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God's Law In New Testament Moral Judgments

(Part I)

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The Old Testament law of God gives definitive substance to many of the central themes of New Testament ethics -- as we have illustrated before. When we ask what it means to follow the will of God or to be holy, as the New Testament requires, we find that the law of God defines these ethical themes. Likewise the law of God is assumed in notions like kingdom righteousness or the golden rule. That law functions as a standard and a guide when we heed New Testament exhortations to attain the stature of Christ or demonstrate the fruit of the Spirit. New Testament ethical themes, then, will quite often take the validity of God's Old Testament commandments for granted.

The complete, continuous, and thus contemporary validity of the Old Testament law which is assumed without challenge in many themes of New Testament ethics is brought out explicitly in moral judgments which fill the pages of the New Testament. In particular circumstances, when some kind of moral evaluation, direction, or exhortation is called for, New Testament preachers and writers often show that they stand firmly on the Old Testament law in making the judgments that they make. They treat and utilize the standing rules of ethics as found in the Old Testament as though these rules were meant for them to keep -- even though these rules were given many, many years earlier, before the advent of Christ our Savior. Particular instances of ethical decision-making in the New Testament illustrate, then, once again that the commandments of God found in the Old Testament have not been discarded, repudiated, or ignored as somehow no longer authoritative and valid.

Use and Validity

Imagine that you wake up some morning to an exasperating problem: the plumbing under the kitchen sink needs repair and a pool of water sits on the floor. After you mop up the mess you stop and take thought as to what should be done to solve your plumbing problem. You think about calling a plumber but reject that plan as too expensive and perhaps unnecessary. Upon reflection you come to believe that you might very well be able to repair the plumbing yourself -- if only you had some good direction. Therefore you conclude that you will go down to the

public library this morning and check out a self-help book on kitchen plumbing. Add one more feature to this scenario, namely, that you are reasonably informed as to the operating procedures of a public library. That is, you realize that the library is not open all of the time and that only those with library cards may have the privilege of checking out books. So then, let us go back to your decision to check out a self-help book on plumbing this morning. What does such a decision tell us about your current beliefs? Among other things it tells us that you believe (rightly or wrongly) that the public library is open this morning, that you have a library card there, and that the library card is still valid. If you decided to use the library's self-help plumbing book this morning but knew either that the library was closed, that you had no card, or that your card was expired, you would most likely be irrational or a crook. People do not normally plan to use things which are closed down (e.g. the library), non-existent, or expired (e.g. your library card).

Likewise when you wait in line at the Chevron station, fill your car's tank with gas, and then hand the attendant your Chevron credit card, you are expecting that the card is still valid. Whether you scrupulously check the expiration date on the credit card before submitting it for payment to the attendant or not, the very fact that you use the card reveals the assumed validity of that card. And the attendant's acceptance of that card shows that he too believes it to be a valid one. When something has expired or is no longer valid, we do not have the authority to use it. Dishonesty aside, an expired library card or invalid credit card is useless. On the other hand, the use of something indicates its validity.

Much of the same can be said regarding rules. Invalid or expired rules have lost their authority and as such are useless (except for purposes of historical illustration). A professor may draw laughs from his class by reading some of the city ordinances which were on the books a century ago, but a policeman would be out of place in trying to enforce them. A rule which has been repealed, amended, or replaced is no longer authoritative and cannot be used as a rule any longer. Thus if a rule is put to use, the assumption

tion must be that it is (or is thought to be) a valid rule. When a football referee allows a touchdown to count which was accomplished by means of a forward pass, it is futile for the other team to complain against the pass on the ground that the forward pass was once illegitimate in football. The old prohibition against the forward pass has been repealed, and football is now played by slightly different rules. When a baseball umpire does not allow a designated hitter to bat for the pitcher, it is evident that the umpire is taking National League rules to be valid instead of American League rules. The use of the particular rule instead of alternative rules demonstrates the current authority and validity of the particular rule. For this reason a driver who is stopped by a highway patrolman for traveling sixty-five miles per hour will not avoid a ticket by appealing to the former law which set the maximum speed at sixty-five. The use of the fifty-five mile per hour speed law by the courts and police establishes the validity of this law over against the older one. We do not use expired rules if we are informed and honest.

Rule Use in the NT

Looking at library cards and credit cards, and reflecting on civic rules and sports rules, we have seen that the use of them assumes their validity. Invalid cards and rules are unauthoritative. We can now apply this reasonable insight to the practice of the New Testament speakers and writers. Like policemen and umpires, the inspired speakers and writers of the New Testament were called upon to make decisions on the basis of rules; they needed to draw moral judgments in particular situations. When that time came, which rules did they utilize? Did they -- as infallibly informed in their utterances -- ignore the moral rules (commandments) of the Old Testament as though they were expired, inapplicable, or invalid? What does New Testament usage of the Old Testament law tell us about that law's authority today?

The current validity of the standing rules of Old Testament morality is challenged or circumscribed by many within the Christian church today. We find some who teach that the New Testament Christian has nothing whatsoever to do with the law of the Old Testament; the believer, it is said, is not bound to the law at all. We find others who would put stiff limits on the extent of the Old Testament law's validity; the believer, they say, is bound

to follow only a portion of the Old Testament moral code (usually the ten commandments). But what does the inductively ascertained practice of the New Testament speakers and writers reveal about this? Do they ignore the law in moral judgments? In ethical decision-making do they restrict themselves to the decalogue? Simply put, the answer is obviously "No." The New Testament speakers and writers show themselves more than willing to put the Old Testament law -- decalogue and extradecalogue -- into service in critical moral judgments. They do not treat the Old Testament commandments like an expired library card or a repealed speed limit. Just the opposite is the case! They make free and unexplained use of the Old Testament law, thereby assuming its moral authority for the New Testament age (extending from Christ to the consummation).

Moreover the use of the Old Testament law in New Testament moral judgments is quite thorough. It is not limited to a single New Testament writer (although that would be enough to establish the law's authority), to a single New Testament book (although, again, the authority of one infallible document is sufficient), or to one restricted Old Testament source. In contexts of moral application New Testament citations and allusions are taken from portions of Genesis, Proverbs, Psalms, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Habakkuk, and Zechariah; however, even more frequently and consistently does the New Testament make moral judgments on the basis of the Law portion of the Old Testament, citing Exodus 20, 21, 22, 23, Leviticus 11, 18, 19, 20, 21, 24, 25, Numbers 18, 30, and Deuteronomy 1, 4, 5, 6, 8, 13, 15, 17, 19, 21, 22, 23, 24, 25, 27. The moral use of these Old Testament passages will be found scattered throughout Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, Romans, I and II Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians, I Timothy, Hebrews, James, I Peter, I John, and Revelation. Therefore, the attempt to reject or circumscribe the authority of the Old Testament law made by some Christian teachers today will over and over again meet embarrassment before the text of the New Testament.

(For further reading along these lines see Theonomy in **Christian Ethics**. Craig Press, 1977. The book may be ordered from me for \$9.50 at 412 E. Quincy, Orange, CA 92667; include check and address.)

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