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2 Timothy 3:16-17

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The Functions of God's Law

(Part V)

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To this point we have seen that the law can and should declare the character of God, display His demands, pronounce blessing upon obedience, provide a definition of sin, expose infractions, incite further rebellion, and condemn all transgressions. These are lawful and appropriate functions of the law of God. To them others can be added. (8) The law drives us to Christ for salvation.

Thus far we have noted the unmitigated, absolute, unchanging demand of the law which reflects the holiness of God and thus sets out the evil of man by glaring contrast. Those who would have hoped in their own righteousness for acceptance before God are shown the futility of this hope by looking at the high standard of the law. The law speaks and shuts every mouth, bringing all the world under God's judgment (Rom. 3:19). Sinners apart from Christ have no hope in this world (Eph. 2:12). The sinner's only recourse must be to the free mercy of God's promise. Enlightened as to his guilt, he cries out with Paul, "Wretched man that I am! who shall deliver me from the body of this death?" (Rom. 7:24). God's gracious answer is Jesus Christ (3:25), who manifests a righteousness of God apart from our obedience to the law (Y. 21) and who justifies us by the free gift of faith (Rom. 3:22-26; 5:18-21; 6:23). In this way the law serves an important function in bringing men to salvation. It demonstrates their need and leaves them no honest option but God's offer of salvation. "Before faith came we were kept in ward under the law, shut up unto the faith which should afterwards be revealed. So that the law is become our tutor to bring us unto Christ that we might be justified by faith" (Gal. 3:23-24). This passage is customarily cited for the wording which suggests that the law drives us along to Christ.

(9) The law guides the sanctification of the believer.

Since the law sets down the pattern of God's holiness for our lives, and since the law was our obligation from the beginning, and since it is precisely the violation of the law which brought about the death of Jesus Christ for sinners, it only stands to reason that those delivered from sin's guilt and bondage should now desire to follow the previously spurned law. Those who have seen the glory of God in His law and have thereby been convicted of their own sin, being

driven to Christ for salvation, should strive to bring their thoughts, words, and deeds into conformity to the glorious standard of the law. God says, "You shall keep My statutes and practice them; I am the Lord who sanctifies you" (Lev. 20:8). Christ gives His Spirit to believers "in order that the ordinance of the law might be fulfilled" (Rom. 8:4). The law offers guidance and discernment to the believer (cf. Ps. 119:24, 66, 105; Prov. 6:23) so that he can walk in the light of God's moral perfection rather than in darkness (1 John 1:5-7; 2:3-6; cf. 3:4-1 @ 5:2-3). Christians ought not to sin but rather evidence love toward God and neighbor, and the First Epistle of John tells us that sin is violation of the law, and that love is seen in keeping God's commandments. Accordingly Christians are properly guided in their lives by the law of God.

John Newton wrote: "Another lawful use of the law is, to consult it as a rule and pattern by which to regulate our spirit and conversation. The grace of God, received by faith, will dispose unto obedience in general, but through remaining darkness and ignorance we are much at a loss as to particulars. We are therefore sent to the law, that we may learn how to walk worthy of God, who has called us to his kingdom and glory; and every precept has its proper place and use" (Letters, p. 47). Such an outlook led men like Newton to find another use of the law closely associated with its function of guiding sanctification. They often spoke of the law serving "as a test whereby to judge of the exercise of grace" (ibid). Such a concept, although unpopular in our day of easy believism, was very much on the mind of the Apostle John, who wrote "Hereby we know that we know Him, if we keep His commandments" (1 John 2:3). Obedience to the commandments was for John also a mark that one loved God and loved God's children (1 John 5:2-3). It thus appears appropriate that believers should use the law of God as a benchmark by which to gauge and evaluate their growth by God's grace in holiness of character. Because Bolton viewed the law as "a direction of life, a rule of walking to believers," he went on to find that God's law functioned "as a glass (mirror) to reveal the imperfections in our performance of duties," "as a reprover and corrector for sin, even to the saints," and as "a spur to quicken us

to duties" (The True Bounds of Christian Freedom, p. 83).

(1 O) The law also serves to restrain the evil of the unregenerate.

Although only believers will appreciate aright the glory of God's character revealed in the law, be convicted of their sinful pollution by comparison, and seek to be conformed to the righteous standard of the law, the law also serves a function in the life and experience of the unbeliever. Even if the unbeliever is not duly driven by the condemning finger of the law to the arms of a faithful Savior, the law should be utilized within a civil society to restrain the outward evil of ungodly men. Indeed, in the very passage when Paul tells us that the law is good when used lawfully, the precise lawful use of the law which he has in mind is its restraining function upon rebellious men: "knowing this, that the law was not enacted for a righteous man, but for the lawless and unruly, for the ungodly and sinners, for the unholy and profane, for murders of fathers and mothers, for man-slayers, for fornicators, for homosexuals, for menstealers, for liars, for false swearers.. ." (1 Tim. 1:9-1 O). This may not be a sanctifying effect in the unbeliever's life, but it is nevertheless a preservative function within society which is honored by God. It was intended as one of the proper functions of the law when God revealed it—both through the created realm and through the medium of written legislation.

The Traditional "Three Uses" of the Law

Our preceding survey has aimed to delineate many facets of the legitimate function of the law as discussed in Scripture. However traditional Reformed thought has tended to summarize all of these various functions under the heading of three main uses of the law. The Reformers recognized quite clearly that the law had not been abolished in the New Testament age, and yet they were keenly aware of the abuses of the law to which the medieval Roman Catholic Church was prone. Therefore, against antinomians they argued for the law's validity, and in order to prevent falling into error in the use of the law they set down the law's proper functions.

The "second use" of the law which they identified was called "the pedagogic use of the law." By providing con-

viction of sin and creating a sense of spiritual need in the sinner, the law was a tutor which brought him to Christ. In his well known Commentary on the Book of Galatians, Luther wrote: "The right use and end, therefore, of the law is to accuse and condemn as guilty such as live in security, that they may see themselves to be in danger of sin, wrath, and death eternal. . . . The law with this office helpeth by occasion to justification, in that it driveth a man to the promise of grace" (at Gal.2:17and3:19). Certainly no evangelical believer can gainsay that the law properly serves such an end.

The "third use" of the law identified by the Reformers was its "didactic use," whereby the law supplies a rule for life to believers. Calvin wrote, "The law is the best instrument for enabling believers daily to learn what that will of God is which they are to follow" (Institutes of the Christian Religion 2. 7,12). Although some modern Lutherans have wished to distance themselves from this use of the law, there can be no doubt but that it is endorsed by Luther and by the Formula of Concord. Luther said that apart from appealing to the law for justification, "we cannot sufficiently praise and magnify those works which are commanded of God" (Commentary at Gal. 3:22). To remove the law from the believer, thought Luther, "is a thing impossible and against God" (Table Talk 286). Accordingly Luther's Small Catechism begins with an exposition of the Decalogue. The Formula of Concord declared, "We believe, teach, and confess that the preaching of the Law should be urged . . . also upon those who truly believe in Christ, are truly converted to God, and regenerated and are justified by faith" (Article VI. 2). Although the Calvinist branch of the Reformation stresses the law as a good gift of God's grace and the Lutheran branch stresses it as a constraint, they both agree that the law is to be used to form the life of the regenerate believer.

(To be continued.)

(For further reading along these lines, see Chapter 13 of **Theonomy In Christian Ethics**, which maybe ordered for \$9.50 from meat 412 E. Quincy Ave., Orange, CA 92667; include check and address.)

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