

For Whom Was God's Law Intended?

By Dr. Greg Bahnsen

When God promulgated His moral will through the Mosaic law, how much of mankind did He consider accountable to keep that law? From Paul's standpoint the answer was obvious: "Now we know that whatever things the law says, it says to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be stopped and *all the world* may be brought under the judgment of God" (Romans 3:19). God declared His righteous standards to Israel, and through Israel to *all the world*, thereby stopping *every* mouth and bringing all men, Jew and Gentile alike, under judgment. "*Whatever* things the law says," therefore, it says to the whole of mankind. Precisely for this reason Paul could "lay to the charge both of Jews and Greeks that they are all under sin.... There is no distinction, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (vv. 11, 23).

Considering the nature of God and the nature of His righteous standards, the preceding Pauline perspective ought to be self-evident to us as Christians. But we live in a confused day where even the obvious is obscure to many believers. Theological opinions are poorly thought out or accepted with little thought at all. Viewpoints which would have bewildered the apostles are conveyed and readily endorsed as gospel truth in churches and Christian organizations all the time -- including the idea that God's law was never intended for the Gentile world. Such thinking solicits scrutiny.

A Spirit Of Scrutiny

In order to realize a resurgence of full-orbed, life-transforming Christian faith in our land -- a Christian commitment which listens to the whole of God's word, from cover to cover -- we must hope and pray for a general increase in the theological stability and maturity of professing Christians in America. This, in turn, will require God's people to become more responsible in their handling of His holy word and in the way they arrive at their personal theological convictions about what it teaches. To put it briefly, we need a revival of "Berean nobility."

Luke the physician was a traveling companion of the apostle Paul and the author of the book of Acts. In Acts 17:11 Luke records the apostolic commendation of the believers in the city of Berea that, in contrast to the Jews as Thessalonica who resisted "reasoning from the scriptures" (cf. v.2), the Bereans "examined the scriptures daily whether these things [taught by Paul] were so." Understandably, Luke remarks that the Bereans were "more noble" than Paul's opponents at Thessalonica.

The nobility of the Berean attitude and method takes a willingness to overcome intellectual inertia and to resist common preconceptions -- even if they are advanced by a well known or favorite Christian teacher. It fosters the "Protestant spirit" which compares whatever we are told with the infallible teaching of God's word -- something which entails careful reading, hard work and detailed investigation. The noble probing of Berean Bible study will scrutinize shallow and simplistic slogans, aiming to reach clear and faithful Biblical conclusions.

A Slogan to Scrutinize

It would be entirely appropriate to apply the Berean method to a notion which is often voiced, but rarely substantiated -- despite the fact that it is a pivotal premise for determining how much of God's word we should attempt to proclaim and apply to our society today. This notion, which we will soon find to be suspect, is that the moral laws of the Old Testament were intended *only* for the ancient Jews. That is, when God revealed His commandments through Moses, He placed only the Israelites under obligation to the moral demands of those commandments. Though instances abound where this misleading notion is set forth, it was very clearly and recently enunciated in the July/August issue of the *Fundamentalist Journal* (for 1988), in Norman Geisler's article "Should We Legislate Morality?"

Along the way to reaching his conclusion that modern civil legislation should be neither secular nor specifically Christian, Dr. Geisler used the following premise as a stepping stone: "Nowhere in the Bible are Gentiles ever condemned for not keeping the law of Moses." According to him, the Mosaic law was intended only for Israel, and on that basis he categorically declares "God no more holds today's governments accountable to His Divine Law to Israel than present residents of Massachusetts are bound by the Puritan laws at Plymouth." Such an idea finds popularity with many people today for its usefulness in dismissing the obligation of modern civil magistrates to enforce specific scriptural commands which are not to our liking.

But the slogan that God's law was intended only for Israel will not survive Biblical scrutiny. In this article, let us examine Dr. Geisler's claim that "Nowhere in the Bible are Gentiles ever condemned for not keeping the law of Moses." To the contrary, we find that it happened all the time.

It Even Happened Before Moses

One of the most conspicuous illustrations that Gentiles were condemned for breaking the law of Moses comes from a time long before Moses lived or delivered God's law from atop Mount Sinai -- which only drives home the truth that the same moral code published by Moses is clearly known by all men, whether they are exposed to the written books of Moses or not. Even the conduct of Gentiles who lived *prior* to Moses was condemned by God according to the standards which He would later reiterate through Moses.

We see this most dramatically in the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, which the apostle Peter held up as "an example unto those who intend to live in an ungodly manner" (2 Peter 2:6). This was no special case, but an exemplary one. And what did it exemplify? That men -- Gentile men -- who engage in unrighteous, wicked conduct are kept under divine condemnation or punishment (v. 9) and will be utterly destroyed by God's wrath. Peter describes the wicked conduct of the Sodomites whom God destroyed with fire and brimstone as "lawless works" which daily tormented the soul of Abraham's nephew, Lot (v. 8). The same word, "lawless," which is used by Peter is found in the Septuagint (the Greek translation) of Genesis 19:15, where God's angels hastened Lot's family out of Sodom, lest they be destroyed "with the lawlessness of the city."

The Sodomites were condemned for behaving contrary to the LAW -- God's law, of course. They had demanded homosexual relations with the guests staying in Lot's home (Gen. 19:5-9), having given themselves over to fornication and strange flesh (Jude 7). God's law through Moses clearly prohibited homosexual relations as an abomination to God (Leviticus 18:22). God's law specified that those who committed such an abomination shall have "their blood upon them" -- that is, should "surely be put to death" (Leviticus 20:13). And even prior to the promulgation of His law at Sinai, God held the men of Sodom accountable to what His law through Moses later declared. Yet Dr. Geisler says "Nowhere in the Bible are Gentiles ever condemned for not keeping the law of Moses." In fact, they were being condemned for such behavior before Moses was on the scene! As the apostle Paul later wrote, even the Gentiles "know the ordinance of God that those who practice such things are worthy of death" (Romans 1:32). It is precisely "the ordinance [statute] of God" which condemns Gentile sinners.

Gentile Condemnation and Moses

During the historical period when God specifically revealed His statutes through Moses, the Lord clearly declared that He would, at that very time, hold the Gentile tribes of Palestine accountable to the same law Moses brought to the Israelites. That is, Gentiles would be condemned for not keeping the law of Moses.

Consider what we read in Leviticus 18. The chapter begins with God speaking to Israel through Moses and prohibiting the Israelites from doing the kind of things which are done in Egypt and in Canaan: "After the doings of the land of Egypt, wherein you dwelt, you shall not do; and after the doings of the land of Canaan where I will bring you, you shall not do; neither shall you walk in their statutes. You shall do My ordinances..."(vv. 3-4). God then issues a series of specific prohibitions of things done by the Gentile Palestinians. He commands the Israelites that they must not engage in incest, polygamy, adultery, child sacrifice, profaning Jehovah's name, homosexuality, or bestiality (vv. 6-23). The Mosaic law forbade all such conduct and severely punished it.

Immediately following the long list of prohibitions, God's word in Leviticus 18 goes on with these pointed words:

Do not defile yourselves in any of these things for in all these things the nations are defiled which I cast out from before you; and the land is defiled. Therefore, I do visit the iniquity thereof upon it, and the land shall vomit out her inhabitants. You therefore shall keep My statutes and My ordinances, and shall not do any of these abominations ... (for all these abominations have the men of the land done that were before you, and the land is defiled), lest the land vomit you out also when you defile it, even as it vomits out the nation which was before you (vv. 24-28).

Why were the Gentiles which dwelt in the land of Palestine prior to Israel's conquest of the land under the wrath and curse of God? Because they engaged in the abominable actions which God's statutes through Moses condemned. The very law which God was revealing to Israel was *the same law* which concurrently brought divine punishment upon the Gentiles for transgressing. Israel and the Gentiles were under the same moral law, and they both would suffer the *same penalty* for the defilement which comes with violating it -- eviction from the land.

Dr. Geisler's statement that "Nowhere in the Bible are Gentiles ever condemned for not keeping the law of Moses" is oblivious to this quite evident counter-example. God's word is unambiguous about the accountability of the Gentiles to the law of Moses: "because of the wickedness of these nations, Jehovah thy God does drive them out from before you" (Deuteronomy 9:4-5) -- the wickedness which is forbidden to Israel in the Mosaic law (cf. Deuteronomy 12:29-32; 18:9-14).

Gentile Accountability in the Psalms and Prophets

It was characteristic of the Jewish (and later Christian) perspective that the revelation of God's law -- which the Jews identified with the law of Moses -- was not simply a matter of narrow, tribal morality. The Mosaic law was their wisdom in the eyes of the Gentiles (Deuteronomy 4:6-8), and the justice of God's law made Israel a light to the Gentiles (Isaiah 51:4). Because Jehovah created all men and nations, because He was their Governor and Judge, all nations were subject to God's holy word and direction -- and liable to be punished for violating it. God's law was universal in its application. This premise was presupposed by David's desire to speak God's law before the Gentile kings (psalm 119:46) and his declaration that God chastens the nations out of His law (Psalm 94:10-12). According to David, Jehovah "will judge the world with righteousness, and the peoples with equity" (Psalm 98:9).

In Psalm 119:118-119 David did exactly what Dr. Geisler alleges was never done. Geisler's claim is that "Nowhere in the Bible are Gentiles ever condemned for not keeping the law of Moses." However, under inspiration David did not hesitate to condemn "all the wicked of the earth" who "stray from [God's] statutes" (119:118-119). The "law of Jehovah" which Psalm 119 extols cannot credibly be thought to exclude the law of Moses, either the Torah in general (v. 1, etc.) or the moral precepts and statutes in particular (vv. 4-5, etc.), and "all the wicked of the earth" (v. 118) cannot reasonably exclude sinners who are Gentiles. So Geisler's claim stands against David's own words.

The Old Testament conviction that God's law was universal in its demand led J. H. Bavinck to note:

It is striking how frequently the other nations are called upon in the Psalms to recognize and to honor God, and how complete is the witness of the prophets against the nations surrounding Israel. God does not exempt other nations from the claim of His righteousness; he requires their obedience and holds them responsible for their apostasy and degeneration (*An Introduction to the Science of Missions* [Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1960], pp. 12-13).

The universality of God's law was presupposed by Ezra's praise of Artaxerxes for having God's law taught and enforced in lands exceeding the boundaries of Israel: "And whosoever shall not do the law of God and the law of the king, let judgment be executed upon him with all diligence, whether it be unto death or banishment or confiscation of goods or imprisonment" (Ezra 7:14-26). Far from disapprobating this as inappropriate -- on the Geisler hypothesis that Gentiles were no more answerable to the law of Moses than present-day citizens of Massachusetts are accountable to the Puritan laws of Plymouth -- Ezra said "Blessed by Jehovah, the God of our fathers, who has put such thing as this in the king's heart..." (v. 27).

The universality of God's law was presupposed in the preaching and writing of the Old Testament prophets. Born along by the Holy Spirit (cf. 2 Peter 1:21) the prophets longed for the Gentile nations to turn unto, hear and submit to God's law ("the Torah") as it would be proclaimed from Jerusalem to all the world (Isaiah 2:2-3). The law of Jehovah was, accordingly, recognized as the standard by which God would "judge among the nations [Gentiles]: and bring them to the way of international peace (v. 4). Isaiah's authoritative declaration here cannot be squared with Dr. Geisler's idea that responsibility to the Mosaic law of God was quarantined from the Gentiles. Nor can it be squared with the denunciation of Gentile sins by the Old Testament prophets, for they understood the wisdom of God's word that "righteousness exalts a nation, but sin is a disgrace to *any* people" (Proverbs 14:34). The Jews well understood that the standard which defined sin was the law revealed through Moses (as we later see in Paul's words "I had not known sin, except through the law," Romans 7:7). Accordingly, God's prophets did not hesitate to hold the Gentiles all around them responsible to this same standard. Consider just a few examples.

The prophet Amos opened his prophecy with a series of divine indictments ("for three transgression, yes four") against the Gentile nations which surrounded Judah (Amos 1:3-2:3) -- represented by Damascus, Gaza, Tyre, Edom, Ammon, Moab. In each case the Gentiles were condemned for brutality and cruelty (which in itself transgresses God's holiness by indulging in the malice which the law of Moses forbids at, e.g., Leviticus 19:14, 17:18; Deuteronomy 27:18). Notice three concrete illustrations. Amos condemned the Gentiles (1:6) for engaging in slave trafficking, which is forbidden in the law of Moses (Exodus 21:16; Deuteronomy 24:7). The law of Moses grants special protections to pregnant women (e.g., Exodus 21:22-23), yet the Gentiles violate this moral principle by ripping up pregnant women, for which they came under prophetic condemnation (Amos 1:13). Amos likewise condemned the Gentiles for the defining of a corpse, and in so doing disobeying the teaching of the Mosaic law that even the bodies of condemned criminals are to be treated with respect (Deuteronomy 21:23).

The prophet Nahum preached against the wickedness of the mighty city of Nineveh, the capital of the Assyrian empire. His indictment included denouncing the specific sin of witchcraft (Nahum 3:4) which the law of Moses repeatedly condemned many years before (Exodus 22:18; Leviticus 19:21; 20:6,27). Similarly, in the prophecy of Habakkuk we read a moral indictment of the Babylonians. Chapter 2 of the prophecy details the sins of these Gentiles: dishonesty, exploitation, violence, debauchery, idolatry. But the prophecy contains noteworthy, specific condemnations of things which are defined as sinful by the law of Moses. For instance, Habakkuk censured the Gentile practice of making graven images (2:18-19) which is forbidden in the Mosaic law (e.g., Exodus 20:4-6; Leviticus 19:4; 26:1; Deuteronomy 4:16; 27:15). Another specific sin calls for special attention. Habakkuk condemned the Babylonians for violating the Mosaic law in the

particular matter of pledges (2:6; cf. Exodus 22:25-27; Deuteronomy 24:6, 10-13). Geisler claims that "Nowhere in the Bible are Gentiles ever condemned for not keeping the law of Moses," but the remark is not very convincing after reading the prophecies of Amos, Nahum, or Habakkuk (among others).

Gentile Lawlessness Condemned in the New Testament

Continuing in the spirit of the Bereans, we want to examine the scriptures of the New Testament as well, wondering whether it is safe to subscribe to Dr. Geisler's published opinion that "Nowhere in the Bible are Gentiles ever condemned for not keeping the law of Moses." The preaching and ministry of John the Baptist belie such an idea. For instance, in Mark 6:18 John explicitly condemned the Gentile, Herod, for his violation of the law of Moses, in particular for transgressing the Mosaic law's restrictions on the degrees of acceptable marriage. Herod Antipas was a Gentile (an Idumaeon) who married the wife of his half-brother, Philip. John the Baptist openly confronted this sin by declaring "it is not lawful for you to have your brother's wife" -- thus *doing* the very thing that Geisler says is *never* done in the Bible, namely condemning a Gentile for not following the law of Moses. John's words are pointed that Herod's behavior is contrary to what is "lawful," despite the fact that he was a Gentile.

Dr. Geisler's claim that "Nowhere in the Bible are Gentiles ever condemned for not keeping the law of Moses" does not comport with the words of the apostles when they described the epitome of a wicked Gentile ruler -- namely, "the Beast" spoken of in the book of Revelation. Here John tells us of a Gentile tyrant whom the Lord will punish for trying to replace God's law with his own (13:16-17; cf. Deuteronomy 6:8). The exact point of Paul's condemnation of this Gentile ruler was that he behaved as a "lawless" man (2 Thessalonians 2:3 -- the very essence of sin, 1 John 3:4). It is precisely this which ushers him in to conflict with those who "keep the commandments of God" (Revelation 12:17; 14:12). God's judgment rests upon the man of sin, despite the fact that he is a Gentile, because he will not keep the law of God -- which both John and Paul recognize as revealed through Moses.

A Slippery Escape

We have found that a detailed reading of God's word turns up many instances where Gentiles are held accountable to the moral obligations of the Mosaic law revealed to Israel. Dr. Geisler's key premise is thereby refuted, and he has no scriptural, theologically reliable basis for dismissing modern civil magistrates from the relevant dictates of Biblical law.

However, Dr. Geisler might imagine that he can slip out of this refutation of his position. How would he try to do so? By claiming that each of the illustrations offered above can be accounted for in a different way -- in a way which does not place the Gentiles under the specially revealed law of Moses, but merely under natural revelation. Geisler would attempt to explain away each case by alleging that what the Gentiles, but simply the application of laws from *Natural revelation* (which in these particular cases happen to coincide with and overlap the laws of special revelation).

Of course the answer to this line of thinking is simple and plain: Namely, *all of the Mosaic* laws (in their moral demands) are reflected in general revelation. The moral obligations communicated through nature and conscience are *identical* with the moral obligations communicated through special revelation. The ethical overlap of the two is total. Scripture never suggests that God has *two sets* of ethical standards (or two moral codes), the one being an abridgment of the other. Rather, He has one set of commandments which are communicated to men in *two ways*: through Scripture and through nature. Therefore, any of the Biblical laws which are applied to the Gentile world will, in the nature of the case, *also* be laws which are known from general revelation.

This observation nullifies Geisler's attempt to escape refutation. His answer to the counter-illustrations is simply a trivial truth, one which applies across the board to *all* of God's laws. And because all of them can be found in Scripture and in general revelation, all of them may be legitimately applied to Gentiles of all times and places. "Now we know that whatever things the law says, it says to those who are under the law so that *every mouth* may be stopped and *all the world* may be brought under the judgment of God" (Romans 3:19).

To save his position Geisler has only one tack to take. He must demonstrate two things: (1) that *not all* of the moral laws of Scripture can be learned from natural revelation (i.e., that the two revelations do not totally overlap each other in ethics), and (2) that *each* of the illustrations offered in the article above can be justified from natural revelation (in a way that the other moral laws of Scripture cannot).

In order to accomplish this task, Dr. Geisler would first need to become clear about how *any* moral obligation is learned and justified from nature. He has not explained how this is done, nor has he ever done it. But until we can be satisfied that there is a general, objective, and predictable method by which moral obligations could be proven from nature, we can have no reliable way of evaluating Dr. Geisler's particular attempt to demonstrate that the illustrations previously offered in this article can be justified from nature (apart from Biblical revelation). Merely saying so does not make it so.

Just here Dr. Geisler's attempt to escape refutation becomes especially slippery. He must take *descriptive* observations about people or the natural world as premises and somehow use them to prove *prescriptive* judgments about how people should behave. That is, he must argue from what

is the case (naturally) to what ought to be the case (ethically) -- thereby committing the infamous "naturalistic fallacy." Just what kind of argumentation would Dr. Geisler utilize to prove from nature alone that homosexuality, or idolatry, or adultery, etc. are immoral? Trying to get specific answers to such crucial questions from Dr. Geisler is like trying to nail jello to the wall.