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Reformation
& Revival



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Jews in Jesus' and Paul's day certainly did not divide up the law into categories; on the contrary, there was a strong insistence that the law was a unity and could not be obeyed in parts. This being the case, we would require strong evidence from within the New Testament to think that the word "law" in certain texts can apply only to one part of the law.

Douglas J. Moo

It is only in retrospect that an event, person or institution may be seen as typical. The existence of types necessitates there being other events, persons or institutions (earlier or later) of which they are typical.

David Baker

Divine Law: A New Covenant Perspective

Fred G. Zaspel

Introduction

At least part of what makes the subject of divine law such a rewarding area of study is the wide range of biblical and theological issues which it touches. The study takes the student from the many passages bristling with exegetical challenges to hermeneutical issues such as redemptive history and typology and on through to theological categories such as ecclesiology, soteriology, even eschatology. But most rewarding of all, as we should expect, the study finds its culmination in the person and work of Christ. It is to this end that our study should always lead us.

Further, as is widely recognized among Christian interpreters, it is a biblical-theological approach which most easily and most accurately facilitates this pursuit. Like so many other teachings of the Scriptures, we should expect to find the doctrine of divine law progressively unfolded throughout the history of redemption. Specific issues of discussion (and dispute!) are best treated in this context.

Law Before Moses

Survey. The subject begins virtually with history itself. "The law was given through Moses" (John 1:17), to be sure, but of course that is not to say that before Moses there was no law from God. Indeed, we so take this for granted that when we read in the Old Testament of pre-Mosaic sinners judged for their wickedness we never stop to ask what law code it was which they had violated and to which they were held accountable. We very naturally and very rightly understand that *they knew better*. And, in fact, if we would stop to ask the question of the apostle Paul, his answer would be the same: *they knew better*. It is this very point he expounds at some length in Romans 1-2. "That which is known about God is evident within them; for God made it

evident to them” (1:19). The knowledge man had (has) of God he has suppressed (1:18ff.). That is to say, man sinned even before Moses took the nature of rebellion. Man “approves” neither of God nor His law (1:28). Against God’s law man universally turned away, and did so even in the knowledge of the coming judgment (1:32).

Are there exceptions to this rule of universal rebellion? Only in degree. All have transgressed, and even those who “had not the law” instinctively knew and to some degree obeyed the law’s requirements (2:14). This law “written in their hearts” (2:15) served both to inform their “conscience” and direct their lives. Accordingly, when Paul declares “all under sin” (Rom. 3:9), the Gentiles are not condemned for their violation of the terms of Sinai; for to them the Sinaitic legislation was never given (2:14). Rather, they are declared culpable for suppressing the truth that was *in them* (Rom. 1:18-19). These things they knew to be wrong, independent of the formal legislation of Sinai.

To say the same from a contrasting standpoint, Paul speaks of the Gentile who “keeps the requirements of the law” (Rom. 2:26; cf. 2:14). This could hardly imply that the Gentiles “who have not the law” of Moses are in fact fulfilling every requirement of it. Clearly, he means only that they observed principles of righteousness which were in keeping with those contained also in the law of Moses. It is in this sense alone that Gentiles can be said to “fulfill the law” (v. 27). Again, it is evident that there is a law—a standard of moral righteousness—that is independent of Mosaic legislation. Divine law is published universally within every man; it is a standard of righteousness that exists independent of any formal codification. To restate the point, those who violated the eternal moral precepts of divine law before Moses knew better.

For that matter, we very naturally and very rightly understand the same in reference to those Gentiles of Moses’ day

who were “far off” (Eph.2:13) from the law which he mediated to Israel. We are not surprised that the prophets who went to such people did not, in order to establish their guilt, hold before them the tablets of stone.² Their sin constituted rebellion against the law of God, yes, the law of God written on their hearts. As men made in God’s image, they knew better. And when their “iniquity became full,” they were judged accordingly.³

Conclusion. The picture we see of divine law in the Old Testament, both in pre-Mosaic times and in “extra-Mosaic” contexts, is one of inner witnesses, conscience. God’s image in man impresses within him an intuitive sense of right and wrong. Formal code or no, it was a sufficiently clear rule of life which all men, in varying degrees, have both obeyed and suppressed. And it is to this that men were and are justly held accountable.

The Law Through Moses

Its Occasion. Since it is into this context that God gave His law to Israel through Moses, we may be excused for wondering why it was necessary! Why give law to those who already have God’s law in them?

The answer, of course, lies in the unique status of the nation of Israel. With them God was entering into special, covenantal relationship. That relationship carried with it specific privileges and responsibilities, and these responsibilities had to be made plain. Accordingly, a covenant detailing the terms of the relationship was formally enacted. It is in this covenant that God’s law to Israel through Moses is embedded.

Its Content. Given its unique, covenantal setting it does not surprise us that this Mosaic law was not identical to that law of God in man. It was far more specific and detailed. Those principles of divine law which were both eternal and universal were, in the law of Moses, not only

formally codified but also fleshed out in specific ways. For example, man's obligation to worship God is something recognized intuitively (cf. Rom. 1:18-25). But in the Mosaic legislation this requirement was given specific applications: the Sabbath and other holy days and festivals, the sacrifices, the entire Levitical system. These additions were specific applications and extensions of the principles embedded in the law of God, given now within the framework of a particular covenantal relationship and obligatory so long as that covenant was in force. But they were not essential elements of that divine law itself. To repeat, divine law underlay and formed the basis of the Mosaic legislation, and it was there given a particular codification and many specific applications.⁴

Important also is the recognition that this law of God in men's hearts from creation onward is nearly identical with the Decalogue which came by Moses. Other than the fourth command (Sabbath) virtually all of the "Ten Words" were in force well before Moses;⁵ it would seem so since the beginning of human history. Idolatry, murder, theft, adultery, etc., did not first become wrong when Israel was at Sinai. The great bulk of the Decalogue, then, is clearly but a formal codification of the law of God that was (and is) in man's heart naturally. These matters are reflective of the very character and holiness of God and are thus eternal principles of righteousness that are binding upon all men regardless of formal codification—Mosaic or otherwise. With or without formal legal codes, all men are judged by this standard. The law of God exists quite independent of Mosaic legislation. There is indeed overlap, but not exact duplication.

The relation between the law of God and the law of Moses, then, is one of foundation—extrapolation. That is, Mosaic legislation is founded upon the law of God and makes specific applications from it. It formally stated the

principles of divine law and also gave specifics as to how those laws were to be carried out in that economy. With Moses the law of God was formally codified and applied to a people who stood in a distinctive covenantal relation to God.

The two laws, then, are neither identical nor altogether different. The one formed the basis of the other, and the second required more than the first. But the two cannot be equated absolutely.⁶ Divine law written on the heart informs all men in terms of eternal principles of morality. The Mosaic codification of that law informed Israel of its peculiar responsibilities in its privileged relationship under God.

What exactly was Israel's part in this covenant? A great bulk of the Pentateuch and the writings and the prophets all extrapolate on this very issue. But specifically, the terms are summarized in the Ten Commandments. The Decalogue is the statement of the covenant.

Indeed, God Himself says so. "Then the Lord said to Moses, 'Write down these words, for in accordance with these words I have made a covenant with you and with Israel.' . . . And he wrote on the tablets *the words of the covenant, the Ten Commandments*" (Ex. 34:27-28).

Much hermeneutical and theological confusion has resulted from a failure to appreciate this identification. These ten words to Israel *are* the covenant; apart from this foundational summary statement (the Decalogue), there is no covenant at all.

Its Nature. This "old covenant" further stipulated not only the specific responsibilities of the Israelites, with whom the covenant was made, but also the responsibilities which God in covenant agreement took on Himself in this relationship. What was God's part? He would bless Israel in every way *if* she would do her part. Leviticus 26 spells this out in detail.⁷ Indeed, God made this clear at the very out-

set: "Now then, if you will indeed obey my voice and keep My covenant, then you shall be My own possession among all the peoples" (Ex. 19:5; see vv. 1-8). If Israel would remain faithful and obedient, she would enjoy God's protection and blessing. "So you shall keep My statutes and My judgments, by which a man may live if he does them" (Lev. 18:5; cf. Rom. 10:5). But "Cursed is he who does not continue in all the things that are written in the book of the law to do them" (Deut. 27:26; Gal. 3:10).

The old covenant was, therefore, very much performance oriented. Attempts to characterize the Mosaic covenant as gracious in nature inevitably fail.⁸ The agreement was one of conditional blessing, and the obedience it required was absolute and allowed no exception. One must "continue" in obedience to "all" the law's demands. It is for this reason that the apostle refers to the old covenant as "the letter that kills" and "the ministry of death" (2 Cor. 3:6-7). In contrast to the new covenant, which makes "better promises" (Heb. 8:6) and offers life to sinners, the old covenant could only condemn sinners. It held out promises of blessing for those who were obedient, but for those who transgressed its demands, it held out only a curse.

Mosaic Law and Redemptive History

So the law was given formally through Moses because of the unique relationship into which God was entering with Israel. But that relationship, we find, had a purpose. It was not an end in itself. It was established for the purpose of demonstrating something essential to the outworking of God's redemptive program.

Here was a law given which demanded obedience for life (Lev. 18:5; Deut. 27:26). That raises yet another question: Did not God promise to Abraham that His blessing would come by grace? How could law, with all its curses, enter where grace had already been promised?

Paul takes up this question in Galatians 3. "The law is not of faith; on the contrary, 'He who practices them shall live by them'" (3:12; citing Lev. 18:5). Moreover, "If the inheritance is based on law, it is no longer based on a promise" (3:18). That is, law speaks of works, not faith. By very definition and upon threat of condemnation, law demands absolute obedience. "But God has granted it to Abraham by means of a promise. Why the law then?" (vv. 18b-19a). That is, why did God insert law after He had already made the promise of grace? Surely, the law, coming later, could not annul the promise (v. 17)! But why add law, with its rigorous demands and threats, when grace has already been announced?

Answer: the law was "added because of⁹ transgression" (v. 19b). That is, the law's purpose was to objectify sin and thereby demonstrate it as "transgression." This is Paul's statement in Romans 5:13 also: "Sin is not imputed¹⁰ when there is no law." The idea in both of these passages is that of itemization, objectification, delineation. The purpose of the law was to specify sin with clarity. Once sin is thus objectified, that sin is shown to be transgression. It is in this sense that the law "was added because of transgression." Paul presents the nation of Israel as a showcase nation, a microcosm of the world. In the experience of Israel He set out, in giving the law, to demonstrate on a national level the fact of human sin and thus the law's inability to justify. Given man's failure, the law could only condemn.

But this He did only until the seed came (v. 19), "before faith came" (v. 23). The law functioned as Israel's "tutor to lead us to Christ,"¹¹ that we may be justified by faith" (v. 24). That is, by establishing the fact of human sinfulness, men are driven to Christ, the only alternative. This is Paul's gospel. Christ is "the seed" to whom the promise was made (v. 16); and in that He alone has satisfied all of the law's

demands, both actively and passively, He is the only means of justification. Righteousness comes not by personal merit in the eyes of the law, but by faith in the One whose merit is truly sufficient and so who died as “a curse for us” (v. 13). The law, with all its beauty and holiness, was incapable of justifying sinners. But in pronouncing condemnation, it pointed away from itself to Christ.¹² It spoke of sin, but in doing so it spoke of Him; therefore, while the law itself is not gracious, it was made to serve a gracious purpose in redemptive history. It did not annul the Abrahamic promise of grace, demanding perfection though it did (vv.17, 21). It rather forced men to see the necessity of that promise of grace and in fact threw them back upon it, and herein lay its purpose in the history of redemption (vv. 21-24).

Divine Law in This New Covenant Age

The Continuing Relevance of Divine Law. Moses’ law, then, served a very significant purpose in the divine schema. It reaches its “end” (*telos*) in Christ (Rom. 10:4).

So now what remains of law? Plainly, we should not expect that with the passing of the old covenant there remains no more law! God’s law was well known and well read before its Mosaic codification, and it has been ever since. Nor should it surprise us, after Moses, to find sin defined as “lawlessness” (*anomia*, 1 John 3:4) or to find explicit references to law (Gal. 6:2; James 1:25) or to find duties enjoined upon us as obligatory. Early dispensationalist writers regularly denied the continuing relevance of law in the life of the believer, who is “under grace.”¹³ But the obligations of God upon His creatures have not ceased, and never could those obligations have any less binding force. *The Formula of Concord* (1576), although confusing the law of God and the law of Moses, is entirely correct in its insistence that the law of God is today a “certain rule after which [regenerate men] may and ought to shape their

life.”¹⁴ The law of God is an eternal standard; never could it become any less a binding rule of life.

The Passing Relevance of Moses. But what of the Mosaic formulation/codification of that law? And what of us who are related to God under the terms, not of the old, but of the new covenant? Is there a codification of law for us?

Here we enter a large body of teaching, found primarily in the Pauline literature, which at the same time teaches us both that Moses’ law has “passed away” (*katargeo*) and that we are not “without law” (*anomos*). In some sense, Moses is gone, but law is not. This demands clarification.¹⁵

Since the relationship between the law of God and the law of Moses is one of obvious overlap and similarity but not exact identity, some differences between the two are of course expected. Specific applications of divine law under Moses—such as ceremonial rites, dietary regulations, and certain civil and personal obligations—were not themselves essential to the law of God which underlay the Mosaic legislation. They were specific applications of that law to those who were related to God under the terms of that old covenant. Accordingly, we should not expect the old covenant to be the ultimate expression of the believer’s rule of life under the new covenant.

Moreover, when Paul speaks of the law as a rule of life, he insists that we must not allow a man to be judged on Mosaic grounds (e.g., Col. 2:16). In a way that often struck Paul’s critics as antinomian, Paul spoke recklessly (or so it would seem) about the passing relevance of the Mosaic code. He repeatedly speaks of it in the past tense. The law *had* its purpose, it served that purpose, and now it is passed away. Indeed, this was both a matter of heated dispute in the early church and of unified pronouncement by the apostolic company (Acts 15). The issue generally centered on the place of circumcision in the new covenant community and the necessity of law-keeping as a means of

justification (Galatians), but the decision rendered was a part of a larger principle; viz., that Moses' law itself had no binding relation to the believer whatsoever (Acts 15:10, 19; Gal. 3:19-25; 4:21-31; 5:1-12; 2 Cor. 3). Paul's repeated theme of Christian liberty (Rom. 14; Galatians) argues from the assumption that Moses' law is not binding on the Christian; indeed, it is the weaker brother who insists upon Mosaic demands (Rom. 14:1ff.; cf. Gal. 4:9-11; Col. 2:16). Again, the Mosaic code is consistently spoken of in the past tense and so is no longer in effect (Rom. 8:3; 9:31-32; Gal. 3:23-24; 4:5; Heb. 7:19; etc.), and as fulfilled and replaced in Jesus Christ (Matt. 5:17-20; Heb. 7:12; 10:1-9). Indeed, it was "abolished" (*katargesas*, Eph. 2:15; cf. 2 Cor. 3:11, 13) and "wiped out" (*exalepsas*, Col. 2:14). It is in fact the very Mosaic covenant that is now annulled and replaced (Heb. 8:6-9:1; 2 Cor. 3), not just a part of it. With the covenant itself abolished, its law (Ex. 34:27-28) is likewise no longer in force.

The popular hermeneutical attempt to divide Moses' law into so many parts and then interpret New Testament statements of the passing of law accordingly is simplistic, nor can it be maintained exegetically. To argue that not the moral (i.e., decalogue) but only the civil and/or ceremonial aspects of Moses are passed, when Paul says that it is in fact the old covenant itself, "written and engraven in stones," that has passed away, misses Paul's point. It is Moses *en toto* that he says has gone (2 Cor. 3). Moreover, the apostle speaks not only in general, all-encompassing terms but also in specifics. That which is "engraved on stones" (2 Cor. 3:7) and "the certificate of debt consisting of decrees against us" (Col. 2:14) refer not to civil or ceremonial applications of the Decalogue but to the Decalogue itself. It is the Mosaic legislation in its entirety and the Decalogue specifically that Paul says "fades away" (*katargesas*, 2 Cor. 3:11, 13; cf. *exalepsas*, Col. 2:14).

Of critical significance here again is the statement of

Exodus 34:27-28, noted earlier, where God identifies "the Ten Commandments" as "the words of the covenant." No dividing of Moses will fit here. The legislation of Sinai is an inseparable unit, and this statement (Ex. 34:27-28) must inform the apostolic declarations of its abolition. It is the Mosaic code as a whole and in all its parts that has passed away, and the apostolic declarations to that end must therefore be seen to embrace even the Decalogue.¹⁶

Still further, the tripartite division of Moses fails of its own definitions. If the "ceremonial" law is but an application of the first table of the "moral" law, and if the "civil" law is but an application of the second table of the "moral" law,¹⁷ the supposed three divisions of Moses have thereby been reduced to two and then to one. And that one part is "the words of the covenant, the Ten Commandments." "The whole law"¹⁸ stands or falls together as an indivisible unit.

It would be wrong to forget this stated, essential unity of the old covenant/Decalogue when reading New Testament statements of the covenant's / law's abolition (e.g., 2 Cor. 3). The statements are as broad and inclusive as they appear. And this is to be expected. The new covenant believer is not under the old covenant but the new. It would be an odd thing indeed if "the words of the [old] covenant, the Ten Commandments" (Ex. 34:28) were made to be the new covenant believer's rule of life. We would rather expect that for new covenant believers divine law would be codified in the new covenant.

There is still more to be said here, but only after some other considerations are discussed.

Moses' Law Fulfilled: Matthew 5:17

Interpretation. It is precisely this point (i.e., the passing nature of Mosaic law) which again directs our attention to the Lord Jesus Christ. It is not that there is no law. Nor is it that Moses is simply cut off or "overthrown."¹⁹ Rather,

Moses is “fulfilled.”²⁰ In this regard, Matthew 5:17-21 is of primary significance.²¹

One outstanding aspect of Matthew’s Christology is his “better than Moses” motif. From the slaughter of the infants to the temptation in the wilderness following the baptism in water and lasting *forty* days and on to the mountain, the giving of the law on the mountain, the parallels are extensive and quite beyond coincidence. Jesus is the prophet “like Moses” whom Moses said would come and to whose word Moses said we would be held accountable (Deut. 18:15-19).

It is in this context that Jesus’ opening words, “I came to fulfill” (Matt. 5:17) and His following explication, “You have heard it said . . . but I say unto you” (5:21ff.), are found. And it is at the climax of this that Jesus emphasizes the unsurpassed significance of “these words of *Mine*” as the ultimate standard of judgment (7:24-27). Disobedience to *His* words constitutes “lawlessness.”²² This, together with “The Son of Man is lord even of the Sabbath” (12:8) and the voice from heaven insisting on obedience (*akouo*) to Christ’s words (17:5) and on to Jesus’ own “all authority has been given to Me” (28:18)— all point to Christ as the new Lawgiver, the One of whom Moses wrote. It is *His* commandments which are to be taught and kept (v. 20).²³ His authority is supreme, and His law is obligatory.

This lordship Jesus proceeds to exercise. Many have argued that in the ensuing antitheses of the Sermon on the Mount²⁴ Jesus corrects rabbinic perversions of Moses. Perhaps He does. But the fact remains that Jesus here quotes *Moses* and proceeds to take him in sometimes very unexpected directions.²⁵ From “Do not murder” to “Do not hate,” and from “Do not commit adultery” to “Do not lust” may not seem like a long jump, but it is an addition to the original commands which no fair exegesis of those commands would have yielded. And from here Jesus’ exercise

of authority becomes even more evident. Taking Moses’ allowance for divorce and replacing it with “Do not divorce except for fornication” is plainly a rescinding of Moses; it is no clarification. Moses’ command was intended to curtail divorce, yes; but Jesus goes further still and curtails Moses! Likewise, proceeding from Moses’ *lex talionis*, the famous “eye for an eye” command, to a command to nonresistance is an exercise of authority superior to that of Moses. Whatever hyperbole may be involved here, Jesus plainly places severe restrictions on Moses. He is not clarifying Moses. He is advancing. And He is rescinding. He is restricting. And He is adding. In short, He is exercising His prerogatives as the “greater than Moses,” the new interpreter of the will of God. Matthew is careful to record for us that this is precisely what impressed those who heard our Lord speak these things. “He taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes” (Matt. 7:29) whose ultimate appeal was to Moses. Jesus, rather, exercised the prerogative of lordship.

All this informs the meaning of “fulfill.” In keeping with the Matthean usage of *pleroo*²⁶ Jesus portrays the law of Moses as having a forward look, anticipating a “fuller” significance to come. The coming of Jesus had an eschatological significance in relation to Moses; it brought about what Moses’ law anticipated. Moses’ law did not “fall,”²⁷ nor was it “destroyed.”²⁸ It was “filled full” with that which it could only anticipate. Simply put, Jesus did not merely rubber-stamp Moses, nor did He merely clarify him. The meaning of His claim to fulfill is more climactic than that; there is eschatological transcendence. Jesus’ teaching brings about that for which Moses’ law was ultimately intended. It expresses fully and ideally the righteousness anticipated at Sinai and in the prophets. The old law was not “full” in itself; it had a forward look. It anticipated a “fulfilling” which in Christ’s teaching finally came to perfect realiza-

tion. As John Brown put it, Jesus “holds himself up as the person appointed by God to finish the work which [the law and Prophets] had left incomplete.”²⁹

Although he comes to different final conclusions than those offered here, Brevard Childs states the point well:

The depth of the disagreement [between Jesus and the Pharisees] is underestimated when scholars suggest that Jesus was only opposing the Pharisaic tradition of the law, but leaving the Mosaic law itself intact. Nor is the controversy adequately described by claiming that Jesus sought only to dispense with the OT ceremonial law while retaining the ethical imperatives. *Rather, the issue turned on Jesus’ claim to be the new interpreter of the will as revealed in the law.*³⁰

Where does this leave Moses? Clearly, he has taken a back seat. No, he is not now to be ignored; but the law he gave remains relevant only insofar as it is read through Christian lenses. Moses can no longer be read by Himself. His Fulfiller has come, and it would be wrong to ignore Him for Moses’ sake. Moses himself would not allow this; we must hear this Prophet who is like—but greater than—Moses (Deut. 18:15-19). We read Moses and learn from him, but our loyalty is to the One of whom he spoke, the One who took Moses’ law and “filled it full.”

In other words, Jesus’ lordship extends even over Moses. It is no longer Moses, but Jesus who informs our conscience. It is *His* moral instruction that shapes our lives and defines true sanctification.³¹

Explication. Paul reasons from this very premise in 1 Corinthians 9:20-21, where he argues that he is not bound by Moses; he is rather “under the law of *Christ*.”³² Paul explains that while in a given circumstance he is free to choose either course of action, he is free from Mosaic leg-

islation (v. 20); he is “without law” and has perfect liberty to act accordingly (v. 21a). However (not to be misunderstood!), he is “not without law” absolutely; he is “under the law of Christ.” Here Paul is clear on both scores: (1) he is *not* obliged to Moses’ law,³³ and (2) he *is* obliged to the law of Christ. Again, Jesus’ stands above even Moses.³⁴

This aspect of Christology is one that is frequently fleshed out in the New Testament. As already noted, this is a prominent note in the Matthean Christology. *His* words must be obeyed (Matt. 17:5). It is *His* words which will be brought to bear in the final judgment (7:24-27). And it is *His* words which must form the whole substance of our discipling ministry (Matt. 28:20). But the other New Testament writers build on this idea also. On the eve of His crucifixion Jesus explained to His disciples that while He had more to tell them and although He was soon to leave, He would nonetheless give “all truth” to them via the Holy Spirit whom He sends in His name (John 16:12-14; cf. 17:8). This, Jesus’ word, the disciples would in turn give to us (John 17:8, 18, 20). The full revelation in Christ (Heb. 1:1-2)³⁵ is the “tradition” which the apostles pass along to the Christian community and which we are responsible to faithfully “hold” (2 Thess. 2:15). For all the New Testament writers, Jesus has highest priority, even in terms of moral and ethical instruction. We will not go back to Moses, for it is in Jesus that Moses is made “complete.”³⁶

The Sabbath Question

This better positions us to deal with the question of the Sabbath. Does it remain a binding rule? What do the new covenant Scriptures have to say about the Sabbath? Not surprisingly, it is nowhere enjoined upon the new covenant believer. I say this is not surprising, for we would not expect new covenant believers to observe that which was the “sign” of the old covenant (Ex. 31:13-14, 16-17). Instead,

the New Testament writers speak of the Sabbath in redemptive-historical categories: the day finds its significance in the person and work of Christ.

The linguistic ties here are impressive and fit well with the New Testament teaching on the subject. Matthew's record of Jesus' promise of "rest" to those who come to Him for it (Matt.11:28), may not be enough information to take us very far, but taken up as it is in the following chapter we are well on our way to a redemptive-historical/Christocentric understanding. "The Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath" (Matt.12:8) would hardly seem to be a rubber-stamping of Moses! It is rather Jesus' claim of the right to exercise His own prerogatives over the day.³⁷ Granted, exactly where Jesus is taking the Sabbath is not here stated; but we are left with the distinct impression that as a result of His coming, the Sabbath will undergo some kind of transformation. To borrow from His words in the previous chapter, He is Himself the "rest" which the day typified.

Nor are Matthew 11 and 12 our only clues. The writer to the Hebrews treats the subject in exactly this way (Heb. 4:1-10). Here we learn that the Sabbath, as all the law,³⁸ had a forward look. It anticipated a "rest" which is realized in Christ. The day enjoys no other continuing significance. It found its significance in Christ.

This is the direction in which Paul takes the Sabbath also. In Colossians 2:16-17 the apostle insists that we must not submit to judgment concerning Sabbath observance. His reason? The Sabbath was but the "shadow" of which Christ is the reality.³⁹ It was intended as a picture only. It carried but a typical significance. It had a forward look in that it anticipated the rest enjoyed in Christ. It has no continuing relevance of its own. It has been "filled full" in Christ.

All this should not surprise us. Given the forward look which Jesus specifically stated that the old had, we should

expect the epochal event of His coming to have some effect here also. And so it does.

In light of all this it is not surprising to notice the apostolic denial of Sabbath *day* observance. In Colossians 2:16 Paul specifies that the Sabbath law must not be laid upon us as obligatory for the simple reason that the One whom it anticipated has now come. In Galatians 4:9-11 he expresses horrified surprise that some at Galatia would turn back to observing the day, a backward step which for Paul carried devastating implications. And in Romans 14 it is the weaker brother who observes the day as holy. The stronger brother understands that no particular day is holy but that all days are equally holy under God. The natural and easiest understanding of these verses recognizes an end to Sabbath day observance. The Sabbath, the sign of the old covenant, bore a greater significance than a continuing regulation of activity on a certain day of the week. It pointed forward to soteric verities realized in Christ.

The traditional Puritan/Reformed position which sees the Sabbath as an abiding obligation even on new covenant believers⁴⁰ is generally argued first of all from the standpoint of the "eternal" nature of the Decalogue/"moral" law, as opposed to the passing relevance of the "civil" and "ceremonial" categories of Moses. But as already observed, this argument begins with an unwarranted assumption (i.e., that we must divide Moses so) and proceeds to a foregone conclusion (i.e., that the Decalogue is the expression of God's eternal moral law). These are matters which demand exegetical support but which find none. Moreover, the division is unnecessary. It ignores the old covenant setting of the Sabbath and its status as the old covenant "sign." It is further plagued by those specific statements, highlighted above, which deny Sabbath day observance to the new covenant believer. It also runs against those statements, also highlighted above, which in speaking of the abolition

of the Mosaic code refer specifically to the Decalogue. But more to the point, that position misses the new covenant significance of the Sabbath and fails to see its fulfillment in Christ.⁴¹

Conclusion

Divine law continues, but not in its Mosaic formulation. Christ supersedes Moses. This is no “destroying” of Moses but rather his “fulfilling” (Matt. 5:17; cf. Deut. 18:15-19). Christ is the one of whom Moses wrote (John 5:46), whose law would be absolute and the ultimate standard of judgment (Deut. 18:15-19). By no means are we left without law. Rather, Christ has taken morals a step higher, above Moses. From Him we learn God’s highest expression of holiness.

Summary

There are distinct advantages to this reading of the subject. On the one hand, it avoids the older dispensationalist tendency of denying any relevance of law to the new covenant believer; law there is, and it is a continuing rule of life. On the other hand, it renders the complex and apparently artificial tripartite division of Moses irrelevant. Such difficult hermeneutical grids are simply unnecessary, for to be without Moses is not to be without law. This also allows the Sabbath discussion to proceed on exegetical and theological grounds rather than on the less stable ground of hermeneutical presuppositions. In short, this perspective harmonizes the statements of both the abolition of Moses and the enduring continuity of law.

More importantly, this new covenant perspective provides a Christocentric focus which takes seriously Christ’s claims of lordship. It is, in fact, a theology of lordship. Moses wrote of Christ (Matt. 5:46) in many ways, and this new covenant perspective on the law makes that fact all the more evident. Christ fulfills and stands above all that came

before Him. Unlike the scribes whose highest appeal was to Moses, Jesus teaches on His own authority, an authority that is unique (Matt. 7:29).

Author

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Endnotes

- 1 *Ouk edokimasan.*
- 2 E.g., Amos 1-2.
- 3 Genesis 15:16. Some specifics can be ascertained here also. Note the various sins for which men were condemned of God in pre-Mosaic times: covetousness (Gen. 3:6), false worship (Gen. 4:5, whatever the exact nature of it), murder (4:8-11), adultery/sexual profligacy (6:1-7; 19:4ff.), evil thinking (6:5), dishonor of parents (9:22-25), pride and selfishness (11:4ff.), injustice (16:5ff.), incest (19:31ff.), lying and deceit (chap. 27), false gods and idolatry (Ex. 12:12; Rom. 1:25), etc. Guilt was justly established in all these apart from formal legislation. However subjective, divine law is specific and detailed.
- 4 This also explains the “Because I told you to” nature of so many of the law’s requirements (e.g., the dietary regulations).
- 5 It is impossible to find clear pre-Mosaic statements regarding the third and fifth commands (the name of the Lord and honor of parents), but these obligations would appear implicit in the actions of the patriarchs toward their parents and in their reverence toward God.
- 6 It is likely that the distinction is implicit even in Jeremiah’s prophecy of the new covenant (31:31-33) where “my [God’s] law” is placed in *contrast* to the law

of the old covenant, not a continuation of it. This which is new is “not according to” the Mosaic covenant.

- 7 Notice throughout the chapter the “If you . . . then I . . .” nature of the covenant.
- 8 Kaiser attempts to interpret this old covenant “Do this and live” stipulation not in terms of justification but of sanctification of justified people (Walter C. Kaiser, “Leviticus 18:5 and Paul: Do This and You Shall Live [Eternally]?” *JETS* 14 [1971], 19-28). But the argument reduces the stipulation to a tautology: “The man who does these things shall do these things.”

That the stipulation demanded complete and continuing conformity to the law for justification seems its easiest first reading, and it fits well with the prophets’ enforcement of the covenant and the curses of the covenant stated so plainly in both Leviticus and Deuteronomy. Moreover, Paul’s use of these words in Romans 10:5 (as also his citation of Deut. 27:26 in Gal. 3:10) runs in this same (soteriological) direction. The attempt to justification by law obligated one to keep the law perfectly and forever in order to attain that justification. The law, therefore, can only condemn; for all have transgressed its demands. It makes promises only to obedient people, not to sinners.

- 9 *Ton parabaseon charin* (“because of transgression”) here expresses purpose.
- 10 *Ellogeo*, “to keep a record of something— ‘to record, to list.’ . . . ‘but where there is no law, no account is kept of sins.’ . . . ‘a sin is not listed as a sin’” (Johannes P. Louw and Eugene A. Nida, *Greek- English Lexicon of the New Testament Based on Semantic Domains*, second ed. [New York: United Bible Societies, 1989]), 394.
- 11 *Paidagogos eis Christon*.
- 12 Cf. Romans 3:21, “being witnessed by the law.”
- 13 Lewis Sperry Chafer, *Grace: The Glorious Theme* (Grand

Rapids: Zondervan, 1978), 87ff., 152ff.; M. R. DeHaan, *Law or Grace?* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1965), 140-41; Arno C. Gaebelin, *The Gospel of Matthew* (Neptune, New Jersey: Loizeaux Brothers, 1961), 232; Clarence Larkin, *Rightly Dividing the Word* (Philadelphia: Rev. Clarence Larkin Est., n.d.), 195-96; McClain, *op. cit.*, ch. 7; C. I. Scofield, *Law and Grace* (Winona Lake, Indiana: BMH Books, 1973), chap. 6. For a brief interaction with this view, see my *The Continuing Relevance of Divine Law* (Hatfield, Pennsylvania: Interdisciplinary Biblical Research Institute, 1991), 8-10.

- 14 Article VI, “Of the Third Use of the Law” (Philip Schaff, *Creeeds of Christendom* [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1983], 3:131).
- 15 This passing relevance of Moses is spoken of both in terms of the law’s justifying and/or condemning qualities (soteriology) and of the law as a rule of life (the so-called “third use” of the law). As a condemning force it has nothing whatever to say to those who are “in Christ.” This was discussed earlier; it forms a large segment of the Pauline soteriology. The law’s condemning power is stopped in that it is satisfied in the penal death of our Substitute, who provided for us all the righteousness the law requires (Rom. 3:21-26; Phil. 3:8-9; etc.). But it is Moses as a rule of life that is under discussion here.
- 16 This is Luther’s position exactly. “That Moses does not bind the Gentiles can be proved from Exodus 20[:1], where God himself speaks, ‘I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage.’ This text makes it clear that even the Ten Commandments do not pertain to us. For God never led us out of Egypt, but only the Jews. The sectarian spirits want to saddle us with Moses and all the commandments. We will just skip that. We will regard Moses as a teacher, but we will not regard him as our lawgiver—

unless he agrees with both the New Testament and the natural law. . . . Paul and the New Testament . . . abolish the sabbath, to show us that the sabbath was given to the Jews alone." Luther goes on to explain that to the new covenant believer, every day is equally holy. ("How Christians Should Regard Moses," *Luther's Works*, 35:165-66). Luther's entire treatise here is worthy of careful attention.

- 17 Walter Kaiser, *Toward an Old Testament Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1978), 118.
- 18 *Holon ton nomon*, James 2:10.
- 19 *Kataluo*, Matthew 5:17.
- 20 *Pleroo*, Matthew 5:17.
- 21 For a fuller treatment of this subject, see my *The Status of Mosaic Law in This Messianic Age: A Theological and Exegetical Analysis of Matthew 5:17-20* (Th.M. thesis; Biblical Theological Seminary, 1994); or a very much abbreviated version of the same, *New Covenant Theology and Mosaic Law* (Pottsville, Pennsylvania: Word of Life Baptist Church, 1994), available also at <http://www.infi.net/~tulip>.
- 22 *Anomia*, 7:23.
- 23 Cf. the oft-repeated "Jesus said"; the 55 "I say" sayings, significantly more than any other gospel writer; "My words"; the discourses, etc.
- 24 "You have heard it said. . . . But I say unto you," Matthew 5:21ff.
- 25 "'The law,' is a phrase which, to a Jew, conveyed the idea of the Mosaic institution, the peculiar order of things under which the Israelitish people were placed at Mount Sinai. That is the law to which our Lord seems to refer; and I apprehend interpreters would not likely have supposed that the reference was to anything else, had it not been that they found difficulty in explaining words, which seemed to them to imply a declaration of

inviolable stability to a system which was temporary as well as local, and which has in fact long ceased to exist" (John Brown, *Discourses and Sayings of Our Lord*, vol. 1 [1850, reprint; Carlisle, Pennsylvania: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1990], 171).

- 26 See D. A. Carson, *Matthew* in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, vol. 8, ed. Frank E. Gaebelain (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984), 142-45. Also Vern Poythress, *The Shadow of Christ in the Law of Moses* (Brentwood, Tennessee: Wolgemuth & Hyatt, 1991), 263-69. Also John Brown, *Discourses and Sayings of Our Lord*, 170-72.
- 27 *Pipto*, v. 18.
- 28 *Katalusai*, v.17.
- 29 The entire quote: "I apprehend the word 'fulfil' is used in the sense of 'complete,' 'fill up,' 'perfect.' This is so common a use of the term, as to make it unnecessary to quote examples of it. It is as if he had said, 'My design is not to invalidate the Old Testament revelation, but to complete it. It is but the first part of a great divine manifestation; I come to give the remaining and the most important part of it.' Our Lord came to complete divine revelation. . . . In these words our Lord sanctions the divine authority of the Old Testament Scriptures, and at the same time holds himself up as the person appointed by God to finish the work which they had left incomplete. . . ." (*Discourses and Sayings of Our Lord*, 170).
- 30 Brevard S. Childs, *The New Testament as Canon: An Introduction* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985), 71-72; emphasis added.
- 31 Cf. Douglas Moo, "The Law of Moses or the Law of Christ" in *Continuity and Discontinuity*, John S. Feinberg, ed. (Westchester, Illinois: Crossway Books, 1988), 204-206.
- 32 *Ennomos Christou*, v. 21b; so BAG.
- 33 *Me on autos hupo nomon*.

- 34 Paul spoke like this earlier: "Circumcision is nothing, and uncircumcision is nothing, but what matters is the keeping of the commandments of God" (1 Cor. 7:19). Any man living under the old covenant would object, "But circumcision is the commandment of God!" And so it was. But Paul discards it out of hand—it is "nothing." Again, Paul's point of reference was not Mosaic but Christological. The writer to the Hebrews speaks the same way when he observes that "when the priesthood is changed, of necessity there takes place a change of law also" (Heb. 7:12). The Lord Jesus brought with Him a new law which has displaced the old.
- 35 Cf. Jude 3, the "once-for-all-delivered-to-the-saints" faith (*te hapax paradotheise tois hagiois pistei*).
- 36 John Brown, *Discourses and Sayings of Our Lord*, 1:170. Cf. note 27 above.
- 37 This is how the narrative of Matthew 12/Mark 2 leads us. See my *Jesus and the Sabbath* (Pottsville, Pennsylvania: Word of Life Baptist Church, 1993). Also available at <http://www.infi.net/~tulip>.
- 38 Cf. the discussion of Matthew 5:17ff. above.
- 39 *Soma*, body.
- 40 Ironically, the sabbatarian is not properly a "Reformed" position, for the continental Reformers themselves did not so observe the day. Calvin's "lawn bowling" on the Sabbath is well known. See also the quote of Luther above (note 16).
- 41 This continuing relevance of the Sabbath is also argued on the grounds that it is a "creation ordinance." But the argument finds precious little exegetical support. Nothing in the Genesis account establishes such. Nowhere is it given to Adam as a day to be observed, nor is there any example of Adam observing it so. To be sure, the day was sanctified, and on it *God* rested (cf. "His rest," Heb. 4:10). But nothing more is said about it

until Israel is so instructed at the giving of the manna (Ex. 16) and the giving of the law at Sinai (Ex. 20:8), and here Sabbath day observance is stated to be given to them *as the sign of the old covenant* (Ex. 31:12-18). This is confirmed in Nehemiah 9:14 where it is plainly stated that it was at Sinai that the Sabbath was first "made known" to Israel. From Israel's standpoint, Sabbath observance was not an ancient but a very new phenomenon.