

Introduction

“How do you use the law of God?”

Before discovering the riches of the Reformed faith, I would not have known how to answer that question. Frankly, I wouldn't have understood the question at all; instead, I would find myself asking: “By ‘law’ do you mean the sacrifices of the Old Testament or the Ten Commandments? And what do you mean by ‘use’? Since the law was given through Moses and grace and truth came through Jesus Christ (John 1:17), why would we use the law if it only condemns? Leave the law in the Old Testament where it belongs.” I suspect that most professing Christians today, if asked the same question, would respond with the same confusion.

As I would later come to discover, such an attitude toward the law likens it to a primitive relic kept behind museum glass, left to gather dust with the passage of time. What John Newton said of the church in his day could easily be said of the church in our own: “Ignorance of the nature and design of the law is at the bottom of most religious mistakes.”¹ Think of it—what is self-righteousness but a woefully low view of what the law

1 John Newton, *The Works of John Newton* (Edinburgh, UK: Banner of Truth Trust, 2015), 240.

really requires? What is a lack of assurance of salvation but forgetting that our acceptance with God is not based on our obedience to the law? What is backsliding and loose living but a failure to see that the law is not contrary to our joy but the means whereby we experience true joy (Ps. 119:35, 47, 143)? So many of our problems are traceable to ignorance of the law's meaning and purpose.

Reformed theology offers a positive (and threefold!) answer to this important question. John Calvin, in his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, introduces the reader to what the Reformed tradition calls “the three uses of the law.”² By “law” Calvin was speaking narrowly of the Moral Law, which is most clearly summarized in the Ten Commandments.³ Of course, this does not mean that Calvin, or the Reformed tradition as a whole, believes there is no benefit in studying broader Old Testament laws.⁴ They are anything but useless. They hold tremendous instructive value even today; they were written for our instruction (1 Cor. 10:11). Nevertheless, the Moral Law stands alone in its continuance as a perpetual rule of life for believers even after Christ's death and resurrection. The question is—why? Are Christians being selectively ethical, choosing to follow only the laws that they like and casting

2 John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, transl. Henry Beveridge (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2008), 2.7.6-17

3 Or, as the Westminster Shorter Catechism (WSC) puts it, the Moral Law is “summarily comprehended in the Ten Commandments” (see Questions 40 and 41). From this point forward, the terms “Ten Commandments,” “Moral Law,” and “law” will be used interchangeably.

4 The Reformed tradition has historically distinguished between the Moral, Civil, and Ceremonial Laws of the Old Testament. The Moral Law is found in the Ten Commandments; the Civil and Ceremonial Laws are found throughout the rest of the Old Testament and are specific and situational applications of the Moral Law. This threefold division of the law will be clarified in chapter one. For a modern defense of this idea, see: Philip S. Ross, *From the Finger of God: The Biblical and Theological Basis for the Threefold Division of the Law* (Fearn: Christian Focus, 2011).

aside all the ones they don't? This is a common objection to the Christian faith and one for which believers should have a ready answer (1 Pet. 3:15). Chapter one will tackle this issue head-on by defining the three basic *types* of law, and explain why the Moral Law remains binding upon all men and the Ceremonial and Civil Laws do not.

Chapter two will unpack each of the Ten Commandments, using the Westminster Shorter and Larger Catechisms' expositions of the commandments as a guide.⁵ Before we can even speak about *how* to use the Moral Law, we first need to know what it is and the breadth and depth of what it requires. This is the point at which Jesus corrected the shallow interpretation of the scribes and Pharisees. They mistakenly assumed that they knew God's law exhaustively and so obeyed it perfectly. Together with the rich young man they thought, "All these I have kept" (Matt. 19:20). But when Jesus examined the Moral Law and exposed their pride and hypocrisy, then and only then could the law begin to do its good work of bringing Christ's hearers to a knowledge of their sin and their need of His perfect righteousness. We need to interpret the Ten Commandments the way that Jesus did. Many professing believers are indeed familiar with the *letter* of the Ten Commandments—they can recite a handful of commandments from memory—but far fewer have truly grasped and meditated upon the *spiritual* nature of the law. This chapter will aim to take the reader deeper, to show that there is more to the law than at first meets the eye.

The remaining three chapters will examine each of the three uses of the Moral Law and how it functions like a mirror, muzzle, and map.⁶ When used properly, the law brings

5 The reader will want to keep Larger Catechism Q. 99, with its eight rules for rightly interpreting the Ten Commandments, close at hand as they work their way through this chapter.

6 These three images are not unique to me. See Phil Ryken's book, *Written in Stone* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2010), 27, where he acknowledges

conviction, protection, and direction. We *need* the law to reveal our sin, to restrain sin in us and in our neighbors lest society completely unravel, and to help us answer the age old question, “How do I live a life that is pleasing to the Lord?” For a generation that struggles with aimlessness and lacks a sense of purpose, the law acts as man’s true north, pointing us straight to the will of God for our lives. You will notice in these chapters that I am deeply indebted to men like John Calvin, Anthony Burgess, Samuel Bolton, Stephen Tyng, and, of a more recent vintage, Ernest Kevan. Their wisdom and insights have inspired a deeper love and appreciation of the law of God within me. This book would not be in your hands were it not for these men. As I pass along just a handful of the many gems I have mined from their writings, my prayer is that their words will have the same profound effect upon you as they have had on me.

My ultimate aim in this book is to convince you that the believer’s growth in grace will not be inhibited but enhanced by a careful study of the Moral Law. Many, for fear of appearing legalistic, have avoided studying the law altogether. Others, when they do encounter the imperatives of Scripture, will rush to say, “But of course none of us have or can obey this command perfectly. But don’t worry, Jesus did. He kept the law for you.” Soundbites like this, though true as far as they go, effectively drain any sense of moral oughtness from the command in question. The hearer is left floating in an ethical no-man’s land, wondering, “So what *am* I supposed to do now?” The good news of what Christ has done does not negate our responsibility to do what God commands. Imperatives do indeed drive us back to the indicative of Christ’s person and

that he heard these three images from another preacher (who I expect heard them from another preacher before him, who heard them from a preacher before him ...).

work, and yet they are no less imperative. God commands His redeemed people to strive for holiness (Heb. 12:14). Many of us have been conditioned to think that the law itself is bad. This book will argue just the opposite—the law of God is good and is the key to a truly blessed life when used in the way that God purposes—not as a means of earning eternal life, but of bringing us to Christ for our justification and conforming us into His glorious image through the power of the Spirit in our sanctification (Rom. 8:29). We should not wince, but rejoice over God’s law.

Instead of seeing the Ten Commandments like an antiquated museum piece, I hope that you will view them more like a cherished cast-iron skillet that has been passed down through the family—something that was made long ago, but, if handled properly, will prove to be more and more useful as time goes on. May the Lord through this study cause us all to say together with David, “Oh how I love your law! It is my meditation all the day” (Ps. 119:97).

What Is the Law?

“Okay, so let me get this straight. You’re saying that the Bible teaches that sex outside of monogamous, heterosexual marriage is a sin. Doesn’t the Bible also say you shouldn’t eat shellfish and pork? Do you mean to tell me you’ve never eaten a hotdog, bacon, or a (Maryland) crab cake? And what about that shirt you’re wearing? Unless that’s 100 percent cotton, the Bible says you’re in sin because Leviticus 19:19 says you’re not supposed to wear clothes made of two kinds of material. Does that *not* strike you as hypocritical? And what about all the places in the Old Testament where people were stoned for their ‘sin’? Why don’t Christians stone people now if they think they’re so sinful? Do you think I should be stoned?”

If you haven’t been on the business end of a machine-gun interrogation like this before, chances are you know someone who has. If believers go into such a conversation without a firm grasp of the meaning and application of the law of God, questions like these will be particularly jarring to their faith. They may think, “Maybe they have a point. Why do I follow some of God’s commands but not all of them? Could it be that

I have been too closed-minded on this issue? Why have I never thought about this before?” The time to start thinking through the law of God is now, not in the middle of a barrage of “what-about” questions. To that end, this chapter will define the three types of law in Scripture and explain why one type continues to serve as a permanent rule of obedience for all men and the other two do not.

Three Types of Law

The word “law” is used in a wide variety of ways in Scripture. The Hebrew word *torah*, which means “teaching” and is typically translated “law,” occurs hundreds of times in the Old Testament. Sometimes it refers to the entirety of God’s special revelation (Ps. 1:2, 19:7), other times it refers to the Old Testament as a period of time (Matt. 5:17; Luke 16:16), and at other times more narrowly to the five books of Moses (Gen.–Deut., cf. Luke 24:44; John 1:45, 12:34; 1 Cor. 9:9). In two noteworthy places in the prophets, *torah* even refers to the good news of the gospel going forth from Jerusalem and extending its saving influence to all nations:

“Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord,
to the house of the God of Jacob,
that he may teach us his ways
and that we may walk in his paths.”
For out of Zion shall go forth the law,
and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem
(Isa. 2:3, cf. Micah 4:2).

Of all the New Testament writers, the Apostle Paul uses the term “law” (*nomos*) and its derivatives (lawful, lawfully, etc.) more than any other writer. In fact, Paul’s usages in the books of Romans and Galatians alone account for almost half of all usages in the New Testament. The biggest challenge of interpreting Paul is trying to understand what *kind* of law

he is talking about in any given context. For example, in Romans 3:20, Paul uses “law” to refer to the Ceremonial, Civil, and Moral Laws collectively in order to stress that man can in no way be justified by his own obedience.¹ In Romans 7:25, “law” refers to the sinful, fleshly principle against which Paul wrestles and contends in his inner man. It’s shorthand for remaining sin. Then in Romans 8:2, Paul speaks of a “law of the Spirit of life” and a “law of sin and death,” which refer to the rules or standards by which one lives their life, only to shift gears in verse 3 to say that God, through the sending of His Son, accomplished what the *Moral Law* could not do due to our sinful flesh—it could not serve as the basis of our right standing before God.

Admittedly, trying to keep the many uses of “law” straight in one’s mind can be a dizzying task, even to the most careful reader of Scripture. The Scottish preacher John Colquhoun, however, helps us to cut through some of this confusion. Colquhoun referred to these various usages of law (references to Scripture itself, the Old Testament as an era, a spiritual principle, etc.) as the “unrestricted sense” of law—when the term is being used to speak of something other than a divine precept or command. The “restricted or limited sense” of law, he writes:

is employed to express the rule which God has prescribed to His rational creatures in order to direct and oblige them to the right performance of all their duties to Him. Or in other words, it is used to signify the declared will of God, directing and obliging mankind to do that which pleases Him, and to abstain from what displeases Him.²

1 William Hendriksen, *Exposition of Paul’s Epistle to the Romans*, vol. 2. New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, Mich: Baker Book House, 1980), 124.

2 John Colquhoun, *The Law and the Gospel* (Grand Rapids, MI: Reformation Heritage Books, 2023), 9.

The Ceremonial, Civil, and Moral Laws all fall under this restricted sense of law. In each, the Lord commands His people to do certain things and forbids them to do others. The content of the commands and rationales behind them differ, but they are alike in that they communicate the duties God requires of man.

The Ceremonial Law

Made to Be a Shadow

The Ceremonial Law regulated the worship of God's people in the Old Testament period. These laws governed everything from the consecration of priests (Lev. 8), the fashioning of tabernacle and temple furnishings (Exod. 25–30), and the necessary steps for offering right sacrifices (Lev. 1–7). The rites and ceremonies of the Ceremonial Law were all typological, meaning they foreshadowed the ministry of Christ and had no power in and of themselves to save the one who made the offering. Hebrews 10:1-4 makes this very point:

For since the law has but a shadow of the good things to come instead of the true form of these realities, it can never, by the same sacrifices that are continually offered every year, make perfect those who draw near. Otherwise, would they not have ceased to be offered, since the worshipers, having once been cleansed, would no longer have any consciousness of sins? But in these sacrifices there is a reminder of sins every year. For it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins.

The writer of Hebrews argues that the sacrifices of the Old Testament were made to be provisional, not permanent; they were shadows, not the source or substance of salvation. Had the blood of bulls and goats been the permanent solution to Israel's sin problem, why then did they need to be offered every year? Once should have been enough. Moreover, if the sacrifices