth (2 Timothy 2:15). As Luther says, "It is not enough simply to look and see whether this is God's word, whether God has said it; rather we must look and see to whom it has been spoken, whether it fits us. That makes all the difference between night and day." My sentiments are entirely with Luther when he writes of stumbling preachers who "rage and fume, chattering to people, 'God's word, God's word!' All the while they mislead the poor people and drive them to destruction." God save us from such preachers!