

# ***BIBLICAL ETHICS***

*2 Timothy 3:16-17*

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## **The Functions of God's Law**

(Part VI)

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Traditionally, Reformed thought has summarized the proper uses of the law into three specific functions. It drives the convicted sinner to Christ (the second use) and provides a pattern of sanctification for the regenerated believer (the third use). Some debate has surfaced in the past over the "third" or didactic use of the law, but the Reformed, faith has still persisted in the Biblical affirmation that the law retains its binding validity for the conduct of believers.

More recently disagreement has arisen with respect to what the Reformers called the "first use" of the law, which they took to be its "political use" in restraining the ungodly behavior of the unregenerate within society. The Reformers were sure enough of this proper function for God's law that they could call it the first and most obvious use for it. In fact, the very passage where Paul suggests that there are both lawful and unlawful uses of the law of God—1 Timothy 1:8—goes on immediately to illustrate a lawful use of the law as that of curbing the outward civil behavior of unruly men. (w. 9-10). The law provides an external standard of justice which can be applied within the civil sphere, as is evident from Paul's mentioning of transgressions which can particularly be given cognizance by human law. The law was enacted or laid down, says Paul, for the unruly—such as murderers, kidnapers, homosexuals, perjurers, and the like. The law by its very nature aims to restrain the misconduct of lawless men.

In the Publisher's Introduction to the Banner of Truth reprint of Samuel Bolton's marvelous work, *The True Bounds of Christian Freedom*, the civil importance of God's law is pinpointed nicely: "Grievous and alarming is the present-day deterioration in the moral condition of society. For this decay the Church is partly blameworthy because, as the preserving salt of the community, she has largely lost her savour. Modern theology has defected. It has cut itself adrift from the ancient landmarks, and present-day society reaps 'the evil thing and bitter' which is the inevitable consequence. The present prevailing theology has not been able to elevate society and halt its moral decline, and unquestionably, one explanation of this is its misunderstanding of the place of the law and its usefulness in the

service of the covenant of grace" (pp. 10-11). When men fail to see that God's law is meant to operate as external discipline within society, when they doubt and oppose the "political use" of the law, their societies inevitably suffer the accursed consequences.

Carl F. H. Henry puts the matter this way "Even where there is no saving faith, the Law serves to restrain sin and to preserve the order of creation by proclaiming the will of God. . . . By its judgments and its threats of condemnation and punishment, the written law along with the law of conscience hinders sin among the unregenerate. It has the role of a magistrate who is a terror to evildoers. . . . It fulfills a political function, therefore, by its constraining influence in the unregenerate world" (*Christian Personal Ethics*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1957, p. 355).

This political function of the law is undeniable in the Old Testament, where God delivered statutes pertaining to civil matters for His people. These stipulations were integral to the law and order of Old Testament society, and if Paul's New Testament declaration in 1 Timothy 1:8-10 is to be heeded, these stipulations of God's law are still valuable in modern political ethics. "We cannot dismiss these glimpses of the means of law and order in the Old Testament without remembering that this God-given tradition is emphasized and not abrogated by the Christian gospel. . . . Though under grace we are under the Law of God and are still accountable to him and responsible to our fellow men that justice and peace prevail" (D. J. Wiseman, "Law and Order in Old Testament Times," *Vox Evangelic* VIII:19). The law of God continues to have an important political function within the New Testament order, as Donald Guthrie recognizes in saying: "In the New Testament a standard of justice is assumed and there is a clear differentiation between what is right and what is wrong. There are echoes of the Old Testament view of social justice. . . . The approach to law in general in the New Testament is intricately bound up with the Mosaic Law, which makes extensive provision for social justice. . . . The importance of this evidence of the sanctity of the law is that it provides a sound basis for social action. For a stable society law is indispensable" ("The New Testament

**Approach to Social Responsibility: Vox Evangelic VIII: 53-54).**

An ironic situation has arisen in our day. Evangelical Christians who might be considered to lean toward a more "liberal" position in politics and Evangelical Christians who might be thought to favor a more "conservative" position in politics have at least this one unwitting area of significant agreement: they both wish to make principled and authoritative use of the Old Testament law for social justice. Recent publications which have promoted an active involvement by the believer in relieving the needs of impoverished people around the world have made noteworthy appeal to the law of Jubilee, while many books and articles written to protest the tolerance of homosexuality and/or abortion in our day have made clear and unapologetic reference to the Old Testament prohibitions against them. The law is recognized as having a continued political significance by present-day believers, even when they do not systematically work out a theological foundation for the appeals which are made to the law's authority in contemporary society, and even when they might elsewhere unwittingly contradict that assumed foundation. That foundation is the continuing validity of God's law, even in its social or political relevance. Strangely enough, it is often those who are heirs to the Reformation tradition of maintaining the political use of the law that raise objection to that notion today.

In resisting the political use of God's law, in detracting from its political relevance, and in encouraging either indifference to questions of social justice or else alternative standards for it, such men are not aligned with their Reformation forefathers. Luther and Calvin were fully in agreement that God's law was an instrument of civil government, functioning to restrain crime and to promote thereby civil order. Luther taught that, "The first use of the law is to bridle the wicked. This civil restraint is very necessary, and appointed of God, as well for public peace, as for the preservation of all things, but especially lest the cause of the Gospel should be hindered by the tumult and seditions

of wicked, outrageous and proud men" (Commentary at Gal. 3:19). Calvin concurs "The first use of the law is, by means of its fearful denunciations and the consequent dread of punishment, to curb those who, unless forced, have no regard for rectitude and justice. Such persons are curbed, not because their mind is inwardly moved and affected, but because, as if a bridle were laid upon them, they refrain their hands from external acts, and internally check the depravity which would otherwise petulantly burst forth" (Institutes 2.7.1 O). This continued to be the view of Reformed thinkers through the centuries. At the time of the Westminster Assembly, Samuel Bolton wrote. "First of all, then, my work is to show the chief and principal ends for which the law was promulgated or given. There are two main ends to be observed, one was political, the other theological or divine. The political use is hinted at by the apostle in I Tim. 1:8-9 . . . that is, it was made for them in such fashion that, if it were not their rule, it should be their punishment. Such is the political use of the law" (True Bounds of Christian Freedom, p. 78).

The political use of the law is admittedly negative and merely deterrent in character. It does nothing to regenerate the sinner or make him right with God; it does not touch his heart or bring him any closer to the Savior. Nevertheless, this function of the law is crucial for man's society. When the known ordinances of God's law are spumed by a culture, it has the wrath of God revealed against it in the progressive breakdown of social order and moral decency (e.g., Romans 1). Because this important political use of the law of God is unpopular in many circles today, and because many people educated in the secular environment of our society, carry confused inceptions of what this political function entails, the next few studies will focus on the Biblical doctrine of civil government and the law's place therein. We will see that "Righteousness exalts a nation, but sin is a disgrace to any people" (Prov. 14:34), in which case we cannot dismiss the political relevance and use of the law of the Lord.

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