

"Cross-Examination: The Unchanging Character of God's Law-Part 1"

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Each month the "Cross-Examination" column presents a summary statement of a Reformed and Reconstructionist conviction in theology or ethics, and then offers brief answers to common questions, objections or confusions which people have about that belief. Send issues or questions you would like addressed by Dr. Bahnsen to the editor.

We Believe

Scripture teaches us that the standards of moral right and wrong are not arbitrary, changing, or relative to different times and places. Christianity maintains that there are ethical absolutes whose authority is not culturally or personally qualified. This outlook is diametrically at odds with the spirit of our age. The prevailing opinion is that every opinion in ethics and every value judgment must be relative to one's circumstances, chosen ends, desires or feelings. There are no universal and immutable principles of right and wrong, according to the popular thinking of our day. Thus everybody is free to do whatever they wish, and nobody has the right to tell them otherwise.

Sadly, some Christians who would oppose this point of view have nevertheless fallen prey to the same kind of thinking on a more limited scale. Such believers maintain that there are absolute standards in ethics which are revealed in the Bible, but then turn around and teach that these standards have in some measure changed from the Old to the New Testaments. Some of the things commanded or forbidden in the Old Testament are taken as no longer binding upon us because they were revealed in the Old Testament. The assumption is that God has instituted a new regime of ethical values and directives, so that an Old Testament command is not obligatory now unless it has been repeated in the New Testament. Accordingly, the principles of right and wrong are to some degree changing -- to some degree relative to the Old Testament culture which originally received them.

Scripture teaches us, however, that the standards of moral right and wrong which God reveals in His word are a reflection of His own moral character, a character which is not changing or relative to different times and places. The original summary of God's moral demands was written by the very finger of God (Exodus 31:18). Like God its author, "The law of the Lord is perfect," said the Psalmist (19:7). Often enough, an Old Testament command is explained or authorized simply by God simply "I am Jehovah" (e.g., Leviticus 19:18). To know and serve Him is precisely to live in the way which matches His personal character -- the way which is set down in His commandments.

The same perspective is found in the New Testament: "And hereby we know that we know Him, if we keep His commandments" (1 John 2:3). The law of God shows us the meaning of His holy character in day to day life on a created level. Thus Peter taught that "as children of obedience..., like as He who called you is holy, you also be holy in all manner of living; because it stands written, 'You shall be holy because I am holy'" (1 Peter 1:14-16, quoting Leviticus 19:2). Paul taught that the law of God shares His holiness: "So that the law is holy, and the commandment holy, and righteous, and good" (Romans 7:12). Jesus preached that we should be "perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect" (Matthew 5:48). The standard of right and wrong is found in God's own nature.

And God reveals to us that His nature is not variable, fickle, arbitrary or changing. "God is light and in Him is no darkness at all" (1 John 1:5) -- which is why those who walk in ethical darkness cannot have fellowship with Him (v. 6). James speaks of God as "the Father of lights with whom there can be no variation, neither shadow which is cast by turning" (1:17). We know that God is always the same in character and purpose: "I am the Lord; I change not" (Malachi 3:6). God knows all things -- "His understanding is infinite" (Psalm 147:5); and there is nothing that He does not know (cf. Hebrews 4:13; Acts 15:18). Consequently God knows all the factors which affect moral

judgments, whether past, present, or future. He knows exactly what is right for people in all times and places, and He knows His own righteousness perfectly. Thus there is never an occasion or reason for God to change His mind about what He declares to be good and evil.

When Jesus came into this world to die for transgressions against God's law, He did not come in order to change the standards of right and wrong, but rather to acknowledge their unalterable authority and submit to the penalty exacted by God for departing from them. It was "necessary" for Him to offer up Himself as a substitutionary sacrifice for sin (Hebrew 9:23-26); the law's demand could not be ignored or laid aside.

Jesus did not have a moral character different from that of God as revealed in the Old Testament. He was the very Word of God (John 1:1), the exact representation of God's nature (Hebrews 1:3). He did not come to disagree in the slightest measure with what God had revealed. Rather, "Jesus answered and said unto them, 'Truly, truly, I say unto you, The Son can do nothing of himself, but what he sees the Father doing; for whatsoever things He does, these the Son also does in like manner.... I can do nothing of myself: as I hear, I judge; and my judgment is righteous because I seek not my own will, but the will of Him who sent me'" (John 5:19, 30).

Accordingly, Scripture shows us that the coming of Christ did not change or abrogate the moral absolutes which had previously been revealed in the law of the Old Testament. Lest anybody get that idea, Jesus one day declared: "Do not begin to think that I came to abrogate the Law or the Prophets; I did not come to abrogate, but to fulfill. For truly I say unto you, until heaven and earth pass away, until everything has happened, the smallest letter or stroke shall not pass away from the law. Therefore, whosoever shall break one of these least commandments and shall teach men to do so shall be called least in the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 5:17-19).

The same standards of right and wrong which were promulgated in the Old Testament continue to be standards of right and wrong in the New Testament age as well. Indeed, the moral demands of the New Covenant believer are not less than those of the Old Covenant believer, but even greater. This perspective is foundational to the Christian's witness to the world that there are unchanging moral absolutes to which God holds all men accountable.

In this column and the next, we will attempt to answer some of the questions and challenges which are commonly directed at the Reformed/Reconstructionist view of God's unchanging moral demand as rooted in His own immutable and holy character.

Examination

Question: But there are obviously laws revealed in the Old Testament which nobody maintains should be followed literally today -- like laws about sacrifices, the priesthood, and the temple. If God's character is unchanging, why have these kinds of laws from Him now been changed?

Answer: The Bible itself distinguishes between commands which reflect God's essential moral character and those which reflect His free and gracious choice to redeem sinners. The command, "Thou shalt not steal," is not a matter of divine choice; it is morally necessary as reflecting the holiness of justice of God. It would contradict God's very character, if stealing were not prohibited; this is essential to God being who He is. But there is no inherent divine necessity that God save sinners. God's purpose to redeem those who have violated His holy character is a matter of the free and gracious exercise of His will. It is not essential to being God to save us, but the exercise of His mercy.

Thus directions which God has revealed for securing redemption -- directions for priesthood, temple and sacrifice -- have a different nature than laws expressing His holiness and justice. The sacrificial laws (for instance) have a relative and historically variable character. Otherwise the declaration "I desire faithful love, not sacrifice" (Hosea 6:6) would not make sense. The directions pertaining to the redemptive ritual of the Old Testament were foreshadows of the work of Christ to come (cf. Col. 2:17; Heb. 10:1) and were intended to be laid aside once Christ accomplished what they anticipated. The historical work of Christ has put this system of ordinances out of gear (Eph. 2:15), but has done nothing to remove the unjust and impure character of theft, murder, adultery, etc.

Further Investigation

If you would like to look further into the subject of moral absolutes and God's unchanging law, you can order the taped lecture, "The Immutability of God's Commandments," from Covenant Tape Ministry, 24198 Ash Court, Auburn, CA 95603. It was originally delivered to the annual meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society, showing how dispensationalism cannot effectively argue against situational ethics.