

BIBLICAL ETHICS

2 Timothy 3:16-17

Vol. III, No. 1

©1980, Institute for Christian Economics

January, 1980

Old and New Testament Views of God's Law

by Greg L. Bahnsen, Th.M., Ph.D.

The purpose of the present work simply be to compare and contrast the outlook on the law of God which we find in the Old and New Testaments. Granted, there are many ways to summarize the theology of law in either testament; the present is only one among many. However it hopefully serves a useful purpose: that of stressing the continuity between Old and New Testaments regarding God's law -- over against contrary misconceptions fostered by some teachers -- and of indicating salient points of discontinuity -- over against the baseless fears of some that those who acknowledge the continuing validity of God's law today suppress or ignore important differences.

Continuity Between the Testaments

I. God's law is perpetual in its principles.

(A) The commandments of God are not deemed a uniquely Mosaic administration but as obliging man from the beginning.

(1) Before man's fall into sin God delivered to him commandments which were his moral obligation, for instance the creation ordinances of marriage (Gen. 2:24), labor (Gen. 2:15), and the Sabbath (Gen. 2:1-3), as well as the cultural mandate of dominion over creation (Gen. 1:28). Paul too would view the standards of morality as in force from the very beginning, being constantly communicated through general revelation (Rom. 1:18-21). In particular, the creation ordinances (e.g., Matt. 19:5) and cultural mandate (e.g., I Cor. 10:31) are applied in the New Testament.

(2) The Old Testament shows that, as the New Testament teaches (Rom. 5:13-14), between Adam and Moses law was in the world. The Adamic covenant established a marital order (Gen. 3:16) and the requirement of labor (Gen. 3:19) which are both authoritative in the New Testament (1 Tim. 2:12-14; 2 Thea. 3:10). The Noahic covenant reaffirmed the cultural mandate (Gen. 9:1) and revealed God's standard of retribution against murderers (Gen. 9:6), which are again valid in the New Testament (e.g., Rom. 13:4). In the Abrahamic covenant we see that Abraham had commandments, statutes, and laws to keep

(Gen. 18:19; 26:5), and the New Testament commends to us Abraham's obedient faith (Jas. 2:21-23; Heb. 11:8-19). Moreover, prior to the special revelation of the Mosaic law we can see the perpetual validity of its moral standards in the example of God's judgment on Sodom (Gen. 19), punished for violating the case law against homosexuality (Lev. 18:23) -- for their "lawless deeds" according to the New Testament (2 Peter 2:6-8). Indeed, according to Paul, all men know God's moral standards through general revelation -- showing "the work of the law written in their hearts" (Rom. 2:14-15). This universal communication of God's law is as broad as His ethical demands, not being restricted narrowly to the ten commandments (e.g., Rom. 1:32, where condemned homosexuals are said to know "the ordinance of God").

(B) The principles of God's law are perpetual because they reflect the character of God, who is unchanging.

Leviticus 20:7-8 declares, "Be holy, for I am Jehovah your God, and you shall keep My statutes and do them"; this is how God's people sanctify themselves -- becoming holy as God is holy (1 Peter 1:15-16) or imitating His perfection (Matt. 5:48, in the context of the law's demands). The Old Testament teaches that the law of God is perfect (Ps. 19:7), being holy, just, and good like God (Deut. 12:28; Neh. 9:13), and the New Testament viewpoint is the same: the law is perfect (Jas. 1:25), holy, just, and good (Rom. 7:12).

II. God's law is thorough in its extent.

(A) His commandments apply to matters of the heart, and not simply external affairs.

In the Old Testament God required His people to seek Him with all their hearts (Deut. 4:29) and to circumcise their hearts (Deut. 10:16), even as the New Testament continues to show that we are to love Him with all of our hearts (Matt. 22:37) and submit to His law in our thoughts, attitudes, and intentions (e.g., Matt. 5:21-48).

(B) God's law applies to every area of life.

The commandments of God called His people to love Him with everything they had (Deut. 6:4-6), throughout

the day (v. 7), at home and away from home (v. 9), whether in thought or deed (v. 8). Indeed, man was to live by every word from God's mouth (Deut. 8:3, 6). Likewise the New Testament requires that every aspect of man's life and being be given over to the love of God (Matt. 22:37) and that God's people demonstrate their holiness "in all manner of living" (1 Peter 1: 15-16).

(C) God's law is a standard for all nations (not simply Israel).

Deuteronomy 4:6, 8 clearly taught that the commandments delivered by Moses to Israel were to be her wisdom in the sight of the nations, who would exclaim "what great nation is there that has statutes and ordinances so righteous as all this law?" Similarly Paul indicates that the standards of God's law are declared through natural revelation and are binding upon all men (Rom. 1: 32; 2: 14-15). Because the nations once occupying Canaan violated the standards of God's law, God would punish them by expelling them from the land (Lev. 18:24-27) -- even as He would expell Israel if she violated His laws (Deut. 30:17-18). The moral standard and the judgment on disobedience were the same, then, between Israel and the nations. Accordingly Paul teaches that all men, Jews and Gentiles, have sinned by violating God's law (Rom. 2:9, 19-20), and Jude declares that God will judge all ungodly men for all of their ungodly deeds (Jude 14-15). Where the Old Testament taught that "Righteousness exalts a nation, but sin is a reproach to any people" (Prov. 14:34), the New Testament teaches that whatever Christ has commanded is to be propagated to the nations (Matt. 28:20). God's law binds all men at all times in all places.

To this point we have seen that the Old and New Testament agree perfectly that the law of God is perpetual in its principles -- not being uniquely Mosaic, but reflecting the eternal character of God -- and thorough in its extent -- touching matters of the heart, applying to all areas of life, and binding all mankind to obedience. At this juncture it will be important to add that:

III. God's law is complementary to salvation by grace.

(A) The law was not to be used as a way of justification.

In the Old Testament it was understood that in God's sight "no man living is righteous (or justified)," for if God

marks iniquities no man can stand (Ps. 143:2: 130:3). Instead, "the just shall live by faith" (Hab. 2:4). The Psalmist saw that "Blessed is the man unto whom Jehovah imputes not iniquity," and "He that trusts in Jehovah, lovingkindness will compass him about" (Ps. 32:2, 10). Old Testament saints were not saved by law-obedience but by faith in the coming Savior, typified in the sacrifices of the Old Testament system. Likewise the New Testament declares in no uncertain terms that "by the works of the law shall no flesh be justified in His sight" (Rom. 3:20). Indeed, "if righteousness is through the law, then Christ died for nothing" (Gal. 2:21). God's law is the standard of righteousness, but because sinners cannot conform to that standard their salvation must come by God's grace **through faith** (Eph. 2:8-9). This was true in both Old and New Testaments.

(B) Obedience to God's law is harmonious with grace and saving faith.

The Old Testament indicates that God's law was specially revealed to Israel in the context of His redeeming and delivering His people from bondage (Ex. 19:4; 20:2); those who were willing to keep His law had already been shown His grace. In this vein David could sing, "Grant me thy law graciously" (Ps. 119:29) -- feeling no tension between a proper use of God's grace and law. Those who were justified by faith in the Old Testament, such as Abraham and Rahab, were those who were so renewed by God's grace that they were willing to obey His demands (cf. James 2: 21-25). Those who were justified and living by faith, due to the grace of God, desired to obey the commandments of God out of respect for His authority, love of His purity, and gratitude for His salvation. The same holds true for saints in the New Testament. Paul says that we have not been saved by good works, but we have been saved for good works -- that is, in order to live obediently before God (Eph. 2:10). According to him God's grace teaches us to renounce lawless deeds (Titus 2:11 -14), and by faith we actually establish -- rather than nullifying -- the law of God (Rom. 3:31).

(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.)

(To be continued)