

BIBLICAL ETHICS

2 Timothy 3:16-17

III

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Old and New Testament Views of God's Law

(Part III)

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[Continuity Between the Testaments, continued]

The common testimony of the two Testaments is that God's law is perpetual in its principles, thorough in its extent, complementary to salvation by grace, central to God's one covenant of grace, and taken by His people as a redemptive token and delight. The two bodies of inspired literature have a single testimony to the character, status, and significance of the law of the Lord. For that reason it should not prove surprising for us to learn further that both Old and New Testaments teach that:

VI. God's law is eternal and is not to be altered.

In a day when many view the law of the Lord as arbitrary, expendable, or temporary in its authority for the life of man, it is highly valuable to observe the outlook of the inspired writers. Moses wrote that forever it would go well with God's people to observe the commandments which He revealed (Deut. 12:28). David exclaimed that "All his precepts are sure; they are established forever and ever" (Ps. 111:7-8; cf. 119:152). Indeed, the eternal authority of God's commands characterizes each and every one of them: "Every one of thy righteous ordinances endureth forever" (Ps. 119:160). Looking unto the fearful day of the Lord when the wicked will be consumed with fire (Mal. 4:1), the prophet Malachi pronounces as one of the final words of the Old Testament, "Remember the law of Moses my servant" (4:4). However in the pages of the New Testament we hear the words of one who is far greater than Moses, David, or any prophet of old. Their testimony to the eternal authority of God's law is pale in comparison to the absolutely clear and utterly unchallengeable declaration of Jesus Christ that God's commandments—each and every one—is everlastingly valid: "Truly I say unto you, until heaven and earth pass away, until everything has come about, one letter or one stroke shall by no means pass away from the law" (Matt. 5:18). The Old and New Testaments unite in this doctrine.

The voice of the two Testaments is further united in saying that God's law is not to be altered. David recognized that God commands only what is just and right, and thus to depart from His commands is to deviate from moral integrity. "I esteem all thy precepts concerning all things to be right, and I hate every false way . . . All thy commandments are righteousness" (Ps. 119:128, 172). To change or ignore any of God's commands is necessarily to create an unrighteous

—or unjust pattern for behavior. Therefore the law itself guards against alterations within itself: "You shall not add unto the word which I command you, neither shall you diminish from it, in order that you may keep the commandments of Jehovah your God" (Deut. 4:2; cf. 12:32). No man has the prerogative to tamper with the requirements laid down by God. Only God himself, the Lawgiver, has the authority to abrogate or alter His commandments. Yet the testimony of God incarnate in the New Testament is that the law is not to be changed, even with the momentous event of His coming: "Do not think that I came to abrogate the law or the prophets . . . Therefore whoever shall break one of the least of these commandments and shall teach men so shall be called least in the kingdom of heaven" (Matt. 5:17, 19). God's eternal and righteous law is unalterable, according to the joint teaching of the Old and New Testaments.

VII. Therefore, we are obligated to keep the whole law today.

Anyone who suggests, without authorization from the word of God, that some law of the Old Testament is not binding upon our behavior today would fall under the double censure of both the Old Testament and New Testament writers. Such a suggestion would contradict the perpetuity and extent of God's law as taught in both testaments it would evidence forgetfulness of God's mercies, violate the covenant, and deprive God's people of one of their delights. Such a suggestion would stand diametrically opposed to the externality and immutability of the law as set forth in the Old and New Testaments. To challenge the law without direction from the Lord is to grieve and challenge Him, threatening to demote the challenger within God's kingdom.

Unless Scripture itself shows us some change with respect to God's law or our obedience to it, the principle which governs our attitude and behavior should be the same as the Bible's categorical assumption—namely, that our instruction in righteous behavior is found in every Old Testament scripture (1 Tim. 3:16-17), every point of the law (Jas. 2:10), even the least commandment (Matt. 5:19; 23:23), every word (Matt. 4:4), and every letter (Matt. 5:18). This is clear from the major points—to which both Old Testament and New Testament give assent—that have been reviewed about the law above. Given these agreed upon points, we have no reason to expect that the New Testament would categorically or silently release the believer from his moral duty to God's law.

To summarize we must assume continuity of moral duty between the Old Testament and New Testament. Accordingly, by operating upon this biblical assumption, the burden of Scriptural proof lies directly and heavily upon anyone who would deny the validity or the relevant authority of some particular Old Testament stipulation for our day. The next time you hear someone say, "We need not follow that commandment because it is the Old Testament law," you should say to yourself (if not also to him) "Now wait just a minute. . . ." That kind of assertion will require some explanation and clear biblical proof before the faithful believer will accept it. Faithful and inspired authors of Scripture—both Old and New Testaments—wrote to just the opposite effect.

What has been said above does not in the least deny that there are some forms of discontinuity between the Old Testament and the New Testament—that is, between the old covenant and the **new covenant**—regarding the law of God. What it does indicate is that any such discontinuity must be taught by God's word and not be brought as a categorical, theological assumption to God's word. We can turn now to such biblically-grounded discontinuities between the old and new covenants. Because the law of God plays a central role in His covenantal dealings with His people, it is altogether appropriate that the contrast between these two covenants should have a bearing on our relationship to that law.

Discontinuity Between the Covenants

1. The New Covenant Surpasses the Old Covenant in Glory

(A) While the Old Covenant was fundamentally a ministration of condemnation and death, the New Covenant is a ministration of righteousness and life.

Paul reflects upon the distinctiveness of the new covenant in 2 Corinthians 3, proving that anyone who exalts the law over the gospel (as did the legalistic Judaizers)—anyone who is so absorbed in the commandments that he obscures or overlooks the good news of redemption—has made a grave mistake. The new covenant, teaches Paul,

far outshines in glory the law of the old covenant. The law certainly has its glory (2 Cor. 3:9, 11), but despite that glory, what stands out in the old covenant is the feature of condemnation which brings death (36, 7, 9).

The law is good, indeed ordained unto life. However, the sinfulness of man works through the good law to produce death (Rem. 7:12-16). The outstanding feature of the old covenant to Paul's mind was the external tables of the law which, although they commanded good things, could not confer good things. These external ordinances necessarily condemned all unrighteous men and demanded their death: as Paul said, "the letter kills" (2 Cor. 3:6). There is no way that sinful men can be justified by doing the law (Gal. 2:16; 3:11). When Moses returned from receiving the law his face shone with the glory of God, and after reading the law to the people he needed to put up a veil over his face for the sake of the people (2 Cor. 3:7, 13). Paul sees in this fact the double character of the old covenant: (1) it was glorious, but (2) it continually accused and condemned those who, due to sin, could not endure to behold the glory of Moses' face.

Nevertheless, when Moses appeared with Christ on the Mount of Transfiguration, it was only the face of the Savior which shone with God's glory. Christ, the mediator of the new covenant, "has been counted worthy of more glory than Moses" (Heb. 3:3). The old covenant law condemned and killed, but by contrast Christ takes away the curse of the law by enduring its penalty and gives His life-producing Spirit to create an obedient heart in us. Accordingly the new covenant is distinctively "a ministration of the Spirit" or "a ministration of righteousness" (2 Cor. 3:8, 9) which "imparts life" (3:6). Christ "has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do" (Rem. 8:3). Accordingly Paul says that, in contrast to the covenant epitomized by tables of stone, the new covenant "exceeds in glory" (2 Cor. 3:9).

(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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