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2 Timothy 3:16-17

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The Categories and Continuity of God's Law

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The law of the Lord is fully and forever valid; as such it holds moral authority over all men today, just as it did previously during the Old Testament era. This biblical truth has been substantiated in numerous ways in past studies -- from cardinal doctrines of the Christian faith, direct assertions of God's word, and all three of the major perspectives on ethics. Christ spoke clearly and forcefully on the subject when He said, "Do not think that I have come to abrogate the law or the prophets; I have come not to abrogate, but to fulfill. For verily I say unto you, until heaven and earth pass away, until all things have come about, not one letter or stroke shall by any means pass away from the law. Therefore, whoever breaks the least of these commandments and teaches men so shall be called least in the kingdom of heaven" (Matt. 5:17-19).

Those who oppose keeping the law or paying attention to its details today have a great deal to explain and defend in light of the teaching of God's word -- for instance the strong affirmation of the Lord quoted above. If the validity of the law (or a portion thereof) has expired in the New Testament, as some claim, then what are we to make of scriptural assertions that God does not alter His covenant word, does not allow subtraction from His commandments, is unchanging in His moral character (which the law reflects), and does not have a double-standard of right and wrong? Why then is the writing of the Old Testament law on our hearts central to the New Covenant? Why does the Bible say His commandments are everlasting? Why do New Testament writers say that the entire Old Testament is our instruction in righteousness and to be obeyed? Why do they cite its stipulations with authority and use them to bolster their own teaching? Why are we expected to model our behavior on Christ's, while we are told that He obeyed the law meticulously and perfectly? Why does the sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit entail the observance of God's law? Why does love summarize the law in particular? Why does faith establish the law for us to keep, and why does God's grace teach us to walk in the law's path of righteousness? Why are we told in numerous ways that the law brings blessing to those who heed it? Why are the law's requirements never

criticized or explicitly repudiated in the New Testament? Why are those who do not keep the law but claim to know the Savior called liars? God's inspired word says all of these things and more. What reply can the detractors from God's law today make in the face of such insurmountable evidence of the law's full validity?

The reply that is commonly, albeit fallaciously, made is that we find details in the Old Testament law which are somehow too strange or harsh to obey today, or we find particular requirements in the law which we in fact do not and should not observe in our day. Of course, such replies as these do not face the issues raised above. Surely God was completely aware of the law's details when He revealed those truths in His word which, as observed above, contradict the relaxing, ignoring, or disobeying of His law. If Scripture does not make an exception for us, we do not have the moral prerogative to make exceptions for ourselves when it comes to the law's authority over us. No extrabiblical standard, reason, or feeling can be legitimately used to depart from the law of God, for God's word has supreme and unchallengeable authority. If the Lord says that His commands are to be kept, no creature may draw His word into question. So then, the attempt to belittle obedience to God's law today by pointing to allegedly odd or harsh requirements in that law is doomed to theological failure. It also borders on disrespect for the Lawgiver whose holiness is transcribed for the creature in God's law. "O man, who are you who replies against God?" (Rom. 9:20). It is never our place to become judges of the law, for our calling is to be doers of the law (Jas 4:11).

Nevertheless, there do seem to be Old Testament requirements which are not kept by New Testament Christians, and there are some legal provisions which seem culturally outdated or at least inapplicable to our modern world. How are we to accommodate that fact -- without becoming judges of the law and without disregarding Christ's declaration that every minor detail of the law has enduring validity? The answer lies in recognizing the nature of the various Old Testament laws, seeing the kind of categories into which they fall. That is, it is necessary to

understand the laws of God according to their own character, purpose, and function. Only in that way will the law be "lawfully used" (cf. I Tim. 1:8).

The most fundamental distinction to be drawn between Old Testament laws is between moral laws and ceremonial laws. (Two divisions within each category will be mentioned subsequently.) This is not an arbitrary or ad hoc division, for it manifests an underlying rationale or principle. Moral laws reflect the absolute righteousness and judgment of God, guiding man's life into the paths of righteousness; such laws define holiness and sin, restrain evil through punishment of infractions, and drive the sinner to Christ for salvation. On the other hand, ceremonial laws -- or redemptive provisions -- reflect the mercy of God in saving those who have violated His moral standards; such laws define the way of redemption, typify Christ's saving economy, and maintain the holiness (or "separation") of the redeemed community. To illustrate the difference between these two kinds of law, the Old Testament prohibited stealing as a moral precept, but it also made provision of the sacrificial system so that thieves could have their sins forgiven. When Christ came He obeyed perfectly every moral precept of God's law, thereby qualifying as our sinless Savior; in order to save us, He laid down His life as a sacrificial lamb in atonement for our transgressions, and thereby giving fulfillment to the Old Testament foreshadows of redemption. While the moral law sets forth the perpetual obligation of all men if they are to be perfect as their Father in heaven is perfect, the ceremonial law is "the gospel in figures," proclaiming God's way of redemption for imperfect sinners.

The Ceremonial law can be seen to have sub-divisions: (1) laws directing the redemptive process and therefore typifying Christ -- for instance, regulations for sacrifice, the temple, the priesthood, etc., and (2) laws which taught the redemptive community its separation from the unbelieving nations -- for instance, prohibitions on unclean meats (Lev. 20:22-26), on unequal yoking of animals (Deut. 22:10), and on certain kinds of mixing of seed or cloth (Deut. 22:9, 11). None of these laws are observed today in the manner of the Old Testament shadows, and yet they are confirmed for us. The principle they taught is still valid. For instance, the ceremonial law prescribed the necessity of shed blood for atonement (Lev. 17:11), and accordingly when Christ made atonement for our sins once for all, "it was therefore necessary" that He shed His blood for us (Heb. 9:22-24); the Old Testament redemptive system called for a Passover lamb to be sacrificed, and Christ is that for us (I Cor. 5:7; 1 Peter 1:19). The ceremonial law separated Israel from the nations by requiring a separation to be drawn between clean and unclean meats and by prohibiting the unequal yoking of animals; in the New Testament the outward form of such

laws has been surpassed - the spreading of the redeemed community to the Gentiles renders all meats clean (Acts 10), and the sacrifice of Christ has put the system of ordinances which separated the Jews and Gentiles out of gear (Eph. 2:1 1-20) -- but their basic requirement of holy separation from the unclean world of unbelief is still confirmed and in force (2 Cor. 6:14-7:1). The ceremonial law is therefore confirmed forever by Christ, even though not kept in its shadow-form by New Testament believers.

The moral law of God can likewise be seen in two subdivisions, the divisions having simply a literary difference: (1) general or summary precepts of morality -- for instance, the unspecified requirements of sexual purity and honesty, "thou shalt not commit adultery" and "thou shalt not steal," and (2) commands which specify the general precepts by way of illustrative application -- for instance, prohibiting incest, homosexuality, defrauding one's workers, or muzzling the ox as he treads. The Puritans termed these case-law applications of the decalogue "judicial laws," and they correctly held that we are not bound today to keep these judicial laws as they are worded (being tied in the language of an ancient culture that has passed away) but only required to tread their underlying principles (or "general equity," as they called it). The Old Testament required that a railing be pieced around one's roof as a safety precaution, since guests were entertained on the flat roofs of houses in that ancient society; with our sloped roofs today we do not need to have the same literal railing, but the general underlying principle might very well require us to have the fence around our backyard swimming pool -- again, to protect human life. There is abundant evidence that the New Testament authoritatively cited and applied these case-law illustrations to current situations. To use examples mentioned above, the New Testament echoes the Old Testament law in prohibiting incest (I Cor. 5:1), homosexuality (Rom. 1:26-27, 32), defrauding employees (Mark 10:19), and muzzling the ox as he treads (I Tim. 5:18). Many more examples of ethical injunctions outside of the Decalogue being enforced in the New Testament are available. Therefore, we conclude that Jesus has forever confirmed the moral laws of God, their summary expressions as well as their case-law applications.

By recognizing the various categories of God's Old Testament law we can readily understand the continuing validity of every stroke of God's commandments for today. It is simply a matter of properly reading the law itself.

(For further reading along these lines see *Theonomy* in Christian Ethics, Craig Press, 1977, esp. chapter 9. The book may be ordered from me for \$10.60 at 1219 Pineview Dr., Clinton, MS 39056; Include check and address.)

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