

Old Testament Law in the Church

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Introduction

The Old Testament is a major portion of the Bible. These thirty-nine books, composed over a period of 1500 years, represent approximately seventy-seven percent of Scripture. Like the New Testament, the Holy Spirit inspired each book. As such, the doctrines presented in these pages are the very Word of God.

Many people, however, pay little attention to the Old Testament. The long lists of genealogies, strange rituals, and ancient wars seem far removed from the modern, western world. Christians today often view the Law of Moses as irrelevant. During the last hundred years, the traditional link between the Bible and Christian ethics has been seriously challenged and flatly repudiated.¹

Most theologians throughout history, however, have considered the Mosaic Law to be very important. The purpose of this paper is to explore the role of Old Testament Law in the church.

Historical Background

The early New Testament church consisted of Jews, proselytes, and Samaritans. Faith in Jesus Christ did not clash with obeying the Mosaic Law; many Christians were also devout Jews (Acts 21:20).

The conversion of uncircumcised gentiles raised important questions about the Mosaic Law. Some felt circumcision was necessary for salvation, but the church quickly realized that full conversion to Judaism was unnecessary for salvation. The church also realized that the Law was, in some sense, still relevant (1 Cor 7:19).

New Testament authors emphasized different themes but affirmed the same basic view concerning the Law. They understood that no one can obey the Law perfectly or earn salvation through good works. They also agreed that obedience was now possible through the Spirit, that good works were the natural result of God's grace, and that believers should obey the moral norms of the Law.²

There is some tension, however, regarding the on-going validity of the Law of Moses. This is especially evident in Paul's writings. At times, Paul appears to advocate the abolition of the Law, while at other times he favors its observance.³

Schreiner notes that the explanations for this situation run the entire spectrum from radical discontinuity to almost total continuity between the two covenants. Marcion (ca. AD 85-160) rejected the Old Testament altogether, but the church opposed this drastic position. A less radical example of discontinuity is seen among Lutheran scholarship (e.g. Rudolph Bultmann) and some forms of dispensational theology.

Reformed theology upholds moderate continuity. The two covenants are continuous in principle while still recognizing their differences in salvation history. The theonomist movement, however, supports radical continuity and the enactment of Old Testament Law and penalties by modern nations.⁴

Schreiner believes that Paul saw the Mosaic covenant as fulfilled in Christ and no longer in force. The Mosaic Law was still the Word of God, but it no longer functioned in the same way.

¹ Walter C. Kaiser, *Toward Old Testament Ethics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1983), 39-56.

² Thomas R. Schreiner, *The Law and Its Fulfillment* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1993), 240.

³ Schreiner, *The Law and Its Fulfillment*, 240, 243.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 243-44.

This shift in the covenants explains why the apostles did not apply the Law to the church or the Roman Empire because the church is not a civil entity.

While Schreiner feels that one should not simply transpose Old Testament laws onto modern states, one should not ignore them either. For example, Paul creatively applied the principles of the Law in the life of the church; he justified excommunication in language borrowed from the Old Testament (cf. 1 Cor 5:13, Deut 17:7). The situation is clearly more complex than simply opting for discontinuity or total continuity.⁵

Interpretive Frameworks

The debate between continuity and discontinuity can lead to rigid interpretive frameworks. Traditionally, Reformed theologians divide Old Testament laws into three categories: moral, civil, and ceremonial.⁶ While there is some consensus about the status of the moral and ceremonial laws, the current debate concerns the applicability of the civil laws.

Theonomists, like Greg Bahnsen, consider Old Testament laws to be binding on modern society unless modified by further revelation.⁷ This position is based on the immutability of God's character and Jesus' explicit teaching (Matt. 5:17-20). They agree that the ceremonial laws are fulfilled in Christ but uphold the moral and civil laws as the perfect model for social justice. They are usually postmillennialists who see the Law as the basis for a Christian millennium that combines church and state.⁸

Friend and foe alike are quick to acknowledge theonomists for some helpful contributions. Old Testament Law confronts Christians with God's priorities and opposes the spirit of secular humanism, autonomy, and antinomianism so prevalent in modern society. Theonomists have also challenged many evangelicals to come to grips with the issue of properly applying God's Law in modern society.⁹

Intrusionists, like Meredith Kline, support discontinuity. They feel that ethical practices more properly associated with the Messianic kingdom of God have "intruded" in certain ways into the laws of ancient Israel. They argue that the Mosaic social and political laws are not applicable today because they were specially tailored for ancient Israel.¹⁰

They are quick to point out certain weaknesses in the theonomist position. Waltke rightly notes that Bahnsen's thesis is self-contradictory and impractical. Theonomists cannot use Matthew 5:17-20 to prove the abiding validity of the Law in all details and also concede that Christ abrogated the ceremonial law.¹¹

⁵ Schreiner, *The Law and Its Fulfillment*, 244-45.

⁶ Esmond Birnie, *Testing The Foundations Of Theonomy And Reconstruction* (Belfast: Queens University, n.d.), n.p.

⁷ Greg L. Bahnsen, *Theonomy in Christian Ethics* (Phillipsburg: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1977), 184.

⁸ Bruce K. Waltke, "Theonomy in Relation to Dispensational and Covenant Theologies" in *Theonomy: A Reformed Critique* ed. William S. Barker and W. Robert Godfrey (Grand Rapids: Academie Books, 1990), 74-78.

⁹ Birnie, *Testing The Foundations Of Theonomy And Reconstruction*, n.p.

¹⁰ Vern S. Poythress, "Effects of Interpretive Frameworks on the Application of Old Testament Law" in *Theonomy: A Reformed Critique* ed. William S. Barker and W. Robert Godfrey (Grand Rapids: Academie Books, 1990), 103-104.

¹¹ Waltke, *Theonomy: A Reformed Critique*, 80-85.

Intrusionists, however, are equally vulnerable. Simply rejecting Mosaic statutes that are not reiterated in the New Testament leads to new problems. Leviticus 18:23 and 19:15 appear to express abiding, universal norms but are not directly repeated in the New Testament.¹²

Both systems are equally unworkable because the process of categorizing various laws is highly subjective. Since the Bible does not contain a formal designation of these laws into moral, civil, or ceremonial categories, Bahnsen and his critics have been engaging in speculation as to their purpose.¹³

One tends to classify statutes according to their function, but this is not always possible. The primary function may be ambiguous or several functions may be tightly interwoven. Mosaic laws typically include both moral (permanent) and ceremonial (limited) purposes in an inextricable unity.¹⁴

Neither framework can solve the problems that are raised by the other. Rigid interpretive frameworks become self-perpetuating filters that lead to circular reasoning, dogmatism, and harshness. “It is too easy to read into a passage what [one] afterwards reads out.”¹⁵

Balanced Perspectives

Poythress suggests viewing ethical questions from three perspectives. The normative perspective focuses on the rules of Scripture, the attitudinal focuses on personal attitudes, and the situational focuses on the environmental context. Each perspective must be harmonized with the others because each encompasses aspects of the others.¹⁶

Using only one perspective tends to distort the truth. Theonomists emphasize the normative and underestimate the difficulty of separating abiding principles from their particular application to Israel. Intrusionists emphasize the situational and negate the possibility of finding universal norms in the Mosaic Law. Relying on a natural sense of right and wrong is a misuse of the attitudinal perspective; humans need an objective standard of justice because human nature is deceitful and rebellious.¹⁷

Timeless Principles

Although many Old Testament commands are universal norms, others must be applied indirectly. They can usually be identified through one or more characteristics: limited recipient, limited cultural conditions for fulfillment, limited cultural rationale, or a larger limiting context. They should be examined for timeless spiritual principles and reapplied today using proper hermeneutical methods.¹⁸

Kellogg admonished the church to heed the principles that underlie the Levitical code especially those regarding marriage and family life. Christians should not imagine that these

¹² Poythress, *Theonomy: A Reformed Critique*, 110.

¹³ Birnie, *Testing The Foundations Of Theonomy And Reconstruction*, n.p.

¹⁴ Poythress, *Theonomy: A Reformed Critique*, 107-109.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 105, 116-17.

¹⁶ Poythress, *Theonomy: A Reformed Critique*, 111.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 112-13.

¹⁸ William J. Larkin, “Interpretation, Application, and Contextualization” in *Culture and Biblical Hermeneutics* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1988), 316.

laws were only intended for Israel (Lev 18:23-24). God visited harsh judgments on the Canaanites precisely because they broke this law of holiness.¹⁹

While most of the ceremonial law is not applicable to gentiles, the Levitical priesthood does appear to have a divine mandate for some kind of ceremonial ministry (Jer 33:17ff, Ezek 44). Jesus said that the Law will remain “till heaven and earth pass away” (Matt 5:18, Rev 21:1).²⁰

Howard observes that the biblical feast days (Leviticus 23) symbolically outline Christ’s work from Calvary to the Messianic kingdom. Rosenthal also notes that the spring holy days were fulfilled “literally and right on time” (i.e., on each respective holy day) with the Messiah’s first coming and that the fall holy days have not yet been fulfilled.²¹

Archer agrees and cautiously suggests that Ezekiel’s temple vision (Ezek 40-48) will find a literal fulfillment in a glorious, earthly kingdom.²² The sacrifices of this millennial temple system appear to be memorials of Christ’s finished work; they will be graphic reminders of humanity’s need for redemption just like the elements of the Lord’s Supper.²³

While there is considerable ambiguity and debate on this topic, there are some interesting possibilities as well. One thing is certain: “we know in part and we prophesy in part. But when that which is perfect has come, then that which is in part will be done away” (1 Cor 13:9-10).

Proper Exegesis

In certain cases, one cannot understand the ritual laws of ancient Israel without understanding Canaanite cultic practices. While Israelite and Canaanite religious worship shared certain similarities, they differed in moral and spiritual character. Canaanite sacrifices, for example, were an attempt to bribe or appease the gods, while the Israelite sacrificial system was based on blood atonement.²⁴

The prohibition against boiling a kid in its mother’s milk is an interesting example of this principle (Exod 23:19). At the end of the harvest, superstitious Egyptians boiled a kid in its mother’s milk and sprinkled the broth on their gardens and fields as a magical charm to make them more fertile next season.²⁵ Many Jews misinterpret this as a prohibition against eating meat and dairy at the same meal; consequently, they have created an elaborate system of separate dishes and container markings to implement this prohibition.

While this particular statute is culturally limited, it is based on the timeless principle that superstitious practices should be avoided. Superstitions like this were based on the ancient concept of sympathetic magic, which is strongly prohibited in Scripture (Deut 18:9-14, Gal 5:20).

¹⁹ Samuel H. Kellogg, *The Book of Leviticus* (New York: A. C. Armstrong, 1891), 430-31.

²⁰ All Scriptures are from the New King James Version.

²¹ Kevin Howard and Marvin Rosenthal, *The Feasts of the Lord* (Nashville: Nelson, 1997), 25,46.

²² Gleason L. Archer, *A Survey of Old Testament Introduction* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1994), 260-63,415-19.

²³ Ralph Alexander, *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*. ed. Frank E. Gaebelein, et al. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), 951.

²⁴ Elmer B. Smick, *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*, (NL:NP, 1989), 32:14.

²⁵ Robert Jamieson, A. R. Fausset, and David Brown, *Commentary Critical and Explanatory on the Whole Bible*, Online Bible software, ver. 1.31 (Lanarkshire: Online Bible Foundation, Apr. 19, 2003), s.v. Ex 23:19.

Careful Application

There are timeless principles behind all these statutes that are applicable to all peoples. The modern application, however, must be carefully adapted to each new situation.

In the ancient world, natural and manmade disasters had but two outcomes: slavery or death. There was no Social Security, no Medicaid, and no Disability or Unemployment Insurance.

The Mosaic economy, however, was truly “The Great Society” of the ancient world. God mercifully provided food for widows and orphans (Deut 14:28-29), nationwide debt relief for the poor (Deut 15:1-2), and a limited period of indentured servitude for the chronically unemployed (Deut 15:12-15).

Many modern nations have created similar programs based on these principles. These statutes, however, do not require modern nations to follow the cultural practices of ancient Israel.

The law of levirate marriage may seem undesirable today, but for women like Ruth, this statute was a real blessing. Widows in western societies have more choices thanks to universal, compulsory education, but in cultures that still practice arranged marriages, this law would seem quite reasonable.

The practice of arranged marriages, however, should not be imposed on modern, western nations simply because God allowed it in ancient Israel. Indeed, levirate marriage appears to have been somewhat voluntary for both parties (Deut 25:5-10, Ruth 3:1-13). The timeless principle is that widows deserve care and support.

Pauline Theology

The early New Testament church faced similar issues as they reached out to other nations. Trying to understand the role of Old Testament Law in the early church is, in some respects, like trying to understand the United States Constitution by reading a series of Supreme Court decisions.

Kaiser offers some helpful observations concerning Paul’s attitude toward the Law. At issue are several statements that appear to be contradictory or negative toward the Law.

First, Paul upholds “the law of God” as having divine authority and being worthy of the greatest respect (Rom 7:22, 25). Paul could hardly have been abolishing the Law in Ephesians 2:15 when he enjoins obedience to the fifth commandment in Ephesians 6:2.²⁶ What was abolished was the enmity between Jews and gentiles caused by the ceremonial laws. In Christ, gentiles have access to God without circumcision or Aaronic atonement sacrifices (Acts 15:7-11).

Second, Paul had no ready term for legalism, which is the true object of his hostility. Christ is the “end of the law” (Rom 10:4) in the same way that He is the end (goal) of one’s faith (1 Pet 1:9). Ironically, Jewish legalism led people away from Christ, who was the goal and aim of the Law.²⁷

Third, some Pauline phrases are abbreviated, which can create wrong inferences. In 2 Corinthians 3:7-16, what was passing away was not the Law but the ministry that Moses rendered. Paul was contrasting two different ministries. What faded was the glow on Moses’

²⁶ Kaiser, *Toward Old Testament Ethics*, 310.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 309,314.

face, which was only temporary. What was taken away was not the Law but the veil that blinded their minds when they read the Law.²⁸

Rhyne also rejects the notion that Paul was abolishing the Law. Paul established the Law (Rom 3:31) in its role as a witness of the righteousness that comes by faith. Christ is the goal (*telos*) of the Law (Rom 10:4) because the essence of His work was to supply the righteousness, which the Law promised. Paul does not attack the Law per se but the notion that the Law can be a way to salvation.²⁹

Schreiner maintains that Paul's theology of freedom does not mean that the Law is irrelevant in the Christian life. Freedom from the Law is not freedom from obedience but freedom from the power of sin, which leads to death.

In the new covenant, the Law is written upon the heart. Those who have the Spirit manifest God's love, which is the fulfillment of the Law. While love is central to Paul's theology, the Law also exists to provide an objective antidote to sentimentality and vagueness in a world that justifies almost any course of action by an appeal to love.³⁰

The Role of the Law

Jesus did not come to denigrate or displace the Law but to fulfill and establish it (Matt 5:17-20). He was not advocating a lax attitude toward the Law or the Old Testament. Those who ignore the Law will meet with disapproval in the kingdom of God. "There is no contrast between what the Old Testament law required and what the New Testament enjoined."³¹

Believers can continue to find abiding use for the Law in three areas. The Law continues to define what is right or wrong conduct for all peoples. The Law continues to convince and convict people of their sin and guilt, and it helps believers spot residual moral imperfections.³²

While no one can earn salvation, Christians will not be justified without good works because they are the evidence that salvation has actually occurred. While believers may not keep the Law perfectly, the Spirit will produce observable and significant fruit in one's life that is consistent with God's definition of morality and justice.³³

Conclusion

The Old Testament is an important and abiding part of God's Word. Jesus held the Law and the prophets in high regard, and specifically warned His disciples not to relax any part of it.

The early New Testament church found moral guidance and profound doctrinal truths within these laws. While Paul vigorously opposed legalism, he upheld the validity of the Law as an objective basis for sanctified living.

Considerable debate exists over how to apply the Law today. The situation is more complex than simply opting for discontinuity or total continuity with the past. A variety of perspectives is needed in order to achieve a balanced and integrated view.

²⁸ Kaiser, *Toward Old Testament Ethics*, 309-10, 313.

²⁹ C. Thomas Rhyne, *Faith Establishes the Law* (Chico: Scholars Press, 1979), 117-20.

³⁰ Schreiner, *The Law and Its Fulfillment*, 245.

³¹ Kaiser, *Toward Old Testament Ethics*, 311.

³² *Ibid.*, 312.

³³ Schreiner, *The Law and Its Fulfillment*, 246.

The Law of Moses contains a mixture of universal norms and specifically limited commands; however, each law is based on timeless spiritual principles that reflect God's holy character. These laws and principles require careful study in order to determine their original intent and their correct application in the modern world.

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