

WRITTEN ON STONE OR WRITTEN ON THE HEART?
OLD TESTAMENT LAW IN THE LIFE OF
NEW TESTAMENT BELIEVERS

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Introduction

Legalism is an ugly word in churches today. Generally used of one who demands that others keep this or that law, it is often used to dismiss one whose demands conflict with another's. While some believers think that the Christian's conscience is all that counts in matters of obedience, others are not so sure. Certain laws given to Old Testament Israel, such as the command to children to obey their parents, appear to be binding on New Testament believers as well. Yet other laws do not seem to have authority in a believer's life. Many Christians, for instance, blame the moral decay in schools on the removal of the Ten Commandments from the classroom, yet they do not hesitate to ignore the command to keep the Sabbath. Playing on this cognitive dissonance, one popular Seventh Day Adventist teacher has pointed out that the only commandment Christians feel free to forget (Sabbath observance) is the only one God said to remember.¹

The confusion does not end with the Ten Commandments. Christians often hear sermons on giving from the pulpit and then fret over whether or not their "tithes" should come out of their paycheck before or after taxes. This is despite the fact that Old Testament tithing was radically

¹Doug Bachelor, *Don't Be Fooled - Amazing Facts Study Guide 7* (Roseville 1994), 2.

different than the New Testament church offerings that are incorrectly labeled “tithing” today.²

When pressed for a coherent principle of differentiation within God’s law to explain these seemingly contradictory positions, many have no clear response. The confusion that results can easily lead to legalism on the one hand as one attempts to follow every precept of Old Testament law, and antinomianism on the other hand as one gives up on Scripture and simply “follows his heart.” Neither option, however, is acceptable for a follower of God.

Further, one’s view of many related issues will flow naturally from his view of the relation between the law and the gospel. Cardinal doctrines such as justification are affected (are we guilty for breaking Old Testament law?), as well as sanctification (while the law cannot justify, should it be used as a guide for sanctification?). One’s Ecclesiology or Eschatology may revolve around the issue (hence the Dispensational / Covenant debate). It is important, then, for the sake of one’s theological coherency, to arrive at Scriptural conclusions to these questions.

Three basic positions are possible with regard to the Law and the Christian. It is either the case that all, none, or some of the Old Testament laws have been repealed since the coming of Christ and His gospel. The first option is held by almost no one outside of apocalyptic cults. It is abundantly clear that New Testament believers had at least *some* laws changed. The question, then, often comes to this: “Are we to assume that *only* those particulars which the NT *expressly sanctions* . . . remain in force today? Or are we to assume instead that Christians are bound to obey *all* those particulars which the NT does *not expressly abrogate*?” [emphasis in original].³

²The church is not the storehouse (compare Nehemiah 13:12 with Malachi 3:10), nor do our “tithes” feed the “priesthood.” Also compare the ceremonies attached to the giving of tithes in the Old Testament (Dt 14:22-29).

³Knox Chamblin, “The Law of Moses and The Law of Christ,” in *Continuity and Discontinuity*, ed. John Feinberg (Westchester, Crossway Books, 1988), 183.

There are several variations among those who view Old Testament law as (at least) partially binding today: some apply it only to the church, while others believe the entire world is to be governed by them. Different views offer varying categories with which to distinguish between those laws that continue and those that are discontinued, usually based on distinctions such as the moral, ceremonial, or civil dimensions of each law. Those who teach that the Old Testament law has simply ended replace it with New Testament laws of one sort or another to account for repeated commands: usually the “law of Christ” (1 Cor. 9:21; Gal. 6:2), or the “law of love” (Mt. 22:36-40). In this brief survey the two primary positions, that of partial continuity and full discontinuity will be presented.

Old Testament Law as Binding Today

Walter Kaiser Jr. writes that, “any solution [to the issue of continuity] that quickly runs the law out of town certainly cannot look to the Scriptures for any kind of support or comfort.”⁴ The New Testament does, indeed, appear to validate the continuity of Old Testament law in New Testament times: Chapter 5 of Matthew’s gospel records Jesus’ proclamation regarding the law:

Do not think that I came to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I did not come to abolish, but to fulfill. For truly I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not the smallest letter or stroke shall pass away from the Law, until all is accomplished. Whoever then annuls one of the least of these commandments, and so teaches others, shall be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever keeps and teaches *them*, he shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven.

⁴Walter Kaiser Jr., “The Law as God’s Guidance for the Promotion of Holiness,” in *Five Views on Law and Gospel*, ed. Stanley Gundry (Grand Rapids, Zondervan Publishing House, 1996), 178.

Christ's faithfulness to the law prompted Willem VanGemeran to write, "Jesus' teaching on the law has clear lines of continuity with the law of Moses."⁵ He points out that Jesus gave a stricter interpretation of Moses' law and challenged His hearers to listen more carefully to them.⁶

While some see Jesus' statements as inconclusive due to the time frame in which He spoke (between "ages"), the apostles seem to echo Jesus' teachings on continuity.⁷ John equates loving God with obedience to His commandments (Jn. 14:15; 1 Jn. 2:2-4). Paul uses the Old Testament as his basis for judgment (1 Cor. 9:9) stating elsewhere that the law has not been annulled by faith (Rom. 3:31), and must be obeyed (Gal 5:3). James calls believers to follow every part of the law without judgment (Js. 2:8-10, 4:11-12). After quoting several of these passages of Scripture, reformed theologian Greg Bahnsen concludes, "In some important sense for Christian living, the Old Testament law is indisputably upheld by the writers of the New Testament."⁸

Most who see Old Testament law as continuing in its authority for the Christian recognize that while Scripture seems to support their view in many places, it is also true that at least some element of discontinuity exists. Even those who follow the theologian ideal do not give equal weight to all laws, and do not see every law as obligatory today. Bahnsen admonishes interpreters

⁵Willem VanGemeran, "The Law is the Perfection of Righteousness in Jesus Christ," in *Five Views on Law and Gospel*, ed. Stanley Gundry (Grand Rapids, Zondervan Publishing House, 1996), 37-38.

⁶Ibid. 38.

⁷Douglas Moo, "The Law of Christ as the Fulfillment of the Law of Moses," in *Five Views on Law and Gospel*, ed. Stanley Gundry (Grand Rapids, Zondervan Publishing House, 1996), 323.

⁸Greg Bahnsen, "The Theonomic Reformed Approach to Law and Gospel," in *Five Views on Law and Gospel*, ed. Stanley Gundry (Grand Rapids, Zondervan Publishing House, 1996), 93.

to exercise “hermeneutical common sense” when dealing with Old Testament commands, recognizing not only distinctions between them, but also cultural differences in their application:

it should be obvious that in teaching us our moral duties, God as a masterful Teacher often instructs us not only in general principles . . . but also in terms of specific illustrations . . . expecting us to learn broader, underlying principles from them.⁹

It seems clear that at least some Old Testament laws were specifically withdrawn such as: dietary laws (Mk. 7:18-19; Rom. 14:1-12), as well as the observance of festivals and Sabbaths (Col. 2:16-17). Additionally, even those laws that many agree are still in effect today are not always said to warrant the punishments associated with them in the Old Testament (such as the death penalty for homosexuality, idolatry, or false prophecy). Clearly, advocates of Old Testament continuity must account for these many examples of cessation, and they do so by categorizing laws according to their function. These distinctions between Moral, Ceremonial, and Civil laws are very important to this view. It is said that verses such as 1 Samuel 15:22-23; Isaiah 1:11-17, Jeremiah 7:21-23; Proverbs 21:3 and Matthew 9:13 and 23:23 would make little sense if these distinctions could not be made.¹⁰ The following chart summarizes the essential differences between these law types:

Moral	Ceremonial	Civil ¹¹
Unchanging Based on God’s nature Standard of purity For all people	Changeable Based on Christ’s Work Foreshadow of Christ For Israel	Changeable Outworking of Ceremonial laws for Israel

⁹Bahnsen, 101

¹⁰Bahnsen, 103-4.

¹¹Some categorize the laws into only two categories: those pointing to God’s redemption and those illustrating His righteousness. The former collapse the ceremonial/civil laws into one category. See Bahnsen, 103.

Moral laws, unlike ceremonial or civil, are based on God's unchanging nature and are therefore eternal in their authority, and all inclusive in their scope. It is argued that to ignore God's moral law leaves one open to moral relativism with no appeal to ultimate authority. The ceremonial / civil laws, however, are out workings (or specific examples of) the moral law, and may be changed as God wills. This is especially evident with regard to the ceremonial laws that foreshadowed Christ's work and therefore were fulfilled by his coming (Col. 2:17; Heb. 10:1). That these specific instances of certain categories of law have been done away with does not diminish the essentially continuous nature of God's law.

In conclusion, the fact that Jesus did not abolish the law, that His apostles appealed to and upheld the law, and that God's unchanging nature is the basis for moral law, the Old Testament record of God's will is still in effect. Unless an inspired New Testament author specifically renounces certain aspects of an Old Testament law, or a law clearly falls into the ceremonial category, it is binding on believers (at minimum) today.

Old Testament Law as Abolished Today

Those who argue for discontinuity appeal first to several facts regarding the purposes of the Old Testament law. Mosaic law was a guideline for Israel's conduct, setting them apart as a holy nation to God and separate from the other nations (Ex. 19). The law provided for their worship (Lev. 23). It was set out to govern Israel under the theocratic authority of God (Dt. 28). The New Testament reveals further functions of the law: it exposed sin and produced guilt (Gal. 3:19-22; Rom. 3:20; Col. 2:14). As such it pointed to the need for redemption (Rom. 3:19). This latter function of the law acted as a tutor for Israel (Gal. 3:23-25), and served in this way as a preparation for the message of the gospel.¹²

¹²Wayne Strickland, "The Inauguration of the Law of Christ with the Gospel," in *Five Views on Law and Gospel*, ed. Stanley Gundry (Grand Rapids, Zondervan Publishing House, 1996), 243-5.

The law, as can be seen from these verses, concerned itself with the nation of Israel - not the Church. Based on this understanding of the manifold purposes of Old Testament law, it becomes evident that it has no bearing on the believer today who is under the gospel and not the theocratic kingdom of Israel. Thus, in contrast to the previous position, if an Old Testament law is not specifically reaffirmed in the New Testament it is no longer binding.

Second, there is no denying the fact that Old Testament laws were specifically said to be abrogated in the New Testament age (Mt. 5:17-48; Mk. 7:18-19; Rom. 14:1-12; Col. 2:16-17). This would not be possible if these laws continued to be authoritative for New Testament believers, and at the very least it suggests that Old Testament laws were subject to change. Moo adds that although there are cases where Old Testament law is reasserted, even these are nuanced away from their Old Testament significance (Ex. 20:12 cf. Eph. 6:2-3), implying that even laws under the so-called “moral” category are changeable.¹³

The basis for understanding the change from law to gospel resides in understanding the change from the Old Covenant with Israel to the New Covenant with the Church. The gospel of Matthew records Jesus’ offer of the New Covenant (26:26-28 cf. Jer. 31:31-34; Heb. 8:6, 9:15). This was in contrast to the Old Covenant with Israel which contained the law (Ex. 24:7; Dt. 9:9-11). Under the New Covenant the law is replaced (2 Cor. 3:6; Gal. 4:24-26; Col. 2:13-14), making the Old obsolete (Heb. 8:13). As Strickland notes, “Just as there was no Mosaic law during the dispensation from Adam to Moses, so also there is a period following the Mosaic era in which the law is no longer the operative principle.”¹⁴

¹³Moo, *Law of Christ*, 337.

¹⁴Ibid. 262

Many other New Testament texts are brought to bear on this issue. Among the more important are: Romans 6:14-15 which clearly shows a contrast between law and grace, Romans 10:4 where Paul cites Jesus as the goal (and thus the termination of) the law, 2 Corinthians 3:3-18 where the New and Old Covenants are repeatedly contrasted shows that the Old is fading away, and Philippians 3:7-9 where Paul stresses the antithesis between righteousness based on law and that based on faith.

The question that arises from a discussion of this view is just what sort of moral guidelines does the believer have if the Old Testament laws are truly set aside? Here many cessationists look to the same type of law categories employed by those of the former view, however they hold to the reverse order of the basis for each. Rather than asserting that certain laws in one category (moral) continue into the New Testament era, those advocating discontinuity between the covenants explain the Mosaic law by a higher “moral” (or *natural*) law that is based on God’s unchanging character. It is *this* law, they say, that is written on the hearts of believers (Jer. 31:31) rather than the one written on stone (Jer. 31:32-34).¹⁵ This natural, unchanging law is also known as the “law of God,” upon which the Mosaic law and the law of Christ are based.

Without this distinction it would be difficult to understand how Paul could believe himself to be under the law of God, yet not under the law of Moses (1 Cor. 9:20). Paul called this new administration of God’s law the “law of Christ” in Galatians 6:2. It is a law that is centered more on Spirit-guided principles than legalistic particulars, which is why it may be summed up in Matthew 22:37-40 by Jesus in the two great commands. This ideal is expressed by the apostles as well (Rom. 13:8; Gal 5:14-25; 1 Jn. 1:7).

¹⁵Strickland, 276-7.

In conclusion, because Christ has fulfilled the law (Mt. 5:17), specifically abrogated even “moral” Old Testament laws (Mt. 5:17-48; etc.), and allowed His apostles to do likewise (Rom. 14:1-12; etc.), it is clear that He has replaced the Old Covenant Mosaic law written on stone for Israel with the New Covenant law of Christ written on the heart for the Church (2 Cor. 3:6). Therefore, Old Testament laws are not binding on believers today unless specifically reasserted in the New Testament (Eph. 6:2-3).

Further Difficulties

It should be obvious from the above considerations (which represent only the most broad and common arguments) that the issue is not one that is easily settled by appealing to a verse here and a verse there. Additionally, both sides rely on disputed interpretations of key verses to bolster their case. A few examples will illustrate this:

Matthew 5:17: “Do not think that I came to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I did not come to abolish, but to fulfill.” At issue here is the proper understanding of *plhrow* (NASB: “fulfill”). Continuity advocates claim that this word has the sense of “establishing” or “upholding.”¹⁶ Bahnsen points out that “Christ twice denied that his advent had the purpose of abrogating the Old Testament commandments . . . until the expiration of the universe, not even a letter or stroke of the law will pass away.” Bahnsen claims that this verse is, “the decisive word on this point.”¹⁷

Moo responds with several counterpoints. He presents the antitheses of 5:21-48 as evidence that *plhrow* means “to complete” since Christ goes on to explain how His words are to be followed rather than Old Testament laws. Matthew uses *plhrow* several times in his gospel, and after listing them Moo concludes that,

¹⁶Douglas Moo, “The Law of Moses or the Law of Christ,” in *Continuity and Discontinuity*, ed. John Feinberg (Westchester, Crossway Books, 1988), 204.

¹⁷Bahnsen, 113-4

What emerges from this list is that *plhrow* is the key term chosen by Matthew to depict the impact of Jesus' coming on the OLD Testament. . . . it is likely that the "fulfillment" of Matt. 5:17 means that Jesus' new, eschatological demands do not constitute an abandonment of the law but express that which the law was all along intended to anticipate.¹⁸

Romans 10:4: "For Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes." Again in this verse we see a subtle Greek nuance playing a significant role in either side's interpretation. In this verse *telos* (NASB: "end") is said by continuity advocates to mean "goal" rather than "end."¹⁹ VanGemeren reads *telos* as "perfection."²⁰ Bahnsen claims it means "focus and aim."²¹

Strickland, however, sees in *telos* both "the goal and the termination" reasoning that once a goal has been reached it is no longer operative as such. He cites several other New Testament passages for support of this interpretation (1 Cor. 1:8, 10:11, 15:24; 2 Cor. 1:13, 3:13, 11:15; 1 Thess. 2:16; Phil. 3:19). Moo agrees with this treatment, seeing it as a close parallel to the message of Matthew 5:17.²²

1 Corinthians 9:20: "not under the law" (cf. Rom. 6:14-15; Gal. 3:23, 4:4-5 & 21, 5:18). Here the word *nomos* (NASB: "law") is contended to mean either the entirety of the Mosaic legislation or only legalistic interpretations of the law. Bahnsen and other continuity supporters argue that "law" in these cases refer only to the misuse of the law (Gal. 2:19), ceremonial requirements (Eph. 2:14-15), or spiritual bondage (Rom. 6:14).²³ Bahnsen appeals to 1 Timothy 1:8, claiming that the lawful use of the law presupposes its inherent goodness and reflection of

¹⁸Moo, *Continuity Discontinuity*, 205.

¹⁹Kaiser, 188.

²⁰VanGemeren, 37.

²¹Bahnsen, 98.

²²Moo, *Continuity Discontinuity*, 206-7.

²³*Ibid.* 166.

God. This being the case, only misuse of the law (i.e. legalistic attempts to gain salvation) can be judged negatively.²⁴

Contrary to Bahnsen, Moo argues that Paul in these passages shows that he himself was no longer ruled by Old Testament law and that it, having now passed, should not rule over any other believers either. As to the phrase in question, he points out that Christ was born “under the law” (Gal. 4:4) and therefore the phrase cannot mean legalistic curse.²⁵

Clearly, in all these texts one’s theological presuppositions will come into play. While it is an admirable goal to attempt to reach conclusions “*without* imposing forced and unnatural meanings on those texts,” it is one that can only be reached with great effort.²⁶

Concluding Criticisms

In answering the general question “What is the relationship between Old Testament law and the New Testament believer?” several facts must be accounted for in one’s conclusion:

(1) Mosaic legislation has *in some way* ceased for New Testament believers. This is shown by the abrogation of parts of the Mosaic code by Jesus and the apostles. (2) *Some* parallel elements exist between the law of Christ and the law of Moses. This is shown, in part, by the fact that all but one of the Ten Commandments are reasserted in the New Testament. (3) *Some of* God’s laws reflect His unchanging attributes and therefore cannot be taken away. This is shown from 1 Peter 1:16 and Romans 1:19 - 2:15.

Of the three possible solutions, the idea that Old Testament law continues unabated and unchanged throughout the New Testament era cannot be correct due to point 1. The position that the Old Testament law has ceased completely unless reasserted only appears to be viable when

²⁴Bahnsen, 94.

²⁵Moo, *Law of Christ*, 361-2.

²⁶Ibid. 320

one considers the relevance of the Ten Commandments. But when one moves beyond these to laws regarding incest, bestiality, sorcery, etc. he finds that appeal to Old Testament Mosaic law is the only objective, God breathed rule to which he can appeal. Therefore, if no continuity exists between the Mosaic law and law of Christ it might seem that believers are robbed of many objective rules and left with a host of subjective principles - easily twisted by sinful hearts.

The best solution appears to be that *some* continuity exists. This solution brings with it its own problems however. The question that remains to be answered is: with what principle can we discern which laws remain? First, the Bible gives no specific guidelines for discerning moral / ceremonial / civil laws, so it often entails question begging to use these distinctions to make one's case. Second, even with a pre-defined grid through which to judge these alleged distinctions, it is not always easy to divide them. A case in point is Sabbath observance: it is based on God's activity (Ex. 20:8-11) and thus might appear to be morally binding, but it is fulfilled in Christ (Heb. 4:9) which would put it in the ceremonial category. Additionally, some laws appear to cross several lines, mixing civil and moral categories (i.e. Lev. 11:45). Further, while Jesus himself recognized more or less important aspects of the law (Mt. 23:23), He did not provide an objective method for discerning them unless one falls back on His law of love. But if love always acts as moderator *and* fulfiller of the law, then of what good is the law? It seems that this position also fails in practice if not in theory.

A Possible Solution

The third option above appears to have come closest to fulfilling all three major requirements - failing only in its inability to discern between moral and ceremonial / civil laws. Perhaps the answer is to be found not in the laws themselves, but in the Lawgiver Himself. What is the relation of God to His laws? The confusion here results in something like the following syllogism:

God's moral law (being based on His nature) is universal and unchangeable.

God's moral law is found in the Mosaic code.

(Therefore) The Mosaic code is universal and unchangeable.

Now, as Moo points out, it is clear that the second premise is not a universal statement.²⁷ For the conclusion to necessarily follow, it would have to read, "God's moral law is *only* found in the Mosaic code." This confusion of God's law, the Mosaic law, and the Moral law muddies the waters to the point that no progress can be made in understanding how one can change while the others cannot. For if the Mosaic law follows from the Moral law, and the Moral law is based on God's unchanging nature then it must be the case that Mosaic law cannot change.

While God may never make a law that violates His nature, He can change laws that are a reflection of His nature for other laws that perform the same function (Heb 7:12). Thus, when God repealed the Mosaic law for Christians (Acts 15:5), He added the law of Christ (Gal. 6:2). Both reflect His nature in different ways. This explains why even the "repeated" commands in the New Testament are sometimes altered (Eph. 6:3 cf. Ex. 20:12).

When two *different* sets of laws are based on the same Lawgiver it is to be expected that they would be similar, for they continue to reflect His will and His nature. An illustration from American history may help. Britain and America both have laws against murder. They are not the *same* codes, for each only applies to, and has authority in, its country of origin. America separated from Britain in 1776, thus freeing herself from British law, yet in practice these laws are essentially identical. This is because both the British and American laws against murder are based on a higher natural law (Rom. 2). Their similarity does not entail the conclusion that they are the same law, for no American is tried under British law (in America) and vice versa. This does not, however, free him to commit murder. In the same way, Christians are not under the

²⁷Moo, *Law of Christ*, 170.

Mosaic legislation of the Old Covenant with Israel, for they are under God's law as revealed through Christ. It is this necessary, foundational law of God that is the key to continuity.

God's laws that necessarily flow from His nature are binding for all people at all times and in all places. Scripture itself testifies that God judged people based on His law before it was revealed in writing (Gen. 4:8-12) despite the fact that "sin is not imputed when there is no law" (Rom. 5:13). It is this universal law that explains how those outside Israel could be judged by aspects of God's law (Lev 24:21-22), but not Mosaic law (Dt. 14:21). It is because of this universal law that we see the same moral law in all cultures (in various codified forms). The result is that all people can be judged by God's "moral" laws (those based on His nature) - even those to whom it has not been given in writing (Rom. 2).

Conclusion

God has not left the New Covenant Church without law. As Christ has fulfilled and abolished the Old Covenant for us (Heb. 8:7), He has left us with His summary regarding God's commandments: Love of God and neighbor (Mt. 22:38-39; Jn. 15:12-14). If we know the God we serve then we will know the law that flows from His character. It is this law alone that we are obligated to follow, aided by the Spirit Who gives life, no longer being in bondage to the letter which brings death (2 Cor. 3:6).

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