

# The Law of God

## INTRODUCTION – WHY THE QUESTION ARISES

A significant part of our Bible is taken up with the Law of God given to Moses. It occupies large parts of four books – Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy – and any person who wants to read the whole Bible will soon come across these long sections of commandments. The relationship of Christians to the Old Testament Law has been difficult from the very beginning with the Jewish origins of the Church. It is a particularly pertinent issue today in the postmodern world when many people, especially Christians are looking for an absolute standard of morality to guide human behaviour.

One example of the controversy surrounded Judge Roy Moore in Alabama, USA:

- 1990s fought against a lawsuit seeking to remove a wooden plaque depicting the 10 Commandments from his courtroom
- 2000 – propelled to office as Alabama Chief Justice in 2000 after campaigning as the "Ten Commandments judge"
- 2001 – installed a 2.4 tonne granite 10 Commandments monument in the rotunda of the Alabama State Courthouse without consulting his colleagues
- A U.S. District judge demanded that the monument be removed by August 20, 2003. Moore refused to comply and was suspended from office and charged with six ethics violations.
- August 27 2003 – the monument was moved to a side room in the courthouse.
- November 13 2003 – Moore was ordered removed from office. A state ethics board had ruled unanimously that Moore violated judicial ethics by refusing to comply with a federal court's order to remove the commandments monument.
- Immediately after the decision, Moore told supporters "I have absolutely no regrets. I have done what I was sworn to do."
- CNN-USA Today-Gallup poll November 2003 – 77 percent of 1,009 Americans interviewed disapproved of removal

In the UK Channel 4 recently conducted a poll to discover the "new ten commandments". The results are very telling about our modern society. Altogether, seven of the original Ten Commandments were rejected in the Channel 4 poll including the commandments against breaking the Sabbath, taking the Lord's name in vain and coveting the possessions of others. The new commandments were mainly positive, but interestingly, despite the claims of some commentators that the poll results proved a rejection of Biblical values, the top 20 commandments were mainly based on biblical principles – all but two ("Be true to your own God" and "Be true to yourself") are found in one form or another in Scripture. In reality, then, this poll would suggest that people in modern society are crying out for a society ordered on Biblical lines but without the Biblical pre-requisite of honouring God!

How then, should we as Christians respond? How should we understand and apply the Old Testament Law to our lives? Does the Law or any part of it still apply to us?

## TRADITIONAL EVANGELICAL VIEWS OF THE LAW

Evangelicals have traditionally divided the Law into 3 aspects:

1. **Moral** – reflecting the character of God and showing what is right and wrong in individual behaviour (e.g. Leviticus 19:18)
2. **Ceremonial** – regulating system of worship of the nation of Israel including sacrifices and festivals, the priests and the Tabernacle (e.g. Deuteronomy 16:13)
3. **Civil** – regulating the government and criminal justice system of the nation of Israel including land and economics (e.g. Deuteronomy 15:1)

The traditional evangelical approach has been to say that the Moral law still applies to Christians (since it is claimed to be universal and timeless in its application), but that the Ceremonial and Civil aspects do not, since the Ceremonial laws have been fulfilled and replaced in Christ and the Civil only applied to the nation of Israel under God's rule. Those who hold this view would, however, claim that the Ceremonial and Civil laws can still teach us about the character of God and provide guidance to law-makers about wise principles for government. This approach was popularised in documents such as the 1646 Westminster Confession of Faith.

One alternative view is **Theonomy**, which recognises that the Ceremonial law has been fulfilled in Christ but does not distinguish between the Moral and Civil aspects. Followers of this view therefore claim that every nation should base its laws on the Old Testament Law given to Moses, and that Christians should seek to hold positions of influence to change laws to be more in keeping with the Civil Law. However, the Old Testament never indicates that the Civil Law as given to Israel should be applied to other nations, and the New Testament does not support this approach (see, for example, Paul's teaching about submission to the authorities in Romans 13).

## PROBLEMS WITH THE TRADITIONAL APPROACH

There are a number of significant problems with the traditional approach of dividing the Law into three parts which I believe should lead us to reconsider our approach to the Law:

### 1) The Old Testament does not recognise these divisions

Because there are no indicators in the text itself as to which category a particular Law falls into, it becomes arbitrary how the laws are categorised. Many chapters contain lists of laws that apparently fall into different groups without any indication of a change in style and application. An obvious example would be Leviticus Chapter 19, where there is no textual indicator of the division between moral (v1-4, 18), ceremonial (v5-8) and civil (v9-10, 19) laws, and where some laws are difficult to classify as one group rather than another (for example is the command to protect the disabled in verse 14 Moral or Civil Law?) Most Christians who follow the traditional approach would say that the Ten Commandments fall clearly into the Moral Law category, but even this runs into difficulties when we consider the Sabbath commandment. Is the observance of the Sabbath Moral or Ceremonial? If it is Moral then Christians are falling short of God's Moral standards as few of any observe the Jewish Sabbath on Saturday as described in the Law. Surely the Sabbath is a Ceremonial law required of the nation of Israel but not of Christians (although the principle of one day in seven of rest is older, being part of the creation order). However, this raises the question of what the Sabbath commandment is doing in the famous list of ten!

### 2) It ignores the place of the Law in the Old Testament Covenant with Israel

The Old Testament Law cannot be separated from the Covenant of God with Israel, and in fact obedience to the Law is the condition for blessing within that Covenant. There is no indication in the Old Testament that the Law in its entirety was ever intended to be extended to other nations.

### 3) The New Testament does not recognise these divisions

Paul and the other New Testament writers consistently speak of the Law as one unit, as did Christ. If Christians had been intended to identify these three categories and reject two of them whilst holding on to the third, surely the New Testament would reflect this.

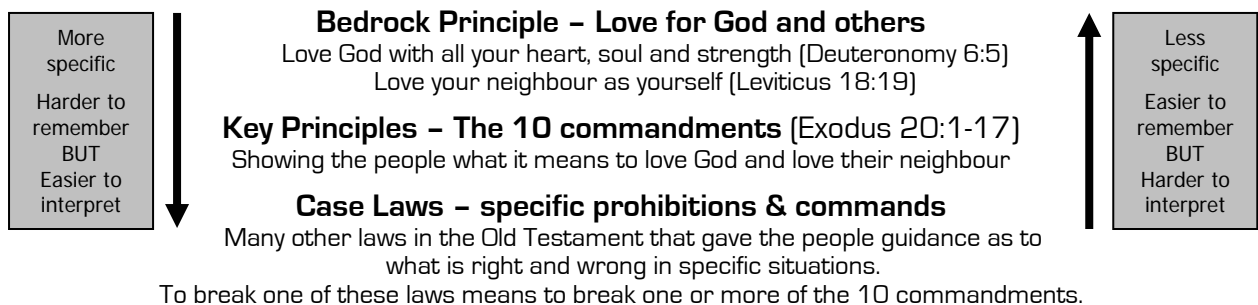
The three divisions may be helpful for categorising individual laws in terms of their function:

1. Regarding the individual's behaviour (Moral)
2. Regarding worship of God (Ceremonial)
3. Regarding society and government (Civil)

However, they are not helpful in our overall understanding of the Law's function or in helping us to apply its truth to our own lives. The fact is that the Old Testament Law stands or falls as a whole unit, and to the Old Testament people it would have been unthinkable to separate out some of the laws of God as being more important than others. The Law came to them as a complete list of God's requirements for them (including over 600 commandments) and was to be obeyed in its totality as a rule for all of life. To begin to know how we as Christians should apply the Law to our lives we must first understand how the Law was structured and what its purpose was.

## THE STRUCTURE OF THE LAW

The Law is a reflection of the character of God. It can be thought of in 3 layers:



The basis of the Law, as identified by Jesus (see Matthew 22:37-40), is simply stated in two great principles. In fact these commandments summarise God's total requirement of human beings – that we should love Him and love one another. However, in practical terms this is difficult for us to work out. We need some additional guidelines as to what it means in practice to love God and to love one another. Hence God gave the Ten Commandments, written on slabs of stone and contained within the Ark of the Covenant – the first four told the Israelites what it meant to love God with their whole being, and the other six what it meant to love their neighbour as they loved themselves. Ten commandments are harder to remember than two, but give much more specific pointers and are less likely to be misinterpreted. However, there are still many questions about specific situations that are not clear from these ten laws. What exactly does it mean not to steal – where do we draw the line between what is honest and what is theft. To clarify these questions God gave the Israelites many case laws dealing with highly specific situations. These laws are so numerous that they would be difficult to remember, but so specific that they are impossible to misinterpret.

So, then we must never lose sight in the detail of the many individual laws of the bedrock of the Law, which is love – first for God and then for our fellow man.

**THE PURPOSE OF THE LAW**

**1. It reveals the character of God – His holiness and love**

The purpose of the whole Bible is first and foremost to reveal God to us – it is firstly a book about God and only secondly a book about mankind. The Bible reveals God’s character as being perfectly holy and also perfect in love. It is not difficult to see how the Old Testament Law shows God’s holiness and His absolute intolerance of sin, and how this was to be a motivation to holiness on the part of His people (Leviticus 19:1), but it is equally true that God’s Law is a law of love, given not to be a burden or a snare to the people of Israel, but to protect them and guide them into the best possible life:

- a) The Moral laws showed them how to live a peaceful and fulfilled life in their individual actions
- b) The Ceremonial laws showed them God’s desire to live with His people – the sacrifices were intended to allow Him to live among them as they worshipped Him in a way that reflected His holiness
- c) The Civil laws display God’s desire for order and justice in society and protection for the poor and foreigners etc. They also contain much wise advice that minimised the risk of disease (this health benefit would have been unknown to the Israelites but was designed by God).

**2. It guided God’s people into right actions and protected them from harm**

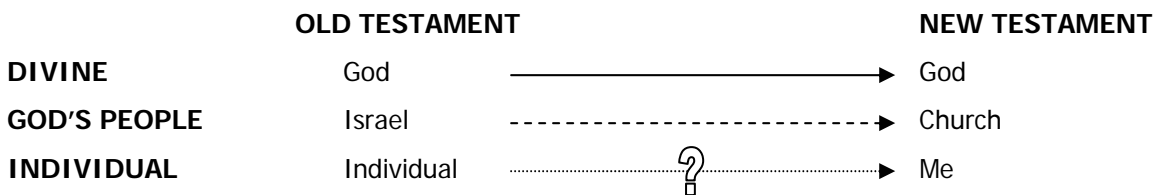
The Law did not only reveal God’s character, it provided very clear guidance about how the people should live before God if they wanted to enjoy the blessings of His Covenant (see Deuteronomy 28).

**3. It made the people aware of their sin and need of forgiveness**

From a New Testament perspective this is perhaps the most important purpose of the Law. By comparing their lives with the perfect standard of God’s Law the people were left in no doubt of their own imperfection and their failure to reach God’s standard. They were conscious of their need to be forgiven. Furthermore, God gave a system of sacrifices to express their dependence on God and their need of a substitute to pay for their sin so that they could be made right with God. The Law was never intended as a means for people to be made right with God (see Paul’s teaching in Romans 3:20 and Galatians 2:15&16) since it was powerless to change the heart of a person. It was intended to lead people to repentance (turning away from their sin) and faith in God (trusting Him for forgiveness).

**CONTINUITY & DISCONTINUITY BETWEEN OLD AND NEW TESTAMENTS**

Before We look at the New Testament teaching about the Law it is important to remember that there is both continuity but also discontinuity between the two testaments. This varies between three levels:



At the first level (divine) it is clear that God has not changed and cannot change. Whatever we learn about His character from the Old Testament carries over directly to our understanding of Him in the New Testament. This is represented by the solid black arrow. At the second level (God’s people), in the Old Testament this refers to Israel, but in the New to the Church. There are some aspects of continuity but also many of discontinuity between Israel and the Church (hence the dashed arrow), and so we must be careful about directly applying what we learn about God’s relationship to Israel to His relationship with Christians in the New Testament. The lowest level (Individual) is the weakest level for continuity (represented by the questioned faint arrow). In other words, we can seldom transfer lessons from the lives of individual characters in the Old Testament narratives over to our own lives. When we try to do this we may become confused and misled, and we miss the point of the Old Testament story, which is primarily to teach us about God. Therefore, the safest way to apply truth from the Old Testament to our lives is first to work up from the individual story to discover what it teaches about God, then work down again to ask how this truth impacts our individual lives today.

**THE LAW IN THE NEW TESTAMENT**

Christians cannot hope to understand the Law of God without looking at it through the lens of Christ – looking back from the perspective of His and His apostles’ teaching. The New Testament makes several key points about the Law:

**1. Jesus fulfilled it (Matthew 5:1)**

I believe this statement is true in two respects. Firstly, His life and death fulfilled its righteous demands since He alone was perfectly obedient and utterly sinless. Secondly, His teaching upheld the bedrock principles of the Law – love for God and our neighbour. It is interesting to see how Christ handled the Law in His teaching:

- a. He restated some aspects – Matthew 19:18&19
- b. He modified some aspects – Matthew 5:31-49
- c. He intensified some aspects – Matthew 5:21&22, 27&28
- d. In at least one case (the dietary restrictions) He negated some laws – Mark 7:15-19

**2. It is summarised in the two commandments (Matthew 7:12; 22:34-40)**

Jesus emphasised the bedrock principles of the Law – love for God and for our neighbour. He helped to clarify our understanding of the structure of the Law.

**3. The Ceremonial aspects were a shadow of the reality found in Christ (Hebrews 10:1)**

This is a key theme of the book of Hebrews (see Hebrews 10:1), whose writer emphasises how much greater the reality in Christ is than the incomplete shadows (or pictures) that the sacrifices, festivals and Tabernacle represented. The sacrifices all pointed to Christ, and once He came and offered the one perfect sacrifice for sins forever, no further sacrifices were required. Paul presents a similar argument in Colossians 2:16&17 where he teaches that the dietary restrictions, the religious festivals and the Sabbath no longer apply to Christians.

**4. The Old Covenant is obsolete (Hebrews 8:13 / Galatians 3:25)**

The writer of Hebrews is very clear that the New Covenant has superseded the Old and made it obsolete. This surely also applies to the Law which is an integral part of the Old Covenant. The reality is that we are not under Law but grace as Christians. The Old Testament Law in its entirety (including the so called “Moral Law”) is no longer binding for us as law.

**5. God’s Law is written on our hearts and minds in the New Covenant (Hebrews 8:10)**

Although in the New Testament we are not under Law But grace, it would be wrong to fall into the trap of antinomianism (lawlessness). It is still important that we seek to live lives that reflect God’s holiness and love. However, Christians do not look to the Old Testament Law for our guidance on ethics, rather we depend on the teachings of Christ and the apostles and the inner witness of the Holy Spirit. Paul discusses this principle in Galatians 5:13-26 where he speaks of love as our ultimate duty to our neighbour and then says that if we live by the Spirit we will not gratify our sinful natures. We are not under the Law because we are led by the Spirit (v18). In other words, as the Spirit leads us and produces His fruit of Christ-like character in our lives, we will do by nature the things the Law required. He writes God’s Laws on our hearts and minds so that by nature we love to do and think what is pleasing to God. As Christians, then our moral guidance comes from the New Testament teachings and the leading of the Spirit.

**HOW TO APPLY THE LAW PASSAGES TO OUR LIVES (C.H.I.N.A.)**

So, then, having said that the Old Testament Law is obsolete for Christians and should not be the basis of our moral guidance, how are we to read the substantial parts of Scripture that are taken up with recording it? Are these chapters irrelevant for us? Should we cut them out of our Bibles or skip over them? Of course not! We believe that all Scripture is profitable for us (II Timothy 3:16&17). How, then are we to apply these sections to our lives? I have identified five steps that will help us (these can be applied to any particular law, and to many other Old Testament passages), the initials of which conveniently spell “China”:

- 1. Context** – We must first understand what the Law meant to the initial audience. The Old Testament Laws were given in context of narratives at a particular stage in the history of Israel as God led them out of Egypt, through the desert and towards the Promised Land, and of God’s work with mankind. They sit within God’s covenant with Israel and stipulate how that nation should behave towards Him.
- 2. How are we different?** – We must recognise the similarities and differences between the initial audience and believers today. For example, both Israel and the Church are God’s chosen covenant people, but the nature of His covenant relationship with each and the environment in which they live and serve Him are very different. We must be clear about the continuity and discontinuity between Israel and the Church.
- 3. Identify Universal Principles** – We must draw from the text universal principles that are always true and always applicable. These will often be about the character of God, the nature of sin, the heart of man, or issues of obedience or concern for others. These things continue unchanged from the Old to New Testaments. To correctly identify these principles we must be sure that they:
  - a. Are reflected in the text itself – not read into it

- b. Transcend culture and time period – they must be relevant under both Old and New covenants
- c. Are supported by Scripture as a whole – we must use the rest of scripture to interpret them if not clear

**4. New Testament** – We must correlate the principles with New Testament teaching and modify them accordingly. What does the New Testament say about this issue? Does it quote, modify or negate the law from which the principles are drawn?

**5. Application** – Finally we must apply the principles to real life situations facing Christians today.

There are clear examples in the New Testament of this kind of approach to Old Testament laws:

- **Jesus** – In Mark 2:23-28 Jesus quotes from I Samuel 21 to rebuke the Pharisees for their judgement of His disciples. They had missed the principle of God's loving provision for His people in sticking to and even intensifying the letter of the commandment. Jesus draws out the universal principle from I Samuel 21 and applies it to the immediate situation.
- **Paul** – In I Corinthians 9:9 Paul quotes from Deuteronomy 25:4 to support the principle of Christian workers being paid. The original law was about allowing oxen to feed as well as using them for labour, but Paul draws out a universal principle from this and then applies it to the immediate practical situation of His ministry.

To help us to understand this approach more fully, let us consider a worked example:

#### **How should Christians apply the truth of the Old Testament Law of tithing?**

There are two Old Testament Law passages to consider:

- a) Leviticus 27:30 – teaches that for the people of Israel one tenth (a tithe) of everything they produced or owned belonged to God
- b) Numbers 18:21-24 – teaches that tithes were the inheritance of the Levites (who worked in the tabernacle) and should be given by the people supported their work for God

Let us, then, follow the five steps outlined above:

- 1. Context** – The Levites worked in the Tabernacle. Tithing was required of the people of Israel as their duty, although they also gave offerings from free will.
- 2. How are we different?** There are no Levites and no Tabernacle today, and we are not part of the nation of Israel. We don't live in subsistence economy – most of us do not produce our own crops or food. We also pay taxes for the welfare of poor and sick people.
- 3. Universal principles** – there are several key principles in the text that are universal in their applicability:
  - a. Possessions are a gift from God
  - b. We need to honour God with our possessions
  - c. It is appropriate for those who work fulltime in God's service to be supported by those who don't
- 4. New Testament teaching:**
  - I Corinthians 9:9 – Paul's comment about paying those who work fulltime for the gospel
  - There is no repetition of the principle of tithing
  - II Corinthians 8&9 – Paul's teaching about giving – that we should give generously and cheerfully according to our means as we decide in our heart
- 5. Application** – Christians are not bound to the rule of tithing (it is an Old Testament principle that does not carry over to the New Testament). However, we must consider how much we should give from our possessions to support God's work and the work of the church since this is an important part of honouring God with our possessions. We can compare with the Israelites and ask whether we would give less than 10% or if we should give more (are we better off or worse off than they were?)

## **CONCLUSIONS**

As Christians we should avoid three dangers:

- 1. Legalism** – we must not artificially carry over the Law from the Old Testament so that we end up living under Law rather than grace: "It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery" (Galatians 5:1).
- 2. Lawlessness** (antinomianism) – we must not pretend that we are free to live as we like, but must treat sin seriously. We must seek our moral guidance in the teaching of Christ and the apostles, and seek to live a Spirit-filled, God-honouring life as the Spirit leads: "So I say, live by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the sinful nature" (Galatians 5:16).
- 3. Ignoring the Old Testament Law** – lastly, we should not ignore the Old Testament Law passages as if they have no relevance for our lives today, but learn how to correctly apply their truth to our lives. Above all, we will never be disappointed if we read the Scriptures primarily for what we learn about God and only secondly for what we learn about ourselves.