

## Letter: "About Law"

*By Dr. Greg Bahnsen*

Conflicting pressures and teachings, as well as the ethical discord and disintegration of modern culture, can easily confuse sincere believers with respect to their fundamental ethical principles. At such a time the Westminster Confession of Faith can offer stabilizing instruction to God's people. For that reason Mr. Bourgault's quiet but misleading interpretation of it should not pass without comment. (December 1977 issue of the GUARDIAN)

When he suggests that only the ten commandments bind men today, he overlooks the fact that they SUMMARIZE -- not exhaust -- the moral law of God. "The moral law is summarily comprehended in the ten commandments" (LC 98). As John Murray observes in another connection, "the summary does not obliterate or abrogate the expansion of which it is a summary" (PRINCIPLES OF CONDUCT, p. 192).

The catechism explains that under ONE sin or duty ALL of the same kind (along with causes, means, occasions, provocations thereunto) are forbidden or commanded (LC 99) When the summary commandments of the decalogue are expounded in the Larger Catechism, it IS quite clear that they are viewed as encompassing and including the VARIOUS commands of God throughout Scripture (including the case laws of the OT). If one will simply read the extensive list of sins and duties covered by the ten commandments, as well as the Scripture citations given, it should be obvious that the Confession and Catechisms do not narrowly reduce our moral obligation to the decalogue.

It is biblical that they do not. Every one of God's righteous ordinances is everlasting (Ps 119:160) and nothing can be subtracted (Deut. 12:32). The slightest infraction of any detail renders one guilty of the whole law (Jas. 2:10). Thus our Lord taught that the broad principles should be followed WITHOUT neglecting the minor details of the law (Lk. 11:42).

In Matthew 5:19 Jesus solemnly warns against teaching that even the least of God's commandments in the OT can be loosened in its obligation; not one jot or tittle has been abrogated by His coming (vv. 17-18). John Murray commented on this passage: "Jesus is saying that he came not to abrogate any part of the Mosaic law. . . . Our Lord recognized that the minutiae of the law had significance. If we do not like minutiae or insistence upon them, then we are not at home with the attitude of Jesus. . . . We are not to expect an underevaluation, far less disparagement, of the details of the law" (pp. 150, 151, 152). Contrary to Mr. Bourgault, we are bound to the whole of God's law and not just one summary of it.

Mr. Bourgault's suggestions concerning "civil law" are equally misleading with reference to our Confession of Faith. First, to my knowledge, the Confession nowhere recognizes any such separate category of God's law. God's commands in the area of CIVIL relations (e.g., murder, adultery, stealing, false witness) are fully binding today. Again, reading through the Larger Catechism's exposition of the law will show that a multitude of civil matters are included in our present duty as believers (among which, be it noted, is a general prohibition of usury). The standards of the church do not teach that the norms of civil morality have been abrogated, but just the contrary!

What the confession does mention is (sundry judicial laws." By this the Confession refers to the CASE LAW of the OT, as is obvious from the scriptural citations and the common usage of that day (e.g., John Cotton's work, MOSES HIS JUDICIALS, 1636). The case laws illustrate the application of God's moral law in particular cases (e.g., protecting human life by placing a railing around the roof where one entertains guests). With the expiring of the State of Israel, the particular illustrations also pass away (e.g., sloped roofs in America are not used for entertaining guests). However, the confession is careful to remind us that "the general equity" of this illustrations - that is, the underlying moral principle - is still "required" of us. Accordingly, we continue today to distinguish between manslaughter and premeditated murder, as the law instructs (cf. Ex 21:12-13; Deut. 19:4ff). Accordingly, Paul could clinch his moral arguments by appealing to the principle taught in the OT case law (I Cor. 9:8-10, which is cited by the Confession). Thus, contrary to Mr. Bourgault, we are NOT "looking in the wrong place" when we consult the OT on the moral question of usury.

Moreover, the notion of "Christian liberty" has no application to such particular moral issues (e.g., usury) on which Scripture clearly speaks. To practice any sin (any "transgression of the righteous law of God," WCF VI.6) on the pretence of Christian liberty destroys the very intended end of such liberty (WCF XX. 3). Indeed, when the Confession explicitly teaches that "under the new testament, the liberty of Christians is further enlarged," it mentions freedom ONLY from the ceremonial law (XX.1). We are not free from the general equity of the judicial law, much less free in regard to civil morality. Thus, contrary to Mr. Bourgault, believers ought not to leave the decision about usury, for instance, to their own maturity and conscience. Even believers can wound their consciences (WCF XVII. 3; XVIII. 4). In this mature age of the fullness of the Spirit, it is still the LAW which is fulfilled in us (Rom. 8:4). God graciously gives us a new heart, with His law written on it, so that we may obey all His commandments (Jer. 31:33; Ezek. 36:26-27).

In this troubled day of existential and situational morality the church needs to heed its Confession, not trading the full details of God's holy law for confusion.

Greg L. Bahnsen

Assistant Professor of Apologetics and Ethics

Reformed Theological Seminary