

**This is My Beloved Son, Hear Him!**

**The Foundation For  
New Covenant  
Ethics and  
Ecclesiology**

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# "This Is My Beloved Son, Hear Him!"

*The Foundation for New Covenant Ethics and Ecclesiology*

An Extensive Examination and Critique  
of Historical and Contemporary Views  
of Christian Ethics and Church Life

*By Jon Zens*

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## I. The "Problem" in Christian Ethics

Many believers are being deceived by various attempts to formulate a Christian ethic that is not rooted in Christ's redemptive work. Preachers lift their voices in support of imposing the Ten Commandments on secular society with no concern for the fact that it was a moral code specifically connected to an exodus out of Egypt that set Israel apart from all other nations. In *The Management Methods of Jesus: Ancient Wisdom for Modern Business*,<sup>1</sup> Bob Briner lifts Jesus out of his historical setting as the Redeemer so he can be an example for corporate executives. Similarly, in *The Ten Commandments: God's Rules for Living*,<sup>2</sup> Stuart Briscoe assumes that there is nowhere else to go as a springboard for ethical guidance except Exodus 20. What is missing in the majority of Christian ethical teaching is this simple, yet absolutely critical truth: *the cross of Christ that saves us also commands us how to live*. Douglas Webster writes,

For Paul, ethics and theology were not divorced. Understanding the nature of Christ coincides with living out the ethics of Jesus . . . The Christian ethic is exclusively dependent upon Christian redemption . . . Jesus' cross is planted squarely at the center of the believer's existence, providing both the means of salvation and the challenge of a new life-style.<sup>3</sup>

Christian ethics has captured my attention for years. Sadly, I have reached the conclusion that traditional teaching on godly living is based far more on the words of Moses than on the words of Christ. There is a tragic insensitivity to the movement of redemptive history from a reign of law to a reign of grace (John 1:17). It is as though nothing ethically significant occurred with the coming of the "prophet" Moses foretold and commanded us to hear (Deut. 18:15-18). Most writers on Christian ethics tend to focus on the Ten Commandments with little, if any, attention to Jesus' "New Commandment" of love as set forth in John 13:34.

This problem has a number of historical roots. The change that took place in 323 AD when Constantine ascended to power over the Roman Empire is especially important. From then on, visible Christianity took on an increasingly Old Covenant cast - an orientation that continued unabated through the Reformation and that greatly influenced Puritanism. From 1520 through 1660 many books on Christian behavior (ethics) appeared. Whether from Roman Catholic or Protestant writers, the outlook was essentially theocratic and the teaching was invariably couched in Old rather than New Testament perspectives. The basic tendency for Christian ethics to take on a Mosaic flavor with an insensitivity to the flow of redemptive history is illustrated in the following remarks by Puritan Samuel Bolton:

While you are in the wilderness of this world, you must walk under the conduct of Moses . . . The law sends us to the Gospel that we may be justified; and the Gospel sends us to the law again to inquire what is our duty as those who are justified.<sup>4</sup>

Jesus Christ is not functionally central in this approach to ethics. In the final analysis, Christ ends up serving the law.<sup>5</sup>

### **Our Ethical Starting Point is of Critical Importance**

Traditional Christian witness has indeed asserted that Christ alone provides salvation, but it has virtually passed him by when it comes to ethics. It teaches that he alone can save us from our sins, but sends us back to the law to learn how to live. It is a gospel that looks to Christ for justification but then relies on Moses for sanctification. It speaks of the New Covenant sealed with Christ's own blood, but has nothing to say about the "New Commandment" ethics that flow out of Calvary's remarkable redemptive event.

This study will show that the New Testament will not support such a dual allegiance approach to the gospel. It will establish exegetically that the Lord Jesus Christ is indeed the only source of salvation, but that he is also the principal source of ethical instruction for those who believe - a significant point in light of the wide spread Old Covenant orientation of current Christian thought. It will encourage a complete re-thinking of our ethical paradigms, looking to Christ rather than to Moses, and to the New Covenant rather than to the Old for instruction in practical righteousness. It will call believers to reject the "flat Bible" perspective that essentially negates the radical changes introduced with Christ's incarnation, death and resurrection. It is an important call for change, because our ethical starting point will inevitably color our entire view of the important subject of sanctification.

To that end we will first confirm the centrality of Christ in Christian obedience through an examination of relevant biblical texts. We will next evaluate the historical and traditional approach to ethics in light of the biblical evidence we have presented. Finally, we will look at some of the practical implications of adopting a Christ-centered view of ethics.

### **A Few Important Definitions**



Most of the words and expressions used in this study are not technical and should be defined sufficiently by their context. There are a few terms, however, that are not always understood by everyone in the same way. For our purposes, these few biblical or historical terms should be understood as follows:

**Law** - Whole books have been written on how this word is used in the Bible. It can refer to the entire Old Testament (Rom. 3:19), to the making and maintaining of the Old Covenant (Gal. 3:17), or to the idea of "principle" (Rom. 3:27). In this study, the word "law" usually refers to that covenantal administration which lasted from the Mt. Sinai law-giving until the coming of Christ (Rom. 5:13-14; Gal. 3:17). When "law" is considered as that which is binding, it must be linked concretely to the covenant that is in force.

**Covenant** - Covenant is not an abstract term, but refers to some solemn transaction "cut" in history that can be remembered and celebrated. Covenants can be unilateral or bilateral. The former is promissory and depends on God to fulfill the conditions necessary for blessing; the latter is conditional and depends upon the obedience of the subjects.

**Redemptive History** - Sometimes called "salvation history," this refers to that special history announced in Gen. 3:15 and culminating in the appearance of Christ "in the fullness of time." Redemptive history takes place within the framework of general human history, but is differentiated from it because it is related to God's revelatory purpose in Christ.

**Constantinianism** - Around 325 AD, Emperor Constantine declared Christianity to be the religion of the Roman Empire. This action set in motion the mistaken practice of identifying Christ's kingdom with a territory (paralleling Israel's special place among the nations). This gave rise to the idea of a monolithic state religion. Thus began the institutionalization of a "Christianity" informed more by the Old Covenant than the New.

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Footnotes:

1. Thomas Nelson, 1996.
2. Harold & Shaw, 1995.
3. *A Passion For Christ: An Evangelical Christology*, Zondervan, 1987, pp. 52,149,153.
4. Samuel Bolton, *The True Bounds of Christian Freedom*, London: Banner of Truth, 1964, pp. 76, 71.
5. Werner Elert, *Law and Gospel* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1967), p. 8, 47.

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*This is My Beloved Son, Hear Him.* Jon Zens. **Searching Together**. Summer-Winter 1997, Vol. 25:1,2,3. Pages 1-3.

## II. The True Old Testament Focus: The Person and Work of Christ

Almost all professed believers formally acknowledge that Christ is the focus of the Old Testament. Neither the Dispensational nor the Reformed camp, however, has given adequate attention to the implications of such a view.

How did Christ and the Apostles see the Old Testament? Did they use its "laws" to prepare sinners for the gospel? Did they teach that its "laws" have abiding validity for all areas of societal life? Did they interpret its prophetic content as relating primarily to Israel and the future earthly purpose of God for his "chosen nation"? By examining some representative New Testament passages we will see that the Old Testament was viewed by Jesus and his Apostles, not as an end in itself, but as a foreshadowing of the superceding person and work of Jesus Christ.

*Search the Scriptures; for in them you think you have eternal life: and they are they which testify to me . . . For had you believed Moses, you would have believed me: for he wrote of me. (John 5:38-47)*

"Scriptures" in verse 39 obviously refers to the whole body of Old Testament writings, with particular focus on the Mosaic books (vv. 45-47). This corpus of literature, Jesus says, "testifies" (stands as a witness) to his person. Thus, according to Jesus, to read the Old Testament without reference to himself is to miss its stated purpose entirely. In 2 Cor. 3:14-16, Paul reflects on this when he mentions the spiritual blindness of unconverted Jews who study the Old Covenant religiously, yet fail to see the glories of Christ. Not until faith restores their spiritual sight, says Paul, is that veil of blindness taken away.

In verse 45, Jesus states that Moses is an accuser of unbelievers. Puritan Samuel Bolton references this accusing function of Moses to the law when "its sentence and curse take hold of us."<sup>6</sup> That is a serious mishandling of the passage, however, for Christ does not refer the accusing action of Moses to a conviction brought about by preaching the Ten Commandments. Rather, he refers to the fact that Moses wrote about his *person*, and yet they would not believe in him. This passage, then, teaches clearly that the Old Testament writings converge on the person of Jesus Christ - they are Christocentric in nature and purpose. To view them otherwise will lead to various errors. R.C.H. Lenski summarizes this important truth:

Jesus says, "Moses wrote of me" (John 5:46), which means that he did so, not in a few direct promises, but in all that he wrote, not a line of which would have been penned save for Christ and the things Christ would be and bring.<sup>7</sup>

*And beginning at Moses and all the prophets, he expounded to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself. . . These are the words which I spoke to you, while I was with you, that all things must be fulfilled concerning me, and in the prophets, and in the Psalms. (Luke 24:27, 44)*

Again, the Old Testament in its entirety is in view. Our Lord gives his authoritative perspective concerning the Old Testament. He sees this literature as focusing on his own suffering, resurrection (glory) and the universal proclamation of the gospel during this age (vv. 46-47). Our Lord does not view the Old Testament as a "law-word" but as an anticipatory, Messiah-centered work.

It is very significant that this use of the Old Testament by our Lord comes *after* his glorification in the resurrection. It becomes a usage that is also reflected by the apostles and all other early disciples of the New Covenant. Indeed, in the Book of Acts we find the apostles and prophets freely employing the Old Testament to proclaim both the person and work of Christ (Acts 17:2-3). We greatly err, therefore, if we use the Old Testament as social "case-law" to be applied to culture, or as commandments to be preached as "law-work," or as future promises to be realized in Israel's earthly kingdom. The resurrected Lord Jesus' statements in these verses inform us as to how the Old Testament should be viewed in the gospel age. We must always find "things concerning himself." As Herman Ridderbos put it:

That which was revealed in the Old Testament, of a provisional and passing glory, was already the glory of Christ, and the Old Testament must now be read from the present perspective of its fulfillment in Christ.<sup>8</sup>

*Of which salvation the prophets have inquired and searched diligently, who prophesied of the grace that should come to you: searching what, or what manner of time the Spirit of Christ in them pointed when he testified beforehand about the sufferings of Christ and the glory [resurrection] that should follow. To them it was revealed, that not to themselves but to us they did minister the things which are now reported among you by those who have preached the gospel with the Holy Spirit sent down from heaven. (1 Peter 1:10-12)*

In Luke 24:46 we observed that Christ himself interpreted the Old Testament in terms of the two-fold nature of his own work: *suffering and glory*. In the passage above, Peter also indicates that the Spirit of Christ not only guided the prophets who wrote of things to come, but also filled their documents with prophetic information about the coming Messiah's suffering and glory. He tells those now living under the New Covenant that the Old Testament writers wrote about this age - "the day of salvation" (2 Cor. 6:2). Their ultimate focus was not on themselves or their contemporaries, but on "us" who live in the New Era (1 Pet. 1:12). The Old Testament Scriptures were intended primarily for those "upon whom the fulfillment of the ages has come" (1 Cor. 10:11).

This passage strikes at the heart of Dispensationalist teaching. The Old Testament is gospel-centered and speaks, sometimes clearly, sometimes in types and shadows, of the blessings of this New Covenant age. Moreover, the Old Testament does not "skip over" the "church dispensation" and focus on a separate earthly purpose of God for the Jewish nation after the church is "raptured," as they allege.

*From infancy you have known the Holy Scriptures which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.* (2 Timothy 3:15-16)

What is the primary function of Old Testament revelation? Verse 15 tells us that the Scriptures are designed to lead us to "salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus." This coincides with John's stated purpose in his gospel: "But these are written in order that you might believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you might have life through his name" (20:31). The Scriptures are not designed just to stimulate us intellectually, or to present us with an interesting history of redemption for our bedtime reading pleasure. The Scriptures - if handled rightly - are specifically designed to elicit faith in Jesus Christ (cf. Rom. 10:17). Gutbrod writes,

Genuine faith with regard to Moses and with regard to the law, genuine listening to this revelation, must lead to the acknowledgement of Jesus . . . Genuine listening to the law leads to faith in Jesus [and] rejection of Jesus is at the same time rebellion against the law.<sup>9</sup>

Once salvation has come to the heart, these God-breathed Scriptures are also profitable with reference to our obedience (v. 16). In this context the emphasis falls on the "man of God" (v. 17) who is to experience this function of Scripture in his own life so that he can be holy in life (v. 17b) and accurately apply the gospel to the lives of others (1 Tim. 4:2).

It can be seen from these representative passages that Jesus' person and work stand at the center of the Old Testament. The Old Testament was used in the early church to "preach Jesus" (Acts 8:35). In light of the Christ-centeredness of the Old Testament, two important implications need to be emphasized.

### **The Old Testament is Not Israel-Centered**

Dispensationalists allege that Israel as a nation has a divinely appointed earthly purpose entirely separate from the heavenly purpose God has in store for the church. In their hands, the Old Testament becomes Israel-centered. Their "prophetic timetable" revolves around what happens to Israel. The Old Testament promises to Israel cannot be fulfilled, they teach, until the church is "raptured" out of the earth. The glory of Christ that actually commenced with his resurrection they "postpone" until God's earthly purpose for Israel is resumed. The verses we have studied are fatal to such an approach to the Old Testament. In fact, a Dispensational approach to the Old Testament effectively destroys any possibility of "rightly dividing the Word of Truth," for it mistakenly perpetuates what God has once and for all abolished - the earthly institutions of Israel.

### **The Old Testament is Not Law-Centered**

The Mosaic administration was certainly replete with "laws," and therefore was law-centered in terms of its temporary function in the history of redemption (Gal. 3:17-26). However, with the coming of the New Covenant, this law-centered Mosaic economy is now viewed in retrospect as Christ-centered. Thus, the name most historically connected with law (John 1:17) Christ regards as a witness to himself: "[Moses] wrote of me" (John 5:46). When early believers came to understand the Old Testament in the light of Christ's incarnation and resurrection, they no longer used it as a law code, but rather to "show by the Scriptures that Jesus was the Christ" (Acts 18:24-28).

We are blessed with examples of New Covenant preaching in the Book of Acts and receive glimpses of the content of apostolic preaching in the Epistles (1 Cor. 15:3-4). I have searched the New Testament data in vain to find the "preaching of the law" advocated by the Puritans. Samuel Bolton dogmatically asserts, "we cannot appeal to Christ until first we are found guilty and condemned by Moses."<sup>10</sup> By this he means that the Ten Commandments must be preached to sinners as preparation for the reception of Christ. But where in the inspired documents do we find servants of the New Covenant isolating the Old Covenant "moral law," and preaching it to men before and in connection with the proclamation of Christ? Rather, we find them using Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms to preach Christ! (Luke 24:27, 44).

Furthermore, the New Testament writers never command us to use the Old Covenant law to bring our socio-political order under the "dominion" of Christ, as Reconstructionists like R. J. Rushdoony teach. Such a use of the Old Testament is contrary to the clear function assigned to it by our Lord in the passages we studied. The exhaustive details of the Old Covenant law belong to a past age, and are now designated by Paul as being among the weak and beggarly elements of the world.<sup>11</sup>

An undue focus on Israel, therefore, is common to both Dispensationalism and Reconstructionism. The former absolutizes the nation of Israel, while the latter absolutizes the law of Moses. Again, the former restores the nation of Israel to a place of prominence in the future while the latter tries to re-impose her laws in the present age. It is neither Israel nor her laws, however, that offers the key to understanding the Old Testament. *It is the person and work of Jesus Christ!* <sup>12</sup>

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Footnotes:

6. Samuel Bolton, *The True Bounds of Christian Freedom*, London: Banner of Truth, 1964, p. 38.

7. R.C.H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Paul's Epistle to the Colossians*, Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1964, p. 127.

8. Herman Ridderbos, *Paul and Jesus*, Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., 1958, p. 60.

9. W. Gutbrod, *Law*, London: Adam & Charles Black, 1962, pp. 133-134.

10. Bolton, p. 34.

11. Gal. 4:9-10; A.J. Bandstra, *The Law and the Elements of the World: An Exegetical Study in Aspects of Paul's Theology*, Kampen: J.H. Kok, 1964, pp. 31-72.

12. Norman Geisler, "Christ: The Key to the Interpretation of the Bible," *A Popular Survey of the Old Testament*, Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1977. pp. 19-25.



### III. The True Relationship of Christ to the Law: To Fulfill and Set Aside

The Mosaic administration of law was sandwiched between the Abrahamic promise and the appearance of Christ in history (Gal. 3:17, 19, 24, 25). In his incarnation, our Lord as the "last Adam" (1 Cor. 15:45) "took on him the seed of Abraham" (Heb. 2:16) and was "born under the law" (Gal. 4:4). Jesus, in terms of outward circumstances, was identified both with Gentile humanity ("Adam," Luke 3:38) and the Jewish nation ("under law"). Abraham stands as a unique individual between Adam and Moses, for he is both the father of a particular nation (Israel) and the recipient of a universal promise ("in you shall all nations be blessed"). The Lord, therefore, was identified as the "seed" of Abraham who was endowed with both particular and universal elements (Gal. 3:8, 16).

How, then, did our Lord stand in relation to the Mosaic economy? This relationship can be subsumed under the two Biblical headings of "fulfillment" (Matt. 5:17-18) and "abolishment" (Eph. 2:15).

*Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. I tell you the truth, until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, nor the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished. Anyone who breaks one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever practices and teaches these commands will be called great in the kingdom of heaven.* (Matthew 5:17-19)

In verse 17 Jesus makes it clear that his ministry as the Messiah was in no way opposed to the Old Covenant documents. He had not come to rescind the Old Testament but *to fulfill it*. Indeed, he was born "under law," and voluntarily made himself subject to all of its righteous requirements. The law's promise of life was predicated on *perfect* obedience - a condition beyond the reach of Adam's fallen descendants. What elect sinners lacked the power to do their divinely appointed representative did on their behalf. The vicarious death of the "Lamb without blemish" (1 Pet. 1:18-19), *in satisfaction of the just demands of the law*, provided release from the curse of death that held his people fast. His life of *perfect and sinless obedience to the law* gave him the right to claim its promise of eternal life for his chosen bride - a claim that required him to *fulfill*, not "destroy" the law. This is why the word "fulfilled" is used fourteen times in the Gospel of Matthew with reference to various aspects of Jesus' work (1:22; 2:15, 17, 23 etc.).

Fairbairn understands verse 17 as an affirmation by Jesus that the purpose of his ministry was not as much to introduce something totally new as it was to bring to fruition "the proper growth and development of the Old."<sup>13</sup> He adds that Christ could never be an enemy of the Old Testament, but rather "stood in a friendly relation to the law and prophets . . . they must find in him only their fulfillment."<sup>14</sup>

In verse 18 Christ affirms a truth that Peter would later echo. The Old Testament stands as a "sure word of prophecy" (2 Pet. 1:19), speaking of things that must come to pass until the end of the present age. (cf. Acts 2:16-21 where Peter saw Joel's prophecy as extending from the Day of Pentecost to the "great and notable day of the Lord"). Acts 3:21 is another passage that indicates that the Old Testament prophets spoke of things that must be fulfilled during the whole course of history: "whom the heaven must receive until the times of restitution of all things, which God has spoken by his holy prophets since the world began."

The message of the Old Testament prophets is not limited to the relatively few years during which our Lord was on earth. All that they spoke concerning things of the future must be fulfilled also. The phrase "shall in no wise pass from the law" also demonstrates the abiding nature of the Old Covenant books. Although the *Mosaic Covenant* has been abolished by Christ, the inspired documents (Old Testament) continue to stand as a witness to Christ and to many other things which must surely come to pass. What the law and prophets said concerning the Messiah's age must come to pass, for they reflect the predetermining purpose of God in Christ (John 17:12; 19:24; Acts 2:23; Eph. 3:11).

In verse 19, Jesus teaches us that the law and prophets are profitable for ethical behavior in his kingdom. They teach us about righteous living, as is made clear in his exposition in verses 21 - 48. Verses 17-18 are surrounded by the ethical teachings of Christ. Christ is no doubt setting his hearers at ease by making it clear that he is in complete harmony with the law and prophets.<sup>15</sup> Chapters 5-7 of Matthew stand as "the chief formal promulgation of the fundamental principles of his kingdom" and this law-giving of Christ is somewhat parallel to the Mosaic law-giving at Sinai.<sup>16</sup> Thus, in verse 19, after establishing the fact that his ministry fulfills the law and prophets, Christ indicates that certain Old Covenant commandments are also ethically relevant in his

kingdom. Indeed, the "righteousness of the law" will be "fulfilled in us who walk not after the flesh, but after the Spirit" (Rom. 8:4).

Obviously, verses 17-19 cannot be used to prove that the Old Covenant laws, in exhaustive detail, are still "law" for the New Covenant believer.<sup>17</sup> The New Covenant revelation makes it clear that many of the binding regulations of the Old Economy are not part of the New Covenant law. All that the law and prophets have spoken concerning Christ must be exhaustively fulfilled in the gospel age (Luke 24:44) but not every detail of the law once binding on those under the law is still binding on the believer's conscience in the new age. The clean/unclean regulations concerning food were uncompromisingly binding on the Old Testament saints, for example, yet in Christ Paul could say, "I am fully convinced that no food is unclean in itself" (Rom. 14:14). Thus, for Greg Bahnsen to simplistically assert that "if something was sinful in the age of the Old Testament, it is likewise sinful in the age of the New Testament . . . for God's standards are not subject to fluctuation from age to age"<sup>18</sup> demonstrates a total insensitivity to the temporary character of the law (Mark 7:19).

*Having abolished in his flesh the enmity, even the law of commandments contained in ordinances; for to make in himself of two [Jew and Gentile] one new man, so making peace; and that he might reconcile both to God in one body by the cross, having slain the enmity thereby. (Ephesians 2:15-16)*

The Mosaic Covenant separated Israel from the nations (Eph. 2:12). This created a barrier between the Jews and all other nations. Yet, because salvation for any sinner had to come *through* the Jews (John 4:22; Rom. 9:4; Eph. 2:12), the estrangement of Gentiles from the covenants of promise put them in the position of being without hope and without God in the world. Thus, the ministry of Christ, in the manifold wisdom of God, both abolished the Mosaic economy and fulfilled the central covenant promise to Abraham, "in you shall all nations be blessed" (Gal. 3:8). In order for the promise of the covenants to come upon the Gentiles, the law covenant had to be taken out of the way (Gal. 3:12, 14). But the abolishment took place in the form of a fulfilling, not in terms of destruction or utter disregard. Fairbairn asserts: "Rightly viewed, the change was more properly a fulfilling than an abrogating; an abrogating, indeed, formally, yet a fulfilling or establishing in reality."<sup>19</sup>

In order for Jews and Gentiles to be in one body, the Mosaic system had to be abolished. The enmity between Jew and Gentile is graphically outlined in the following description:

The Temple in Jerusalem consisted of a series of courts of increasing holiness and sacredness. The outermost court was the Court of the Gentiles into which any nation might enter. Then came the Court of the Women, beyond which women might not go except to make some stipulated sacrifice. Then there came the Court of the Israelites, beyond which no lay person could go. The innermost court was the Court of the Priests, at the end of which there stood the Temple proper and the Holy Place . . . Between the Court of the Gentiles and the Court of the Women there was quite low balustrade called the *chol*; and inset into it at intervals there was an inscription: "No person of another race is to enter within the balustrade and embankment around the Holy Place. Whoever is caught so doing will be answerable for his own death, which will follow." Quite literally there was a dividing wall between Jew and Gentile, an absolute separation . . . With the coming of Jesus the wall of separation was broken down.<sup>20</sup>

It seems to be generally agreed that Eph. 2:15 and Col. 2:14 refer to the entire Mosaic system, not just the ceremonial aspects of the law.<sup>21</sup> The work of Christ, therefore, both honored ("fulfilled") and set aside the law (Gal. 3:25). In Eph. 2:11-20 the central thought is that Christ abolished in his flesh the law of commandments contained in ordinances. Through this abolition of the law the middle wall of partition between Jew and Gentile was done away.<sup>22</sup>

There is, therefore, a delicate balance to be maintained between Christ completely honoring the law with his life and yet absolutely setting it aside through his death on the cross. In the gospel age, any law regarded as binding upon believers must be drawn, not from the Old Covenant that Christ fulfilled and therefore abolished, but from the New Covenant he has established and sealed with his own blood (1 Cor. 11:25). We err greatly if we impose as binding laws regulations drawn from a Covenant that is no longer in force. As Neil R. Lightfoot observes in commenting on Heb. 7:12; 18-19:

When the author speaks of an inevitable change in the law, he is speaking of the whole Mosaic arrangement conceived of as sacrificial essence. The law and the Levitical priesthood went together. One was integral to the other because on the basis of the priesthood the law was given . . . The priesthood was to the law what a foundation is to a building. Take away the foundation and the superstructure comes down with it. For the author it was axiomatic that if a new priestly order was established, that involved also a change of the old legal superstructure . . . The term set aside [*athetesis*], as Deissmann has shown, was a technical

term used in legal documents; the verb means "to declare as void," "to invalidate," "to abrogate," or "disannul." Here it is the Mosaic law, called the former commandment, that is cancelled, as sin is cancelled or made void by Christ's sacrifice in 9:26. The fact that it is called a former commandment indicates that at best it was only temporary and provisional.<sup>23</sup>

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Footnotes:

13. Patrick Fairbairn, *The Revelation of Law in Scripture*, Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1957, p. 215.

14. Fairbairn, p. 224.

15. John Gill, *An Exposition of the New Testament*, Vol. 1, London: William Collenridge, 1852, p. 33.

16. Fairbairn, pp. 219-220.

17. Gary Long, *Biblical Law and Ethics: Absolute and Covenantal*, Rochester, New York: Backus Books, 1981, for an exegetical and historical study of Matthew 5:17-20.

18. *Biblical Ethics*, 1:3, Nov. 1978.

19. Fairbairn, p. 227.

20. William Barclay, *Flesh and Spirit - An Examination of Gal. 5:19-23*, Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1976, p. 88.

21. Fairbairn, pp. 459, 466; Bolton, p. 31; Gill, Vol. 2, p. 295.

22. Charles Carroll Everett, *The Gospel of Paul*, New York: Houghton, Mifflin & Co., 1893, p. 167.

23. Neil R. Lightfoot, *Jesus Christ Today - A Commentary on the Book of Hebrews*, Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1976, pp. 142-144.

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*This is My Beloved Son, Hear Him.* Jon Zens. Searching Together. Summer-Winter 1997, Vol. 25:1,2,3. Pages 8-11.

#### IV. A True Measure of Obedience: The Work and Words of Christ

##### **The Work of Christ**

Every new Christian faces this important question: "now that I am 'in Christ,' how do I please God in my daily living?" This question, whether consciously or unconsciously, leads to the relationship of gospel and law. This issue soon arose in the early church (Acts 15:1-6). What is the standard of my conduct as a Christian? With what perspective am I to approach the demands on my life and determine what is pleasing to God? We need to examine a number of Scriptures with a view toward seeing the New Testament structure of Christian ethics. As I have studied the matter of Christian obedience, one thing has become increasingly apparent: we must be content with the clear structure which emerges in the New Testament and not expect to construct an exhaustive, detailed system of Christian ethics. As Helmut Thielicke puts it, "in theological reflection the distinction between law and gospel does not admit of any conceptual perfection and completeness."<sup>24</sup>

It is the Lord Jesus Christ who stands as the focus of our obedience. Our union with him - the One who spoke words of life and finished a redemptive work - is the basis from which our obedience flows. "The imitation [of Christ] was rooted in the fellowship and union with Christ and sprang forth from it . . . The 'ought' arises from what their Lord has done for them."<sup>25</sup>

*A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another. (John 13:34-35)*

Because of its foundational character, the beginning point in Christian ethics must be John 13:34-35. In this passage we are confronted with the one commandment that flows out of the redemptive work of Christ at Calvary. All other commandments are related to this "new" demand, a demand which is intimately connected to his "obedience unto death" (Phil. 2:8).

There is a certain "special importance" attached to the final discourses of our Lord in John 13-17. They are his last words on earth. It is apparent that just before his "hour" came (13:1), Jesus confronted his inner circle with matters of critical importance. Therefore, it is incumbent upon us to pay close attention to Jesus' words.

The Lord Jesus was Lord of all (13:3). At this point in time, he could have rightly commanded these men to fall down before him in fearful worship. But, no, the King of Kings "took a towel and girded himself . . . and began to wash the disciples' feet" (13:4-5). Wonder of wonders! The King takes the position of a lowly servant! Does not this action highlight the lesson our Lord intends to communicate? He wants them - more than anything else - to see that loving servanthood is foundational in his kingdom. Our Lord does not act here as an aloof King who is ministered unto, but does not minister. Rather, he calls his disciples to emulate what he has just done before their very eyes (13:14-16). This action of Christ stands as a constant "example" which is to serve as a model for Christian behavior until the end of the age.

Would we be "happy"? Then we must be captured by this "singular" action of Christ and live in light of its demand among our brothers and sisters (13:7). The only way to Christian blessedness is to become a servant (Matt. 20:26).

##### *"As I Have Loved You"*

This important "example" of Christ, however, was not done in a vacuum. The humbling of God's incarnate Son is symbolic of the imminent baptism of suffering to occur at Golgotha.<sup>26</sup> This is brought out in John 15:12-13. After repeating the "New Commandment," Christ connects the "as I have loved you" with the laying down of his life for his friends.

Christ's supreme act of love on the cross clearly becomes the starting point, the reference point, and the touchstone of all Christian obedience. Our love to one another is not just a reaction to the general love of God. It is a love specifically related to the act of God in giving Christ for us (I John 4:9-11). The multifaceted commandments which inform the Christian of his duties (John 14:15) are to be approached through the singular commandment to "love one another, as I have loved you."

If we miss this point, we miss everything. If we come to any duty, any commandment, apart from the love of God shed abroad in our hearts by the Spirit (Rom. 5:5), we have either landed on or are approaching dangerously close to the troubled shores of legalism. Jesus reveals that the most important perspective to grasp is that the pervasive demand that the gospel places on the believer's life must be carried out in love - a love that is a voluntary response to God's love for us in Christ. It is this kind of love



alone which provides the impetus for Christian duty. It is this display of love on the cross that is "sufficient incentive" to restrain Christians from sin and to move them toward holy living.<sup>27</sup>

*"By this shall all men know you are my disciples"*

The importance of this love perspective is further reinforced by Christ's words in 13:35. The one characteristic that he isolates as bearing testimony to the world about the reality of the Christian faith is brotherly love. Not right doctrine, nor denominational creeds, nor persuasive preaching, nor impressive sanctuaries, nor elaborate social programs, nor vast numbers, but genuine and discernible love between believers.

In the Reformed tradition the historical "marks" of a "true church" are identified as: (1) the Word preached, (2) the ordinances properly administered, and (3) discipline practiced. But we can have all these "marks" and yet miss the one identifying "mark" that Christ says is the only one that matters. Without love, all else is in vain (1 Cor. 13:1-3). As his followers, we need the love of our Lord as described in John 13:34 more than anything else.

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Footnotes:

24. Helmut Thielicke, *Theological Ethics*, Vol. 1, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979, p. 118.

25. Willis P. DeBoer, *The Imitation of Paul*, Kampen: J.H. Kok: Kampen, 1962, pp. 55-57.

26. DeBoer, p. 55.

27. Dennis Winter, "Motivation in Christian Behaviour," *Law, Morality and the Bible*, Downers Grove: IVP, 1978, eds. Bruce Kay and Gordon Wenham, p. 212.

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## V. A New Covenant, A New Commandment, A New Exodus

### A New Covenant

The shedding of Jesus' blood constituted the sealing of a "New Covenant" (1 Cor. 11:25) between God and his people and as such became the ultimate display of the love of God. Because the fallen descendants of Adam could not keep the terms of the Old Covenant, it has stood as a broken contract and impenetrable barrier to fellowship with an offended God (Jer. 31:32). The New Covenant in Christ's blood, however, was put into effect and prevails because it is founded on "better promises."

### A New Commandment

It is in connection with the blood of the New Covenant that Jesus issues his "New Commandment." It is imperative for us to see that with any covenant comes a demand upon the covenant people. The Old Covenant was consecrated with the blood of animals (Heb. 9:18) and with it came the requirements upon the covenant nation of Israel. Can we not rightly see that the New Covenant, sealed by the blood of God's spotless Lamb, also brought with it Christ's "New Commandment" to love one another?

It is impossible to grasp what is "new" about the New Commandment unless the historical element in John 13:34 is considered. The command to love is old (Lev. 19:18). But the command for brethren to love as Christ loved them at the cross is new. In other words, in the text it is a strictly historical factor that renders the command to love new. The Old Covenant brought with it a law of works (Exod. 20). The New Covenant brought with it a "New Commandment" - a new law of "faith expressing itself through love" (Gal. 5:6). It is a command that flows out of the vicarious death of Christ: "love . . . as I have loved you."

As Rudolph Stier points out, "to a covenant belongs a law-giving."<sup>28</sup> The "law of Christ" is the law of love (Gal. 6:2). The Christian is to order his life in the light of the all-encompassing demand of love (1 Cor. 13:4-7).

### A New Exodus

To emphasize the relationship of a covenant to its law, we can compare two redemptive events: the exodus that separated Israel unto God and the blood sacrifice that purchased the church. Israel's deliverance from bondage in Egypt precedes the demands of the Old Covenant placed upon her. A gracious act of God comes before the imposition of covenant stipulations. The Egyptian exodus was not an end in itself, but rather a foreshadowing of a greater exodus that would be accomplished in the Messianic age. F.F. Bruce observes:

Jesus' contemporaries freely identified Him as a second Moses - the expectation of a second Moses played an important part in popular eschatology at the time - and with the expectation of a second Moses went very naturally the expectation of a second exodus.<sup>29</sup>

Thus, it should not surprise us that with the mighty deliverance effected by Christ in his death, burial and resurrection, came a pervasive call to loving servanthood (John 13:14-17; 15:12-13). Arising out of the loving act of Christ is the summons to love.

*What I do you know not now; but you shall know hereafter. (John 13:7b)*

It was not until after the resurrection of Christ - and specifically until the promised Holy Spirit had been given on the Day of Pentecost - that the apostles came to more fully understand the implications of Christ's washing of their feet (cf. John 2:22). In his First Epistle, John exhorts his readers in terms that echo the John 13 example of Christ. "Hereby we perceive the love of God, because he laid down his life for us [redemptive event]: and we ought to lay down our lives for the brethren [moral demand]" (1 John 3:16). "In this was manifested the love of God toward us, because God sent his only begotten Son into the world . . . to be the propitiation for our sins [redemptive event]. Beloved, if God so loved us [at the cross], we ought to love one another" [moral demand] (1 John 4:9-11).

Is it not clear enough that when the New Testament writers wish to press duties upon Christians, their starting point is the cross - "as I have loved you"? This is not the sole approach to unfold duty in the New Testament, but it is certainly the most basic and important approach. We can say such a thing because Jesus taught this perspective at the end of his earthly ministry. Bruce Kaye summarizes all of this by saying:

The fundamental idea of the Christian as someone in relationship with Christ provides not only the best way to see the basis of the Christian's ethical life, but also the form and content of that life.<sup>30</sup>

Perhaps in light of John 13:34-35 we can understand why so much material in the Gospels focuses on the final "hour" of Christ. John Blanchard points out that two-fifths of Matthew, three-fifths of Mark, one-third of Luke, and about one-half of John "record the events surrounding the week Jesus was crucified."<sup>31</sup>

### The Words of Christ

After much study in the standard systematic theologies and in books dealing with the Ten Commandments, I have concluded that justice has not been done to an obvious emphasis in the New Testament. The Ten Commandments in Exodus 20 are usually isolated as the "abiding will of God" and treated as an ethical unit which provides the "rule of obedience" for the Christian. While this method certainly ends up saying many necessary and practical things for the believer's conduct, it fails to reckon seriously with the redemptive-historical shift from Old Covenant to New Covenant. For example, Samuel Bolton says, "while you are in the wilderness of this world, you must walk under the conduct of Moses."<sup>32</sup> But the New Testament teaches that the norms for Christian behavior are to be located in the words of Christ.

*Therefore whoever hears these sayings of mine [5:7 - 7:23] and does them, I will liken him to a wise man, who built his house on a rock (v. 24) . . . When Jesus had ended these sayings, the people were astonished at his teaching: for he taught as one having authority and not as the scribes. (Matthew 7:24-29)*

Since the context indicates that Christ includes 5:17-18 among "these sayings," it is imperative to emphasize that his teaching is in no way set against Moses' law. But Christ's teaching in 7:24 is set up as the standard for ethical behavior in the Gospel age. John Gill points out how the term "Lawgiver" applied to Christ:

The Son of God . . . is King of saints, and Lawgiver in his house, and has given out commandments to be observed, and laws of discipline for the right ordering of his house . . . and particularly the New Commandment of love, which is eminently called the law of Christ.<sup>33</sup>

The rain and the flood in 7:25, says Gill, represent

. . . the temptations of Satan, the persecutions of the world, the corruptions of a man's own heart, and the errors and false doctrines of men; from all which a man is safe, who is built upon the rock Christ Jesus . . . the wind of divers and strange doctrines may blow hard upon him, but not cast him down.<sup>34</sup>

Thus, it is the man who builds his life on the sayings of Christ who is unshakable when the trials of life come upon him (Luke 6:48). Does this not, then, indicate that the Christian's attention is particularly directed to the words of Jesus Christ?

In John 7:28-29 the authority of Christ as a teacher is manifested. John R.W. Stott describes the Rabbinic method which was void of real authority:

They conceived their duty in terms of faithfulness to the tradition they had received. So they were antiquarians, delving into commentaries, searching for precedents, claiming the support of famous names among the rabbis. Their only authority lay in the authorities they were constantly quoting.<sup>35</sup>

John Gill, then, shows why Christ's method was so striking:

This [authority] chiefly regards the method he used in preaching, which was by delivering truths of himself in his own name and by his authority . . . he spoke as a lawgiver, as one that had authority from heaven . . . Scarce ever would they [rabbis] venture to say anything of themselves, but said, "the ancient doctors say this and that" . . . one Rabbi speaks in the name of another; but our Lord spoke boldly of himself . . . and did not go about to support his doctrine by the testimony of the elders.<sup>36</sup>

These verses, coming at the conclusion of the Sermon on the Mount, clearly reveal that the source of all kingdom authority was now invested in Christ. His sayings were to constitute the focus of attention in the new age. We must also understand that Jesus' words were not isolated from the context in which he lived. His hearers were well versed in Rabbinical tradition where "God himself is conceived of as tied to the Torah, studying it and observing it," and where the Torah is viewed "as the one and only

mediator between God and man, indeed between God and the world."<sup>37</sup> As Bandstra observes, however, "there was [also] a widespread Jewish tradition that with the coming of the Messiah the law, in its old form, would either terminate, or be radically altered."<sup>38</sup> D.E.H. Whiteley also points out that Rabbinical writings taught that "the Torah which a man learns in this life is vanity compared with the Torah of the Messiah."<sup>39</sup> It was in this context that Jesus indicated that the reference point for godly behavior is to be found, not in the Torah, but in his own words. Thus, as Gutbrod observes:

For the disciples their relationship to the Torah, for example, is replaced by their relationship to Jesus as his disciples, and this finds its appropriate expression in the law of love . . . Thus in so far as Jesus as the Son of God takes the place in every respect of all the other mediators and so of the Torah too, the Torah is thereby at the same time abolished and fulfilled.<sup>40</sup>

*While he yet spoke, behold, a bright cloud overshadowed them: and behold a voice out of the cloud, which said; "this is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased; hear him" . . . And when they had lifted up their eyes, they saw no man, except Jesus only."* (Matthew 17:1-9; Mark 9:2-9)

In this very significant passage, two of the most revered Old Testament figures appear with Christ in the presence of three of his Apostles (v. 3). Moses, the great leader of Israel, was most closely associated with the giving of the law. His presence on this occasion surely testifies that a greater Lawgiver has come. Elijah, the great prophet, is associated with powerful signs, but none as great as the last sign to be soon accomplished in the death, burial and resurrection of Christ. Clearly, Moses and Elijah's presence at this astonishing event mark the fulfillment of Moses' own prophetic words in Deut. 18:15,18: "the Lord your God will raise up to you a prophet from the midst of you, of your brethren, like unto me; to him you shall hearken." As he would testify later, Peter saw this passage as fulfilled in the ministry of Jesus Christ (Acts 3:22-23). The transfiguration of Christ taught his Apostles something that was epochally significant. Namely, that they were now to listen to Christ as the final Prophet sent in fulfillment of Deut. 18 (cf. Heb. 1:1-2).

It seems to me that any presentation of Christian ethics which would seek to be Biblical must have as its starting point the perspective set forth in the Transfiguration. We must do justice to the redemptive-historical shift from the authority vested in Moses to the absolute authority now vested in Christ (John 17:2). We have been commanded by the voice of the Father from heaven to listen to his beloved Son. We have been summoned by Moses' prophetic words in Deut. 18 to hear the Messiah or be cut off. Dare we, then, lend our ears to any other source for sufficient authoritative ethical commandments?

*Teaching them to obey all things whatsoever I have commanded you: and, lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age.* (Matthew 28:20)

As the gospel, beginning with the Jews first, ultimately goes forth to all the nations, what is pointedly designated as the content in evangelism? What are faithful servants of the New Covenant to proclaim? Again, our Savior, who possesses all authority in heaven and earth (28:18), tells us that we have warrant to be blessed in preaching all that he has commanded. This does not mean that we have nothing to do with Moses, but it surely means that we must see Moses as he is viewed in the light of redemptive-historical progress. As Herman Ridderbos puts it:

The law no longer has an unrestricted and undifferentiated validity for the church of Christ. In a certain sense, the church can be qualified as "without the law" . . . The continuing significance of the law can be qualified as "being bound to the law of Christ."<sup>41</sup>

*And if any man hear my words, and believes not, I judge him not: for I came not to judge the world, but to save the world. He that rejects me, and receives not my words, has one that judges him: the word that I have spoken, the same shall judge him in the last day.* (John 12:47-48)

What will be the touchstone of judgment in the final day? The Ten Commandments? No! The authority for all judgment has been placed in the hands of Christ (John 5:22, 27). While his judgments will certainly be in line with the greatest commandments in Moses (Deut. 6:5; Lev. 19:18), we must do justice to the fact that the words of Christ are the final standard. Not the Mosaic law, but the gospel is clearly stated to be the criteria of judgment in the last day (Rom. 2:16; 2 Thess. 1:8). This distinction, keep in mind, is not so much one of content, but one that comes because of the advance of history to a "better covenant": "the new creation brings a new canon, a new standard of judgment, along with it. This is above all redemptive-historical in character."<sup>42</sup>

*If you love me, keep my commandments . . . he that has my commandments, and keeps them, he it is that loves me . . . If a man loves me, he will keep my words.* (John 14:15, 21, 23)



In light of the passages surveyed, you should now appreciate where the emphasis falls in the New Covenant. Our attention is to be focused on the words of Christ, the all-sufficient Prophet in the new age. These words in John 14 further confirm this emphasis. Not that the commandments of Christ are contrary or opposed to Moses; God forbid! But because a better covenant has been ratified, the Christian is to consciously direct his heart to the commands of Christ, not to the economy of Moses - a covenant administration no longer in force (2 Cor. 3:13).

The treatments of the "moral law" in Reformed theology generally omit the relevance of the perspective presented in these passages. For example, Fairbairn states that the moral law, as revealed in the Old Testament, had with the apostles of our Lord a recognized place in the Christian Church, and was plainly set forth by them as the great test of excellence, and the authoritative rule of life.<sup>43</sup>

While our Lord was certainly in harmony with the law, I cannot, in light of the centrality Christ gives to his own commandments, accept the position that the Mosaic moral law is the Christian's "authoritative rule of life." Is not the authority now vested in the Prophetic office of Christ? Moses himself would plead with us to listen to that Prophet of whom he spoke in Deut. 18:15, 18.

If we grasp this redemptive-historical shift from Moses to Christ (John 1:17), many of the tensions present in Calvinistic treatments of the relationship of law to the believers would be alleviated. An example of this tension is set forth by Samuel Bolton: "It is a hard lesson to live above the law, and yet to walk according to the law . . . to walk in the law in respect to comfort."<sup>44</sup>

If we see our duties as resting in the words of Christ, and not, as Bolton put it, "under the conduct of Moses," then this unnecessary tension of being both under the law of Moses for conduct, but not under it as a covenant unto justification disappears.

Furthermore, Reformed theology has usually isolated the Mosaic "moral laws" as "the special instrument . . . for keeping alive in men's souls a sense of duty."<sup>45</sup> But in the verses we have studied in this section, love to Christ is supplied as the central and sufficient motive for total obedience to his commandments (2 Cor. 5:14). Our sense of duty is wrought by the love of God shed abroad in our hearts by the Holy Spirit (Rom. 5:5), not by the constant "reminder" of the Mosaic code. F.F. Bruce summarizes this beautifully by saying:

The "law of Christ" is a repromulgation of the injunction of Leviticus 19:18, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself" (Gal. 5:14). But when "law" is used in this way, it cannot be understood "legally": the law of love is incapable of being imposed or enforced by external authority. Rather, it is the spontaneous principle of thought and/or action in a life controlled by the Spirit of Christ; it is willingly accepted and practiced. Paul was persuaded that the freedom of the Spirit was a more powerful incentive to a good life than all the ordinances or decrees in the world.<sup>46</sup>

Love in the New Covenant, of course, should not be thought of as command-less (1 John 5:3). But the attention of the believer is to be focused on the Lord's commandments (John 13:34; 2 John 5-6), not on the Mosaic administration of law.

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Footnotes:

28. Rudolph Stier, *The Words of the Lord Jesus*, Vol. 6, Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1865, p. 161.

29. F.F. Bruce, *The New Testament Development of Old Testament Themes*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976, p. 49.

30. Bruce Kay, "Law and Morality in the Epistles of the New Testament," *Law, Morality and the Bible*, Downers Grove: IVP, 1978, eds. Bruce Kay and Gordon Wenham, p. 84; p. 85.

31. John Blanchard, *Right with God*, Chicago: Moody Press, 1978, p. 80; DeBoer, p. 67.

32. Samuel Bolton, *The True Bounds of Christian Freedom*, London: Banner of Truth, 1964, p. 76.

33. Gill, Vol. 2, p. 798

34. Gill, Vol. 1, p. 61.

35. John R.W. Stott, *Christian Counter Culture: The Message of the Sermon on the Mount*, Downers Grove: IVP, 1978, p. 214.

36. Gill, Vol. 1, p. 62.

37. W. Gutbrod, *Law*, London: Adam & Charles Black, 1962, pp. 73-74.
38. Bandstra, *The Law and the Elements of the World: An Exegetical Study in Aspects of Paul's Theology*, Kampen: J.H. Kok, 1964, p. 179.
39. D.E.H. Whiteley, *The Theology of St. Paul*, London: Basil & Blackwell, 1964, p. 86.
40. Gutbrod, pp. 133-134.
41. Herman Ridderbos, *Paul - An Outline of His Theology*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975, p. 284.
42. Ridderbos, p. 286.
43. Fairbairn, p. 275.
44. Bolton, pp. 219-220
45. Fairbairn, p. 289.
46. F.F. Bruce, *Paul: Apostle of the Heart Set Free*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977, pp. 187, 201.

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## VI. The True Purpose of Law in the History of Mankind

*Until the law sin was in the world* (Rom. 5:13)

This part of our study will focus on the relationship of Adam and the Gentiles to "law." Historically, the Reformed tradition has asserted that "the law [is] that law of nature engraven in the heart of man in innocency."<sup>47</sup> The validity of this teaching needs to be examined in the light of Scripture. To do so, we will divide human history into the pre-Christ and post-Christ eras. In the pre-Christ era we will examine "law" with reference to Adam and Moses.

### **The Pre-Christ Era: Adam**

*All who sin apart from the law will also perish apart from the law, and all who sin under the law will be judged by the law . . . Indeed, when Gentiles, who have not the law, do by nature things required by the law, they are a law for themselves, even though they do not have the law, since they show that the requirements of the law are written on their hearts . . . for before the law was given, sin was in the world. But sin is not taken into account when there is no law. Nevertheless, death reigned from the time of Adam to the time of Moses, even over those who did not sin by breaking a command, as did Adam, who was a pattern of the one to come.* (Romans 2:12, 14-15; 5:13-14)

Admittedly, these are difficult passages. But perhaps we can make some observations and raise some questions that will stimulate insight into this difficult matter. Adam was created upright in holiness, yet mutable with the ability to fall. The only outward command ("law") imposed upon him and his wife Eve was to refrain from eating of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil (Gen. 2:16-17). Many difficulties arise if it is said that the Ten Commandments were placed in their hearts. In that pre-sin environment there was no reason for Adam to possess a commandment such as "you shall not covet." The existence of law, as embodied in the Ten Commandments, "assumes the sin of man to be an accepted, unalterable state of affairs."<sup>48</sup> Law as set forth in the Ten Commandments presupposes the fall. Even Fairbairn, quoting J.B. Lightfoot approvingly, agrees that Adam did not have specific commandments on his heart, "but this law in general, of piety and love towards God, and of justice and love toward our neighbor."<sup>49</sup>

The general solution to this issue lies in viewing man as image-bearer rather than in trying to locate the Ten Commandments in his heart. In Rom. 1:18-32, Paul formulates the Gentile apostasy in terms of their constitutional inward knowledge of God, and perversion thereof, as image-bearers confronted with general revelation (creation). C.K. Barrett agrees:

Paul in Rom. 1ff. deduces his views about universal obligation and responsibility from the place of man in creation; it is the fact that man is God's creature, and is related to God upwards and to the rest of creation downwards, that makes him answerable to God, not a set of legendary commands. <sup>50</sup>

After Adam fell into sin, his offspring came into the world manifesting an inherently sinful behavior (Gen. 6:5, 8:21). In the period between Adam and Moses, this wickedness is not measured in relation to specific commandments, for indeed, as Fairbairn admits, there were none:

In earlier ages of mankind [there was no] law in some definite and imperative form, standing outside the conscience, and claiming to regulate its decisions . . . of law, strictly so called, we find nothing applicable to the condition of mankind generally, from the period of the fall to the redemption from Egypt. <sup>51</sup>

What does Paul mean, then, when he writes "sin is not imputed when there is no law" (Rom. 5:13)? John Gill states, "there was a law [Gen. 2:17] before that law of Moses, which law was transgressed, and the sin of it was imputed to men to condemnation and death."<sup>52</sup> Samuel Bolton gives the following interpretation:

"Sin is not imputed when there is no law"; that is, though sin and death did reign, yet men were secure and careless, and having no law to discover sin to them, they did not charge their own hearts with sin; they did not impute sin to themselves.<sup>53</sup>

Fairbairn notes that Augustine, Luther, Calvin and Beza all took a position similar to Bolton's.<sup>54</sup> Since "there was no formal and express command of God from the time Adam was forbidden to eat of the fruit of the tree in the Garden of Eden until the time when the law was given to Moses on Sinai,"<sup>55</sup> Gill's position seems to be the most accurate. Paul's point is that the disobedience of one has been imputed to the many. But sin cannot be imputed where there is no law. So whatever law Adam violated by eating

of the forbidden fruit must have been imputed to the entire race. This accounts for the universal reign of sin and death from Adam to Moses and the giving of the encoded law.<sup>56</sup> It also explains why Paul describes the Gentiles as those who have "sinned without law" (Rom. 2:12). It is because external law does not have to be present in order for sin to reign.

Looking more closely at Rom. 2:12-16, therefore, we find Paul outlining the sinful condition of the race - both Jew and Gentile. "The centre of the epistle is a great blaze of light . . . For this blaze of light a lamp-black background is provided by the description of human sin which we find in Rom. 1:18-3:20." <sup>57</sup> Paul sees mankind divided into two initial categories, then ultimately three (1 Cor. 10:32). The Jews were blessed with covenantal law and are thereby *huponomos* ("under law"). The Gentiles possess, in varying degrees, constitutional law (referring to their makeup as fallen image bearers) and are *anomos* ("without law"). Christians are related to Christ's law and are *ennomos Christou* ("in law") [1 Cor. 9:20-21]. Paul's point in Rom. 2 is not that Jew and Gentile stand under the identical law, especially since Paul specifically says that Gentiles will "perish without law."<sup>58</sup> It is clear that Paul's point relates to God's impartial judgment upon Gentiles even though they are "without law." Fairbairn's summary of these verses touches on the crucial arguments of Paul in Rom. 2:14-15:

What, in regard to particular requirements of the law, forms the proper ground of approval, or constitutes good character? Is it hearing or doing? Doing, says the apostle; and then goes on to add that, on this account, Gentiles may justly be placed in the same category with Jews. "For when" - here comes his matter of fact proof or reason - "Gentiles, who have not the law, do by nature [constitutionally] the things of the law, they are to themselves the law." It is not said of Gentiles as a whole that they do this, but only when they do it, or insofar as any of them do it . . . And as regards the performance of what is ascribed to such heathen, the law-making (we are told) is of themselves - that is to say, it is the dictate of their own instinctive sense of right and wrong; forming, to a certain extent, a substitute for the written law; so also the law-doing is by nature . . . it is such as arises from the impulse and energy of the moral faculty, naturally implanted in them, as contradistinguished from the discipline of a formal legislation, or the gift of sanctifying grace.<sup>59</sup>

It is important to observe that Paul is not stating a universal truth in Rom. 2:14, namely, that all Gentiles do all the things in the law. Rather, he is making the observation that *some* Gentiles instinctively do *some* things contained in the law.<sup>60</sup> It should be clear that "the work of the law" mentioned in 2:15 is not equal to the law itself. Again, Fairbairn notes that:

by doing the things of the law, they [the Gentiles] show that they have prescribed for themselves as right what the law prescribed, and imposed on themselves the obligation the law imposes.<sup>61</sup>

This, again, points to the fact that Paul is not anxious to get Jew and Gentile under the same (covenantal) moral law, but is concerned to demonstrate that the Gentiles possess a constitutional "instinctive sense" of moral obligation as apostate image-bearers. Their instinctive moral notions sometimes correspond outwardly with "the things of the law," but in any event they know inwardly that those who practice unrighteousness are worthy of death (Rom. 1:32).

J.B Lightfoot's previously cited statement seems particularly appropriate at this point. His view is that love toward God and neighbor comprised the spontaneous ethical disposition of Adam as he stood created in holiness.<sup>62</sup> It appears that his observation may provide the link in the relationship of "law" to Jews, Gentiles and believers. Jesus taught that love of God and love of neighbor are the two greatest commandments, and that "on these two commandments hang all the law and prophets" (Matt. 22:37-40; Mark 12:29-31; Luke 10:25-28). The word "hang" indicates dependency. Therefore, in these two abiding precepts "was comprised all moral obligation."<sup>63</sup>

Paul asks, "Is he the God of the Jews only? Is he not also of the Gentiles? Yes, of the Gentiles also: seeing it is one God, who shall justify the circumcision by faith, and uncircumcision by faith" (Rom. 3:29-30). For Paul, the one-ness of God is an over-arching link between Jew and Gentile. <sup>64</sup> He taught that "a mediator is not a mediator of one, but God is one . . . But the Scripture has concluded all [Jew and Gentile] under sin, that the [Abrahamic] promise of faith might be given to those who believe" (Gal. 3:20,22). What does this one God require of both Jew and Gentile? He requires not the Ten Commandments, but what the Ten Commandments hang upon - love for God and love for one's neighbor. In the New Covenant in which both Jew and Gentile are brought into one body, the following pattern emerges:

Our Saviour's expressing them [the Ten Commandments] by loving God, shows us that the law of God was not fulfilled in the observation of the letter of those commandments, but doing these things which God commanded out of a principle of love . . . There is nothing commanded in all the Old Testament but may be reduced to these two heads [of love to God and neighbor]. This is the whole duty of man there commanded . . . Moses summed up all in the Ten Commandments, to which, truly interpreted, all the



precepts of Scripture are reducible. Christ here brings the Ten to two. The apostle brings all to one, telling us love is the fulfilling of the law.<sup>65</sup>

The two greatest and most fundamental commandments, then, summarize the requirements of the one God upon Adam, apostate Gentiles, law-breaking Jews, and Christ-loving Christians.

The "New Commandment" of love (new only in a redemptive-historical sense) given by Christ in John 13:34-35 stands as a sufficient motive to keep his commandments (John 14:15). The Holy Spirit who is given to both Jew and Gentile (Acts 10:45-47) sheds the love of God abroad in our hearts, and empowers us to love our neighbor (Gal. 5:14, 22). Thus, believing Jews and Gentiles in the New Covenant are not referred to the Mosaic Ten Commandments as a "rule of life," but to the sayings of Christ and his inspired apostles (Eph. 2:20). As Meredith Kline puts it:

The words of the New Testament which the enthroned Christ has spoken through his inspired ministers of the New Covenant are his architectural directives for the holy task of constructing this New Covenant home.<sup>66</sup>

### **The Pre-Christ Era: Moses**

The law was given only to Israel (Rom. 2:17-18; 9:4). The appearance and development of this temporary Mosaic economy stood in an organic relation to the promises given to Abraham (Gen. 15:13,14,16,18). To do justice to the Biblical data, however, we must also assert that the principle underlying the Abrahamic and Mosaic covenants were quite different. For Paul, the Abrahamic covenant is based on "promise" and "faith," while the Mosaic covenant is "not of faith, but the man that does them shall live in them" (Gal. 3:6-9, 12; Exod. 19:8; Ezek. 20:11). The Mosaic covenantal administration, therefore, stood between the promise of a "seed" ("who is Christ") and the actual historical manifestation of that seed (Gal. 3:16, 17, 19). With the establishing of a "new" and "better" covenant by Christ, there is no longer any need for the disciplinary oversight of the law (Gal. 3:24-25).

The Mosaic law-covenant should be viewed as a unity. To be sure, the civil ceremonial and moral aspects are separately discernible. Paul, however, was adamant that even if only one precept were isolated and made binding - such as circumcision - it would automatically create a liability to the entire Mosaic system (Gal. 5:3). How could Paul make such a far-reaching statement unless he viewed the whole Mosaic economy as an indivisible unit?

Some have suggested that the denial of the moral, ceremonial and civil distinctions in the law is peculiar to Dispensationalism. Viewing the law as a unity, however, has also been the position of a number of non-Dispensational scholars. Consider the following quotations:

*Herman Ridderbos*: "True, one can say that Paul here (Gal. 5:2; 4:10) speaks of certain ceremonial elements of the law; however, over against this stands the fact that he nowhere in a formal sense distinguishes between the ceremonial and moral (portions) of the law, and he always speaks of the law, (i.e.) the Torah known from of old, as a unit."<sup>67</sup>

*F. F. Bruce*: (Referring to the Acts 15 decisions) "While the collation of ethical and non-ethical requirements may seem strange to us, it would not necessarily have seemed so to Jewish Christians; they were familiar with the juxtaposition of such (to us) disparate requirements in the law."<sup>68</sup>

*Andrew J. Bandstra*: "Paul does not make a basic distinction between the so-called 'moral law' and 'ceremonial law,' as is indicated by the fact that the Apostle always uses the singular of the word and never the plural . . . Yet it is true that the Apostle, upon occasion may place emphasis upon the ethical side of the law."<sup>69</sup>

*W. Gutbrod*: "Paul makes no distinction on principle between the Decalogue and the rest of the legal material."<sup>70</sup>

*D. E. H. Whiteley*: "St. Paul never makes any explicit distinction between the moral and the ritual law."<sup>71</sup>

Thus, when the New Testament speaks of the end of the Mosaic order - "He takes away the first, that he may establish the second" (Heb. 10:9) - we are obliged to view the Old Covenant in its entirety as terminated. A New Covenant has taken its place - a covenant whose Priest has fulfilled the "ceremonial" types and shadows, whose King rules over a spiritual kingdom which has taken the place of the "civil" theocracy, and whose Prophet now stands as the "moral" Lawgiver in the new age.

The Reformed tradition has historically assigned a special priority to the Ten Commandments because they were placed in the ark (Heb. 9:4):

engraven by God on the mount, two tablets of stone - the only part so engraven, and, in this enduring form, the sole contents of that sacred chest or ark which became the centre of the whole religious institutions of Judaism.<sup>72</sup>

To be sure, there is a centrality of the Ten Words in the Old Covenant. However, the Old Testament data reveals to us that the Ten Commandments were not the "sole contents" of the ark. In Deut. 29:1, reference is made to a covenant renewal in the land of Moab. This entire written document (Deut. 31:24) was also placed "in the side of the ark of the covenant" (Deut. 31:26).

Merideth Kline observes that we have the "disposition of the Decalogue, and of Deuteronomy too, laid up in or by the ark of the covenant from the time of Israel's beginnings."<sup>73</sup> What was it that Hilkiah the high priest discovered in the house of the Lord? It was the "Book of the Law," that is, Deuteronomy (2 Kings 22:8,10,11,13,16). While the Ten Commandments were certainly constitutive in the Israelite community, closer examination reveals that the whole law was viewed as an entirety, even in or near the ark.

### The Post-Christ Era

We have already alluded to the place of law in the New Covenant - a topic to be further developed when we consider the teaching of Paul. Here it must be emphasized again that law must be identified with the covenant in force. We are faced with a delicate balance that must be maintained. In the New Testament, we are confronted with two facts about the Old Testament: (1) the Mosaic *covenant administration* as a whole has been terminated in history and succeeded by a better covenant, but, (2) the Old Covenant *documents* still remain as valuable and necessary to the New Covenant community. A failure to make this basic distinction has caused confusion. Many have complained that to make the first assertion is tantamount to "throwing out the Old Testament." But such is definitely not the case as outlined earlier. The following illustration establishes this point. When a country adopts a constitution, it stands as "law" for its citizens. If some years later that constitution is replaced with a new one, then the old constitution, though useful, no longer has the force of "law" for that nation. As George C. Knapp puts it:

When a ruler introduces a new statute-book into his dominions, the old book, after its rejection, is no longer the rule by which right and wrong are determined, although much in it still remains true.<sup>74</sup>

Lorraine Boettner, author of *The Reformed Doctrine of Predestination*, crystallizes this point when he says:

The old order died when Christ died. No requirements from the Old Covenant are binding upon the Christian except the moral principles that are repeated in the New Covenant. The Old Testament is our history book. It is not our law book.<sup>75</sup>

The national constitution illustration has admitted limitations, but it does portray the basic relationship between Old and New Covenant law. If the Old Covenant is no longer in force, it cannot impose its laws as normative and binding. It is the law set forth in the New Covenant by our Prophet, Jesus Christ, that has become normative and binding upon those he purchased with his blood. But because the Old Testament is also Christ-centered and is "holy, just and good" (Rom. 7:12), the New Covenant church does not discard or disregard it, but holds it in high esteem. The Old Testament is as inspired and infallible as the New Testament. But we must view it now in light of New Covenant fulfillment, and this markedly qualifies the binding nature of its theocratic law structure.

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#### Footnotes:

47. Samuel Bolton, *The True Bounds of Christian Freedom*, London: Banner of Truth, 1964, p. 59.

48. W. Gutbrod, *Law*, London: Adam & Charles Black, 1962, p. 90; F.F. Bruce, *Paul: Apostle of the Heart Set Free*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977, p. 193.

49. Patrick Fairbairn, *The Revelation of Law in Scripture*, Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1957, pp. 46-47.

50. C.K. Barrett, *First Adam to Last*, London: Adam & Charles Black, 1962, p. 25.

51. Fairbairn, pp. 70, 71, 76.

52. John Gill, *Exposition of the New Testament*, Vol. 2, London: William Collenridge, 1852, p. 35.
53. Bolton, p. 82.
54. Fairbairn, p. 418.
55. Charles Carroll Everett, *The Gospel of Paul*, New York: Houghton, Mifflin & Co., 1893, p. 247; Fairbairn, p. 70.
56. John Murray, *The Epistle to the Romans*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1965, Vol. 1, p. 189, note 22, he states that this view "fits perfectly well with the thought of this passage," but does not adopt it because he feels it conflicts with Rom. 4:15.
57. Whiteley, pp. 58-59.
58. Rom. 2:12; Murray, Vol. 1, p. 70, where he sees "perish" as equivalent to the "infliction of God's wrath" in judgment.
59. Fairbairn, pp. 406-407.
60. Whiteley, pp. 59-60; Charles Bridges, *The Christian Ministry*, Banner of Truth, 1961, p. 230; Murray, Vol. 1, p. 73.
61. Fairbairn, p. 407.
62. Quoted by Fairbairn, pp. 46-47.
63. Fairbairn, p. 240.
64. Bandstra, pp. 123-124.
65. Matthew Poole, *A Commentary on the Holy Bible*, Vol. 3, London: Banner of Truth, 1969, pp. 106-107.
66. Meredith Kline, *The Structure of Biblical Authority*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972, p. 85.
67. Quoted by Bandstra, p. 76, note 6.
68. Bruce, p. 185.
69. Bandstra, p. 76.
70. Gutbrod, p. 102.
71. Whiteley, p. 86.
72. Fairbairn, pp. 82-83.
73. Meredith Kline, "The Correlation of the Concepts of Canon and Covenant," *New Perspectives on the Old Testament*, Waco: Word Books, 1970, p. 275.
74. George C. Knapp, *Lectures on Christian Theology*, New York: Lutheran Publications, 1845, p. 414.
75. Loraine Boettner, "Response to Dispensational Premillennialism," *The Meaning of the Millennium*, ed. by Robert G. Clouse, Downers Grove: IVP, 1977, p. 98.

## VII. Paul's Dual View of the Law & Paul's View of Redemptive History

Paul was a unique person. He was a "Hebrew of Hebrews" (Phil. 3:5) who became the apostle to the Gentiles (Gal. 2:7). He was most fluent in the law, and yet spent the majority of his time among those "without law" (1 Cor. 9:21). Bandstra observes that Paul's view of the law cannot be understood without recognizing two parallel strands of thought.<sup>76</sup> It is "typically Pauline," he writes, "to affirm with respect to the Old Testament law and practices based upon it, both its positive relation with Christ and its having become obsolete in Christ."<sup>77</sup> Similarly, Bolton affirms that "we are not without some places of Scripture which declare the law to be abrogated, and not without some again that speak of it as yet in force."<sup>78</sup> Fairbairn notes that there is a "dual reflection upon the law as both good and bad."<sup>79</sup> This ambivalence should caution us against extremes. Perhaps it would be fair to judge that some Anabaptists did not do justice to the positive aspects of Old Covenant law while the Reformed community has not done justice to its negative aspects.<sup>80</sup>

### **Paul's View of Redemptive History**

In addition to his view of the law, Paul's ethical perspective was also shaped by his redemptive-historical understanding. As Herman Ridderbos points out:

Before everything else, he was a proclaimer of a new time, the great turning point in the history of redemption, the intrusion of a new world aeon. Such was the dominating perspective and foundation of Paul's entire preaching.<sup>81</sup>

These perspectives are reflected in Paul's injunctions to the churches: "The 'indicative' of God's redemptive act in Christ is insolubly linked to the 'therefore' of the ethical 'imperative.'"<sup>82</sup> Redemptive history provides the "indicative" in Paul's thought. In particular, it is the Christ-event that gives the foundation for the apostle's "imperatives." Thus, "No interpretation of the Pauline ethic can be judged successful which does not grapple with the problem of indicative and imperative in Paul's thought."<sup>83</sup>

Several key redemptive-historical themes can be isolated in order to illumine Paul's ethical perspective: (1) God's promise in Abraham, (2) the law through Moses, and (3) grace and truth in Jesus Christ.

#### **Promise to Abraham (Rom. 4:9-16; Gal. 3:8:9; 17-18)**

Christians are specifically linked to Abraham as their "father" (Rom. 4:16). This is to be taken, of course, in a spiritual, not physical, sense. Faith is that which makes both Jews and Gentiles the "children of Abraham." Paul sees much significance in the fact that Abraham possessed a justified status prior to circumcision (Rom. 4:10-11). This indicates that the promise of righteousness apart from works was not given through the law-covenant (Rom. 4:13). Imputation of righteousness apart from works was historically, in Abraham's case, "apart from law" (Rom. 3:21). Thus, both the justification and sanctification of Abraham were able to occur by faith without the specific administration of law - law that was not "added" until 430 years later (Gal. 3:17). We might further point out that the priesthood to which Christians are referenced is not the Aaronic in the Mosaic era, but that of Melchizedek in the Abrahamic era (Heb. 5:10; 6:13, 20; 7:1-21).

#### **Law through Moses (John 1:17a)**

Just as "promise" provides the foundation for the Abrahamic covenant, "law" is foundational to the Sinaitic covenant. This law was inflexible, and imposed a relentless "curse" on everyone under it who failed to do *everything* in it at *all* times (Gal. 3:10). This administration of law was added 430 years after the Abrahamic covenant (Gal. 3:17). It was added "because of transgressions" (Gal. 3:19), and so that "the offense might abound" (Rom. 5:20), "until the Seed [Christ] should come" (Gal. 3:19). This administration of law, therefore, "is not something that is of fundamental importance to us. It is something additional, it is something that has come for the time being, for a particular function." <sup>84</sup>

The Book of Hebrews makes it clear that the law could make nothing perfect, and that something "better" was necessary to effect redemption and holiness. From the New Covenant perspective, it is retrogressive and dangerous to go back under the "beggarly elements," and "yoke of bondage" of the Mosaic covenant (Gal. 4:9; 5:1). This Mosaic administration was, like the Egyptian bondage, a stiff taskmaster that offered no relief. Thus, while the law (as Scripture) is "good," it is (as covenant) connected to the reign and strength of sin (Rom. 6:14; 1 Cor. 15:56). As to its proper purpose, it is "not made for a righteous man," but for the ungodly (1 Tim. 1:8-9).

If men were left with "do this and live" there would be no hope. But in the fullness of time Christ came.

### Grace and Truth by Jesus Christ

There is something accomplished in the historical manifestation of Christ that was completely unattainable under Moses' administration of law. That "something" is described in verse 16 as "grace upon grace" (Greek, *charin anti charitos*). Most commentators see this phrase as similar to "faith to faith" (Rom. 1:17) and "glory to glory" (2 Cor. 3:18). The revelation of Christ brought an administration of "grace and truth." Why? Because he was the promised "seed" of Abraham, and the "prophet" promised by Moses. And, while the law is "not of faith" but rather "do this and live," the gospel is by faith, that it might be of grace (Rom. 4:16; Gal. 3:8,11).

The Christian life, then, is not initiated and sustained by law. Rather, it is in union with Christ, partaking by faith in his fullness. In him we live a life "under grace" - even "grace upon grace." And it is this "grace of God" which has historically been revealed and made possible in Christ that teaches or disciplines us to "deny ungodliness and worldly lusts, that we should live soberly, righteously, and godly in this present age" (Titus 2:11-12). Again, we see that incentive for holy living arises out of our union with him "who gave himself for us" and is coming again to judge the living and the dead (Titus 2:13-14).

### *In the Fullness of Time* (Gal. 4:4)

Bringing the three historical considerations together, we can see the importance attached to the historical appearance of Christ. His coming in the fullness of time is the decisive event of redemptive history. The crucifixion both accomplished redemption and became the crucial reference point for Christian obedience. We *must* bring this Christ-centered perspective to our reflection upon the relationship of law and gospel.

In Paul's writings, then, we find that he "evaluates also the law completely from the vantage point of the new stage of the history of redemption in Christ."<sup>85</sup> "Paul's doctrine of the law," therefore, "is developed from a purely Christological point of view."<sup>86</sup> W. Gutbrod crystallizes this point by saying:

It is the cross of Jesus which determines for Paul his understanding of the content of the law. The whole of Paul's thought revolves around the proposition that the crucified Jesus is the Christ. In the same way it determines his attitude toward the law. This alone provides an intelligible, inherently necessary, connection between his affirmation and negation of the law.<sup>87</sup>

Thus, as Oscar Cullmann writes, "without taking salvation history into account, we would have to regard Paul's teaching on the law as completely self-contradictory."<sup>88</sup> It is interesting to note that Cullmann also observes: "to my knowledge a comprehensive 'salvation-historical ethics' is still to be written."<sup>89</sup>

### Key Texts in Paul's Thought

*Now we know that whatever the law says, it says to those who are in the law, so that every mouth may be silenced and the whole world held accountable to God. Therefore no one will be declared righteous in his sight by observing the law; rather, through the law we become conscious of sin.* (Rom. 3:19-20)

In the preceding verses 10-18 Paul quoted at length from several portions of the Old Testament. Thus, when he says, "what things so ever the law says," he has in view not the "moral law" in particular but the entire Old Testament in general.<sup>90</sup> "It says to those in the law" is a proper rendering, rather than "under the law." It means that both Jews and Gentiles are "in the sphere within which the law of which Paul had quoted samples had relevance."<sup>91</sup>

Paul then indicates that by law-works no man shall ever be justified. This is not inconsistent with the Old Testament, as he demonstrates in 4:3, 6-8, for the way of salvation has always been "the just shall live by faith," not "the man that does them shall live in them" (Gal. 3:11-12). Thus, in saying "by the law is the knowledge of sin" (3:20), he "rests his doctrine as to the universality of sin even on the texts of Scripture he had previously cited."<sup>92</sup>

Walter Chantry uses 3:20b, following the Puritan tradition, to prove that we must preach the Ten Commandments: "God's law is an essential ingredient of Gospel preaching, for 'by the law is the knowledge of sin'."<sup>93</sup> But F.F. Bruce takes issue with such an interpretation:

The second use (of the law "as a summons to repentance") is recognized by Paul as a fact of experience - "through law comes knowledge of sin" (Rom. 3:20) - but not, it appears, as an aid to gospel preaching. It may be held, as a principle of pastoral theology, that confrontation with the law is a salutary means of leading the sinner to acknowledge his inability and cast himself upon the mercy of God. But there is no evidence that Paul ever used the law in this way in his apostolic preaching.<sup>94</sup>

Since it cannot be exegetically proven that Paul has the Ten Commandments in view when he employs the word "law" in 3:20b, it is certainly tenuous to use this text as proof that Exodus 20 is essential to gospel preaching.

*Do we then make void the law through faith? Let it never be! Yes, we uphold the law. (Rom. 3:31)*

In the preceding verse 27 Paul uses the phrase "law of faith" as opposed to salvation by works. Some might suppose that this invalidates the Old Testament so he indicates in verse 31 that his gospel upholds the law, for righteousness by faith was "witnessed by the law and the prophets" (3:21). As Alford put it, "the law itself contained this very doctrine" of justification by faith.<sup>95</sup> F.F. Bruce summarizes the teaching of 3:31 and the context by saying:

"do we then overthrow the law by this faith?" . . . "By no means! On the contrary we uphold the law." In the immediate context, in which Paul goes on to expound the narrative of Abraham's faith which was reckoned to him for righteousness (Rom. 4:1-25), it might appear that the law which is upheld by the gospel of justification by faith is the Torah in the wider sense - the Pentateuch, and more particularly the Genesis account of Abraham. That is so, but Paul goes on farther to show that the law in its stricter sense as the embodiment of God's will, is upheld and fulfilled more adequately in the age of faith than was possible "before faith came," when law kept the people of God "under restraint" (Gal. 3:23). Only in an atmosphere of spiritual liberty can God's will be properly obeyed and his law upheld.<sup>96</sup>

*Wherefore the law was our schoolmaster to bring us unto Christ, that we might be justified by faith. (Gal. 3:24 KJV)*

This text offers another example of an incorrect interpretation that has become fixed in the history of the Reformed tradition. This text and Rom. 3:20b are the chief proof texts used to teach that "the law as a preparation for the gospel, is also part of our ministry."<sup>97</sup> Bridges cites Archbishop Usher: "First the Covenant of the law is urged, to make sin, and the punishment thereof, known . . . After this preparation the promises of God are propounded."<sup>98</sup> Spurgeon says:

I say you have deprived the gospel of its ablest auxiliary when you have set aside the law. You have taken away from it the schoolmaster that is to bring us to Christ. No, it must stand, and stand in all its terrors, to drive men away from self-righteousness and constrain them to fly to Christ. They will never accept grace till they tremble before a just and holy law; therefore the law serves a most necessary and blessed purpose.<sup>99</sup>

If this understanding of Gal. 3:24 is mistaken, the Puritan linkage between preaching "law" and "gospel" needs to be re-evaluated. Other commentators see this passage as referring to the progression of redemptive history, not a use of the Ten Commandments to convict men of sin as a *necessary* preparation to the gospel. John Brown writes:

"The law was our schoolmaster to bring us to Christ." These words have often been applied to express this idea - that it is by the commands and threatenings of God's law brought home to the conscience of the sinner . . . that he is induced to believe the revelation of mercy . . . But this, though a very important truth, is obviously not what the apostle means.<sup>100</sup>

Ernest DeWitt Burton comments on Gal. 3:24:

Nor is the reference to the individual experience under law as bringing men individually to faith in Christ. For the context makes it clear that the apostle is speaking, rather, of the historic succession of one period of revelation upon another and the displacement of the law by Christ.<sup>101</sup>

John Calvin's opinion is, "I deny that Paul here [Gal. 4:1-4] treats of individuals, or draws a distinction between the time of unbelief and the calling of faith," and he then goes on to assert that Paul here is comparing the demise of the old era and the appearance of the new era.<sup>102</sup>

It is clear from the New Testament that men will not flee to the Physician unless they are convinced they need the Doctor. The Reformed tradition believes that "law preaching is the necessary means to bring about such conviction." But where do we find examples of such a use of the law in the apostolic preaching? In light of the lack of any real evidence for something they assert is

so crucial, the assertion that "the law is the forerunner, that makes room, and prepares welcome in the soul for Christ" is called into question.<sup>103</sup> Such a doctrine has no exegetical basis in Gal. 3:24, and yet this is the text most often cited as vindicating it.<sup>104</sup>

Jesus' confrontation with the rich young ruler in Mark 10:17-22 is often cited as a basis for law preaching. Chantry exhorts, "Remember our Lord's dealings with the young ruler. Let them guide your message and methods."<sup>105</sup> Did not our Lord use some of the Ten Commandments to bring him to conviction of sin? Is this not a clear model for us to use? Yes, the Lord used the law with this man. No, it cannot be a model for us with all men. Why? Luke 10:28 gives us the answer. Jesus used the law when dealing with people who were in bondage to the underlying principle of the Mosaic economy: "Do this and you will live" (Gal. 3:12; Ezek. 20:11, 13). Did Christ ever use the law in the same manner with the few Gentiles he encountered? It was, therefore, quite natural and right for the Lord to confront a man "under law" with the convicting character of that law in which he trusted. Paul purposely distanced himself from a law-preaching methodology when dealing with Gentiles, for these people were "without law" (1 Cor. 9:20-21; Acts 14:15-17; 17:22-31).

Conviction of sin is certainly a necessary part of repentance and belief in the gospel. What, then, is the correct instrument of such conviction if it is not law-preaching? The commission from our exalted Christ is that "repentance and remission of sins is to be preached among all nations." His prescription for the content of this evangelistic message, however, is not the law, but "all that I have commanded you" (Luke 24:47; Matt. 28:20). In the Book of Acts, therefore, we find the specific form apostolic preaching took: they pressed the claims of the resurrected Christ upon Jews and Gentiles, and conviction was elicited by means of this proclamation (Acts 2:36-37; 10:42-44; 17:34). "We preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those whom he has called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God" (1 Cor. 1:23-24).

Gospel preaching that focuses solely on the person and work of Christ *will* produce conviction. What is more convicting than the total claim upon the sinner's life that Jesus demands (Luke 14:25-33)? What could be more searching than the obligations of kingdom life detailed in Matthew 5-7? Obviously, as we seek to make the Scriptures understood, we must deal with the law. But to isolate the Ten Commandments as a separate and necessary element "preparatory" to the gospel has no New Testament warrant. As F.F. Bruce observes, "there is no evidence that Paul ever used the law in this way in his apostolic preaching."<sup>106</sup> Paul's evangelistic work among the Gentiles shows no desire or concern to bring the Torah into the picture. Instead, he lived among them as one "in-law to Christ" (1 Cor. 9:21).

The concept of "law preaching" associated with Puritanism, therefore, is unnatural and does not do justice to the advance of redemptive history. It is a practice which, at best, rests solely on dubious interpretations of several questionable proof texts. There is no question that the law must be handled and explained in light of Christ's coming. But it must be expounded naturally and contextually as it is encountered in the Scriptures - and *always* from a New Covenant perspective.

*I would not have known what sin was except through the law . . . The law is holy, and the commandment is holy, righteous and good. (Rom. 7:7,12)*

The context surrounding this passage has been used to teach that the law is necessary to produce conviction of sin. However, there are some textual considerations that demand a re-evaluation of the Puritan use of this passage. Bridges asks: "was it [the law] not also the appointed means of bringing the Apostle to the spiritual apprehension of his sin?"<sup>107</sup>

To understand Romans 7, we must take into consideration the transition in Paul's life from being "under law" to being "in-law" to Christ. Before his own conversion, Paul viewed himself as "blameless" with reference to the law (Phil. 3:6). But in Rom. 7 Paul views himself as "slain" by the law (v. 11). We must ask, what brought Paul to move from being "blameless" to being "slain" by the law? Was it a separate preaching of the Ten Commandments he heard somewhere? No! It was the direct result of his confrontation with the gospel. It was the gospel's convicting impact on his mind and heart that brought the weight of the law upon his soul as described in Romans 7. When Paul stood by consenting to Stephen's death, it was not "law preaching," but a Christ-centered unveiling of Old Testament truth that must have challenged all of his presuppositions (Acts 7:57; 8:1). And when he met the risen and glorified Lord on the road to Damascus, the convicting question Christ asked had nothing to do with the law, but rather, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting *me*?" (Acts 9:4).

Bandstra points us in the right direction when he says:

In Gal. 2:15-20 Paul unequivocally confesses that he and his fellow Jewish Christians found themselves to be sinners ("slain") when



they sought to be justified in Jesus Christ (2:17). Prior to this experience they could say that they were by nature Jews and not sinners out of the Gentiles.<sup>108</sup>

To rightly interpret Romans 7, therefore, we must begin by observing that Paul specifically addressed himself to those who "know the law" (7:1). They were Jewish Christians "under law" (7:1-6) who, once confronted with the gospel, had come to this perspective of the law.<sup>109</sup> We might well ask whether a Gentile believer could have written Romans 7:7-13 since they were never, as John Brown puts it, "subject to the law of Moses."<sup>110</sup>

Paul was "blameless" in the law until the gospel confronted him. It was not a prior law-work that drove him to the gospel, but rather the gospel, coming to him as one "under law," that brought about his new-found conviction of sin by the very law that had once been his proud refuge. The law did not compel Paul to face the gospel. Rather, it was the gospel that forced Paul to see the law in a new light.<sup>111</sup>

*To the Jews I become like a Jew, to win the Jews. To those under the law I became like one under the law (though myself am not under the law), so as to win those under the law. To those not having the law I became like one not having the law (though I am not free from God's law, but am in-law to Christ), so as to win those not having the law. (1 Cor 9:20-21)*

This passage is crucial because it summarizes Paul's differing evangelistic methodologies to Jews and Gentiles. He had only one gospel message and would never compromise it for a moment. But as a man raised in Gentile Tarsus, yet well-versed in the Jewish Torah, he was able to mix both with those "under law" and with those "without the law." To isolate Christ's dealings with the rich young ruler, a man "under law," as normative, therefore, does not seem appropriate in light of Paul's practice to "become like one not having the law" when dealing with Gentiles. Would Paul have challenged the Athenian philosophers, "you know the commandments . . . do this and live"? Obviously not (cf. Acts 17:23-31).

In this passage Paul sees the Jews as *huponomian* ("under law"), the Gentiles as *anomial* ("without law"), and himself as *ennomian* ("in law"). Bandstra observes:

In order to guard against misunderstanding on the part of his readers, who might too easily take the reference to "not being under law" and the reference to "without law" as meaning unprincipled and degenerate behavior, the Apostle states that he is not lawless before God but bound to the law of Christ. As [C. H.] Dodd notes "It is evident (in this place, at least) the Torah is not conceived as being identical, or equivalent, or at any rate co-extensive with the law of God, which is either a different, or a more inclusive, law than the law of Moses."<sup>112</sup>

It is clear that Paul does not reference his being "in-law" to the Mosaic economy, which he specifically states he is not under in verse 20, but to the New Covenant economy with Christ as his Prophet. An accurate summary of "law" with reference to the human race would be structured as follows:

1. *Constitutional law* ("by nature," Rom. 2:14) - Gentiles were a law unto themselves as fallen image bearers and are anomic ("without law").
2. *Covenantal law* ("on tablets of stone," 2 Cor. 3:3) - The Jews possessed inscripturated law as a unified covenant administration which they broke, and turned into a legalistic system. They were huponomic ("under law").
3. *Christ's law* ("on tablets of human heart," 2 Cor. 3:3) - Christians are neither under law nor without law, but possess the internalized law promised in the New Covenant and are therefore ennomonic ("in-law").

We must be flexible like Paul in our evangelistic methodologies. In light of 1 Cor. 9:19-21, it is overstating the case to say that "to preach the Gospel without the Law, would encourage self-delusion."<sup>113</sup> Expounding the gospel involves declaring all the teachings of Christ, and self-delusion will never be encouraged when passages such as Matthew 5-7 and 13:18-23 are opened up to men and applied to their consciences.

*Bear one another's burdens and thus fulfill the law of Christ (Gal. 6:2)*

The false teachers in Galatia were imposing dangerous burdens on the brethren. Paul exhorts them rather to "Carry each other's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ" (Gal. 6:2 cf. John 13:34). The background behind the concept of "burden" deserves further attention.

In Matthew 11:28 Jesus says, "come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest." This text has been used to teach that the gospel invitation is directed only to those who are "burdened" by their load of sin as a result of conviction by the law.<sup>114</sup> But this was not Christ's point at all. Rather, he has in view people weighted down by the burdens placed upon them by the Pharisees: "they tie up heavy loads and put them on men's shoulders" (Matt. 23:4); "you load people down with burdens they can hardly carry" (Luke 11:46). Christ is inviting people burdened down with the innumerable traditions of the elders to come to him and find rest.

Not only were the Pharisaical rules burdensome, but the entire Mosaic economy was "a yoke that neither we nor our fathers have been able to bear" (Acts 15:10). Many in the Reformed tradition have limited this text to include only the "ceremonial law."<sup>115</sup> But such a viewpoint overlooks the fact that the Mosaic law was a unit (Gal. 5:3). The yoke of the Torah did not bring rest, but frustration (Heb. 10:1). Thus our Lord bids men so burdened to "take my yoke upon you and learn from me" (Matt 11:29). It is an invitation that specifically links Christian obedience to the person and words of Christ.

As the gospel began to spread first to the Jews and then to the Gentiles (Rom. 1:16), a law problem arose.<sup>116</sup> It was the inevitable question, "what should be the relationship of converted Gentiles to Mosaic law?" The problem was aggravated when certain men from Jerusalem began to teach "that the Gentiles must be circumcised and required to obey the law of Moses" (Acts 15:1, 5). It was a conflict that called for an analysis and decision by the apostles and brethren. "The four regulations in [their] decree came from the Holiness Code in the Old Testament [Lev. 17-18] and are found in the same order as in Acts 15:29 and 21:25."<sup>117</sup>

If the traditional Reformed explanation is correct - that Gentile believers are not under the abolished ceremonial and civil laws but only under the "abiding moral law" as a rule of life - then we must wonder why this reasoning was not employed at Jerusalem. It would have quickly resolved the conflict described in Acts 15:1-6. But this is not the New Testament answer. The "law" binding on all Christians is placed in Christ's hands, and the concern is to bear the yoke of Christ, not the unbearable yoke of the Torah. Indeed, under the New Covenant, "His commandments are not burdensome" (1 John 5:4).

In the Reformed tradition derived from Geneva, it has frequently been said that, while the man in Christ is not under law as a means of salvation, he remains under law as a rule of life. In its own right, this distinction may be cogently maintained as a principle of Christian theology and ethics, but it should not be imagined that it has Pauline authority. According to Paul, the believer is not under the law as a rule of life - unless one thinks of the law of love, and that is a completely different kind of law, fulfilled not by obedience to a code but by the outworking of an inward power . . . Again, it is sometimes said that Christ is the end of the ceremonial law . . . but not of the moral law. Once more, this is a perfectly valid, and to some extent obvious, theological and ethical distinction; but it has no place in Pauline exegesis. It has to be read into Paul, for it is not a distinction that Paul himself makes.<sup>118</sup>

Returning to Gal. 6:2, Paul begins by saying, "I would have you to bear, not the burden of the Mosaic law [which none can bear], nor the burdens the false teachers are imposing on you, but bear one another's burdens and fully fulfill the law of Christ." What does Paul mean by the "law of Christ"? John Brown's words are most instructive:

"The law" here (Gal. 5:14) plainly does not signify the Mosaic law, but the law by which Christians are bound to regulate themselves; for, as the apostle elsewhere says, though completely free from the obligation of the Mosaic law, they are "not without law to God, but under the law to Christ." It is what the apostle calls "the commandment," when he says, "The end of the commandment is charity out of a pure heart" . . . and what the apostle James terms "the perfect law of liberty," and the "royal law," in opposition to the law of bondage . . . There seems to be a tacit contrast [in Gal. 6:2] between the law of Moses and the law of Christ. It is as if the apostle had said, "This bearing one another's burdens is a far better thing than those external observances which your new teachers are so anxious to impose on you. To be sure, it is not like them, a keeping of the law of Moses, but infinitely better, it is a fulfilling of the law of Christ - the law of love."<sup>119</sup>

In light of the fact that in his Galatian Epistle Paul has in view the imposition of the Mosaic system on believers, his focus on "the law of Christ" is all the more significant, for it indicates where our attention is to be directed - not to a terminated economy, but to the new economy and its Prophet, whose voice we must hear.<sup>120</sup>

*Neither circumcision nor uncircumcision means anything; what counts is a new creation. Peace and mercy to as many as follow the rule [Greek, kanon], even to the Israel of God. (Gal. 6:15-16)*

This is a crucial text, for it provides Paul's clearest definition of the proper "canon" or rule of the Christian faith. Only here and in Phil. 3:6 does this word "canon" refer to a theological standard. Whatever this "canon" is, "the apostle obviously considered

[it to be] of cardinal importance."<sup>121</sup>

To begin with, notice that Paul identifies two categories of persons in this context, as indicated by the phrase "as many as" in verses 12 and 16. First, "as many as desire to make a fair show in the flesh," referring to false teachers, and secondly, "as many as walk according to this rule," referring to Christians.

Next, we need to understand what a "canon" is. It is like a yardstick or fixed standard by which things are measured. Verse 15, therefore, gives us the New Covenant *standard* of the Christian faith: "neither circumcision nor uncircumcision means anything; what counts is a new creation." The importance of this "canon" is multiplied when we consider that Paul uses much the same phraseology in two other passages (1 Cor. 7:19; Gal. 5:5). Considered together, these three references give us a complete picture of the essential and necessary yardstick of the Christian faith. All three stress that neither circumcision or uncircumcision means anything. That which counts is, "a new creation" (Gal. 6:15), "faith expressing itself through love" (Gal. 5:6), and "keeping God's [New Covenant] commands" (1 Cor. 7:19). It is a standard that stands in stark contrast to those who "want to make a good impression outwardly" by boasting in the flesh (i.e. circumcision) of others (Gal. 6:12-13).

Walking according to this "canon" is connected in verse 16 with enjoying the peace and mercy of the gospel. Multitudes of professing Christians do not have the joy of Christ which gospel liberty brings because they are weighted down with non-gospel burdens imposed upon them by men. Even good men are zealous concerning matters that are not weighty issues in the law of Christ. If we do not carefully follow this true New Covenant "canon" we run the risk of being deceived by those whose only motive is to escape persecution (Gal. 6:12), or of falling back into a bondage from which we have been freed (Gal. 5:1). Indeed, the true "Israel of God" will walk according to this "canon," for Paul was confident that Christ's elect would ultimately reject false teachers and cleave instead to the true gospel of free grace (Gal. 5:10).

This, then, is the New Covenant perspective on what is important to the believer. This is the standard of true Christianity. "If you love me, keep my commandments" (John 14:15). In light of these texts, we must therefore maintain that, from a redemptive-historical viewpoint, even the "moral laws" of Moses do not constitute the "canon" for the new "Israel of God," which is the church.<sup>122</sup>

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Footnotes:

76. Bandstra, "The Law's Limited Validity and Its Ambivalence," *Law and Elements*, pp. 115-168.

77. Bandstra, p. 91.

78. Samuel Bolton, *The True Bounds of Christian Freedom*, London: Banner of Truth, 1964, p. 52.

79. Patrick Fairbairn, *The Revelation of Law in Scripture*, Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1957, pp. 148-149.

80. A.J. Bandstra's *The Law and the Elements of the World* is the most satisfying and balanced presentation this writer has seen.

81. Herman Ridderbos, *Paul and Jesus*, Philadelphia: Presbyterian & Reformed Publishing Co., 1958, p. 64.

82. J. Christian Beker, *Paul the Apostle*, Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1980, p. 255.

83. Victor Paul Furnish, *Theology and Ethics in Paul*, Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1968, p. 279.

84. D. Martyn-Lloyd Jones, *Romans: An Exposition of Chapter 5*, London: Banner of Truth, 1971, p. 285.

85. Bandstra, p. 77.

86. G.B. Stevens, *The Pauline Theology*, New York: Charles Scribners, 1892, p. 171.

87. W. Gutbrod, *Law*, Adam & Charles Blatk, 1962, p. 106, emphasis mine; p. 119.

88. Oscar Cullmann, *Salvation in History*, London: SCM Press, 1967, p. 335.

89. Cullmann, p. 329.

90. John Murray, *The Epistle to the Romans*, Vol. 1, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1965, p. 106.
91. Murray, Vol. 1, p. 106.
92. A.B. Bruce, *St. Paul's Conception of Christianity*, New York: Charles Scribners, 1893, p. 127.
93. Walter Chantry, *Today's Gospel: Authentic or Synthetic?*, Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1976, p. 36.
94. Bruce, pp. 191-192.
95. Quoted by Fairbairn, p. 413.
96. Bruce, p. 201.
97. Charles Bridges, *The Christian Ministry*, London: Banner of Truth, 1961, p. 232.
98. Quoted by Bridges, pp. 233-234.
99. C.H. Spurgeon, "The Perpetuity of the Law of God," *Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit*, #1660, p. 285.
100. John Brown, *An Exposition of the Epistle to the Galatians*, Evansville: Sovereign Grace Publishers, 1957, p. 174.
101. Ernest DeWitt Burton, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Galatians*, New York: Charles Scribners, 1920, p. 200.
102. Quoted by John Brown, p. 391.
103. Bishop Reynolds, quoted by Bridges, p. 239.
104. Bridges uses Gal. 3:24 several times as proof of the necessity of "preaching law as a preparation for the gospel", pp. 232, 233, 238.
105. Chantry, p. 92; pp. 17-18.
106. Bruce, p. 192.
107. Bridges, p. 224.
108. Bandstra, p. 141; Bruce, p. 189.
109. Bandstra, pp. 140-141.
110. Brown, p. 258; pp. 252, 254.
111. Jon Zens, "While We were in the Flesh: Should Rom. 7:7ff Shape the Christian's Self Image?," *Searching Together*, Vol. 10, No. 4, pp. 13-21; Robert Gundry, "The Moral Frustration of Paul Before His Conversion: Sexual Lust in Rom. 7:7-25," *Pauline Studies*, eds. Donald Hagner and Murray Harris (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980), pp. 228-245.
112. Bandstra, p. 112.
113. Bridges, p. 238.
114. Bridges, p. 236.
115. Bolton, p. 137.
116. Gutbrod, p. 92.
117. Walter Schlunithals, *Paul and James*, Naperville: Alec R. Allinson, 1965, pp. 97, 98; F.F. Bruce, p. 185.
118. Bruce, pp. 192-193.
119. Brown, pp. 287, 326.
120. A lack of sensitivity to this perspective is revealed by the fact that Fairbairn in his classic Reformed treatment of the law never deals with 1 Cor. 9:20-21 or Gal. 6:2, according to the index of "Passages of Scripture More Particularly Referred to and Explained" (p. 481). Yet these two passages are crucial for a proper understanding of law in the New Covenant aeon.

121. Brown, p. 381.

122. "Under the New Covenant the Old Testament is not the current canon." Meredith Kline, *The Structure of Biblical Authority*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972, pp. 85, 89, 102.

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## VIII. Perspectives in Christian Ethics Examined

With the Scriptures we have considered as our guide, we will now examine a wide spectrum of views on Christian ethics. While we cannot fully critique the positions that follow, we will focus particularly on critical premises that either flow out of or detract from the centrality of Christ in Christian obedience.

As we delve into this historical material, it will become even more apparent that traditional "Christian" ethics has focused more on the Old Covenant and Moses than on the New Covenant and Christ. Further, traditional views have shown almost no sensitivity to redemptive-historical progression. This has resulted in what might be called a "flat Bible" approach to Christian ethics.

### *Why has Traditional "Christian" Ethics Been Old Covenant Oriented?*

The concept of "Christian obedience," as we have already observed, has been based primarily on the Old Covenant ever since the fourth century. When Constantine became Emperor of the Roman Empire, he inaugurated the concept of a "Christian society" by forcefully imposing Christianity as the religion of the Empire.<sup>123</sup> From that time on, a theocratic mind-set has characterized much of the visible church.

Lacking any kind of model in the New Testament, the necessary biblical support for this "Christian State" was drawn almost exclusively from the Old Testament.<sup>124</sup> Since it was a societal system based on Old Testament theocratic paradigms, it is no surprise that the general approach to ethics was informed primarily by the Old Covenant.

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Footnotes:

123. Martin E. Marty, "The Idea of a Christian Society," *A Short History of Christianity*, New York: Meridian Books, 1959, pp. 97-119.

124. W.B. Selbie, "The Influence of the Old Testament on Puritanism," *Searching Together*, 8:3, 1979, pp. 13-21; Leonard Verduin, *The Reformers and Their Stepchildren*, Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1980, pp. 23, 210-213.

## *The Anabaptist Perspective: Martin Luther vs. Menno Simons*

In contrast to this Church/State mentality, the Anabaptists seemed to grasp the fact that a New Covenant had taken the place of the Old.<sup>125</sup> They understood that godly obedience must be rooted in the person and work of Jesus Christ. This dissenting view led them to reject the notion of a "Christian state" that would use the sword to supposedly defend and perpetuate the Christian faith. Their concept of the church was a community of believers co-existing with, but separate from the world around them. It was a stark contrast to the traditional territorial church based on Constantine's theocratic model.<sup>126</sup>

Whereas the Reformers virtually equated the Old and New Covenants,<sup>127</sup> the Anabaptists fervently maintained that the New Covenant was superior to the Old. Many Anabaptists went so far in separating the Old and New Covenants that they even denied the possibility of salvation before the coming of Christ.<sup>128</sup>

Because they saw a radical dichotomy between Old and New Covenants, the Anabaptists had to deal with how to use the Old Testament. It cannot be stated with fairness that the Anabaptists neglected the Old Testament, but their use of it did manifest a tendency to excessively spiritualize and moralize its contents.<sup>129</sup>

While Luther saw the Law imposed upon men *in* the Gospel, Menno saw the work of the Law as a necessary *prelude* to induce repentance before "the Gospel comes to give comfort."<sup>130</sup> Both held that the Law had a necessary place in convicting men. The difference was only in methodology.

As noted earlier,<sup>131</sup> there is no basis in the New Testament for either Menno's Law-then-Gospel or Luther's Law-in-Gospel approach to evangelism. Differences notwithstanding, both are simply variations of the traditional pattern, seeing Law as "threat and command" and the Gospel as "promise and comfort."<sup>132</sup> It is a view that totally ignores the crucial redemptive-historical shift from Law to Gospel (John 1:17). Extended to its logical conclusion, it would find no promise in the Law and no command in the Gospel. Indeed, Herman Witsius, one of the original formulators of Covenant Theology, declares, "All prescription of duty belongs to the law . . . The promises of grace [must] be referred to the gospel, all injunctions of duty to the law."<sup>133</sup> A view that is sensitive to redemptive history, however, will recognize that (1) there is promise in the Law, (2) the Gospel commands duty, and (3) Law and Gospel must not be fused together.

In other areas more significant to the Christian life, Luther and Menno differed more sharply. "For Luther, the commands of the New Testament are not the Gospel, but the Law in the Gospel. For Menno, the New Testament commands are an integral part of the Gospel."<sup>134</sup> For Menno, the Gospel was not only "promise and comfort," but a rule of life for the believer. He recognized that the Law had been abrogated in Christ's fulfillment. Luther, however, taught that the Gospel "is always the promise of forgiveness, and never a demand."<sup>135</sup> He held that the moral imperative for the believer must always be located in the Law and not in the Gospel - totally ignoring the important Law/Gospel shift in redemptive history. He did not understand that just as Israel's deliverance from bondage in Egypt provided the basis for the Old Covenant "command" spelled out in Exodus 20, so also does the believer's deliverance through Christ provide the basis for the New Covenant "command" spelled out in John 13:31-35.

In many ways, the Anabaptists were far ahead of their times.<sup>136</sup> They saw that there were indeed important ethical considerations flowing out of the person and work of Christ. In the Sermon on the Mount, for example, they recognized that the New Testament distinguishes between the Old and New Covenants, rather than to fuse them together. They saw that geographical theocracy was part of an old age and that now in Christ the true church was comprised of true believers. They did have their faults, of course. But church history has only in the last thirty years begun to recognize the Anabaptists' singular contribution to the realization of the civil liberties we often take for granted. And, in the realm of ethics, their basic approach provided the rudiments upon which a New Testament perspective could be built.

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### Footnotes:

125. William Klassen, *Covenant and Community: The Life and Writings of Pilgram Marpeck*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1968, p. 145.

126. Verduin, p. 121.

127. Klassen, p. 21.

128. Klassen, p. 42; H. Carl Shank, "The Hermeneutics of Anabaptist Thought," *Searching Together*, 7:3, 1978, pp. 46-47.
129. Klassen, pp. 75, 98.
130. Richard Detweiler, "Luther and Menno," *Mennonite Quarterly Review*, July 1969, p. 201.
131. Detweiler, pp. 70-75.
132. Detweiler, pp. 204-205.
133. Herman Witsius, *Oeconomy of the Covenants*, I, New York, 1798, pp. 407, 411.
134. Detweiler, p. 209.
135. Detweiler, p. 212.
136. Unfortunately, many of the heirs of Anabaptism have retrogressed into an obscurantism which was not inherent in the core of Anabaptist theology and practice.

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## *Reformation Perspective: John Calvin*

Although the Reformers rejected many of the false doctrines and practices of Romanism, they did continue to perpetuate the 1200-year tradition of state churches. Reformation ethics, therefore, were also Old Covenant based. This was tragic, for while Protestantism developed ethics as a "distinguishable and systematic discipline,"<sup>137</sup> only the Anabaptists espoused an ethic rooted in the cross.

Calvin's Law-based ethic resulted from his flat view of redemptive history. He saw no crucial progression from Old to New Covenants. Helmut Thielicke observes that Calvin's tendency to ignore redemptive history results in a view where law and gospel "are regarded as two sides of the same thing."<sup>138</sup> For Thielicke, such a view threatens the imperative to root the love of God in salvation history.<sup>139</sup> It is a disregard for history epitomized by Karl Barth who, according to Thielicke, sees "no movement of saving history from the Old Testament to the New."<sup>140</sup> He points out that for Barth,

There is no qualitative difference between the two Testaments, only a distinction in the manner in which salvation is dispensed and offered, namely the distinction taken over from Calvin between the "mode of administration" and the "substance" of salvation.<sup>141</sup>

Calvin and Barth differ greatly in many other ways, of course, but Thielicke is simply pointing to their common failure to distinguish between law and gospel - an insight even Luther understood somewhat better than Calvin.<sup>142</sup> And what is the root of Calvin's tendency to ignore history in his view of ethics? Again, according to Thielicke,

For Calvin, there is basically only one covenant in many varied forms . . . There is thus an implied identity of the two Testaments . . . For Calvin the New Covenant does not really introduce anything new . . . The New Covenant does not involve a historical turning point . . . Even when Calvin quotes passages from Scripture which tell us that the Law preaches death and condemnation while the Gospel preaches life and righteousness, and that Law is abolished while the Gospel remains, he changes the obvious qualitative distinction between Law and Gospel into a quantitative one . . . The result is that in the Calvinist tradition there is an unhistorical trend which leads finally to the extreme of relating Old and New Testaments in the fashion of two concentric circles.<sup>143</sup>

This is why we must emphasize: (1) the obvious historicity of the Biblical covenants; (2) the obvious a-historicity of the "covenant of grace" as unfolded in Covenant Theology; and (3) the obvious historical turning point which occurred in the incarnation of Christ.

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### Footnotes:

137. N.H.G. Robinson, *The Groundwork of Christian Ethics*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1971, p. 21.

138. Thielicke, p. 99.

139. Helmut Thielicke, *Theological Ethics*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1979, pp. 97-98.

140. Thielicke, p. 100.

141. Thielicke, p. 103.

142. Thielicke, p. 106.

143. Thielicke, pp. 120, 104, 113, 122, 124.

## *A Lutheran Perspective: Helmut Thielicke*

The first volume of Thielicke's *Theological Ethics* ("Foundations") reveals a sensitivity to redemptive history,<sup>144</sup> and presents many pertinent insights. He sees "justification as the presupposition of evangelical ethics."<sup>145</sup> Later, he comes to consider the work of Christ and its centrality in our obedience. Here, we will take a brief look at his development of the believer as both under law and not under law.

### *Not Under Law*

Thielicke observes that in the area of redemption,

the zone in which man is here addressed lies wholly outside the dominion of the law. If I must be commanded by the law, this is a sign that I am not yet "free," that I have not yet died and risen again with Christ, that I do not yet have the spontaneity of the new existence . . . love, joy, peace, etc. are understood as necessary and automatic expressions of the gracious event which has broken through into the life of believers.<sup>146</sup>

This spontaneity is possible, Thielicke continues,

only if the Law has no part in the origin of this total movement . . . This movement devoid of Law and imperative is possible only in love . . . Thus, it is not the Law but the Gospel alone which can release that love . . . The love which actualizes itself in good works is really posited in and with the love of God which is shown to us. In order to come into being it needs no supplementary intervention on the part of the Law.<sup>147</sup>

Does this perspective, then, lead us to confess that "a legal imperative would seem to be completely out of the question?"<sup>148</sup> Absolutely not. The issue is, what are we to think of the commandments directed toward us in the New Covenant? Thielicke asks, "Is the gift [of Christ] not sufficiently powerful and effective to assert itself in the new existence?"<sup>149</sup> Yes, it is. And the beautiful thing is that the commandment to love flows out of the gift (John 15:12-13)! Or, we could say it this way - the gift commands us!

Unfortunately, Thielicke grounds his primary "imperative" in the Ten Commandments (p. 72), and not in the "New Commandment." Nevertheless, he wishes to uphold the priority of the gospel in the imperative of ethics. He emphasizes how important it is to find,

the right starting point, on the basis of which, once it has been attained, everything else will flow naturally of itself . . . In other words, the crucial thing . . . is that we should drink from the right source.<sup>150</sup>

And this Source - our "meat" and "drink" - is, of course, Jesus Christ (John 6:53-57). In summary Thielicke writes,

The purpose of the imperative is not to intrude upon the automatic process and so declare that justification of itself is incapable of producing the "new creation." On the contrary, the imperative is rather a demand that we should attain to that starting point where the automatic process goes into operation.<sup>151</sup>

### *Under Law*

Thielicke, like Luther, sees the Christian as a "stone lying in the sun, which need not be commanded to become warm."<sup>152</sup> This side of glory, however, even a warmed stone is in need of exhortation, spiritual growth, and maturity.<sup>153</sup>

To that end, Thielicke believes that the Christian needs "flashing red lights on both sides of the path" (the Decalogue).<sup>154</sup> He uses another analogy: "the Law is a kind of sheep dog whose purpose is to recall the members of the flock to the path of the shepherd."<sup>155</sup> Thus, he contends, "the Law is necessary in the Christian life to remind us that all spheres are to be related to our sonship."<sup>156</sup>

There are several problems with this rationale - problems related both to Scripture and to his own conclusions. First, in his sheep dog illustration he introduces something radically foreign to John 10. The sheep, according to Jesus the Shepherd, "hear his voice and follow him." It is not the voice of a sheep dog (i.e., the law) they hear, but him. There is no need for another voice. Christ's voice is sufficient to guide the sheep.

Secondly, Thielicke states inconsistently that Christian progress, or sanctification, "consists in allowing the resurrection of Christ into which I have been drawn, to take place in me - in the form of a new life and through my own affirmation of it."<sup>157</sup> Where is the centrality of the Law in this statement?

Thirdly, why should the law be the source that can relate all areas of life to our sonship? Have we not seen from the New Testament that all relationships - marriage, church, even work - are all related to Christ's love? Is the gospel not able to inform us of the many-sided outworkings of our sonship in Christ? Thielicke seems to deny here what he affirms elsewhere: "the love which actualizes itself in good works . . . needs no supplementary intervention on the part of the Law."<sup>158</sup>

### *Motivation in Christian Ethics*

Thielicke points out that in Christian ethics it is impossible and wrong to compile a manual that can give "advance decisions" for all cases that may arise. This is so, he says, because

such advance decisions are possible only within a framework of a "legalistic" rather than an "evangelical" view of things. The view would be "legalistic" to the extent that it does not let the man be the acting subject in the making of his decision. He becomes merely the object, agent, or executor of a decision which has been made already by others, e.g., those in authority . . . It is a characteristic feature of legalism that it does not let a man be a subject. Instead it impels him "from without," and thus makes him the object of this impulsion from outside himself . . . The only obedience which is whole and undivided, and in which the ego has the significance of an acting subject wholly committed to its action, is love.<sup>159</sup>

These comments surely pertain to the typical Puritan pastor and his carefully formulated "cases of conscience." Huge tomes were produced in Puritanism, setting forth and resolving numerous theoretical and actual "cases." This seems to parallel the Rabbinical approach to ethics, "elaborating the will of God as much as possible and in carrying on a casuistry that extended like a net over all of life."<sup>160</sup>

"Those in authority" in Puritanism were the pastors, and "the cure of afflicted consciences" was "now committed to ministers of the gospel."<sup>161</sup> An attempt was made in Puritanism

to build up an all-inclusive theoretical and practical theology, in which there was no attempt made to bypass any of the thorny problems which arise when one tries to apply the Christian ethic to the multifarious situations of daily life.<sup>162</sup>

Perkins' *Whole Treatise of Cases of Conscience* (1606) became a "kind of popular health manual for the soul," and gave specific directives even for "the small issues of conduct."<sup>163</sup>

This approach is Old Covenant oriented (Gal. 3:24-25; 4:1-3), treats Christians like little children, and does not do justice to the spirit of New Testament ethics.

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#### Footnotes:

144. Thielicke, pp. 39-47.

145. Thielicke, p. 52.

146. Thielicke, p. 56.

147. Thielicke, pp. 64-65.

148. Thielicke, p. 69.

149. Thielicke, p. 70.

150. Thielicke, pp. 84-85.

151. Thielicke, p. 29.

152. Thielicke, p. 126.

153. Thielicke, pp. 127, 128.
154. Thielicke, p. 130.
155. Thielicke, pp. 131-132.
156. Thielicke, p. 132.
157. Thielicke, pp. 128-129.
158. Thielicke, p. 65.
159. Thielicke, p. 649.
160. Ridderbos, *Paul - An Outline of His Theology*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975, p. 273; p. 286.
161. Ian Breward, "William Perkins and the Origins of Puritan Casuistry," *Faith and A Good Conscience*, London: Westminster Conference, 1963, p. 8.
162. Breward, p. 9.
163. Breward, p. 6.

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## *The Puritan Perspective: Thomas Watson*

Watson's underlying presupposition is that ethical fullness is to be found only in keeping the Ten Commandments. The starting point for Christian duty in his system is not "as I have loved you," but "I have brought you out of Egypt." For Watson, therefore, it is the *type* rather than its *fulfillment* that is normative. This is typical of the Old Covenant orientation of Puritanism.

Watson specifically identifies the Ten Commandments as the Christian's rule of life. He believes that "obedience [to the Ten Commandments] must be in and through Christ."<sup>164</sup> It is a view that begs the question, where does the New Testament *ever* send us back to Exodus 20 to define our duties? Do not the New Testament writers consistently point us to Christ's "New Commandment" as the sole basis for our obedience?

### *"Do This and Live"*

Puritan ethics was essentially based on the Old Testament equation, "do this and live" (cf. Gal 3:12). Their formula was "if obedience, then blessing." They may not have intended to set works above grace, but that *is* the effect of such teaching. It is *not* the language of grace, but rather the conditional terms of the Mosaic covenant. It is a view that prompted Watson to ask,

what are the great arguments or incentives to obedience? . . . Obedience makes us precious to God, his favorites . . . Would we have a blessing in our estates? . . . To obey is the best way to thrive in our estates (Deut. 28:1, 3, 5).<sup>165</sup>

It is not our obedience that makes us precious to God, but because we have been "accepted in the Beloved" (Eph. 1:6). On this crucial point we must be very clear. Obedience is certainly an essential part of saving faith. And there *are* blessings promised to the believer. But we regress from New to Old when we impose the formula, "if obedience, then blessing" - especially since the traditional use of the word "blessing" most often assumes *temporal* benefit. It is as though God is somehow obligated to reward us with material prosperity if we discharge some Old Testament duty such as tithing, or keeping the Sabbath. It is a formula often employed by many of today's "God wants you successful" preachers. But it is a seriously flawed scheme that is totally without New Testament warrant.

*Every* true believer is already endowed with "every spiritual blessing in Christ" (Eph. 1:3). For his own wise and gracious purposes, however, God may see fit to assign a life of abject poverty, unrelenting pain, or the severest temporal need to the most committed and obedient saint. Must we conclude - according to the "if obedience then blessing" formula - that such a saint is either being punished by God, or that he or she remains in deprivation because of a failure to perform some "work"? On the contrary, the New Testament saints did not measure their standing before God in proportion to their temporal blessings, but rather "because they had been counted worthy of suffering disgrace for the Name" (Acts 5:41).

It is sad that Watson's section on "love" (pp. 6-12) presents the sum of the Decalogue as "love to God and neighbor," yet never mentions the "New Commandment" to "love one another." At best, he only briefly alludes to love as it springs from the work of Christ.<sup>166</sup> He seems quite insensitive to the New Testament emphasis on love in such passages as 1 John 3:18 and 4:9-11.

Watson defines the expression "all these words" in the preface to the Ten Commandments (Exod. 20:1-2) as "moral law," or "the rule of life and manners." He adds, "Though the moral law be not a Christ to justify us, it is a rule to instruct us."<sup>167</sup> In other words, we need Christ for justification, but not for instruction - for that we must return to the Decalogue. As we have repeatedly shown, however, the New Testament consistently sends us to the person and work of Jesus Christ, not only for justification, but as the starting point for instruction in all areas of our Christian life.

### *The Law as a Hedge*

Watson also regards the law "as a hedge to keep us within the bounds of sobriety and piety."<sup>168</sup> But was it not *Israel* for whom the law served as a "hedge" until the coming of Christ (Gal. 3:25; 4:2)? Do those who have now become God's "sons" still need to be restrained by the law? To make such a suggestion defies the very essence of the gospel. In Christ, the believer has become a "new creation" (Gal. 6:15), who is "not under law, but under grace" (Rom. 6:14).

The Puritan "hedge" system implies that if you do not restrain believers with enough rules there is no telling kind of trouble they will get into. But did Paul ever deal with believers as if they were little children in need of imposed restraints? On the contrary, he had confidence that God was at work in them (Phil. 1:6). He does express fear for the Galatians because they observed days

and had placed themselves under beggarly elements (4:10-11). But even with their serious problems, he writes, "I have confidence in you through the Lord, that you will adopt no other view" (5:10). To the Thessalonian saints he writes, "we have confidence in the Lord touching you, that you both do and will do the things which we command you" (2 Thess. 3:4). In the same way, his approach to Philemon was, "Having confidence in your obedience I wrote to you, knowing that you will also do more than I say" (v. 21). It is clear that,

In Paul's letters . . . the presumption is that Christians will grow and develop in faith and character. They should become more able to make correct moral decisions, they must learn to discern what is important and what is not, and they are expected to develop in character as Christians.<sup>169</sup>

The New Testament basis for duty is "the law of Christ," which is *love*. Believers are expected to do the right thing because they have the Spirit of Christ, not because they have been restrained by the seat belt of Mosaic law. It is the work of love, not of the law to sanctify us. And yet, Watson writes,

We say not that he [the believer] is under the curse of the law, but [its] commands. We say not that the moral law is a Christ, but it is a star to lead to Christ. We say not that it saves, but sanctifies.<sup>170</sup>

Such teaching may have a ring of piety, but in the final analysis it is a dangerous notion. Just how is it that a believer gains justification and escape from the curse of sin apart from the law, yet must yield to its enslaving power to achieve sanctification?

### *A Self-Imposed Enigma: Not Under Law Yet Under Law*

This tension of the Christian being *unable* to obey the law sufficiently to gain salvation, yet *required* to obey it as a rule of life, is explained by Watson in the following way:

In a true gospel-sense, we may so obey the moral law as to find acceptance. This gospel obedience consists in a real endeavor to observe the whole moral law. "I have done thy commandments" (Ps. 119:166); not, I have done all I should do, but I have done all I am able to do; and wherein my obedience comes short, I look up to the perfect righteousness and obedience of Christ, and hope for pardon through his blood. This is to obey the moral law evangelically; which, though it be not to satisfaction, yet it is to acceptation . . . though we cannot, by our own strength, fulfill all these commandments, yet doing *quoad pose*, what we are able, the Lord has provided encouragement for us . . . Though we cannot exactly fulfill the moral law, yet God for Christ's sake will mitigate the rigor of the law, and accept of something less than he requires. God in the law requires exact obedience, yet will accept of sincere obedience; he will abate something of the degree, if there be truth in the inward parts. He will see the faith, and pass by the failing. The gospel remits the severity of the moral law.<sup>171</sup>

To allege that the gospel abates the severity of the law has absolutely no New Testament foundation. It would appear that Watson was driven to reduce the demand of the law under the gospel in order to maintain its place as a rule of life for believers. Paul knew nothing of such a compromise. He taught that all who relied upon, but did not *totally* obey the law could expect nothing but its curse (Gal. 3:10; Deut. 27:26).

The tension inherent in Watson's teaching is self-imposed. There is no need to reduce the rigor of the law when its proper role is understood in light of the redemptive work of Christ. By marriage to Christ, we have been released from the law in order that we may "serve in the new way of the Spirit, and not in the old way of the written code" (Rom 7:6). The New ethic arising out of Christ's redemptive event provides all of the instruction and motivation necessary to render positive acts of obedience to God. But it also provides the means for freedom from negative acts of disobedience. Only as we understand what it means to be no longer under law but under grace can we begin to live as those for whom sin is no longer a master (Rom. 6:14). When the law is left in its Old Covenant context there is no need to compromise its demands, for the terms of that covenant have been fully met, not by us, but by our representative, Jesus Christ. Only as we view ourselves "in him" can we do full justice to the severity of the law, yet claim freedom from its "yoke of slavery" (Gal. 5:1).

Does the gospel, therefore, leave believers in a "lawless" condition? Absolutely not! We are not only justified by our faith in Christ, but we must also "live by faith in the Son of God" (Gal. 2:20). We have been set free from the law's "yoke of slavery" that we may freely and happily take on the "yoke" of Christ (Matt. 11:29-30). In many ways, as Ernest Kevan admits, "grace is more commanding than law!"<sup>172</sup> If this is so, should we not turn from the "weak and miserable principles" (Gal. 4:9) of the Old Covenant to concentrate more fully on the implications of Christ's "New Commandment" of love?

## *Built-in Frustration*

Watson's ethical system can only bring frustration. The believer is asked to learn the

hard lesson to live above the law, yet walk according to the law . . . to walk in the law in respect of duty, but to live above it in respect of comfort.<sup>173</sup>

To be truly "in Christ" is to enjoy an all-sufficient relationship from which we are to derive our hope, our comfort, our duty - *our everything!* He is our Husband, our Bread of Life, our Vine, our Prophet, our Priest and our King. If we focus on anyone or anything other than Christ, we run the risk of missing everything that is really important. Does Christ's "New Commandment" to love as he loved us leave us with so little to do that we must look to the Mosaic statutes for something to keep us busy? Why then, do most writers on Christian ethics have so little to say about the infinite demands of Christ's "New Commandment" of love? Why is it Exodus 20 rather than John 13 that provides the foundation for their ethical instruction?

## *Sermon on the Mount*

Some may respond to the last question by observing that Our Lord himself drew ethical teaching from the Decalogue in his Sermon on the Mount, and that in Matthew 5 he cites some of the Ten Commandments along with other Old Testament commands (v. 21-48). Is this not an endorsement of the law's ethical profitableness?

To teach that Jesus is here perpetuating something he would later shed his blood to abolish is ludicrous (Eph. 2:14-16). What Matthew 5 does establish is that unlike all others who impose the law on men, he alone could speak as one with "authority" (Matt. 7:28-29). After all, it was the finger of Jesus that engraved the stone tablets and gave them to Moses in the first place! A little more attention to the overall context would reveal that Jesus actually directed men to find their ethical starting place in his own sayings (Matt. 7:24,26). If there is any lesson here, it is that Moses *must* be approached through Christ. In terms of an authoritative law-giver, it is now Christ alone who has the words of eternal life (John 6:68; Acts 3:22). All scripture is "useful for teaching" (2 Tim. 3:16). We cannot discard Moses as irrelevant, therefore, but his "glory" must be understood as something that would eventually fade in the greater glory of Christ (2 Cor. 3:7-11).

## *Romans 8:4*

The New Testament certainly expects to see the "righteousness of the law" come to expression in the believer's life. But that raises an important question. Exactly what does Paul mean by the "righteousness of the law"? Notice that he does not say that the goal of redemption in Christ is that *the law* might be fulfilled in us, but rather the *"righteousness of the law"*. His point is that the law has always testified to a better righteousness, to something beyond itself. "The law is therefore not so significant as the fundamental principles which it embodies."<sup>174</sup>

The ethical views examined so far have primarily focused on the Ten Commandments. When asked "which is the greatest commandment in the law" (Matt. 22:36), however, Jesus ignored the Decalogue and cited instead two broad commandments found elsewhere in the Old Testament - commands concerning love toward God and neighbor (Lev. 10:18; Deut. 6:5). The "whole law," according to Jesus, hangs on these two commandments. He also taught that everything in the Law and the Prophets is encompassed in the principle, "whatever you would have that men should do to you, do even so to them" (Matt. 7:12; Luke 6:31). Any righteousness expected of us, therefore, can be summed up in the single command to love, for "love is the fulfillment of the law" (Rom. 13:10).

What is the legal basis for believers to be clothed with the "righteousness of the law," yet at the same time be held "no longer under the supervision of the law" (Gal. 3:25)? Again, it is not the terms of the Old Covenant imposed after Israel's exodus from bondage in Egypt, but the terms of the New Covenant sealed with Christ's blood on the Hill of Golgotha. To be able to love God and neighbor in a way that attains to the "righteousness of the law" has been made possible by the loving act of God in sending his Son to be the propitiation for our sins (John 3:16). That singular redemptive event provides not only the legal basis, but also the enabling grace and the perfect example: "We love because he first loved us" (1 John 4:19).

This, then, is how believers can actually exhibit a righteousness that "exceeds" that of the scrupulous Scribes and Pharisees (Matt. 7:20). The law, in and of itself, was a miserable failure in achieving righteousness in sinners. In fact, rather than to make holy,

it actually stirred up sin (Rom. 8:3; 7:8)! Only when there is release from the law through redemption and marriage to Christ can the "righteousness of the law" be fulfilled in regenerate sinners who then walk no longer "according to the flesh," but in the Spirit (Rom. 6:14,18; 8:4; Gal. 5:16,18).

### *England, God's "New Israel"*

Watson saw England as "Israel," or God's chosen nation. This provided him with justification for the use of the sword in "standing for Christ":

In former times the nobles of Polonia, when the gospel was read, laid their hands upon their swords, signifying that they were ready to defend the faith, and hazard their lives for the gospel.<sup>175</sup>

When discussing the blessing of being "delivered from places of idolatry," he rejoices in,

the goodness of God to our nation [England], in bringing us out of mystic Egypt, delivering us from popery . . . Oh! what cause we have to bless God for delivering us from popery! It was a mercy to be delivered from the Spanish invasion and the powder treason; but it is far greater to be delivered from the popish religion, which would have made God give us a bill of divorce.<sup>176</sup>

He conceives of God as being married to England (just as God was a husband to Israel), and that the wrong state-religion would cause God to "divorce" Watson's homeland! "Pray," he goes on to say,

that the true Protestant religion may still flourish among us . . . O pray that the Lord will continue the invisible token of his presence among us, his ordinances, that England may be called Jehovah-shammah, "the Lord is there."<sup>177</sup>

This geo-political understanding of Christ's kingdom stems from Watson's deep-seated Old Covenant orientation. His view of the duties of both men and nations is defined by a Mosaic model rather than by a relationship to Christ. Sadly, although he has many challenging things to say, there is virtually no Christ-orientation in his ethical system. On the one hand, he asks, "if the moral law could justify, what need was there of Christ's dying?"<sup>178</sup> On the other hand, he states that the Old Covenant moral law *is* able to "sanctify." Using his own logic we must ask, "If the law is able to sanctify, what need is there of the Holy Spirit?" His system leaves us in an awkward (and impossible) situation. We need Christ to justify us, but he alone cannot sanctify us. We need the law to sanctify us, but it cannot justify us. It is a study in incongruity.

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#### Footnotes:

164. Thomas Watson, *The Ten Commandments*, London: Banner of Truth, 1965, p. 3.

165. Watson, pp. 4-5.

166. Watson, pp. 9, 11.

167. Watson, p. 12.

168. Watson, p. 13.

169. Bruce Kaye, *Law Morality and the Bible*, Downers Grove: IVP, 1978, p. 89.

170. Watson, p. 13.

171. Watson, pp. 16, 47.

172. Ernest Kevan, *The Law of God in Christian Experience*, London: Keswick Conference, 1955, p. 66.

173. Bolton, pp. 219-220.

174. Kaye, p. 79.

175. Watson, p. 18.

176. Watson, p. 26-27.



177. Watson, pp. 28-29.

178. Watson, p. 44.

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## *The Dutch Reformed Perspective: Herman Bavinck*

Bavinck has many good insights, but often fails to let those insights govern his understanding of ethics. Unlike Watson, he constantly stresses that "Christ is our sanctification."<sup>179</sup> Again and again he emphasizes that sanctification must not be conceived of as "a legal sanctification, but is and must remain an evangelical sanctification."<sup>180</sup> Faith accomplishes both justification and sanctification - not justification by faith, but sanctification by law.<sup>181</sup> For Bavinck, therefore, sanctification is, so inseparably related to the person of Christ that we cannot receive it except in communion with Christ himself; and this is, viewed from our side, only to be obtained and enjoyed through a true faith.<sup>182</sup>

The tension arises when Bavinck states that,

even though it is altogether true that the law remains as the rule of life for the Christian, still the gospel never derives the exhortations to a holy war from the terrors of the law, but derives them rather from the high calling to which believers in Christ are called.<sup>183</sup>

Bavinck tries to maintain a centrality of the gospel:

according to the order which God himself has appointed in the church, the promises of the gospel precede the commandments of the law . . . It is according to this order alone that a true moral life is possible.<sup>184</sup>

In his brief look at the "New Commandment," however, Bavinck sees it as "New" because - unlike the Old Covenant where "the church and the nation coincided" - believers and the world are to be distinguished in the new age.<sup>185</sup> He seems to ignore the crucial historical pattern, "as I have loved you," referenced by Christ in connection with his New Commandment. And, though he does see a priority to the gospel, he still sends the believer back to the Ten Commandments as a "brief summary of the Christian ethic and an unsurpassed rule for life."<sup>186</sup> It is an unfortunate choice of words since the New Testament clearly sets forth the love of Christ as the "unsurpassed" act that has become our norm and rule of conduct.<sup>187</sup>

As we have shown, Christ came to fulfill the law so that his people could be released from its bondage. It is now his work and his words that have become the starting point in Christian ethics. Bavinck's inconsistency again comes to the fore when he rightly observes,

In short, we should have to record all the moral exhortations in the New Testament if we were fully to summarize all the imperatives set forth to encourage believers to a holy walk. But the passages cited are sufficient to indicate that they are all derived from the gospel and not from the law. Irrespective of whether the apostles are addressing themselves to men or to women, to parents or to children, to masters or to servants, to women or to maids, to rulers or to subjects, they exhort them all in the Lord.<sup>188</sup>

Bavinck's reliance on the law for a "brief summary of the Christian ethic" is not as great as Watson's, but *any* reliance is inappropriate. As long as we turn to the Decalogue for any part of our ethic, we will have a tendency to miss, or at least play down, the most significant motivation for right behavior - the love of God displayed in Christ's vicarious death and resurrection. That redemptive event is the believer's new exodus from slavery to sin - an exodus that not only brought a New Covenant and a New Commandment, but that issued a death sentence to the Old Covenant as well as to *all of its rules and regulations*. In the final analysis, the issue of ethics is not one of content as much as "redemptive-historical" priority.<sup>189</sup> If Jesus is our starting point for salvation, must he not also be our starting point in godly behavior?

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### Footnotes:

179. Herman Bavinck, *Our Reasonable Faith*, Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1977, pp. 473, 476.

180. Bavinck, p. 479.

181. Bavinck, pp. 480, 481.

181. Bavinck, p. 480.

183. Bavinck, p. 481.

184. Bavinck, p. 483.

185. Bavinck, p. 486.

186. Bavinck, p. 489.

187. Kaye, pp. 84-85.

188. Bavinck, p. 482.

189. Ridderbos, p. 286.

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*This is My Beloved Son, Hear Him.* Jon Zens. Searching Together. Summer-Winter 1997, Vol. 25:1,2,3. Pages 49-50.

### *Progressive Reformed Perspective: Herman Ridderbos*

Ridderbos, like G. C. Berkouwer, has openly re-evaluated certain aspects of the historic Reformed tradition. It is quite clear that he is keenly sensitive to the redemptive-historical orientation of Paul. In general, his treatment of the "New obedience" is very satisfying. "The imperative [to duty] rests on the indicative [of redemption] and," he adds, "this order is not reversible."<sup>190</sup> This statement meshes well with the teaching of John 13:34, where the imperative for his follower's love rests on the reality of Christ's love on the cross.

#### *Romans 12:1-2*

In Paul's writings, says Ridderbos, a "theoretic [God-centered] viewpoint predominates." This is evident, for example, in Rom. 12:1-2 where "appeal to the redeeming activity of God in Christ takes precedence" and is "the point of departure" for Paul's practical instruction to the church.<sup>191</sup> "The theocentric point of view . . . constitutes the great point of departure of the Pauline *paraenesis* [ethic]."<sup>192</sup> The demand upon us which arises out of Christ's redemption is "totalitarian," meaning that no area of life is left untouched by it, and that it comprehends all of our actions.<sup>193</sup>

Ridderbos believes that it is in the death and resurrection of Christ "that the individual commandments and precepts appear again and again to have their root and deepest motive."<sup>194</sup>

#### *The Law as the Rule of Life*

Ridderbos characterizes Paul's ethic as "theocentric and totalitarian." "The question," he observes, "now arises as to whether and in what way the norm of the new life thus described is to be determined."<sup>195</sup> He specifically asks whether the law continues to function "as the standard for the new life."<sup>196</sup> His conclusion is that "one will therefore not be able to maintain that love or the Spirit or even Christ as the norm and the rule of conduct of the new life, at least if this would mean a substitution for the law."<sup>197</sup> Thus, he sees the law as a "source for knowledge of the will of God."<sup>198</sup> He believes that "the validity of the law in its historical form has not remained the same,"<sup>199</sup> recognizing that the law as having covenant force no longer obtains, while the law as Scripture is still useful to instruct the Christian in righteousness.<sup>200</sup>

"With Christ's advent, Ridderbos observes, "the law, also as far as its content is concerned, has been brought under a new norm of judgment and that failure to appreciate this new situation is a denial of Christ (Gal. 5:2)."<sup>201</sup> Thus, he adds, "Christ also represents the new standard of judgment as to what 'has had its day' in the law and what has abiding validity (Col. 2:17)."<sup>202</sup> It is from this perspective that Ridderbos says of the Sabbath commandment,

The fact that Paul speaks in this manner concerning the Sabbath [Col. 2:17] proves that for him the fourth commandment of the Decalogue no longer had any abiding significance. In addition, as appears probable, the observance of the first day of the week was not viewed as the New Testament's prolongation of the Old Testament Sabbath.<sup>203</sup>

This is a significant departure from traditional Reformed perspectives. It is an insightful recognition that "in Christ" even the Sabbath as a mere shadow must find its ultimate fulfillment in Christ. "There can be no doubt whatever," he goes on to say,

that the category of the law has not been abrogated with Christ's advent, but rather has been maintained and interpreted in its radical sense ("fulfilled," Matt. 5:17); on the other hand, that the church no longer has to do with the law in any other way than in Christ and thus is *ennomos Christou*.<sup>204</sup>

Ridderbos' study of Paul has led him to conclude that Christ has brought a "new canon," which is "above all redemptive-historical in nature."<sup>205</sup>

The canon given with the new creation (Gal. 6:16) appears to represent the category of the law (1 Cor. 7:19) as well as those of love (Gal. 5:6) and of the Spirit (Phil. 3:3) . . . It can appear on the one hand that the law once given is no longer all important. The content of the will of God is also determined from Christ as the Inaugurator of the new creation. Therefore to serve God by the Spirit means not only a new possibility of performing the law, but also a new view of the law, that of faith in the fulfilling work of Christ.<sup>206</sup>

Thus, for Ridderbos, the Pauline ethic is seen to parallel the order found in Jesus' words in John 13:34. He writes,

The content of the new obedience in the epistles of Paul too, finds its most central and fundamental expression in love. In the first place this love derives its central significance from the fact that it is the reflection of the love of God in Jesus Christ. The love of God revealed in Christ's self surrender and working itself out by the Holy Spirit in the love of the church is the real secret and the clearest expression of its holiness . . . The application of the commandment to love consequently has in Paul the clear effect of stirring up the strong awareness in the church of mutual responsibility . . . The liberty in Christ must show itself especially in this, that believers are to be servants one of another through love (Gal. 5:13) . . . The particularizing of this love constitutes a large part of the content of the Pauline paraenesis.<sup>207</sup>

While his view of the role of the law in Christian ethics sometimes reflects his Reformed heritage, it is clear that Ridderbos finds a primary source in the person and work of Christ. Duty flows out of the believer's union with Christ. To discover the "will of God," therefore, we must turn to the new revelation that came by Jesus Christ. The loving and redemptive act accomplished by Christ is the starting point of the comprehensive and life-changing demands expected of all who "live" by Christ (2 Cor. 5:14-15).

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Footnotes:

- 190. Ridderbos, p. 254.
- 191. Ridderbos, p. 259.
- 192. Ridderbos, p. 260.
- 193. Ridderbos, p. 265.
- 194. Ridderbos, p. 275.
- 195. Ridderbos, p. 278.
- 196. Ridderbos, p. 278.
- 197. Ridderbos, pp 281-282.
- 198. Ridderbos, p. 282.
- 199. Ridderbos, p. 283.
- 200. Ridderbos, p. 284.
- 201. Ridderbos, p. 284.
- 202. Ridderbos, p. 285.
- 203. Quoted by Bandstra, p. 92, note 79.
- 204. Ridderbos, p. 285.
- 205. Ridderbos, p. 286.
- 206. Ridderbos, p. 286.
- 207. Ridderbos, pp. 293, 294, 297.

## *A Dispensational Perspective: L. S. Chafer's Postponed Ethics*

While not all contemporary Dispensationalists agree with everything Chafer said in his *Systematic Theology*, his work has provided, in terms of academic influence, the formative structure for students entrenched in Dispensationalism, although C. I. Scofield's Reference Bible has undoubtedly had more influence on a popular level. Even some modifications to Chafer's system by present-day Dispensationalists have not altered the basic structure. This is because the main premise of Dispensationalism depends on certain "distinctions" and "order of events" that cannot be substantially modified without causing the entire structure to crumble.

As we approach Chafer's ethical perspective we are immediately confronted with his peculiar prophetic outlook. In his system, even ethics is eschatologically qualified, for his rigid premillennialism controls all aspects of his systematic theology. Chafer's ethical outlook is totally dependent on certain assumptions regarding the prophetic future. If the Scriptures reveal that any one of the supporting pillars of his system is mistaken, his whole Israel-centered eschatology must fall to the ground.

### *Three Ages and Three Rules of Life*

Chafer felt that most ethical treatments had ignored "obvious distinctions."<sup>208</sup> These "distinctions," as Chafer perceived them, were comprised of "three major ages": (1) the past Mosaic age, (2) the present church age, and, (3) the future "kingdom age."<sup>209</sup> "There are, then," according to Chafer, "three separate and distinct systems of divine government disclosed in the scriptures, corresponding to three separate and distinct ages to be governed."<sup>210</sup>

In his view, any discussion of "the believer's rule of life" belongs to the second, or middle age. This age, or church era, is "an intercalation - a period thrust in which is wholly unrelated to that which went before and to that which follows."<sup>211</sup> While he saw considerable continuity between ages one and three, he was adamant in his view that the church age has nothing to do with the other two ages.<sup>212</sup> We will now examine Chafer's view of the church age.

### *The Relationship of Judaism to Christianity*

Chafer boldly asserted that "Judaism is not the bud which blossomed into Christianity."<sup>213</sup> Much could be said to refute this assertion,<sup>214</sup> but we will focus on one crucial passage in John 4. Jesus told the Samaritan woman, "you worship you know not what: we know what we worship: for [the] salvation is of [Greek *ek*] the Jews" (v. 20-24). Jesus is clearly referring to the "salvation" of which "the prophets have inquired and searched diligently" (1 Pet. 1:9-10). His reference to "the Jews" indicates that salvation in the Messianic age had been foretold in the Old Testament: "Indeed, all the prophets from Samuel on, as many as have spoken, have foretold these [gospel] days" (Acts 3:24 - cf. Luke 24:27,44). The Jews were never an eternal end in themselves, as Dispensationalists assert, but were a temporary means to a great end - even the coming of Christ (Rom. 9:5).

There is both continuity and discontinuity between the Old and New Ages indicated in this passage. "Salvation" has its prophetic roots in the oracles of God given to the Jews (Rom. 9:4). But in the New Age in which this salvation unfolds, a new form of worship is introduced where all existing temporal customs (Jerusalem vs. Mt. Gerizim) are abolished (v. 21). The continuity is in the "Spirit of Christ" prophesying the age of grace in the Old Testament documents (1 Pet. 1:10). The discontinuity lies in the end of the Old Covenant as a legal administration (Matt. 27:51; Heb. 10:9) as a new age of spiritual maturity (sonship) replaces an age of childhood (Gal. 3:24-4:7).

### *The Church Age*

As pointed out above, Chafer saw the age of grace as totally unrelated to the past Mosaic age as well as to his invented concept of a future kingdom age. Thus, some of his general observations about the believer's rule of life are good, but his overall ethical outlook leaves much to be desired. He saw that the Mosaic system had,

been superseded by a new relationship which believers sustain to Christ and with it a new and higher requirement for daily living (John 1:16-17; Rom. 6:14; 7:2, 2 Cor. 3:1-18; Gal. 3:19-25; Eph. 2:15; Col. 2:14).<sup>215</sup>

However, he has not rightly defined the nature of this "new relationship," for he drives a wedge between God's people of all ages.<sup>216</sup> Since the just have always lived by faith from Abel onwards (Heb. 10:38-11:4), the "new relationship" can only be defined in terms of the advance of redemptive history. It is the historical manifestation of Christ that brings a full disclosure of the Father (John 1:14-18). There is only one salvation. But that salvation was progressively revealed in the historical process. Thus,

the just men and women of the era before Christ looked forward to the seed who would come; the saints of the era after Christ both in experience and knowledge surpass the portion of those of the old age. But this occurs, not because those in the new age are "more," justified than those of old, but because the revelation of Christ has brought more light, and the work of Christ has brought reality in the place of shadow and type (Matt. 13:17; John 1:14-18; Gal. 4:6-7; Rom. 3:25; Heb. 9:15). It is only in this light that we can understand what the writer of the book of Hebrews meant when he wrote,

*And these all, having obtained a good report through faith, received not the promise: God having provided some better thing for us, that they without us should not be made perfect. (11:39-40)*

There is a unity of God's people in all ages, but there was a disparity in comparative knowledge and experience. The unity is maintained and the disparity accounted for only as we see that the historical manifestation of the Word is the culmination and climax of all the promises to the fathers (Heb. 1:1; John 1:14).

Chafer was unable to rightly define the "new and higher requirement" on the Christian because of the unwarranted wedge driven between the ethics of the Old and New Eras. He states repeatedly that there is absolutely no essential ethical continuity between the first and second eras.<sup>217</sup> But the two great commandments of the law - love to God and neighbor (Deut. 6:5; Lev. 19:18) - on which the law and prophets hung (Matt. 7:12; 22:36-40), provide an ethical continuity from Adam to the end of history. The "New Commandment" of Christ is an old commandment in one sense (John 13:34). What makes it "New" is a strictly redemptive-historical consideration: "as I have loved you: greater love has no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends" (John 15:12-13). The pervasive command to love is based on the Old Testament; the commandment of Christ to love is based on a historical act of love that sealed the New Covenant (Matt. 26:28; 1 John 4:9-10). Thus, the "new and higher requirement" cannot be conceived of in terms of having nothing to do with the ethical core of the Mosaic age,<sup>218</sup> but must be identified with the love of God in Christ - "as I have loved you." He who has the love of God poured out by the Holy Spirit in his heart fulfills whatever righteousness the law required, but could not achieve (Gal. 5:14; Rom. 13:10).

#### *Chafer Postpones the Core of Christ's Law*

Chafer stated that "the will of Christ for the believer is the law of Christ."<sup>219</sup> That statement may seem to have a ring of truth, but it introduces a line of thought that deprives the Christian of the very core of Christ's law. That core is nothing less than the "manifesto of the King,"<sup>220</sup> the Sermon on the Mount. For Chafer, the Sermon on the Mount belongs "to a future age."<sup>221</sup> Why? Because he believed that Jesus' primary purpose in his "sermon" was to "offer" an immediate earthly kingdom to the Jews. Since they refused his offer, the kingdom was "postponed" until after the future "rapture" of the church. Only then will the "kingdom age" become a reality and God's "earthly" plan for Israel resume.<sup>222</sup> It is the view first theorized by J. N. Darby, popularized by the *Scofield Reference Bible*, and here espoused by Chafer. It is a major tenet of the Dispensational system, and the *only* foundation for postulating a continuity between the old Mosaic age and their concept of a future "kingdom age." Chafer writes,

The law system is not introduced again at the beginning of the kingdom age; it is continued with certain additions directly from the Mosaic system with no reference to, or contributions from, the intercalation age . . . The Old Testament story runs directly into the kingdom age without the slightest recognition of the present age or its purpose, and that the present age is, therefore, wholly disassociated from, and contributes nothing to, the Old Testament program.<sup>223</sup>

This meant, for Chafer, that Matthew 5:1-7:29 must be parallel with the Mosaic period, and as a result Jesus' sermon is described as:

a reverting to the legal principle of the past Mosaic age . . . the teachings of the kingdom increase the burden of works of merit . . . self-earned blessing intensely legalistic . . . done meritoriously . . . and are almost wholly in disagreement with the teachings of grace.<sup>224</sup>

Chafer divides the sayings of Christ into two categories: words of "law" directed toward Israel's future "kingdom" age and words of "grace" uttered near the hour of his death and intended for the church. For the church, the injunction is "hear and believe" (John 5:24) together with "grace teachings" primarily expressed in Christ's "commandments" (John 13:16). This gospel and ethic was given to the church after the Jews "rejected" the kingdom that Christ "offered" to them. For Israel, the injunction is "hear and do" (Matt. 7:24) detailed in "these sayings of mine" and the things "I say unto you" (Matt. 5:1-7:29).<sup>225</sup> The sayings

directed toward Israel, however, are not applicable to the present age, but to a future time when God supposedly resumes his "earthly" purpose for Israel and restores their "kingdom."

This is a wholly arbitrary and unsatisfactory manner of handling the Sermon on the Mount. This Sermon constitutes the heart of the "law of Christ" for Christians, and yet Chafer has taken it out of this age and out of the realm of grace. For example, when Chafer came to the Great Commission (Matt. 28:20), he asserted that "all things I have commanded you" cannot include the Sermon on the Mount, for these "legal" words of Christ are wholly of the future.<sup>226</sup>

Chafer's controlling presupposition is that Christ opened his public ministry by "offering" an earthly kingdom to the Jews. But the message of John the Baptist, Jesus himself, and the apostles is one: "repent, for the kingdom of God is at hand" (Matt. 3:2; 4:17; Luke 24:47; Acts 1:2-3; 2:38; 28:31). When Peter (a Jew) spoke to Cornelius' household, he clearly indicated the one gospel was (1) "sent to Israel," (2) "published throughout all Judea, and began from Galilee," and (3) now preached to the Gentiles (Acts 10:34-43). It does not take a Greek scholar to check the *Englishman's Greek Concordance* (pp. 320-321) to confirm that the Greek noun for "gospel" applies to but one evangelistic message - the gospel that began with the manifestation of Christ. For example, in Mark 1:1 the word "gospel" has reference to the very beginning of Jesus' ministry, while the same word in Mark 16:15 deals with history until the very end of the age. Splitting Christ's message between an alleged parenthetical church age and future kingdom age cannot be sustained exegetically, and inevitably results in twisted interpretations of Scripture.

Chafer felt that the expression "hear and do" (Matt. 7:24) had to be legal and "opposed to grace." But the New Testament obviously does not feel such a tension. Paul taught that God's vengeance is coming upon all who "obey not the gospel" (2 Thess. 1:8). Such terminology as "obedient to the faith," therefore, does not cast any aspersion on the purely gracious character of the gospel. Christ said that "he that does the will of my Father who is in heaven" is the one who qualifies for admittance into the kingdom of heaven (Matt. 7:21). Chafer assigns these words to a future age as "self-earned blessing." And yet, virtually the same words were expressed by John when he wrote "he that does the will of God abides forever" (1 John 2:17) - a message clearly addressed to those under grace.

For Paul, all of Christ's words formed a "canon" by which any teaching should be judged (1 Tim. 6:3). There is no evidence that he deemed some of Jesus' sayings as belonging to a future age and therefore unsuitable for the church. He certainly has believers in mind when he cites the "words of the Lord Jesus, 'It is more blessed to give than to receive.'" (Acts 20:35). And yet, those words are strikingly similar in tone to the Sermon on the Mount. Some have even referred to this saying as the "ninth Beatitude." Are these precious words of Christ a part of the artificial "legal" corpus reserved for another time? Of course not! Chafer's unnatural division of Christ's words into "gracious" (for the church) and "legal" (for Israel's future kingdom age) cannot be sustained except by extraordinary hermeneutical gymnastics.

This is not to say that there are not some statements of Christ that must be qualified by their historical context. When Jesus said, "Go, show yourself to the priest" (Matt. 8:4), he was speaking as one who had performed a healing in the social environment of the Mosaic covenant. At that point, even Christ himself was "under law" (Gal. 4:4) and obligated to observe its every stipulation. The issue in these few cases, however, is not "legal" versus "gracious" words, but words of the gospel spoken in a society still "under the law."

Expounding on the Sermon on the Mount, Chafer observes, "there is never a reference to either salvation or grace. Nor is there the slightest reference to those great realities of relationship which belong to the new Creation."<sup>227</sup> It should be obvious, however, that these precious words are applicable only to those who are in vital union with Christ (Matt. 6:8; 7:11). Wherever such union exists, its nature will not be "self-earned blessing," but free grace. Chafer is positing the impossible, that a favorable relationship between God and sinners - in any age - can be obtained through works of merit.<sup>228</sup> Salvation always parallels Abraham's experience - by promise through faith (Rom. 4:12).

In spite of his unduly complicated and arbitrary eschatological system, Chafer does see that with the establishment of an "age of grace," a new ethical administration has come.<sup>229</sup> Tragically, however, he destroys any possibility of understanding this new economy because he (1) completely disassociates the present age from the ethical core of the Old Testament, and (2) relegates to a future "legal" age much of Christ's ethical instruction intended for today.

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Footnotes:

208. L.S. Chafer, *Systematic Theology*, IV, Dallas Seminary Press, 1948, p. 154.
209. Chafer, p. 155.
210. Chafer, p. 169; pp. 183, 203.
211. Chafer, p. 167.
212. Chafer, pp. 167-168.
213. Chafer, p. 24.
214. Jon Zens, *Dispensationalism: A Reformed Inquiry into its Leading Figures and Features*, Nutley, New Jersey: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., 1978, pp. 25-39.
215. Chafer, p. 155.
216. Chafer, p. 204.
217. Chafer, p. 168.
218. Chafer, p. 180.
219. Chafer, p. 160.
220. Chafer, p. 177.
221. Chafer, p. 244.
222. Chafer, p. 178.
223. Chafer, pp. 167-168.
224. Chafer, pp. 155, 169, 177, 212, 216, 219, 220, 214.
225. Chafer, pp. 177-178.
226. Chafer, pp. 177, 224.
227. Chafer, p. 177.
228. Chafer, p. 216.
229. Chafer, p. 241.

Chafer lived before the contemporary Chalcedon movement and believed that "No legalist proposes to carry forward into grace the judgments which governed the social life of Israel, or the ordinances which governed their religious ritual in the land."<sup>230</sup> Since then, however, men like Greg Bahnsen have come on the scene who *do indeed* believe that the laws of the Old Testament are yet binding on both the Christian and society.<sup>231</sup> An article by Bahnsen entitled "God's Law in New Testament Ethical Themes"<sup>232</sup> is based on this view and reveals a critical deficiency in his perspective. We will now turn our attention to the contents of his article and provide some reasons why it is so retrogressive.

In this essay, Bahnsen begins by quoting Paul's expression, "the good, well-pleasing, and perfect will of God" (Rom. 12:2). He then provides the commentary, "perhaps the most fundamental ethical concept in either the Old or the New Testament is that of the will of God," adding, "Paul can encapsulate New Testament ethics in one stroke, saying, 'Be not foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is'" (Eph. 5:17).<sup>233</sup> This begs the question, "Where do we find the will of God?" if this is of such vital concern to the Christian. It is Bahnsen's reply to this important question that will occupy our attention.

The "will of God," according to Bahnsen, must be discovered in the Old Testament. The New Testament, he observes, "offers little by way of an explicit answer to such a question." Therefore, he concludes, it is the Old Testament that is the "unchallengeable norm for Christian conduct."<sup>234</sup> Here are his convictions.

Indeed, we are to aim to stand perfect, fully assured in all the will of God (Col. 4:12). Well, where do we learn, understand, and become assured of God's will? The New Testament offers little by way of an explicit answer to such a question. We learn that the will of God stands over against the lusts of men (1 Pet. 4:2), and in a very few cases we are told what the will of God specifically requires (e.g., abstaining from fornication and giving thanks in all things, 1 Thess. 4:3; 5:18). However, there is no detailed discussion of the requirements of God's will, and concrete guidance in God's will as such is not systematically explored. Why not? Especially since the will of God is such a crucial ethical theme, we might have expected differently. The answer lies in recognizing that the common conviction of the inspired New Testament writers is that the will of God has been given a specific and sufficient explication in the Old Testament already. It is simply assumed that one can speak of "the will of God" without explanation because it is obvious that God's will traces back to the revelation of his will in the law previously committed to scripture.<sup>235</sup>

This telling explanation cuts to the core of Bahnsen's ethical perspective: the believer's primary norm for behavior is not Christ's commandments, but the details of the Mosaic economy. Bahnsen believes that "every attempt to reject the [Old Testament] law of God in the New Testament era meets with embarrassment before the text of the New Testament itself."<sup>236</sup> However, every attempt to reference the believer's rule of life to the details of the Mosaic era is, in fact, *rejected* by New Testament teaching. Here, then, are some reasons why Bahnsen's untenable position is so retrogressive.

### *1. Bahnsen perpetuates details of an economy designated as "beggarly elements" in the New Testament (Gal. 4:9-10).*

Neither Chafer nor Bahnsen recognize the Mosaic era for what it really was. Chafer expects the Mosaic age to be resurrected in an earthly "kingdom age" following the "age of grace." Bahnsen believes that the Mosaic law-code is to remain in force during the present church age. Martyn Lloyd-Jones' comments on Romans 5:20 are pertinent, incisive and significant:

The very word "added alongside," that Paul uses here, tells us that the Law, in and of itself, is not something that is of fundamental importance to us. It is something additional, it is something that has come in for the time being, for a particular function. It is not fundamental in the sense that sin and salvation are fundamental; it is something that enters, an addition, something that "comes in alongside of" . . . It has a function, but it is not vital in the matter of salvation. . . . What then is the function of the Law according to the Apostle? It has been brought in alongside in order that the offense, the sins, might abound.<sup>237</sup>

The New Testament portrayal of the Mosaic age does not support either Chafer's or Bahnsen's view. Instead, it clearly depicts the former age of Israel as an interlude interposed between the preceding and more abiding Abrahamic faith-covenant and the arrival of its promised "seed," who is Christ (Gal. 3:16-25). Although it certainly had an organic relationship to the Abrahamic covenant and was therefore "not against the promises of God" (Gal. 3:21), Paul described the Mosaic law-covenant, in terms of legal administration, as "not of faith, but 'the man that does them shall live in them'" (Gal. 3:12). This is a New Testament fact that cannot be adequately acknowledged in Covenant Theology, for in order to maintain their system, they must view the Mosaic age as another administration of the "one Covenant of Grace."

The period of Mosaic law, "added" to the Abrahamic covenant, is described as an age of immaturity (Gal. 3:24; 4:2-3). When "faith came" in Christ, a new age of maturity and sonship was ushered in (Gal. 4:4-7). Paul saw any attempt to impose the old economy as the rule of life as a forfeiture of the liberty Christ had purchased with his precious blood (Gal. 5:1-4). To assert as Bahnsen does that the "perfection" of Christian (and societal) behavior is to be found in the "exhaustive detail" of a *paidagogos*,<sup>238</sup> therefore, can only be described as retrogressive. Paul saw the details of the Mosaic period as useful only in a past age of childhood. Bahnsen wants to continue to apply those childhood rules to adult sons in an age of grace and spiritual maturity.

If it can be shown that *any* of the mandatory laws of the old age are no longer a standard of judgment under the New Covenant, then Bahnsen's unequivocal endorsement of the "abiding validity of the law in detail" is shown to be invalid. In fact, nothing could be clearer in the New Testament than the fact that the dietary distinctions of "clean and unclean" no longer obtain in the new age (Rom. 14:2,14; 1 Tim. 4:3-5; Acts 10:10-16; 15:28-29; Mark 7:19). These dietary laws were temporary, and have been set aside with the establishment of a better covenant. The New Testament embarrasses anyone who seeks to reference the believer to the details of Old Covenant case-law.

## ***2. Bahnsen perpetuates an economy that has been terminated.***

The New Testament also speaks with clarity regarding the starting and ending points of the Mosaic age (Gal. 3:17, 19; Heb. 8:7, 13; 10:9; Matt. 27:51). Yet Bahnsen sees the totality of "the commandments of God's law in the Old Testament" as a "sufficient and valid standard of God's will."

This is an appropriate point to discuss a crucial Biblical distinction. Fully understood, this distinction would dispel a great deal of confusion. The Mosaic covenant, as a legally valid administration in history, had a beginning and an end, as the above passages indicate. However, the inspired *documents* that emerged in the historical unfolding of that defunct economy abide in the Messianic age. To assert, therefore, that the Mosaic *covenant* has been terminated does not mean that its *documents* are irrelevant in the present church age. This critical distinction forces us to face the question: "How then, is the abiding literature of the Old Testament to be used by the church?"

The New Testament approach to the Old Testament is Christ-centered, not law-centered. In the post-resurrection use of the Old Testament by Christ and the post-Pentecost use by the apostles, these documents were consistently used to confront men with "the things concerning" Jesus the Messiah (Luke 24:27, 44; Acts 17:2-3; 26:22-23). This perspective provides a revealed priority in approaching the Old Testament. And it certainly calls into question Bahnsen's confident assertion that the New Testament views the Old Testament as a detailed law-code that is still binding on Christians. Viewing the Old Testament in the new age as an enduring and detailed law-code is precisely what the New Testament does not do. Was it not a preoccupation with Moses that so blinded the punctilious Scribes and Pharisees that they could not recognize the Messiah when he stood right in front of them (Matt. 12:2; Luke 7:29-30; 2 Cor. 3:14-15).

The book of Galatians illustrates why the New Testament does not reference the believer to the details of this terminated legal administration. It is because the very foundation of that abolished covenant is "not of faith" (Gal. 3:12). To make any one of its specific codes binding - even something that is "nothing" such as circumcision - is to become a debtor to fulfill all of the rest of its more than six hundred details (Gal. 5:1-4). There is no other way to put it: the New Testament views any attempt to impose the details of a former era of childhood upon the church as a threat to the truth as it is in Christ (Gal. 4:11, 21).

Bahnsen's effort to impose Israel's detailed national law-code on the church is totally inappropriate to the spiritual nature of the gospel era (Rom. 14:17). It is to erroneously encumber the new spiritual and eternal kingdom of Christ with the administrative law-code of a former earthly and temporal nation. The legal stipulations in force during the Israelite theocracy related specifically to the separation of a geographically defined nation from all other nations. These rules were typical and temporary in nature, and were ultimately replaced by the spiritual realities introduced with the coming of Christ (Heb. 8:5; 9:8; Col. 2:17). All temporal worship dimensions under the Old Covenant, therefore, such as "Jerusalem is the place where men ought to worship" (John 4:20), no longer obtain. They have been superseded by the spiritual worship Christ referred to when he explained, "the hour comes when you shall neither in the mountain, nor yet at Jerusalem, worship the Father" (John 14:21). In the New Testament, God's people (the church) are no longer distinguished geographically (Israel vs. the nations), but as a spiritual entity separated unto God and called out from an evil world system (1 John 2:15-17). In the old theocratic era it was appropriate to defend the honor of God with the sword. In the new spiritual era, God's kingdom is not to be conceived of in terms of militaristic conquest or magisterial

authority, as Jesus' words to Peter and Pilate clearly reveal:

*Put your sword back in its place . . . for all who draw the sword will die by the sword . . . my kingdom is not of this world. If it were, my servants would fight to prevent my arrest by the Jews. But now my kingdom is from another place* (Matt. 26: 52-53; John 18:36).

### *3. Bahnsen imposes an economy on people for whom it was never intended*

Bahnsen uses Christ's words, "if you would enter into life, keep the commandments" (Matt. 19:16-17) to prove that what is "ethically good" must be referenced "to the Old Testament law." This is a fatal mistake. Both the Old and New Testaments confirm that the Old Covenant was made *specifically* with Israel. It is totally inappropriate, therefore, to impose the legal principle of an exclusive and abrogated Mosaic Covenant - "do this and live" (Luke 10:28) - upon all men in general, and upon Christians in particular.

Who knew more about Mosaic law than Paul? And yet, he was willing to "become all things to all men so that by all possible means [he] might save some (1 Cor. 9:22). When among the Gentiles, therefore, he became as one "without law" (*anomos*) - a flexibility that was impossible for anyone still bound by Old Covenant rules and regulation. It was an evangelistic freedom based on his own sense of deliverance from the rigors of Mosaic law. And yet, he did not regard himself as "lawless," but "in-law to Christ" (*ennomos Chrisou*) (1 Cor. 9:21). As F. F. Bruce astutely observes,

Paul's way was not to impose the Mosaic law on them [Gentiles], but to emphasize the law of Christ - to insist that the gospel which had brought them salvation had ethical implications and to spell out in detail what those implications were.<sup>239</sup>

It is not the Old Covenant laws that determine what is "ethically good," therefore, but rather the manifestation of God's love in and through his Son. It is ethically good for us to love one another because Christ first loved us (John 13:24-25). It is ethically good for us to please our neighbors because Christ "pleased not himself" (Rom. 15:2-3). It is ethically good for us not to be self-centered because Christ made himself of no reputation and gave his life a ransom for many (Phil. 2:3-7). It is ethically good for us to avoid illicit sexual relations because he purchased our bodies with his own blood (1 Cor. 6:18-20). And it is ethically good for us to freely give of our material goods to those in need because Christ became poor that we might become rich (2 Cor. 8:9). There is nothing in the law that comes close to defining that which is "ethically good" compared to that which is exemplified in the person and work of Jesus Christ! Again, to refer the believer to the stifling details of a terminated code rather than to the new and living way of grace and truth in Christ (John 1:14-18; Heb. 10:20), is manifestly retrogressive.

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#### Footnotes:

230. Chafer, p. 208.

231. Greg Bahnsen, *Theonomy in Christian Ethics*, Nutley, NJ: Craig Press, 1975, pp. 34-35, 44.

232. Greg. Bahnsen, *Biblical Ethics*, 2:9, September, 1979.

233. Bahnsen, p. 10.

234. Bahnsen, p. 1.

235. 236. Bahnsen, p. 1.

237. D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Romans: An Exposition of Chapter Five*, London: Banner of Truth, 1971, pp. 284-285.

238. Gal. 3:24; not a teacher, but an attendant appointed by the parents to watch over a child to see that he got to school and did his lessons.

239. F.F. Bruce, "The Grace of God and the Law of Christ," *God and the Good*, Lewis Smedes, ed., Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1975, p. 29.

### *Traditional Reformed Ethics: Carl F. H. Henry*

Carl Henry's massive *Christian Personal Ethics* reflects a traditional approach to conduct. At points he recognizes some important principles, but his firm commitment to Covenant Theology often seems to obscure his insight into the implications of redemptive history.

He discusses "Love, The Divine Imperative in Personal Relations,"<sup>240</sup> but fails to reference that love to the redemptive work of Christ. He does recognize that the relationship of Christ's death to a life of virtue is "not adequately worked out in many treatises on Christian ethics."<sup>241</sup> And yet his own treatment concludes that while Christ saves us, he has little to say concerning our ethics.

Henry does not find a comprehensive ethic in the Sermon on the Mount, but rather "an individualistic articulation of ethics."<sup>242</sup> His view of Christian obedience ends up with two ethics, public and private. Christ's Sermon on the Mount, therefore, relates "to the person at my side, and not with the larger question of my duty to social groups in the order of economics and politics, or to humanity as a whole."<sup>243</sup> It is a "man-to-man" ethic for private life only. The implication is that privately a Christian should turn his cheek, but publicly he can presumably blow others to pieces.

This two-fold ethic is difficult to apply. When do "private" actions end and "public" actions begin? In those existential situations where decisions must be made hurriedly, how does one determine what is a "private" action which demands one course, or a "public" action that demands another course? As Norman Geisler points out, "a double standard ethic - one for the private citizen and another for the public official - is foreign to the teaching of the New Testament."<sup>244</sup> Jesus gives one ethic which can be applied to all of our life-situations.

The problem inherent in such a position is highlighted in some comments and questions put to Carl Henry by Jim Wallis:

The issue is how we view Christ: whether Jesus Christ is axiomatic for us on a personal, political, and economic level. My basic discomfort with the social ethics of mainline Christendom is the failure to come to terms with the incarnation of God in Christ. Jesus Christ, as I understand the New Testament, is not only the means of my atonement, but the pattern for my life. Is Jesus Christ politically axiomatic for the believing community?<sup>245</sup>

Henry's reply reveals that he feels compelled to compromise the centrality of Christ in Christian ethics:

While I agree with you wholly that Jesus is the example of incarnate sonship, I don't think you can infer from the lifestyle of Jesus all the criteria that should govern Christian living in the world.<sup>246</sup>

Later in the interview, Wallis summarizes some key issues:

What concerns me is how this has worked out historically. What has happened in the doing of mainstream social ethics is that the ethics no longer derive from God in Christ but derive from the state or from notions of civil government. Reinhold Niebuhr, for instance, says that the nonresistant, nonviolent Jesus, while most faithful to the historical Christ, is just not adequate for determining public ethics . . . I can understand how Reinhold Niebuhr does that because of his weak Christology, but I'm alarmed when his is the major text at evangelical colleges teaching political science . . . Is Jesus the norm for us, or isn't He?<sup>247</sup>

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#### Footnotes:

240. Carl F.H. Henry, *Christian Personal Ethics*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1957, pp. 219ff.

241. Henry, p. 374.

242. Henry, p. 324.

243. Henry, p. 324.

244. Norman Geisler, *Ethics: Alternatives and Issues*, Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1971, p. 167.

245. Jim Wallis, "Carl Henry on Evangelical Identity," *Sojourners*, April 1976, p. 23.

246. Wallis, p. 23.

247. Wallis, p. 25.

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## *A Neo-Evangelical Perspective: Daniel Fuller*

In his *Gospel and Law: Contrast or Continuum?* Daniel Fuller seeks to answer the law-gospel debate in the history of theology by suggesting that "the antithesis [of law and gospel] is only apparent and not real," and that both the Old and New Covenants are conditional.<sup>248</sup> There are useful insights in his book, but Fuller leaves crucial questions unanswered and arrives at some conclusions that do considerable injustice to the clear teaching of Scripture.

Fuller has "problems" with the approach to law and gospel in both Dispensationalism and Covenant Theology. Covenant Theology has historically held that law and gospel are distinct and that even the law is an administration of an alleged over-arching "covenant of grace."<sup>249</sup> In reality, however, a kind of fusion of law and grace has dominated Covenant thought. Dispensationalism, on the other hand, has traditionally maintained the sharpest distinction between law and grace. From Fuller's perspective, however, both Dispensationalism and Covenant Theology teach that "gracious revelations always appear alongside legal ones," an observation that has led him to conclude, "there is no longer any substantive difference between the two on the subject of law and gospel."<sup>250</sup> Dispensationalist's "more recent explanations," Fuller observes, "entangle them in covenant theology's problems."<sup>251</sup> He also notes that Covenant Theology has criticized Dispensationalism for finding "merit" in the Mosaic era, yet teaching that Adam would have merited blessing had he not fallen from righteousness under the "covenant of works."<sup>252</sup>

Fuller criticizes both Dispensationalism and Covenant Theology for teaching that law is conditional and grace is unconditional. He concludes that both law and gospel are conditional. "God's forgiveness is conditional not only on Christ's dying for our sins, but also on our repentance."<sup>253</sup> For Fuller, therefore, "The enjoyment of grace [is] dependent on faith and good works."<sup>254</sup> He concludes that in the final analysis, "all biblical promises (except those in the Noahic and Davidic covenants) are conditional."<sup>255</sup>

Fuller separates God's grace from its actualization when he alleges that mercy cannot be obtained unless sinners first fulfill certain "conditions," even though the New Testament teaches that God himself grants the necessary means to salvation, faith and repentance (Eph. 2:8-9; 2 Tim. 2:25). Fuller rejects the idea that faith is described as a gift from God. He asserts that such teaching "clashes with the fact that the pronoun 'this' [in Eph. 2:8-9] is neuter, whereas the preceding 'faith' is feminine in the Greek."<sup>256</sup> But Robert Countess has shown exegetically in a paper delivered to the Evangelical Theological Society that "salvation with all its component parts is of God; even the faith with which a man subjectively appropriates the Gospel is bestowed by God."<sup>257</sup> It remains for Fuller to explain, therefore, how men fulfill these "conditions." Do they (1) meet them in their own "free will," or, (2) does God grant them as a gift?

Even the Abrahamic Covenant is "conditional" in Fuller's view.<sup>258</sup> But the story of the "cutting" of this covenant in Genesis 15 indicates that it was God alone who passed through the pieces of meat. It was therefore a covenant based on God's unilateral promise - not on any "conditions" imposed on Abraham. Meredith Kline has amply demonstrated that there are two kinds of covenants in the Ancient Near East and in Scripture. The Abrahamic covenant is promissory, while the Mosaic covenant is bilateral.<sup>259</sup> This does not mean that there are no responsibilities placed on those in the covenant, but it does mean that God is committed to the success of the covenant arrangement.

Fuller misses the fact that there was indeed a legal foundation to the Mosaic covenant: "do this and live." It was a covenant that demanded absolute, unqualified obedience. Failure to walk in all of it would bring the curses of the covenant. This legal arrangement was in force until the Seed came (Gal. 3:17). Jesus was born "under law," took the curse due to us upon himself to release us from death, and fulfilled all of its righteous requirements to give us eternal life. The law said, "obey fully in order to be blessed" - a "condition" no sinner could meet (Gal. 3:11). The gospel says, "Jesus is the righteous one. *Because* you have already been blessed in him, obey his commands."

In Romans 10:5-8 and Galatians 3:10-12 Paul is not dealing with the law itself, according to Fuller, but with twisted interpretations advanced by the Pharisees and Judaizers.<sup>260</sup> There were indeed perversions of the law by false teachers. In his book, however, Fuller fails to make an important distinction. The word "law" in the New Testament can refer to either the Mosaic code or to what we would call the Old Testament. The term "law," when referring to the legal contract delivered at Sinai is narrow and specific. In this sense it demands "do this and live" and is described by New Testament writers as "not of faith." But "law" as Old Testament literature is filled with truth about the person and work of Christ, faith, and the gospel (Rom. 1:2; 3:21). In this broader sense - by far the most frequent usage in the New Testament - "law" refers to a corpus of truth that ultimately taught that salvation was based on the unilateral promise to Abraham, "the just shall live by faith." Fuller, in fact, admits that if the word

"law" in Galatians 3:18 refers to "revelatory law," and not to a "legalistic frame of mind . . . then the crucial thesis of [his] book would be invalid."<sup>261</sup>

Interestingly, Fuller does see that the problems at Galatia had to do with sanctification.<sup>262</sup> "The Galatians had commenced the Christian life properly; the whole issue had to do with sanctification, as to how one progresses in the Christian life."<sup>263</sup> Fuller rightly observes that "to the extent that one uses the law - understood as what a workman does for an employer - to aid in sanctification he is submitting to that which is contrary to faith."<sup>264</sup> Thus,

Paul would be as angry with modern dispensationalism (and also covenant theology) as he was with the Galatian churches, who were at fault for wanting to add works to their faith . . . Calvin could never predicate *sola fide* to sanctification, as well as to justification, and thus he is guilty of the Galatian heresy.<sup>265</sup>

The most significant failing in Fuller's perspective is his failure to properly differentiate the Mosaic and New Covenants. Since he posits that all covenants are conditional (except the Noahic and Davidic), he cannot do justice to the superiority of the New Covenant. To say "the law and the gospel are one and the same"<sup>266</sup> contradicts many Scriptures. Yet, Fuller dogmatically asserts that,

the only difference between the New Covenant and the old Mosaic covenant which it replaces is that people under the New Covenant are given a new heart which has the inclination . . . to want to keep God's law.<sup>267</sup>

But there are other differences Fuller overlooks. First, God states that Israel "broke" the Mosaic covenant (Jer. 31:32). But the action of God in giving a new heart ensures that the New Covenant will not be broken. This certainly raises questions about the "conditionality" Fuller imputes to the New Covenant. Second, the Old Covenant was incapable of effecting righteousness. But in the New Covenant God effects a reign of righteousness "written . . . not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts" (2 Cor. 3:3). Third, the Old Covenant was national and required only birth for membership. Personal faith was not a requirement in order to be part of the covenant community. But in the New Covenant personal knowledge of God is the basis for covenant participation. Fourth, the Old Covenant could not make anyone perfect, and there was continual remembrance of sins. The New Covenant takes away sin and effects an eternal reconciliation with God.

What the law could not do, God did in the New Covenant. All of this seriously challenges Fuller's thesis that the New Covenant depends on people fulfilling conditions. The New Covenant emphasizes God's effectual initiative.

The New Testament answer to Fuller's dilemma is to couch the categories of law and grace in redemptive history, not in subjective considerations. John 1:17, for instance, clearly teaches a significant difference in law and grace. There was an administration of law that Israel was indeed "under." But in the Gospel age God's people are under an administration of grace and truth. The false teachers in Galatia were asking the believers to go back "under the law." Paul answers them by reviewing redemptive history, proving that salvation is based on the promise to Abraham, not on the temporary "do this and live" code added 430 years later. The Mosaic law-covenant is simply not the "same" as the Abrahamic promise-covenant. To go back under the "beggarly elements" of the Mosaic covenant is a fatal blow to the gospel (Gal. 4:8-10).

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Footnotes:

248. Daniel Fuller, *Gospel and Law: Contrast or Continuum?*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1980, pp. 63, 103, 105.

249. Fuller, pp. 17, 20.

250. Fuller, p. 45, 49.

251. Fuller, p. 46.

252. Fuller, p. 34.

253. Fuller, p. 62.

254. Fuller, p. 63.



255. Fuller, p. 121, p. 109.

256. Fuller, pp. x, 109.

257. Robert Countess, "Thank God for the Genitive!," *Bulletin of the Evangelical Theological Society*, XXI:2, Sp, 1968, p. 121.

258. Fuller, pp. 137ff.

259. Meredith Kline, "Law Covenant," *Westminster Theological Journal*, XXVII:1, 1964, pp. 1-20.

260. Fuller, pp. 70, 80, 98.

261. Fuller, pp. 199-200.

262. Fuller, p. 114.

263. Fuller, p. 115.

264. Fuller, p. 117.

265. Fuller, pp. 116, 117.

266. Fuller, p. 103.

267. Fuller, pp. 143-144.

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*This is My Beloved Son, Hear Him.* Jon Zens. Searching Together. Summer-Winter 1997, Vol. 25:1,2,3. Pages 64-67.

## *A Changed Perspective: Robert D. Brinsmead*

Robert Brinsmead was raised as a Seventh Day Adventist. In the late 1950s he began to see glimpses of the gospel. By 1962, though still an Adventist, he was barred from fellowship under pressure from the Queensland Conference of Adventists. In 1970 he began to study the Reformation and to embrace its view of justification by faith. He also moved from an Adventist to a Reformation view of the law - views that are not really very far apart. His first edition of *Present Truth* (later *Verdict*) appeared in 1972 and brought his understanding of both justification and the law to bear on various theological issues.

A 1979 issue of *Verdict* reflects his view of Old Covenant law before he gave the matter more thought in light of the gospel. The November 1979 issue dealt with "Lutherans in Crisis over Justification by Faith." His section on the "third use of the law" is relevant here. Brinsmead had become sensitive to the importance of redemptive history, but was still trying to function within the Reformed perspective of law. He wrote,

The prophets had also spoken of a new exodus under a new Moses at the end of the age . . . The book of John presents Jesus as that new Moses of the new exodus. Just as the first Exodus gave birth to the nation of Israel, so the new exodus at Calvary would give birth to the new Israel.<sup>268</sup>

In his "third use" section, Brinsmead asks, "Is [the law] a norm of Christian conduct and a rule of life?"<sup>269</sup> He also has some questions for those who may have problems with this "third use" of the law - questions, however that assume the validity of certain presuppositions in need of re-examination. By facing his questions, we can isolate several areas in need of Biblical light.

1. If the law of God is not seriously accepted as his will for man's life (third use), are not all the teeth removed from the law's accusatory function (second use)? . . . Must not a person hear the law as a rule of life before he is accused of sin?<sup>270</sup>

These questions assume that law must be preached before gospel. But where in John 16:8-11 does Christ say that the Spirit will use the law to bring men to Christ? Rather, as Leon Morris observes,

it should not be overlooked that all three aspects of the work of the Holy Spirit dealt with in these verses are interpreted Christologically. Sin, righteousness and judgment are all to be understood because of the way they relate to Christ.<sup>271</sup>

Again, in the preaching found in Acts, where was the law ever preached as the rule of life in order to bring conviction (Acts 2:37)? As F.F. Bruce points out, "there is no evidence that Paul ever used the law in this way."<sup>272</sup> Where in Scripture is it revealed that the Holy Spirit must use the "teeth" of the law to accuse of sin? Is not the many-sided demand which is connected with coming to Christ (i.e., Luke 14:25-33), and the teaching of Christ (Matt. 5-7) quite convicting? James Buchanan rightfully states:

It may be safely affirmed that it is by the Spirit's witness to Christ that he is first brought to see the magnitude of his guilt . . . Christ's exaltation . . . is sufficient . . . to carry home conviction of sin . . . Hence we believe that the Gospel of Christ, and especially the doctrine of the cross of Christ, is the most powerful instrument for impressing the conscience of a sinner . . . And this is because the Gospel, and especially the doctrine of the cross, contains in it the spirit and essence of the law.<sup>273</sup>

We must re-orient our thinking in light of a dogmatism which leaves the impression that the law is the only means of conviction. Obviously when the law comes to sinners, it plays an accusatory role. But even in this, as Buchanan indicates, the gospel has a priority.

2. If we say that the gospel rather than the law informs a Christian how he ought to live, have we not turned the gospel into a new law? Is this not failing to maintain the proper distinction between the law and the gospel?<sup>274</sup>

The traditional law/gospel distinction is essentially oblivious to the advance of redemptive history. The new exodus *does* bring a new law code - not Ten Commandments, however, but one comprehensive "New Commandment" that is in total harmony with all that was written in the Law and the Prophets (Matt. 7:12; 22:40). If we are serious about redemptive history - as Brinsmead is - we must boldly assert that the gospel is completely sufficient to inform a Christian how to live. No area of our new life "in Christ" is untouched by the implications of "as I have loved you." Brinsmead acknowledges that Jesus is a new Moses. Should we not also acknowledge that he is therefore our new Lawgiver?

3. If we say that the Holy Spirit guides the Christian apart from using the law, are we not rejecting the old and well-established Lutheran principle of "the means of grace"? . . . And does not the idea of living without an objective rule of life expose us to all types

The invalid assumption behind these questions is that the only conceivable "objective standard" is the Decalogue. The New Testament has its own "canon" (rule) for Christian ethics. In the "new Israel" the old codes no longer apply. What counts is the "new creation" where love is the all-encompassing standard of conduct (Gal. 6:15-16). This is a very "objective standard," and the only true starting point for gospel obedience. The Holy Spirit does not guide believers by Moses, but "according to Christ" (Rom. 15:5; Phil. 2:5; Eph. 4:20-21). Through the gospel, they are led from "faith to faith," from "glory to glory," and receive "grace upon grace" (Rom. 1:17; 2 Cor. 3:18; John 1:16). It is not that the gospel renders the law worthless, but that in the redemptive-historical unfolding of God's purpose in Christ, the law has become the servant of the gospel - *not vice-versa!*

4. If Lutherans persist in relaxing the moral imperative, will not the gospel of justification by faith cease to be urgent and eventually fail to be relevant altogether?276

Again, the false assumption is that there is no "moral imperative" outside the Decalogue. There simply is no more persuasive moral imperative than that which issues from the redemptive event at Calvary (John 13:34-35; 15:12-13; 1 John 4:9-11). If we are not moved to change our way of life in response to the cross, all the commandments in the world will not produce holiness in us. If the love of Christ does not compel us, nothing will (2 Cor. 5:14). As Thielicke so well put it, "If I must be commanded by the law, this is a sign that I am not yet 'free' . . . that I do not yet have the spontaneity of the new existence."<sup>277</sup> The gospel has moral imperatives, but they are addressed to a people freed by the Spirit to walk in righteousness, not grudgingly, but from the heart (Rom. 6:17-18). Christ's commands are obeyed willingly because God "first loved us" (1 John 4:19). The law demands but cannot empower. The gospel compels *and* enables, for "God has poured out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom he has given us" (Rom. 5:5). We serve God "in the new way of the Spirit, and not in the old way of the written code" (Rom. 7:6), "for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life" (2 Cor. 3:6).

### *Changed Perspective*

By 1980 Brinsmead began to reason that if the gospel was central, why should it take a back seat to the law in the area of ethics?278 His continuing studies brought increasing conviction that the gospel brings both salvation and ethics. The fruit of this study was first published in *Verdict* as "Jesus and the Law." His "Editorial Introduction" summarizes his change in perspective:

Our last two issues of *Verdict* ("Sabbatarianism Re-Examined" and "Jesus and the Sabbath") raised the entire question of the place of law in the New Testament. Is the law abolished or established by Jesus Christ? . . . How should living in the new eschatological age of the Spirit affect ethics? Is not much that appears to be Christian ethics only a form of Christian Judaism or churchly Pharisaism?

About three years ago *Verdict* came to a new appreciation of the historical-redemptive framework of the Bible. (The writings of G. Ernest Wright, Oscar Cullmann, Wolfhart Pannenberg and George Eldon Ladd were among those which spurred a new appreciation for the theme of redemptive history.)

Before this, we had viewed theology in a more classical or systematic tradition. In this framework, revelation is regarded more as abstract propositional information which has to be gathered and arranged in an ordered system. Thus, in classical Calvinism the law is treated primarily as a static code of life delivered from heaven for all time to come. Such a "flat Bible" approach does not sufficiently allow for the dynamic interrelation of ethics and the flow of redemptive history.

It has taken us about three years to explore the implications of the historical-redemptive approach for Christian ethics. This issue of *Verdict* represents a crystallization of our thought in these areas . . .

From the editor's personal perspective, the conclusions presented in this issue of *Verdict* represent as radical a theological breakthrough as that, which launched this journal ten years ago.<sup>279</sup>

The central thrust of Brinsmead's change in outlook can be seen in the following representative remarks from "Jesus and the Law."

All that the law was to Judaism, Christ was to the New Testament community. The law was the center of Judaism. The rabbis said that God spent the first three hours of every day studying the Torah. But Christ was the center of the apostolic faith . . .

Whereas Judaism made the law their Christ, the New Testament community made Christ their law. All that the Ten Commandments and the Sabbath were to Judaism, Christ himself became to apostolic faith . . .

Thus, ample textual and typological evidence demonstrates the truth of this one simple thesis: Jesus Christ replaces the Torah. This is how the law is at once abolished and established. It is abolished because Christ becomes the norm and the rule of life for the believer. It is established because the believer stands under the law of God as revealed in the Christ event . . .

We say again that the New Testament does not make its appeal for proper behavior on the basis of Old Testament rules. It makes its appeal on the basis of the superior revelation of the will of God which has come in Jesus Christ. In the New Testament, Christ and his gospel are the standard by which all behavior is measured.

The idea that Christ sends us back to the law of Moses for our rule of life has a long and hallowed tradition. But it needs to be challenged because it rests on tradition and not on any solid New Testament evidence . . .

Just as the law of Moses contained the moral imperatives which flow out of the Exodus-Sinai event, so the law of Christ embodies the moral imperatives which flow out of the death-resurrection event . . .

A New Covenant must have a new law. The command to love is not new, for Moses also commands us to love our neighbor. What is new in Christ's commandment is the command to love "as I have loved you." Love is given a new historical reference point. It is love defined by the cross of Christ. Moses could not command this kind of love, and therefore, his law is totally inadequate now that the new (and final) manifestation of love has been given in the Christ event . . .

Puritan-Reformed theology goes to the Christ event for grace but returns to Moses for ethics. It says that Christ must structure our faith but Moses must structure our ethics. It sunderes the dynamic relationship between the historical-redemptive event and the ethic which flows from it. In the classical tradition of Reformed theology the Ten Commandments are said to be the rule of life for the New Testament believer. But the Ten Commandments are the law of Moses or "the words of the [Mosaic] covenant" (Exod. 34:28; Deut. 4:13). Because they flow out of the redemptive history of the Exodus, they are not adequate to express the nature of new-covenant life.<sup>280</sup>

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Footnotes:

268. Robert D. Brinsmead, "Lutherans in Crisis over Justification by Faith," *Verdict*, November 1979, p. 21.

269. Brinsmead, p. 26.

270. Brinsmead, p. 28.

271. Leon Morris, *A Commentary on John's Gospel*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1978, p. 699.

272. F.F. Bruce, p. 192.

273. James Buchanan, *The Doctrine of the Holy Spirit*, London: Banner of Truth, 1964, p. 64.

274. Brinsmead, p. 28.

275. Brinsmead, p. 28.

276. Brinsmead, p. 28.

277. Thieliicke, p. 56.

278. I met Mr. Brinsmead in August 1979, asked him to consider the centrality of Christ in Christian obedience, and gave him some materials to read. In January 1980, Brinsmead called me and indicated that these redemptive-historical points were worthy of consideration and further study.

279. Robert D. Brinsmead, "Jesus and the Law," *Verdict*, October 1981, pp. 2-3.

280. Brinsmead, pp. 14, 15, 18, 19, 20.

## IX. Practical Implications of Christ as Our Ethical Starting Point

### *The General Pattern of New Testament Ethics*

The redemptive event / moral demand ("as I have loved you / love one another") pattern introduced in John 13:34 and 15:12-13 is further unfolded in the Epistles where we learn that the "gospel not only provides the basis of the Christian's moral position, but also defines that position."<sup>281</sup> We will now turn our attention to some of the specific ethics required by the gospel.

### *Marriage*

*Wives, submit to your husbands as to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church, his body, of which he is the Savior. Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit to their husbands in everything. Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her . . . (Eph. 5:22-25).*

The general ethical principle that believers must live in submission to one another is established in the preceding verse (5:21). Then Paul focuses in on a wife's responsibility to submit to her husband and a husband's responsibility to love his wife. Notice how Paul uses the indicative / imperative principle to press for obedience. He simply reminds them of the broader relationship between Christ and the church - of Christ's headship over the church, his sacrificial love on behalf of the church, and of the consequent willing submission to Christ by the church. In particular, the loving death of Christ is singled out as a motivating example. Because of his love for the church, Christ "gave himself up for her . . ." (v. 25). Paul apparently believed that "the mere mention of the similarity between the husband/wife and the dying Christ/church relationship is . . . sufficient to convince the readers as to the action they should take."<sup>282</sup>

### *Parents and Their Children*

*Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right. Fathers, do not exasperate your children; instead, bring them up in the training and instruction of the Lord (Eph. 6:1,4).*

The entire context surrounding these verses is Christ-centered. Paul uses such phrases as "in the Lord" (6:1), "instruction of the Lord" (6:4), "like slaves of Christ" (6:6) and, "as if you were serving the Lord" (6:7). Therefore, when Paul cites the fifth commandment of the Old Covenant (6:2-3), we must not isolate it from the union-with-Christ perspective that must now govern its applicability. Any reference to Old Testament commands must be contemplated in their relationship to Christ and the new age he has inaugurated.<sup>283</sup> The parent/child relationship commanded in Exodus 20:12 is an ethically sound principle to obey in any age, but the *authority* for expecting conformity is no longer Moses, but Christ. Obedience to parents and love for children is here detailed because it is an appropriate lifestyle for those in union with Christ,<sup>284</sup> not because it is a part of a supposedly "eternally abiding" Decalogue.

### *Christian Community*

*If you have any encouragement from being united with Christ, if any comfort from his love, if any fellowship with the Spirit, if any tenderness and compassion, then make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and purpose. Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves. Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others. Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus . . . [who] humbled himself and became obedient to death - even death on a cross (Phil. 2:1-5,8).*

Paul's purpose in this passage is to dissuade the brethren from doing anything from "selfish ambition or vain conceit." And where does he turn for an impetus to obedience? "Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus . . ." What more striking example is there than the humiliation Christ endured on behalf of his people? We should also observe how Paul carefully bases his teaching, not on an exodus / "do this and live" code, but on the cross / "as I have loved you" imperative. He was apparently convinced that if contemplating the mind and actions of Christ would not turn believers from "selfish ambition or vain conceit," nothing would.

*For even Christ did not please himself but, as it is written: "The insults of those who insult you have fallen on me" . . . May the God who gives endurance and encouragement give you a spirit of unity among yourselves as you follow Christ Jesus, so that with one heart and mouth you may glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. Accept one another, then, just as Christ accepted you, in*

*order to bring praise to God (Rom 15:3,5-7).*

In this context, Paul is dealing with dissension that had arisen among the brothers over such things as meat and drink. It is once again the example of Christ that he holds up to encourage them to strive instead over things which make for peace and edification (cf. Rom. 14:19). It is not discord, but rather unity that should be the hallmark of those who "follow Christ Jesus." To "accept one another" is the only possible response to Christ's reconciling work that brought Jews and Gentiles together in one body (Rom. 15:7-12).

*You, my brothers, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the sinful nature; rather, serve one another in love. The entire law is summed up in a single command: "Love your neighbor as yourself." If you keep on biting and devouring each other, watch out or you will be destroyed by each other . . . Carry each other's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ (Gal 5:13-15; 6:2).*

It is important to understand the backdrop to this passage. Paul's purpose in writing was to combat the influence of false teachers who were trying to bring the Galatians "under law." He reminds them that the gospel has called them to freedom, not bondage. It is his interesting and almost paradoxical use of the word "free" that needs careful attention. It is both a freedom *from* something - the law - and a freedom *to* something - loving service to others. In other words, though they have been set "free" from bondage to the Mosaic code, their liberty in Christ is not to be exploited for personal gratification. Instead, it must be channeled in loving works of service commensurate with the pattern of Christ's own sacrificial life and death. To "carry each other's burdens" is an ethic that renders the encoded law unnecessary and, more importantly, it will "fulfill the law of Christ." Such loving actions are what he later refers to as "the fruit of the Spirit" and concludes that "against such things there is no law" (Gal. 5:23).

#### *Dead to Sin - Alive in Christ*

*Since, then, you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things. For you died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God. When Christ, who is your life, appears, then you also will appear with him in glory. Put to death, therefore, whatever belongs to your earthly nature: sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires and greed, which is idolatry (Col. 3:1-5).*

The motivation for these purifying actions is not the threat of the law, but the believer's resurrection status with Christ. Any negative effort against sin must be motivated by a positive effort to fix our minds and hearts on "things above, not on earthly things." It is in contemplation of our union with Christ (Rom. 6:11-13; 8:12) that unrighteousness of any kind will be seen as totally inappropriate (Rom. 6:1-2). In Christ, we are dead to sin and alive unto God. We have been set free from our bondage to sin so that we may be free to serve righteousness.<sup>285</sup>

*Flee from sexual immorality. All other sins a man commits are outside his body, but he who sins sexually sins against his own body. Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own; you were bought at a price. Therefore honor God with your body (1 Cor 6:18-20).*

If there were ever a moral issue where Paul could have bombarded his readers with a barrage of Old Covenant regulations, it is certainly the subject of sexual immorality. But what is the basis of his exhortation? The price paid for their redemption! They are to keep themselves pure - again, not because of any threat of the law, but because their bodies have become the dwelling place of the Holy Spirit. If Jesus has purchased their bodies at the price of his own blood, how can they possibly continue to use those bodies for immoral purposes? Instead, they must "honor God" not with words only, but with their very bodies - bodies that no longer belong to them, but to their Lord.

#### *Financial Giving*

*But just as you excel in everything - in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in complete earnestness and in your love for us - see that you also excel in this grace of giving. I am not commanding you, but I want to test the sincerity of your love by comparing it with the earnestness of others. For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich (2 Cor 8:7-9).*

As in each of the preceding ethical issues, Paul once again points to the example of Christ. He reminds these believers that Christ willingly became poor that they might become rich. "The drawing out of the similarity between a given situation and that of the

dying Jesus is again thought to be sufficient incentive to act in the desired way."286 If the unselfish and unrestricted giving of Christ does not motivate them to freely give, nothing will.

Unfortunately, in the history of the church, Christian giving has been too often equated with the "tithe" - the propriety of which was also "confirmed and extended by the State."287 With their attending promises of material blessing for those who obey and punishment for those who do not, Old Testament passages on tithing have long provided convenient proof-texts for those who seek to pressure God's people into providing financial support for one supposedly righteous cause or another. R. J. Rushdoony, in keeping with his Old Covenant (Reconstructionist) orientation, has this to say about this alleged "duty":

Too few tithe to God. A tithe is a tax paid to the sovereign God: it is His due . . . [The tithe] is simply a debt and obligation . . . Men know that the state takes very seriously any tax evasion; can they imagine that God is any the less angry when men evade His due tax?288

Those who seek to make tithing binding on Christians do so on the basis of inconsistent arguments. They admit that tithing is never enjoined in the New Testament. And yet, they allege that the ten percent principle must still be observed because although it was an Old Covenant standard, it has not been specifically rescinded in the New Testament and must therefore be continued. The same kind of faulty reasoning forms the rationale for enforcing infant baptism and Sabbath-keeping: "The New Testament is obviously silent on these matters, but . . ."289 This is not an appropriate way to handle New Testament truth. The problems associated with the Reformed hermeneutic that dips into the Old Covenant for binding law will not go away until the New Testament is afforded its proper place as the definitive norm for Christian duty.

John Mitchell's article, "Tithing, Yes!"290 illustrates the utter inconsistency of those who advocate tithing. He confidently asserts that tithing "is really the key that unlocks our full enjoyment of God's bounty."291 But the futility of Mitchell's position is revealed in the concessions he makes when dealing with the New Testament data. On the one hand, he tries to link 1 Cor. 16:2 with tithing by saying: "Paul seems clearly to be assuming that his readers already know about regular proportionate giving - tithing in other words."292 But then he turns around and admits the following two points which effectively destroy the notion that tithing is still appropriate in the new age:

1. But Paul does not require any fixed percentage. It is to be proportioned in accord with the degree of prosperity God has given.
2. For the person on fixed income in this time of raging inflation, it is extra hard to be too dogmatic. Let him give as he is able, but he should feel no guilt if he cannot manage a full tithe - the Lord has not seen fit to prosper him as much as others.293

Here, Mitchell concedes that ten percent is not a binding law upon the Christian conscience and that since no fixed percentage is mandated in the New Testament, no guilt should be incurred if one is unable to tithe. In light of these remarks, his opening statement that tithing is "the key that unlocks our full enjoyment of God's bounty" is stripped of any validity whatsoever.

R. C. Sproul, certainly one of the most respected contemporary Reformed theologians, also tries to defend tithing with little success. His explicit admission that the New Testament is silent about tithing nullifies his assertion that the ten percent principle is the binding starting point for believers. How can he impose tithing as "law" when he openly concedes the following points?

Nowhere does the New Testament specifically require tithing for Christians . . . The New Testament does not give us a specific instruction about tithing . . . we have no specific guideline in the New Testament of percentages.294

Since the New Testament does not "require" tithing nor give any "specific guideline" for establishing a fixed percentage, is the only instruction on giving to be found in the Old Testament codes? Traditional teaching on giving would certainly make one think so. And yet, even those who would impose tithing on believers freely admit, "nowhere does the New Testament specifically require tithing for Christians."295 Why then, do they insist that a failure to tithe is "stealing from the kingdom of God"?296 It is because they have not given the New Testament its due when it comes to the subject of giving. The fact that tithing is not imposed in the New Testament is not an oversight, it is deliberate! Under the New Covenant, the motivation for giving is not law, but love - a love for Christ and his people that is not measured in terms of percentage points, but in terms of willing sacrifice (1 John 3:16; 4:19-20). Pieter Verhoef has, with great sensitivity, put his finger on the crux of this issue:

[Tithing] has lost its significance as a schema of giving under the New Covenant. In this respect we have both continuity and discontinuity. The continuity consists in the principle of giving, and the discontinuity [consists] in the obligation of giving in accordance to the schema of tithes.297

The New Testament may not require tithing, but it certainly expects Christians to be a caring, giving people. The pattern is not ambiguous. Giving is to be regular, proportionate and sacrificial. In many ways, the New Testament paradigm is much more demanding than the Old. Under Mosaic law, duty was discharged when the appropriate percentage had been offered. Under the terms of the New Covenant, everything belongs to Christ and stewardship extends to all of one's earnings and possessions, not just ten percent. It is the same with the Old Covenant principle of one day in seven set aside unto God. In the new order, every day belongs to the Lord and must be lived accordingly.

What is needed is a New commitment to sound hermeneutics, and an honest approach to new Testament revelation that does not drag with it remnants of an order that has long passed away. The Christian conscience must not be fettered with the old chains of tithing, Sabbaths, dietary restrictions, or any other Old Covenant encumbrance that would interfere with the blood-bought freedom to serve - motivated not by law, but by love. Do you need some kind of guidance as to how you should give? Let these words direct your mind and heart: "Each man should give what he has decided in his heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver (2 Cor. 9:7).

### *Special Days*

*Therefore do not let anyone judge you by what you eat or drink, or with regard to a religious festival, a New Moon celebration or a Sabbath day. These are a shadow of the things that were to come; the reality, however, is found in Christ (Col. 2:16-17).*

The keeping of days - and in particular the Sabbath, has always been a source of sometimes heated debate among professing believers. A proper understanding of this passage would go a long ways in resolving these conflicts. It is of special importance because it reveals a great deal about Paul's attitude toward the Mosaic economy, about the Christian life, and about the significance of Christ in the former age.

A heresy combining gnostic and ascetic philosophy with elements of Judaism had found its way into the church at Colosse.<sup>298</sup> One of the affects was confusion over the observance of "special days" and "Sabbaths" in particular. Adventist Samuele Bacchiocchi tries to disassociate the reference to "Sabbath" in this text from the official Sabbath of the Fourth Commandment because of this mixture of philosophy and religion.<sup>299</sup> It is totally unreasonable, however, to think that Paul would characterize anything other than the Mosaic Sabbath as a "shadow" (cf. Heb. 8:5) whose "reality" is to be found in Christ. That this reference is to Jewish institutions is further substantiated by comparing the language of Isaiah:

*Stop bringing meaningless offerings! Your incense is detestable to me. New Moons, Sabbaths and convocations - I cannot bear your evil assemblies. Your New Moon festivals and your appointed feasts my soul hates. They have become a burden to me; I am weary of bearing them (Isa. 1:13).*

Fairbairn summarizes his understanding of the text by saying:

Thus the distinctively sacred days appointed in the Mosaic law, together with its stated festivals, its distinctions of clean and unclean, and . . . other things of a like outward and ceremonial nature, are here placed in one category, and declared to be no longer binding on the consciences of believers, or needful to their Christian progress. And for this reason, that they were all only shadows of things to come, while the body is Christ . . . they were no more than imperfect and temporary prefigurations of the work He was to accomplish, and the benefits to be secured by it to those who believe; and as such, of course, they fell away when the great reality appeared.<sup>300</sup>

Fairbairn also quotes Dean Alford's opinion that the Sabbath day as a special observance is no longer significant under the New Covenant:

If the observance of the Sabbath had been, in any form, of lasting obligation on the Christian Church, it would have been quite impossible for the apostle to have spoken thus [in verse 17].<sup>301</sup>

Similarly, Bandstra observes:

Since the reality is here, the things of the shadow no longer constitute a norm for judgment. Evidently, Paul judges that the Old Testament regulations on food and feast days were not binding for the New Testament church. This was even true of the Sabbath commandment, and Paul's negative evaluation soon led to a new interpretation in the early church, namely, that Christians should



not observe one day of rest, but that every day should be set aside and dedicated to the Lord . . . Christ himself gives the reality of rest, of which the Sabbath was the shadow. Likewise, Paul speaks of Christ as the true food and drink present in some measure in the old dispensation . . . Paul's main point in Col. 2:17 is to show that since the reality of Christ is present, the things of the shadow no longer form the norm for judging Christians.<sup>302</sup>

Fairbairn, however, felt that even though the Sabbath was fulfilled in its "shadow" aspect, its abiding New Covenant counterpart is the Lord's Day.<sup>303</sup> He bases this on the alleged parallel of the shadow of circumcision being replaced by baptism in the new age.<sup>304</sup> But the New Testament never defines either the Lord's Day or Baptism as replacements for Old Covenant institutions. This is typical of the way the New Testament is handled by those who find it difficult to let go of Old Covenant establishments. It is to permit moot presuppositions to force untenable implications on the New Testament in the absence of any clear explicatory revelation. It raises a basic hermeneutical question. Is it ever appropriate to defend doctrines with such obvious Old Covenant roots in the face of New Testament silence? A case in point would be the following defense of infant baptism by Henry Verduin:

There is no direct command in the New Testament to baptize infants. This objection is usually offered with a great deal of gusto as if it settled the whole matter in one sentence. And it sounds very conclusive to a great many people. But the truth of the matter is that it is worth nothing for the settling of the matter at hand. For we who believe in Infant Baptism can match this true statement with an equally true statement, which runs thus: Neither is there a direct command in the New Testament to withhold baptism from infants . . . There is no direct command in the New Testament either way. Therefore the question of the validity of Infant Baptism has to be decided on indirect evidence.<sup>305</sup>

Then, on the basis of such alleged "indirect evidence," he enforces this "command" upon the Christian conscience with great vigor by saying:

Knowing the zeal of the Lord for the holiness of His covenant, we dare not withhold baptism from our little children . . . if God says they are in the kingdom we must say so too . . . The children of believers are said to be holy . . . [to withhold baptism] robs the little lambs of the fold their just rights. And it puts the conscience of parents to sleep. It causes them to think that they have done well by their children when they have done ill by them.<sup>306</sup>

This is a dangerous form of logical progression. A proposition that lacks any positive exegetical grounds is alleged to be "truth" simply because there is no opposing exegetical evidence to the contrary. Thus defended, the baseless "truth" is then imposed upon believers as "law." It is the way many of the Old Covenant practices have been enjoined on believers, effectively circumventing the New Covenant "canon" clearly stated in Gal. 6:15-16.

While the New Testament cannot be used to defend the perpetuity of any Old Covenant "law," it is not silent about the Sabbath, or on the subject of an appropriate use of baptism. As our text makes clear, the Old Covenant Sabbath was nothing more than a "shadow." Under the New Covenant, its reality is to be "found in Christ." Our union with Christ is not something to be celebrated one day in seven, but every day. Furthermore, just as Joshua led the faithful into the promised physical rest, so also will Jesus lead his people into the ultimate "Sabbath" that awaits them in the age to come (Heb. 4:8-11). While in one sense our rest in Christ has already begun, we are also exhorted to persevere in our pursuit of the eternal rest that yet awaits us. Neil Lightfoot provides this insight into Hebrews 8:

The author who has so much to say about the better hope and the better way of life in the New Covenant cannot be understood as enforcing the observance of the Mosaic Sabbath. The rest that he speaks of is not a thing they are keeping but something that can be entered (vv. 1, 3, 6, 10, 11) . . . This rest . . . will be like the keeping of a Sabbath. As God in the beginning entered His Sabbath, they too will enter theirs - "that they may rest from their labors, for their deeds follow them."<sup>307</sup>

If the fourth commandment was a shadow, then there is no longer any reason to connect the Sabbath with any day. Just as the typical offerings of lambs were rendered unnecessary by the sacrifice of Christ, so connecting the Sabbath with a day is unnecessary because the reality of the type has come in the person of Christ. Hence, Herman Ridderbos sees the following as an implication of Col. 2:17:

The fact that Paul speaks in this manner concerning the Sabbath proves that for him the fourth commandment of the Decalogue no longer had any abiding significance. In addition, as appears probable, the observance of the first day of the week was not viewed as the New Testament's prolongation of the Old Testament Sabbath.<sup>308</sup>

Many regard Sunday as the "Lord's Day" of Rev. 1:10, or isolate Sunday as a special day in the New Covenant based on an alleged

one-in-seven principle embedded in the Fourth Commandment. However, the key texts employed to substantiate Sunday worship (Rev. 1:10; Acts 20:7-11; I Cor. 16:1-3) do not provide an exegetical basis for dogmatism,<sup>309</sup> and the identification of Sunday with the "Lord's Day" in Rev. 1:10 does not rest on evidence in the text itself.<sup>310</sup>

The New Testament teaches that there are no special "holy days" in the new age. Believers are free to view every day the same, or to observe a day to the Lord as they see fit (Rom. 14:5-6). What *is* important in the New Covenant is to enter into the true Sabbath rest that comes through faith in Christ, to serve one another in love, and to assemble regularly to encourage, exhort and admonish one another in the gospel (Heb. 3:12-13; 4:3; 10:24-25).

### *The New Covenant and the Priesthood of All Believers*

*As you come to him, the living Stone - rejected by men but chosen by God and precious to him - you also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. For in Scripture it says: "See, I lay a stone in Zion, a chosen and precious cornerstone, and the one who trusts in him will never be put to shame." Now to you who believe, this stone is precious. But to those who do not believe, "The stone the builders rejected has become the capstone," and, "A stone that causes men to stumble and a rock that makes them fall." They stumble because they disobey the message - which is also what they were destined for. But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light (1 Peter 2:4-9).*

Throughout this study, we have offered considerable evidence to show that Christian ethics has historically been Old Covenant oriented. This sad fact has had an undeniable affect on the life of the visible church. Ever since the fourth century, Israel has been used as a model to defend the concept of a "Christian State," and to justify hierarchical church governments. Judy Schindler notes that as the visible church moved further and further away from its New Testament model,

the Old Covenant order of the priesthood was applied more and more exclusively to the one bishop as high priest, and very little stress given to the priesthood of all believers."<sup>311</sup>

Just as there was a people of God in the old age, so also in the new age is there an "Israel of God" (Gal. 6:16). It is an identity no longer defined nationally, however, but spiritually, as "living stones." That which was once a geo-political entity has become "a holy nation," no longer offering the blood of animals, but "spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ." It is "a spiritual house," built not on the silver and bronze bases of the Tabernacle, but on the "cornerstone," the "foundation" of Jesus Christ (1 Cor. 3:11). Most importantly, no longer is its ministry the exclusive right of the Levites, but of the new "holy priesthood" comprised of all of its members. Paul clearly connects this concept of total body priesthood with the proper functioning of a local church:

*... in Christ we who are many form one body, and each member belongs to all the others. We have different gifts, according to the grace given us. If a man's gift is prophesying, let him use it in proportion to his faith. If it is serving, let him serve; if it is teaching, let him teach; if it is encouraging, let him encourage; if it is contributing to the needs of others, let him give generously; if it is leadership, let him govern diligently; if it is showing mercy, let him do it cheerfully (Rom. 12:4-8).*

The writer of Hebrews declares that "when there is a change of the priesthood, there must also be a change of the law" (7:12). This is of crucial importance on two fronts. First, it speaks of a new priesthood. When Jesus appeared, he became the promised "high priest forever, in the order of Melchizedek" (Ps. 110:4; Heb. 6:20). This was not a continuation, but rather a total superceding of the Old Covenant Levitical priesthood, along with all of its encoded institutions. But, secondly, this verse also establishes that a new priesthood *requires* new law. This one passage alone negates any attempt to carry a single stipulation from the Old age to the New. Not one statute imposed at Sinai and administered by Aaron and the Levites has any ongoing jurisdiction over God's New Covenant people. It is the "law" of the new High Priest, summarized in his "New Commandment," that exclusively defines his righteous requirements. Jesus has become the one "High Priest" of the New Covenant, and his people - *all of his people* - are the "sons of the Levi" (Numb. 3:6; Deut. 21:5), a new "royal priesthood" entrusted with the privilege and authority to offer "spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ." The specifics of these "spiritual" duties are clearly defined in a number of new Testament passages (e.g. Matt. 5:1-7:29; Rom. 12:1; Heb. 13:15-16; Rev. 5:8).

In summary, there are four important issues concerning the priesthood of believers. *First*, a functioning priesthood is essential and basic to the spiritual well being of God's people. *Secondly*, any church tradition or practice that has the effect of stifling the

functioning of all believers as priests must be rejected. *Thirdly*, we must realize that believing people, not buildings, constitute the "house of God" (1 Cor. 3:9). When confronting fidgety children, parents will often tell them to "sit still and be quiet," then solemnize their admonition by adding, "this is God's house." Is this the concept we want to pass on to our children? They certainly need to learn not to be unruly when the saints are assembled, but should it not be respect for the true dwelling place of God - his people - that governs their behavior? *Fourthly*, in light of our equally shared priesthood, we must do away with the historical (and inappropriate) "clergy/laity" distinction. Howard Snyder points this out by saying:

The New Testament simply does not speak in terms of two classes of Christians - "minister" and "laymen" - as we do today. According to the Bible, the people (*laos*, "laity") of God comprise all Christians, and all Christians through the exercise of spiritual gifts have some "work of ministry." So if we wish to be biblical, we will have to say that all Christians are laymen (God's people) and all are ministers. The clergy-laity dichotomy is unbiblical and therefore invalid. It grew up as an accident of church history and actually marked a drift away from biblical faithfulness . . . It is one of the principal obstacles to the Church effectively being God's agent of the Kingdom today because it creates the false idea that only "holy men," namely, ordained ministers, are really qualified and responsible for leadership and significant ministry.<sup>312</sup>

The New Testament, indeed, makes a distinction between leaders and people (1 Thess. 5:12-13). But this distinction assumes the priesthood of believers, and does not swallow it up as the "clergy/laity" practice has in the past.

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Footnotes:

281. Bruce Kaye, "Law and Morality in the Epistles of the New Testament," *Law, Morality and the Bible*, Downers Grove: IVP, p. 74.

282. Dennis Winter, "Motivation in Christian Ethics," *Law, Morality and the Bible*, p. 211.

283. Herman Ridderbos, *Paul and Jesus*, Philadelphia: Presbyterian & Reformed Publishers, 1958, p. 284.

284. Kaye, p. 75.

285. Rom. 6:11, 18, 22; Anthony Hoekema, *A Christian Looks at Himself* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1975), pp. 49-53.

286. Winter, p. 212.

287. H.F. Jacobson, "Tithes," *Schaff-Herzog Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge*, IV, New York: Funk and Wagnalls, 1893, p. 2364.

288. R.J. Rushdoony, "Tipping," *Chalcedon Report*, April 1982.

289. Raymond Zorn, "Review of The Law and the Prophets," *Westminster Theological Journal*, XXXVII:2, 1975, p. 294.

290. John J. Mitchell, "Tithing, Yes!," *Presbyterian Guardian*, October 1978, pp. 6-7.

291. Mitchell, p. 6.

292. 293. Mitchell, p. 7.

294. R.C. Sproul, "What about Tithing?," *Tabletalk*, 3:5, 1979, p. 10.

295. 296. Sproul, p. 10.

297. Pieter Verhoef, "Tithing--A Hermeneutical Consideration," *The Law and the Prophets*, John Skilton, ed., Nutley, N.J.: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., 1974, p. 127.

298. Samuele Bacchiocchi, *From Sabbath to Sunday*, Rome: Gregorian University Press, 1977, p. 346.

299. Bacchiocchi, pp. 346, 368.

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304. Fairbairn, p. 474.
305. Henry Verduin, "Baptism," *The Reformation Sentinel*, 1:1, 1977, pp. 17-18.
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307. Neil Lightfoot, *Yesterday, Today, Forever*, Grand Rapids: Baker, 1977, p. 97.
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310. D. Vincent Price, "Searching for the Imperative: Interaction with Lord's Day Argumentation," *Searching Together*, 9:4, 1980, pp. 13, 20.
311. Judy Schindler, "The Rise of One-Bishop-Rule in the Early Church," *Searching Together*, 10:2, 1981, p. 5.
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*This is My Beloved Son, Hear Him.* Jon Zens. *Searching Together*. Summer-Winter 1997, Vol. 25:1,2,3. Pages 72-82.

## X. The Pattern of Christ and the Christian Lifestyle

Under the Old Covenant, the most concise enumeration of its "laws" was provided in the Decalogue. In addition to the Ten Commandments, however, the Mosaic administration imposed numerous additional rules and regulations, or ethics, to shape the lifestyle of its people. In the New Covenant, Christ has given us one "New Commandment" as the all-inclusive "law" of his administration. But he also provided a considerably detailed expression of the practical outworking of that law in his "Sermon on the Mount" - a manual, if you will, on how his new ethic is to shape the lifestyle of his followers (Matt. 5:1-7:29). There is evidence that this Sermon probably served as catechism for new converts in the early church.<sup>313</sup> John R. W. Scott makes these interesting observations:

It seems likely (as many commentators ancient and modern have suggested) that [Christ] deliberately went up on the mountain to teach, in order to draw a parallel between Moses who received the law at Mount Sinai and himself who explained its implications to his disciples on the so-called "Mount of the Beatitudes," the traditional site of the Sermon on the northern shores of the Lake of Galilee. For, although Jesus was greater than Moses and although his message was more gospel than law, yet he did choose twelve apostles as the nucleus of a new Israel to correspond to the twelve patriarchs and tribes of the old. He also claimed to be both teacher and lord, gave his own authoritative interpretation of Moses' law, issued commandments and expected obedience. He even later invited his disciples to assume his "yoke" or submit to his teaching, as they had previously borne the yoke of Torah.<sup>314</sup>

These practical ethical teachings provide us with "the substance of the new Law, the new Sinai, [and] the new Moses."<sup>315</sup> Compared to the lifestyle of the world, the life to which Jesus calls us is radical, indeed. It is a life, in fact, that is beyond the desire and the capability of unbelievers. It is a life that cannot be attained except by those who are "in Christ."<sup>316</sup> Central to the understanding of these principles, therefore, is the assumption of a faith union with Christ, and a genuine desire to obey his "New Commandment."

Thus the followers of Jesus are to be different - different from both the nominal church and the secular world, different from both the religious and the irreligious. The Sermon on the Mount is the most complete delineation anywhere in the New Testament of the Christian counter-culture. Here is a Christian value system, ethical standard, religious devotion, attitude to money, ambition, life-style and network of relationships - all of which are totally at variance with those of the non-Christian world. And this Christian counter-culture is the life of the kingdom of God, a fully human life indeed but lived out under the divine rule . . . They were not to take their cue from the people around them, but from him, and so prove to be genuine children of their heavenly Father. To me the key text of the Sermon on the Mount is 6:8: "Do not be like them."<sup>317</sup>

The practical implementation of Christ's New Covenant ethic is often hampered by two problems. First, believers are frequently unaware of the degree to which their thinking has been shaped by the world, rather than by the gospel. Secondly, denominationalism, non-biblical clergy/laity distinctions, a spiritually immature susceptibility to false teaching, "verse of the day" study habits, and a host of other contemporary distortions have often served to confuse - if not obscure altogether - the implications of Christ's ethic. Here are a few areas that often need improvement.

### *Believers Must take Interpersonal Relationships More Seriously*

Hatred, which can even lead to murder, begins in the heart. The world allows hatred to fester - even deliberately fanning its consuming flame. This is not the way of the gospel. Hatred - even its least intense forms - must not be permitted to consume the mind and heart of the believer. It is imperative that any breach in human relationships be dealt with quickly and forthrightly. We are not to *avoid* those with whom we have differences, but make every effort to find a means to reconciliation. True, the New Testament speaks of situations where unrepentant offences require separation, but the procedures are very specific, and should only be implemented with much prayer, a genuine sense of loss, and with the consent of the body (Matt. 5:24; 18:15-18; Luke 12:58; Gal. 6:1-2; Jude 1:22-23).

Day by day, week by week, Christians ought to be dealing with interpersonal problems so that they do not pile up . . . Scripture places a premium on living on a daily basis with God; it makes daily dealing with our brothers an urgent matter . . . You don't dare let things go. If there is somebody with whom you are having difficult times or who is having difficulty with you, before this day is over straighten out the matter before God. Write that letter, make that phone call, or if possible pay that visit.<sup>318</sup>

*Christians Must Leave Vengeance with God* (Matt. 5:38-39; Luke 6:29; Rom. 12:17-21)

If the consequences were not so dire, it might be amusing how unbelievers, otherwise having little interest in Scripture, will try to justify acts of severe retribution by quoting the Old Covenant "eye for eye, tooth for tooth" principle. Sadly, professing believers often hide behind the same defense to vindicate retaliatory actions. The ethic that has its starting point with the example and teaching of Christ, however, simply does not permit us to "render evil for evil." On the contrary, we are specifically instructed,

*If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone. Do not take revenge, my friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: "It is mine to avenge; I will repay," says the Lord. On the contrary: "If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink. In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head." Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good (Rom 12:18-21).*

In the world around us, even - if not especially - in America,<sup>319</sup> violence has become an established way of life. Unfortunately, this sinful cultural degradation is "changing and shaping the Christians" more than Christians are changing their cultural surroundings.<sup>320</sup> It is not responding in kind, however, but a commitment to Christ's ethic of nonviolence that most effectively curbs society's increasing propensity to accomplish things by force, as the above passage clearly reveals. We are to overcome evil, not by retaliation, but by acts of kindness. Interestingly, one secular study that compared various "power-coercive" forms of effecting cultural change with "non-violent" approaches found the latter to be the most effective in the long run.<sup>321</sup>

#### *Christians Must Manifest Unconditional Love (Matt. 5:43-48; Luke 6:32-36)*

The world's principle for relationships is "I will take care of you if you take care of me." It is not "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you," but a self-serving "Do unto others as they do unto you." Jesus, however, has instructed his people to always respond with acts of kindness - even to those who may hate, misuse, curse at, or even physically abuse them. God himself is the reference point for this ethic (Matt. 5:48). He has shown goodness and mercy even to the ungrateful and wicked (Matt. 5:45; Luke 6:35). In a day when people are used to conditional relationships, the body of Christ has a unique opportunity to manifest a different spirit.

We can stop loving only the lovable, lending to the reliable, giving only to the grateful, as soon as we grasp and are grasped by the unconditionality of the benevolence of God.<sup>322</sup>

#### *Christians Are to Be a Giving People (Matt. 5:40-41; Luke 6:30, 35, 38)*

Our society operates on the principle of "If I give, what can I expect to get in return?" This flows naturally out of conditional relationships. On the contrary, Jesus' disciples are to freely give and extend themselves with no hope or concern for acknowledgement or return. "Giving" marked God's action and Christ's ministry more than anything else (John 3:16; Matt. 20:28), and this explains why Christians are to be known as a people who share with others with no strings attached.

#### *Christians Are to Work For Peace (Matt. 5:9; Rom. 12:18; Heb. 12:14; 1 Pet. 3:11)*

Strife and power politics are the *modus operandi* of the world. One of the principle objectives of Christ's work, however, was to bring peace in human relationships (Eph. 2:14-15; Col. 1:20). Only as people are brought into a right relationship with God in the gospel can this inherent propensity for conflict be resolved. Jesus' kingdom brings peace, and his people are to work for peace "in the community and the church."<sup>323</sup> To pursue peace may at times necessitate confronting wrong doing in order to effect reconciliation. Genuine peace, therefore, is never realized by skirting Biblical duties and principles.

Paul is not so much concerned about the existence of disputes among Christians, as he is with how disputes are resolved . . . Resolution of disputes among believers, then, is a matter of first-rate ecclesiastical significance . . . We must move ministries of peace from the periphery of Christian concern to the center where they belong.<sup>324</sup>

In light of the threat of nuclear war to the world-at-large, there is a clear need for Christians to work for peace in this regard. Since nuclear war can in no way be construed as a "just war" (for it destroys the aggressor and probably the defender), Norman Geisler suggests that the Christian must be a "nuclear pacifist" with regard to an "all out nuclear war."<sup>325</sup> While political activism and public protest are not the way of the gospel, a quiet, nonviolent, peace loving example by believers can have a "light" and "salt" affect on a society bent on self-destruction. Certainly the church, whose constituency should be comprised of "peacemakers," should have a role to play in this regard.<sup>326</sup>

## *Christians Are to Expect Suffering and Persecution* (Matt. 5:10-12; Luke 6:22-23)

To follow Christ is to "walk as Jesus did" (1 John 2:26). He did not enter into his resurrected glory until he had first emptied the cup of suffering his Father had given him to drink (Matt. 26:39-42; Luke 24:26, 46; John 7:39; 18:11; 1 Pet. 1:11). In the same way, believers will not enter into their glory at Christ's return until they have first suffered on his behalf in this present age (John 16:33; Acts 14:22; Rom. 8:17-18; Col. 1:24; 2 Tim. 3:12; Tit. 2:12-13; 1 John 3:2). The true "success" of the church in this age, therefore, is not measured by outward prosperity, but by patient suffering at the hands of a hostile world (John 15:18-19). Rather than to be surprised and disheartened by persecution, we ought to be more like those early believers who rejoiced "because they had been counted worthy of suffering disgrace for the Name" (Acts 5:41). This is an important point, because it defines the appropriate stance of the church in an unbelieving culture: a minority counter-culture in the midst of an unbelieving and hostile counter-culture.

We ought not to be strangers to alienation, minority status, even exile. Indeed, significant voices from other segments of the American church . . . have recently urged that exile must be the posture for the faithful Christians today.<sup>327</sup>

To marshal believers to "take over" society, or to envision a time before Christ's return when the church will dominate culture (and thus escape persecution by gaining the upper hand), is totally contrary to the ordained pattern established by Christ: *first suffering, then glory!*

### *The New Covenant People and Politics*

[In his original thesis, Jon included a section entitled, "The New Covenant People and Politics." It was a serious challenge to the growing notion that believers must take an active roll in the shaping of government and political interests. Fifteen years have gone by, and as of this writing we are more convinced than ever of the negative impact such religio-political entanglement has had on the effectiveness of the gospel. In recent years, we have published several editions of this magazine that have focused on this important subject. For that reason, we have decided not to include the section on politics from the original thesis, but rather to refer our readers to these more up-to-date treatments. In particular, the issue of *Searching Together* immediately preceding this special edition (Spring 97) perhaps best conveys our present views on the relationship between church and state, between believers and politics. Other issues also dealing with religio-political concerns include Winter 1982, Spring/Summer 1989 and Autumn 1995. All of these back issues are available to those who may be interested in further study.]

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#### Footnotes:

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317. Stott, pp. 19, 18.

318. Jay Adams, *Christian Living in the Home*, Nutley, N.J.: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., 1972, pp.37-38; Ronald Kraybill, *Repairing the Breach: Ministering in Community Conflict*, Akron, Pa.: Mennonite Central Committee, 1981, pp. 53-71.

319. Thomas Rose, ed., *Violence in America*, New York: Random House, 1969.

320. Jim Wallis, "Carl Henry on Evangelical Identity," *Sojourners*, April 1976, p. 25.

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322. Yoder, p. 47.

323. Stott, p. 50; Jean-Michel Hornus, *It is not Lawful for Me to Fight: Early Christian Attitudes toward War, Violence, and the State*, Scottdale, Pa., Herald Press, 1980, for a significant study on how the early church took this mandate seriously.

324. Kraybill, pp. 12-13.

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327. J.R. Burkholder and John Bender, *Children of Peace*, Scottdale, Pa.: Mennonite Publishing House, 1982, p. 22; Mark McCulley, "Exile or Conquest? Power-Seeking and the New Puritans," *Searching Together*, 11:4, 1982, pp. 20-33.

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## XI. The Sum of the Matter: "This is My Beloved Son, Hear Him."

### Historical Overview

When Jesus was transfigured before the eyes of his terrified disciples, a voice from the bright cloud that enshrouded the mountain declared, "This is my Son, whom I love, with him I am well pleased. Listen to him" (Matt. 17:1-6; Luke 9:28-36). The God who spoke through the prophets in the past would now speak to his people "by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things" (Heb. 1:1). God's "Word" become flesh to dwell among men and usher in a reign of "grace and truth" that would supercede the administration of law instituted by Moses (John 1:14-18).

This was a truly momentous event, and its implications had a life-changing affect on the early church. Peter, one of the witnesses to Jesus' glorification, understood its significance when he stood before a crowd of his fellow Israelites and proclaimed,

*The God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the God of our fathers, has glorified his servant Jesus . . . For Moses said, "The Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among your own people; you must listen to everything he tells you. Anyone who does not listen to him will be completely cut off from among his people." Indeed, all the prophets from Samuel on . . . have foretold these days* (Acts 3:13, 22-24).

Jesus himself, after his resurrection, commanded his disciples to spread the gospel worldwide, and to instruct all who would believe to obey - not the law of Moses - but everything he himself had commanded (Matt. 28:20).

Sadly, however, less than two centuries passed before the visible church had all but lost its sense of a Christ-centered redemptive history.<sup>328</sup> Alien Greek philosophy had infiltrated the church at a number of critical points that seriously affected the interpretation of Scripture. K. R. Hagenbach observes,

[Scripture verses] undeniably used in respect to the historical Christ [were] confounded with the metaphysical and dogmatic use of the schools . . . [Not satisfied] with the *Logos*, as historically manifested in the Messiah, [the early fathers] frequently yield to speculation . . . mixed up with foreign philosophies.<sup>329</sup>

Another critical juncture for the early church was when Constantine made Christianity the official state religion throughout the Roman Empire. The effect was an obfuscation of the once clear distinction between church and state. From then on, Christian doctrine and practice was colored by political interests.<sup>330</sup> This religio-political melding, mingled with philosophy, resulted in a visible church with expectations quite remote from the original New Testament vision.<sup>331</sup> Instead of a suffering church armed with the gospel, it was a conquering church armed with the sword. Abraham Kuyper saw Constantine's establishment of Christianity by force as a "complete triumph of the Christian religion."<sup>332</sup> But it had become a theocratic institution modeled after the Old Covenant, and the entire thrust of church life was more Mosaic than Christic. John W. Montgomery notes how this same Old Testament based vision also dominated Puritan thinking:

The most influential factor in creating a legalistic tone in Puritanism was doubtless the Calvinist stress on a single covenant in Scripture . . . which elevated the Old Testament to a position of great prominence in Puritan theology. Old Testament laws were indiscriminately applied to New Testament situations . . . Puritan-Calvinist preoccupation with the history of salvation in the Old Testament gave a special cast to the New England colonists' western dream . . . consistent with their Old Testament interests, they went on to identify themselves with Israel, reading their own history as the story of a New Chosen People.<sup>333</sup>

Shaped by this theocratic mind-set, the church functioned as though "under law." This loss of sensitivity to redemptive history resulted in a view of gospel and law as mutually essential components of saving faith. Salvation was seen to move from conviction by law to forgiveness in the gospel. "The gospel took on legal characteristics" and ended up being a servant to the law.<sup>334</sup>

It was a perspective that effectively blocked any possibility of arriving at a true New Covenant ethic. It was believed that only the law could command and only the gospel could offer promise. But the law was given in the context of the Abrahamic promise, and the gospel indeed included its own ethical demands. In both Roman and Protestant theology, however, the gospel became rigidly defined "always as the promise of forgiveness, and never a demand."<sup>335</sup>

Recent studies have once again affirmed the significance of redemptive history,<sup>336</sup> and that a specific redemptive event is the foundation for the moral imperatives enjoined upon saints of either the Old or the New Covenant. God first acts and then

commands. Only when this historical-redemptive principle is understood can the gospel be seen to include an ethical demand.

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328. Oscar Cullmann, *The Christology of the New Testament*, Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1963, p. 4.

329. K.R. Hagenbach, *A Text-Book of the History of Doctrine*, I, New York: Sheldon and Co., 1864, pp. 124, 117.

330. Louis Berkhof, *The History of Christian Doctrine*, Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1978, p. 87; Ronald Hanko, "The Arian Controversy," *Protestant Reformed Theological Journal*, March 1981, pp. 51, 60.

331. Leonard Verduin, *The Reformers and Their Stepchildren*, Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1980, pp. 16, 17, 38.

332. Abraham Kuyper, *Principles of Sacred Theology*, Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1980, p. 646.

333. John W. Montgomery, *The Shaping of America*, Minneapolis: Bethany Fellowship, 1916, pp. 44-45.

334. Warner Elert, *Law and Gospel*, Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1967, p. 47.

335. Richard Detweiler, "Luther and Menno," *Mennonite Quarterly Review*, July 1969, p. 212.

336. F.F. Bruce, "The Grace of God and the Law of Christ: Study in Pauline Ethics," *God and the Good*, Lewis Smedes, ed., Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1975, pp. 223-4.

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## XII. Theological Overview

### *Redemptive History and New Testament Ethics*

There are five basic theological views on the relationship between Old Testament law and the New Covenant. First, Marcion and Adolf von Harnack simply jettisoned the Old Testament from the Christian canon. The second is the traditional view that regards civil and ceremonial aspects of the law as expired while the "moral" commands continue in force. A third approach sees that part of the law that divided Jews and Gentiles as abrogated, but not the law itself. The fourth finds the key in holding the narrative aspects (*muthos*) and legal aspects (*ethos*) of the "Torah" in balance. Lastly, "the only ultimately satisfactory solution to the relation of the two Testaments is to see them in terms of the movement of redemptive history."<sup>337</sup> As Richard Gaffin observes,

A concern with the *historia salutis* [the history of salvation] rather than the doctrine of justification by faith or any other aspect of the *ordo salutis* [the application of salvation] is central to Paul. A redemptive-historical, eschatological orientation controls his soteriological outlook at every point.<sup>338</sup>

The New Testament clearly reveals that this was indeed Paul's approach to ethics. Yet, as Oscar Cullmann notes, "to my knowledge a comprehensive 'Salvation-historical ethic' is still to be written."<sup>339</sup> This is not surprising in light of the past "flat Bible" Old Covenant orientation of New Covenant ethics. Again, Gaffin asserts that redemptive history must shape our theological methodology:

It is difficult to deny that in the orthodox tradition justice has not been done to the historical character of the Bible, either in terms of its origin or its contents. There has been and continues to be a tendency to view Scripture as a quarry of proof texts for the building of a dogmatic edifice, as a collection of moral principles for the construction of a system of ethics. Inscripturated revelation never stands by itself. It is always concerned either explicitly or implicitly with redemptive accomplishment . . . In other words, the specific unity of Scripture is redemptive historical in nature . . . It does not appear to me, however, that the methodological significance of this correlation has been reflected upon sufficiently.<sup>340</sup>

Robert Brinsmead insists that the Bible is neither an ethical manual nor a book of systematic theology, but that "The Bible is written as history. It is a story of God's redemptive acts." He adds that "When biblical ethics are removed from the context of redemptive history, they cease to be ethics . . . As far as the Bible is concerned, ethics have no independent value and no meaning outside the saving deeds of God." Paul made his ethical appeals, Brinsmead notes,

on the basis of what God has done for us in Christ. It is in view of God's gospel mercies that we are to present our lives as a living sacrifice to God (Rom. 12:1-3) . . . Paul virtually never appeals to the law - "Thou shalt not." When he demands certain behavior of the church, he appeals instead to the holy history of Christ, into which the church is incorporated, and from that standpoint then makes his ethical appeal . . .<sup>341</sup>

### *The Essentials of New Testament Ethics*

**1. A sense of the advance of redemptive history from an abrogated Old Covenant economy to an abiding New Covenant economy (John 1:17; Heb. 10:9; 13:20).**

The New Testament clearly presents the New Covenant as superior to the Old - not because Mosaic Law is an irrelevant part of past redemptive history, but because it has been fulfilled and abrogated in Christ. The New is superior to the Old as adulthood replaces infancy, or as reality supercedes types and shadows (John 1:14-18; Gal. 4:2-7; Col. 2:17). With this superior Covenant came a better form of worship (John 4:21-24), and a higher ethical authority (Matt. 28:20). It is no longer Moses, but Christ who cares for God's house (Heb. 3:2-6).

**2. Moses himself pleads for us to listen, not to himself, but to the Prophet of whom he wrote (Deut. 18:15, 18; Acts 3:22-23; 7:37).**

Even though Moses is dead, his words live on. He still points to Christ and exhorts us, "You must listen to everything he tells you" (Acts 3:22). This does not mean that Christ's words conflict with what Moses wrote in times past, for the two are in absolute ethical harmony. It does mean, however, that it is the Prophet of the New Covenant and not the prophet of the Old Covenant that is now the believer's appointed source of revelation and ethical authority (John 5:39, 46).

**3. God himself has spoken from heaven and has commanded us to listen to the Son of whom Moses wrote (Heb. 1:1; Matt. 3:17;**

17:5; Acts 7:37).

Again, to listen to the Son is not to ignore Moses. The point is simply that in the consummation of redemptive history, God brought all the central institutions of Israel - Prophet, Priest and King - to ultimate and perfect fulfillment in the person of his Son. The passing of the Old Covenant, with Moses as its head, was preparatory for a New Covenant with Christ as its Head. God spoke often in ancient days; but in these last days he has spoken once for all in his Son (Heb. 1:1).

**4. *Christ's death on the cross ratifies his New Covenant and establishes an authoritative basis for his New Commandment*** (1 Cor. 11:25; John 13:34-35; 15:12-13).

When Christ said, "if you love me, keep my commandments," it was not a reference to Old Covenant law, but to his own commandments, verbalized over the course of his earthly ministry (John 17:8). The focus is not on Exodus 20, but on his own "Sermon on the Mount," and the rest of the ethical instruction he gave to his followers. A genuine love for Christ cannot be separated from a genuine desire to obey his commandments (Matt. 28:20).

God's deliverance of Israel from bondage in Egypt justified the imposition of a law-code on those he freed - the physical nation of Israel. Christ's redemptive act on the cross (Luke 9:31; Eph. 4:8) justifies his New Commandment to those he freed - a new spiritual nation of believers from "nation, tribe, people and language" (Rev. 7:9). "To a covenant belongs a law-giving."<sup>342</sup>

Hebrews 8:6 confirms this principle when it describes the New Covenant as "founded on better promises." The Greek verb *nomotheteo* used in this verse has the meaning, "that which has the force of law."<sup>343</sup> In other words, law must be identified with the covenant that is in force - not the covenant thereby abrogated. With the shedding of Christ's blood, it is the New Covenant that has exclusive legal jurisdiction over his people. In other words, "the Law of Christ" cannot be separated from its historical ratification. This "enactment as law" settles once and for all the ethical touchstone for believers.

**5. *Paul's ethical orientation was centered, not in the Law of Moses, but in the "law of Christ"*** (Gal. 6:2; 1 Cor. 9:21).

After Christ's resurrection, he spent many days "giving instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles he had chosen" (Acts 1:2). Paul was not personally present for these final words of instruction, but his apostolic appointment came later when a glorified and ascended Christ revealed himself to Paul on the Damascus Road as "one abnormally born" (1 Cor. 15:8). From then on, Paul's ethical reference, once rooted in the law of Moses, became "the law of Christ" (Gal. 6:2). Even though he had been a Pharisee, his passion for Mosaic rules and regulations was now given over wholly to Christ's New Commandment. He understood that any righteousness the law demanded was fully met by obedience to Christ's single command, for "love is the fulfillment of the law" (Rom. 13:10; Gal. 5:14).

**6. *When the New Testament draws ethical instruction and example from the Old Testament, it is always qualified by redemptive-historical realities*** (1 Cor. 10:11; Heb. 3:7-4:11; Col. 2:16-17; Acts 10:14-15; 15:10-21; 2 Tim. 3:15).

The New Testament writers certainly felt free to derive ethical instruction from the Old Testament (Eph. 6:1-2; James 5:10-11). Even so, it is never unqualified or viewed in isolation from the consummation of redemptive history in the New Covenant. To put it in another way, their approach to the Old Testament is always through person and work of Christ. This is a truth Herman Ridderbos captures beautifully when he says that Christ,

represents the new standard of judgment as to what "has had its day" in the law and what had abiding validity (Col. 2:17) . . . The church no longer has to do with the law in any other way than in Christ and thus is *ennomos Christou* . . . The new creation brings in a new canon, a new standard of judgment, along with it. This is above all redemptive historical in character . . . The law no longer has unrestricted and undifferentiated validity for the church of Christ. In a certain sense the church can be qualified as "without the law."<sup>344</sup>

As believers in union with Christ, we may freely use the Old Testament as a rich source of instruction in righteousness - but never in isolation from the One who has fulfilled its exacting requirements on our behalf. Through him, we have been set free from the law's *bondage* so that we might better understand its holy *objectives*. Our freedom from the law, however, is not so that we may indulge ourselves in sin, but so that we may "serve one another in love" (Gal. 5:13).

In short, New Testament ethics must center in (1) the person of Christ, (2) the words of Christ, and (3) the "New Covenant."

It is in Christ's person that we find the supreme example of love (1 John 3:16). It is his words that are "the words of eternal life (John 6:68). And it is the New Covenant in his blood that provides the basis and justification for the moral demand we must obey (John 15:12-13, 2 Cor. 5:15). Only as we listen to and obey the Son will our ministry be true and our joy be full (John 13:17). It is a living process that also involves the guidance of the Holy Spirit, the fellowship of other believers, and the many and varied situations of life.

Christian ethics involves both *agape* [love] and principles for its completion . . . Principle-agapism furnishes content and guidelines for the direction that love may take in concrete situations. Hence, principle-agapism saves Christian ethics from the twin perils of legalism and antinomianism.<sup>345</sup>

But all of this is meaningless without the Holy Spirit's ministry.

Without the Mind of Christ through the activity of the Spirit at work in the believer, the principles of the Law of Christ remain remote and unattainable . . . The precise function of the Spirit in this matter of the exercise of Christian liberty is probably best summed up in the Apostle's use of the word *dokimazo*, i.e. testing, determining, proving.<sup>346</sup>

### *Guilt or Grace?*

Mainline Christian ethics has never been in a position to articulate an ethic of grace because it has wrenched ethics from its intended moorings in redemptive history. As a result, the principle motivation for ethical behavior has been guilt, rather than the grace of God exemplified and made known in Christ (1 John 3:16; Titus 2:11-12). What Robert Brinsmead says about Adventism and Romanism can be applied across the board to every religious body.

I fear that far too much Adventism is an ethic of guilt. People are motivated by guilt to keep the Sabbath, to pay tithe, to be loyal to the denomination, to eat the right food, to eschew jewelry, to avoid worldly amusements . . . The Pauline Epistles do not present a motivation of guilt but a motivation of grace. Unless a religious group gives free course to the gospel, and unless its pulpits ring with the liberating proclamation of grace, the religious group will become a religious slave camp . . . The two greatest motivational forces in the world are guilt and grace. Where the gospel is not paramount, guilt is the instrument by which we motivate ourselves and others . . . Rome has always complained that justification by faith alone severs the nerve of the moral imperative. But she is really concerned with people who are no longer guilty and can therefore no longer be manipulated.<sup>347</sup>

### *In a Word . . .*

It would be difficult to find a better concise summary of all that has been addressed in this article than the one given by Richard Longenecker:

The Christian life in Paul's teaching is (a) based upon the fact of a new creation "in Christ," (b) directed through the correlation of the "law of Christ" and the "mind of Christ," (c) motivated and conditioned by the "love of Christ," (d) enabled by the "Spirit of Christ," and (e) expressed in a situation of temporal tension between what is already a fact and what has yet to be realized. Although they can be spoken of separately, all these elements must be combined and merged in our consciousness if the apostle's thought is to be rightly understood and the Christian ethic truly exhibited.<sup>348</sup>

- *Jon Zens*

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#### Footnotes:

337. Steve Carpenter, "Paul, The Law, and Redemptive History," unpublished paper delivered at The 1981 Council on Baptist Theology, Dallas, Texas, May 1981, p. 14. The five approaches given above were outlined in this paper.

338. Richard Gaffin, *Westminster Theological Journal*, XXXII:I, November 1969, p. 128.

339. Oscar Cullmann, *Salvation in History*, London: SCM Press, 1967, p. 329.

340. Richard Gaffin, "Contemporary Hermeneutics in the Study of the New Testament," *Studying the New Testament Today*, I, John H. Skilton, ed., Nutley: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., 1976, pp. 15, 16.

341. Robert D. Brinsmead, *Judged by the Gospel*, Fallbrook, Calif.: Verdict Publishing Co., 1980, pp. 209, 213.

342. Rudolf Stier, *The Words of the Lord Jesus*, VI, Edinburgh: T and T Clark, 1868, p. 166.
343. Francis Goode, *The Better Covenant*, London, J. Hatchard and Son, 1837, p. 11; p. 322ff.
344. Herman Ridderbos, *Paul: An Outline of His Theology*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1975, pp. 285, 286 , 284.
345. Henlee H. Barnette, "The New Ethics: "Love Alone,'" *The Situation Ethics Debate*, Harvev Cox, ed., Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1972, pp. 138-139.
346. Richard N. Longenecker, *Paul, Apostle of Liberty*, Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1976, pp. 194, 195; Russ Ross, "The Redemptive Model and the Holy Spirit's Work in Ethics," *Searching Together*, 11:2, 1982, pp. 28-42.
347. Brinsmead, pp. 214-215, 291-292.
348. Richard N. Longenecker, *The Ministry and Message of Paul*, Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1974, pp. 100, 101.

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