

The New Covenant and the Decalogue, part 1

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I want to set the record straight concerning the New Covenant and the law. Several times, in just the past couple of weeks alone, I have had it made clear to me that many people simply do not grasp the relationship of the New Covenant to the laws of the Old Covenant, specifically the Ten Commandments. Even prominent theologians, who should know the distinctions of each system of theology, get this relationship wrong. Possibly because of this weak understanding, there has now been a move to try to reach a compromise between New Covenant Theology and Reformed Theology.

To set things straight, we must understand the nature of the Mosaic law, we must answer the question of whether the Mosaic law is in any way applicable to Christians, we must spell out what Jesus did regarding law, and we must identify what part law plays in this age of grace.

Is the Mosaic Law Divisible into Civil, Ceremonial, and Moral?

In *Summa Theologica*, Catholic theologian Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274) teaches that the law contains moral, ceremonial, and judicial precepts (I-II, Q. 99). This division became standard in the Catholic Church and was later adopted, apparently without much question, by the Reformers. John Calvin (1509-1564), for instance, wrote, "We must attend to the well known division which distributes the whole law of God, as promulgated by Moses, into the moral, the ceremonial, and the judicial law, and we must attend to each of these parts, in order to understand how far they do, or do not, pertain to us" (*Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 4.20.14). It is important to note that Calvin does not attribute this division to the Bible, but admits that it is the work of prior scholars: "For the ancients who adopted this division..." (ibid.).

The common understanding is as follows: the judicial laws were civil statutes for the nation of Israel only, and they passed away with that nation; the ceremonial laws were fulfilled by Christ and ended with Him; the moral law, on the other hand, is an expression of what theologians call "God's eternal moral law," and, thus, the moral law part of the Mosaic Law remains in force.

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Deuteronomy 22:10 might be an example of a "judicial" or "civil law": "You shall not plow with an ox and a donkey together." The "ceremonial laws" might include the dietary laws in Leviticus 11 and the many laws concerning the sacrifices and other aspects of the temple service. The Ten Commandments are usually cited as the epitome of the "moral laws." But we must ask whether the Bible itself makes such a division. After all, isn't breaking the law, whatever kind of law it is, a moral issue?

Perhaps you'll say that we can tell the division by the punishment for breaking the law. If so, then surely, transgressing a "ceremonial law" would have a lighter judgment. Let's see if this is so. Those who divide the law into these categories would surely put the manner in which the things of the sanctuary were to be carried under the "ceremonial law." Yet, Numbers 4:15 says this: "When Aaron and his sons have finished covering the sanctuary, and all the furniture of the sanctuary, as the camp moves forward; after that, the sons of Kohath shall come to carry it: but they shall not touch the sanctuary, lest they die. These things are the burden of the sons of Kohath in the Tent of Meeting." In 2 Samuel 6:6-7, we read, "When they came to the threshing floor of Nacon, Uzzah put forth his hand to the ark of God, and took hold of it; for the cattle stumbled. The anger of Yahweh was kindled against Uzzah; and God struck him there for his error; and there he died by the ark of God." God killed Uzzah for violating a so-called ceremonial law.

In Leviticus 10:1, we read, "Nadab and Abihu, the sons of Aaron, each took his censer, and put fire in it, and laid incense on it, and offered strange fire before Yahweh, which he had not commanded them." What did God do for this violation of "ceremonial law?" "And fire came forth from before Yahweh, and devoured them, and they died before Yahweh" (verse 2). So we see here the death sentence for the violation of a "ceremonial law." Nor is this unusual. Search the Pentateuch for the word "die," and you will find God giving precise instructions for how priests should dress, wash, come or not come into the holy place, and so forth, that they "die not."

What about the "judicial" or "civil laws"? Exodus 21 contains laws that theologians often put into this category. Yet, right in the middle of the chapter, are laws concerning killing a man by striking him, premeditated attempted murder, attacking one's parents, kidnapping, cursing one's parents, striking someone with a stone, and so on. Some of these have the death sentence attached under all conditions and some have the death sentence under certain conditions. Although

these are what verse 1 calls "ordinances" or "judgments," and, therefore, what theologians see as "temporary civil laws" (as opposed to "eternal moral laws") we would have to be very prejudiced in our view to not see that they are really every bit as "moral" as the Ten Commandments.

My point is that the theological classification of Mosaic Laws into "moral," "ceremonial," and "judicial" or "civil" is entirely arbitrary and artificial. To an Israelite, killing someone, eating a pig, refusing to have your child circumcised, picking up sticks on the Sabbath, and muzzling the ox that treads out the grain were all moral matters. The Law of Moses was a unified whole that cannot be divided into laws that are moral and laws that are not. Those who make this division are committing the error of injecting their Christian worldview ideas of morality into the pre-Christian culture and covenant of the Old Testament. The Bible does not divide the Law of Moses into "moral laws," "ceremonial laws," and "judicial" or "civil laws" as if the "moral laws" were somehow more eternally and universally binding than the others.

The Reformed Error: "The 'Moral Law' Is Binding"

What theologians have done in dividing the Mosaic Law would be no more than an academic matter of no consequence to the average Christian if it were not for what they have then gone on to do with this divided law. They say that the "moral law" part of the Mosaic Law remains binding on Christians today. The "judicial law" was only for Israel and passed away with it, and the "ceremonial law" has been done away in Christ.

The Westminster Confession of Faith teaches this division of the Law of Moses and the perpetuity of the "moral law" division of the Law of Moses: "The moral law doth forever bind all, as well justified persons as others, to the obedience thereof; and that, not only in regard of the matter contained in it, but also in respect of the authority of God the Creator, who gave it. Neither doth Christ, in the gospel, any way dissolve, but much strengthen this obligation" (19.5). The Second London Baptist Confession of Faith of 1689, the confession of Reformed Baptists, parrots this word-for-word. Thus, according to many theologians, Christians are bound to the "moral portion" of the Mosaic Law. What they usually mean by this is that the Ten Commandments are still binding:

Q. 98. Where is the moral law summarily comprehended?

A. The moral law is summarily comprehended in the Ten Commandments, which were delivered by the voice of God upon mount Sinai, and written by him in two tables of stone; and are recorded in the twentieth chapter of Exodus; the four first commandments containing our duty to God, and the other six our duty to man.

Q. 99. What rules are to be observed for the right understanding of the Ten Commandments?

A. For the right understanding of the Ten Commandments, these rules are to be observed:

1. That the law is perfect, and bindeth every one to full conformity in the whole man unto the righteousness thereof, and unto entire obedience forever; so as to require the utmost perfection of every duty, and to forbid the least degree of every sin.

2. That it is spiritual, and so reacheth the understanding, will, affections, and all other powers of the soul; as well as words, works, and gestures.

3. That one and the same thing, in divers respects, is required or forbidden in several commandments.

4. That as, where a duty is commanded, the contrary sin is forbidden; and, where a sin is forbidden, the contrary duty is commanded: so, where a promise is annexed, the contrary threatening is included; and, where a threatening is annexed, the contrary promise is included.

5. That what God forbids, is at no time to be done; what he commands, is always our duty; and yet every particular duty is not to be done at all times.

6. That under one sin or duty, all of the same kind are forbidden or commanded; together with all the causes, means, occasions, and appearances thereof, and provocations thereunto.

7. That what is forbidden or commanded to ourselves, we are bound, according to our places, to endeavor that it may be avoided or performed by others, according to the duty of their places.

8. That in what is commanded to others, we are bound, according to our places and callings, to be helpful to them; and to take heed of partaking with others in what is forbidden them.

Westminster Larger Catechism, 98-99

Regarding the Sabbath command, Reformed Theologians perform microsurgery on the Fourth Commandment, removing from it the seventh day portion as being ceremonial, and implanting into it the keeping of the first day of the week as the Christian Sabbath. But this is atrocious theology. Nothing in the command identifies the seventh day portion of the command as less "moral" than the rest of the command. God is quite clear: "Remember the Sabbath day...the seventh day is the Sabbath" (Exodus 20:8, 10). The Sabbath day and the seventh day are one and the same.

So we see that, without biblical evidence, Reformed Theologians divide the Law of Moses into artificial categories, and then when it suits them, they even dissect individual commands into these categories so they can keep what they want and get rid of what they don't.

But there is nothing in the Bible that allows this. We cannot divide the Law of Moses into parts. It is all or nothing. What we must find out, then, is whether the Law of Moses—all of it—remains in effect under the New Covenant. Are Christians bound by the Law of Moses?

Faithful Teachers

As we've seen, many theologians—particularly Reformed or Covenant theologians—have, for centuries, taught that the moral part of the Law of Moses, epitomized by the Ten Commandments, has been carried over into the New Covenant and is binding on Christians. Yet, there have been some who have spoken out against this curse, for, as I will show you, a curse it is.

Samuel Richardson wrote in 1647, "Now we are dead to Moses' Law" (*Justification By Christ Alone*). Willam Gadsby (1773-1844) wrote, "I therefore write to say (though I cannot help thinking you must know) that it is the law given to Moses on Mount Sinai, commonly called the moral law, or ten commandments, recorded in Exod 20, and hinted at, with its curses annexed to it, in Deut 27. This is the law I intend, and do venture to say that the believer in Christ is in no sense whatever under it; so that it is not a rule of life to that man who is led by the Spirit" ("Gadsby's Questions About the Law") (<http://www.wordofhisgrace.org/gadsbylaw.html>).

John Reisinger has been credited with coining the term, New Covenant Theology. He has written: "The Tablets of Stone were, in themselves, the old Pedagogue in the conscience of an Israelite. That old Pedagogue has been dismissed (Gal. 3:24, 25) and been replaced by

the indwelling Holy Spirit" (John G. Reisinger, *Tablets of Stone*, Southbridge, MA: Crowne Publications, 1989, pp. 84-85).

New Covenant Theologian, Steve Lehrer, writes, "When the Old Covenant had fulfilled its purpose, the Law of that covenant *and* the covenant itself came to an end" (Steve Lehrer, *New Covenant Theology—questions answered* [2006], 132, 136).

Fred Zaspel explains,

Paul's repeated theme of Christian liberty (Rom. 14; Gal.) argues from the assumption that Moses' law is not binding on the Christian; indeed it is the weaker brother who insists on Mosaic demands (Rom. 14:1ff; cf. Gal. 4:9-11; Col. 2:16). Again, the Mosaic code is consistently spoken of in the past tense and so as no longer in effect (Rom. 8:3; 9:31-32; Gal. 3:23, 24; 4:5; Heb. 7:19; etc.), and as fulfilled and replaced in Jesus Christ (Matt. 5:17-20; Heb. 7:12; 10:1-9). Indeed, it was "abolished" (*katargēsas* [literally, "to render entirely idle"—pd], Eph. 2:15; cf. 2 Cor. 3:11, 13) and "wiped out" (*exaleipsas*, Col. 2:14). It is in fact the very Mosaic *covenant* that is now annulled and replaced (Heb. 8:6-9:1; 2 Cor. 3), not just a part of it, but the whole of it. With the covenant itself abolished, its law written on tables of stones (2 Cor. 3:7) is likewise no longer in force.

Tom Wells and Fred Zaspel, *New Covenant Theology*
[Frederick, MD: New Covenant Media, 2002] 150

With these clear statements, you would think it would be difficult to mistake the clear position of New Covenant Theology concerning the Law of Moses: Jesus Christ fulfilled all of it, it is no longer in force, and, therefore, it is not binding on the Christian. As Paul asserted, "For sin will not have dominion over you. For you are not under law, but under grace" (Romans 6:14). But many do misunderstand.

In part 2, we will consider what Jesus did regarding the law, examine whether the Law of Moses is in any way applicable to Christians, look at the New Testament references to the Ten Commandments, and see what is the Christian's relationship to the law.