

"Cross-Examination: The Unchanging Character of God's Law-Part 2"

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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

As we saw in the last column, Scripture teaches us that God's holy and unchanging character is revealed to us in the requirements of His law. God's own self-revelation provides moral absolutes which are not variable, changing or relative to particular times, places or cultures. The law declares a universal and immutable standard of moral right and wrong. Accordingly, Jesus did not come into this world to oppose or cancel the moral demands of God's previously revealed law, but rather to submit to its required penalty in order to save law-breakers like ourselves. By His own declaration, we believe that not the slightest jot or tittle will pass away from the law of God until earth passes away -- in which case those who teach the breaking of even the least commandment will be judged as least in the kingdom of heaven (Matthew 5:17-19). We maintain a position of moral absolutism. God does not change His mind about righteousness and evil, and Christ did not come to abrogate what God had said, but rather to reinforce and honor it in His own life, teaching and redemptive ministry.

Jesus taught that "Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God" (Matthew 4:4) -- which is hardly the perspective of someone who intended to abrogate the word which God had revealed earlier to His people. Likewise, the Apostle Paul wrote that "every scripture" -- referring particularly to the Old Testament -- is inspired of God and thus "profitable for instruction in righteousness so that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly furnished unto every good work" (2 Timothy 3:16-17). Neither Paul nor Jesus aimed to subtract from the scriptures of the Old Testament, much less to do away with the moral absolutes which revealed the holiness of God there.

Examination

Question: There are laws in the Old Testament which are not part of the redemptive system (sacrifices, temple, priesthood) and yet are not literally followed today -- like the requirement of placing a railing around the roof of your house and not chopping wood with a loose axhead. Are these still binding really?

Answer: Yes, we say that such laws are binding in terms of the underlying moral principle which they intended to illustrate and teach. God knows how best to communicate to us and does not always teach about righteousness in generalized, summary or abstract principles. He often gives applications of the principle to make it very clear what He means. But He does not expect us to be dull and fail to "get the point." God thus explained that respect for human life (honoring the moral principle, "Thou shalt not kill") extends to taking reasonable safety precautions: for instance, putting a railing around your roof (in a culture where guests were entertained on the flat rooftop) or checking to be sure your axhead is tightly secured (in situations where such a tool is going to be used). Even when you do not live in the very same culture as Old Testament Israel or find yourself in the same situation as someone chopping wood, the law of God still applies to you -- applies to you in terms of the principle which was illustrated. Its application to you might be seen in the need for putting a fence around your backyard swimming pool or checking the adequacy of your car's brakes.

What we have said here about the Old Testament law is pertinent to the moral instruction of the New Testament as well. Jesus told the story of the "Good Samaritan" and ended the lesson by saying, "Go and do likewise" (Luke 10:37). It would be extremely dull and spiritually immature to think that Jesus meant that all of us are literally to go out to the Jericho road with our donkeys and flasks of oil in order to assist travelers who are mugged there. Jesus gave an illustration of the moral principle which we are to follow -- just as the Mosaic law offered illustrations and applications, from the culture of that day, for the moral principles which God expects people in all cultures to emulate.

Question: Aren't there passages in the New Testament which teach that the entire law of Moses has now been abrogated?

Answer: If there were, then we would all face the awkward theological problem that the New Testament contradicts itself -- gives evidence of internal incoherence in its teaching.

Jesus declared that not the least commandment from the Old Testament could be broken with impunity (Matthew 5:18-19). James taught that we are not permitted to stumble at even one point of the law (James 2:10). According to Paul, every single Old Testament scripture is authoritative for Christian ethics today (2 Timothy 3:16-17). He repeatedly speaks of the goodness and holiness of the Old Testament law (e.g., 1 Timothy 1:8; Romans 7:12).

Therefore, if the New Testament is also thought to teach that the Old Testament law has been entirely rescinded, that none of its commandments is obligatory as such, then the New Testament contradicts itself -- from which fact you could prove anything you wish.

Question: Well, what about Galatians 3:23-25, where Paul says that the Mosaic law was a tutor to bring us unto Christ, and that we are no longer under that tutor's discipline?

Answer: In Galatians 3 Paul is not speaking narrowly of the Mosaic moral demands ("the law"), but rather refers to "the Law" as the Mosaic administration of the covenant of grace. Notice the contrast between the Abrahamic covenant and the Mosaic covenant in verses 15-19. In historical context, we know that Paul's particular concern was with Mosaic laws pertaining to "living like Jews" -- circumcision and rituals (cf. 2:14; 4:10; 5:2).

What was distinctive about the Mosaic administration of God's covenant was not the principle of salvation by faith (3:21-22), but rather those laws which ceremonially prefigured the object of faith, Jesus Christ and His saving work. "Before [the object] of faith came" into the world (v. 23; cf. 4:4), these ceremonial laws were a teaching device -- a tutor which pointed "unto Christ," teaching "that we might be justified by faith" (v. 24). The moral laws of Moses did not point to the doctrine of justification or to the saving object of faith in this fashion at all, but the provisions for sacrifice, temple and priesthood did. That to which the Galatians were tempted to return is called by Paul weak and beggarly "rudiments" (4:9) -- the same word he uses in Colossians 2:17, 20 for regulations which foreshadowed the person and work of Christ. The restorative or ceremonial laws of Moses were thus a tutor that taught God's people in their minority about the way of salvation and the coming Savior. But now that Christ has come, "we are no longer under a tutor" (Galatians 3:25).

It is evident, therefore, that what Paul was saying in Galatians 3-4 is that New Covenant believers are no longer under the Mosaic administration of the covenant of grace -- no longer bound to the ceremonies and rituals which, in former days, foreshadowed the person and work of Christ. By no stretch of the imagination does this imply that Christians are free from the *moral* instruction of the Old Testament. The very reason Paul gives for the moral authority of those traits called "the fruit of the Spirit" is that "against such there is no law" (5:23).

Further Investigation

A six lecture series entitled "The Theonomic Approach to Ethics" provides further instruction about the law of God and its continuing validity today, including one lesson entitled "Has God Changed His Mind" and another entitled "How is the Old Testament Old?" It can be acquired www.cmfnow.com.