

THE LAW OF MOSES AND THE CHRISTIAN: A COMPROMISE

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One of the most controversial theological issues among Christian scholars, and one that has troubled the Church throughout its history, is the question of the applicability of the OT law to the NT Christian. To state the problem simply: Which of the 613 laws¹ given by God at Sinai are binding upon Christians in our time? The confusion in the Church today regarding this question could be aptly described by the words of John Wesley on the problem: "Perhaps there are few subjects within the whole compass of religion so little understood as this."²

Examples of what Cranfield has termed "muddled thinking and unexamined assumptions"³ abound in treatments of the subject. This can be seen in the subjectivity that generally characterizes the process of picking and choosing which laws are normative for Christians. Many writers, for example, assert that the Ten Commandments represent God's eternal, unchanging will for all people but then hedge on the fourth commandment, proposing that it be modified.⁴ The condemnation of homosexuality in Lev 20:13 is usually taken to be normative for our culture, but the other laws in that same chapter—including the prohibition against eating "unclean" animals and the prescription of the death penalty for anyone who curses his father or mother—are generally considered time-bound, applicable only in ancient

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¹ The number 613 represents the traditional Jewish enumeration and is used here for convenience. Rabbi Simlai stated: "613 commandments were revealed to Moses at Sinai, 365 being prohibitions equal in number to the solar days of the year, and 248 being commands corresponding in number to the parts of the human body" (*b. Mak.* 23b). Early tannaitic references to the number 613 include those of Simeon ben Eleazar (*Mek. Yitro, Ba-Hodesh*, 5 [only in edition by I. H. Weiss (1865)], 74 [75a]), Simeon ben Azzai (*Sipre Deut.* 76), and Eleazar ben Yose the Galilean (*Midr. ha-Gadol* to Gen 15:1). The number appears to have been based upon even earlier tradition (cf. *Tanhumah*, Buber edition, Deut. 17; *Exod. Rab.* 33:7; *Num. Rab.* 13:15-16; 18:21; *b. Yebam.* 47b) and was adopted by the school of Rabbi Akiva. For a history of the developing Talmudic and rabbinic systems of enumeration and codification of the laws of Moses, including an actual list of the 365 prohibitions, and bibliography, see A. H. Rabinowitz, "Commandments, the 613," in *EncJud*, 5, 760-783. Cf. also J. Owen, *An Exposition of the Epistle to the Hebrews* (ed. W. H. Goold; Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1862), 2, 480-499.

² These words introduced his 1749 sermon on "The Original, [*sic*] Nature, Property, and Use of the Law," now conveniently available in *John Wesley's Fifty-Three Sermons* (ed. E. H. Sugden; Nashville: Abingdon, 1983) 426.

³ C. E. B. Cranfield, "St. Paul and the Law," *SJT* 17 (1964) 43.

⁴ Cf. e.g. J. Calvin, *Institutes* 2.11.4.

Israel. The command in Lev 19:18 ("Love your neighbor as yourself") is seen as binding upon the Christian, while the stipulation in the very next verse, which forbids the wearing of cloth woven from two kinds of material, is deemed inapplicable today. Fee and Stuart note the inconsistency in the exegetical methodology of Christians who, on the basis of Deut 22:5 ("A woman shall not wear men's clothing"), argue that Christian women should not wear slacks or shorts but do not consider as binding the other imperatives in that same list, which includes building a parapet around the roof of one's new house (v. 8), not planting two kinds of seeds in a vineyard (v. 9), and—another regulation regarding dress—the command to wear tassels on the four corners of one's cloak (v. 12).⁵

Part of the problem is that the NT itself seems ambivalent on the subject. On the one hand we read that the council at Jerusalem rejected the view that Gentile Christians "must be circumcised and be required to obey the law of Moses" (Acts 15:5). Paul was exceedingly upset that the Galatian Christians wanted to be circumcised and "observe special days and months and seasons and years" (Gal 4:10; 5:2). He argued that "if you let yourselves be circumcised, Christ will be of no value to you at all" (5:2), and he exhorted the believers: "Let no one judge you by what you eat or drink, or with regard to a religious festival, a New Moon celebration, or the Sabbath day" (Col 2:16). The writer of Hebrews speaks of the obsolescence of the "first" or "old" covenant (Heb 8:13; 9:15, 18; etc.), noting that the old order involved "external regulations that apply until the time of the new order" (9:10).

On the other hand Paul considers the law "good" (Rom 7:12–13) and "spiritual" (7:14) and maintains that it was issued and written "for us" (1 Cor 9:8–10). He denies that his emphasis on faith nullifies the law and exclaims: "Not at all! Rather, we establish the law!" (Rom 3:31). Furthermore the NT writers frequently appeal to various individual OT laws to support their views (cf. 1 Cor 9:8 ff.; 1 Tim 5:18; Eph 6:1–3; 1 Pet 1:15–16; etc.).

Church history and modern Christian scholarship have offered numerous doctrinal statements, theological positions, and theories attempting to resolve the question of the relationship of the law to the Christian. The following are representative positions, arranged sequentially according to their valuation of the law's applicability to the Christian, from lowest to highest.

1. *Marcion*. This second-century heretic's gnosticism led him to view the strict and harsh God of the OT as different from and inferior to the "good God" revealed by Christ in the NT. Consequently Marcion jettisoned the entire OT—with its "Jewish" law—from his canon. The laws of Moses were deemed morally and ethically inferior to the NT standards and therefore unworthy of the Christian.⁶

⁵ G. D. Fee and D. Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1981) 19.

⁶ Three indispensable works on Marcion are A. von Harnack, *Marcion: Das Evangelium vom fremden Gott* (2d ed.; Leipzig: J. C. Hinrichs, 1924); E. C. Blackman, *Marcion and His Influence* (London: SPCK, 1948); J. Knox, *Marcion and the New Testament* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1942).

2. *Dispensationalism*. This hermeneutical approach holds that God has developed different programs for his people in different ages and that the particulars—including the laws—that belong to the “dispensation of law” (Exodus 20—Malachi) are not binding upon God’s people in this present “dispensation of grace.” Chafer, for example, writes:

Only those portions of the Scripture which are directly addressed to the child of God under grace are to be given a personal or primary application. . . . It does not follow that the Christian is appointed by God to conform to those governing principles which were the will of God for people of other dispensations.⁷

Ryrie rejects the popular tripartite division of the law (moral, ceremonial, judicial) and maintains that Christ abrogated the entire corpus—including the Ten Commandments. NT Christians are under no obligation to any part of the law of Moses, only to the law of Christ.⁸

3. *Covenant theology*. In contrast to those of dispensational persuasion, Reformed theologians see a greater continuity between the Testaments, maintaining that sacred history is comprised of a single covenant of grace that has continued from Abraham through Moses and into the Church age. There are not two covenants but one, and Christians are part of that covenant. We live under the “renewed” covenant, not the “new” covenant. The Church is spiritual Israel, and the laws of the Mosaic covenant are accordingly our laws.⁹

Thus, a priori, the Christian should be obliged to live in obedience to all the laws given at Sinai. Many of the stipulations, however, are no longer applicable because of the new circumstances created by the coming of Christ. The 613 laws, it is argued, fall into three categories: moral, ceremonial, civic. The civic laws were time-bound regulations governing a theocratic state that God has seen fit to discontinue, and therefore these rulings are no longer operative. The ceremonial laws likewise had a time-limited function—namely, to point symbolically to the coming Christ. Having completed their purpose these regulations are also now inoperative (Acts 15; Gal 1:6 ff.; 2:14; Hebrews 8–9; etc.). What remain are God’s timeless moral laws such as the Decalogue and the injunctions to love God and one’s neighbor, and it is these that are binding upon all God’s people of all times.¹⁰

⁷ L. S. Chafer, *Major Bible Themes* (Chicago: Moody, 1944) 97.

⁸ C. C. Ryrie, “The End of the Law,” *BSac* 124 (1967) 239–247. Ryrie admits that the NT enjoins Christians to observe some commandments that were originally part of the Mosaic law. But this is not to say that we are obliged to obey some of the OT laws; rather, we are obliged only to obey the law of Christ, which is comprised of many new commands and also some old ones that were previously found in the Mosaic code. Ryrie states: “As a part of the Mosaic law they are completely and forever done away. As part of the law of Christ they are binding on the believer today” (p. 246).

⁹ See standard Reformed systematic theologies, such as C. Hodge, *Systematic Theology* (New York: Scribner, 1877), 3, 267 ff.; L. Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (4th ed.; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1941); cf. also C. F. H. Henry, *Christian Personal Ethics* (Grand Rapids, 1957) 269 ff.; J. Murray, *Principles of Conduct* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1957) 149 ff.

¹⁰ For a recent defense of this view see W. C. Kaiser, Jr., *Toward Old Testament Ethics* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983), esp. 307–314.

4. *Seventh-Day Adventism*. Adventists, proceeding from a covenant perspective, protest that it is inconsistent to accept the Ten Commandments as normative for all times and then reject or modify the fourth commandment. The entire Decalogue, including the injunction to observe the seventh day, is binding upon all Christians.¹¹ In addition Seventh-Day Adventists believe that the dietary laws issued by God at Sinai should also be observed today.¹²

5. *Christian reconstructionism*. Also called theonomy or the Chalcedon school, this recent spinoff from Reformed theology argues for the normativity of not only the moral laws but also the civic regulations. Advocates of the view, including Rushdoony, Bahnsen and North,¹³ maintain that their Reformed brothers have erred in discarding the judicial laws, that while the ceremonial laws were fulfilled in Christ,¹⁴ God's civic laws were not, that they are intended for all governments at all times, and that they should be instituted and enforced by civil magistrates of every land—including, for example, capital punishment in all cases for which it is prescribed by Moses, including incorrigibility in children, blasphemy, apostasy, idolatry, witchcraft, homosexuality and Sabbath-breaking.¹⁵

6. *World-Wide Church of God*. Representing one of several positions advocating an even higher degree of continuity, Herbert W. Armstrong argues that only a few of the laws, such as the sacrificial regulations, are no longer valid because they have been fulfilled in Christ, and that the great majority of laws still apply to spiritual Israel, including the Ten Commandments, with the observance of the seventh day, the keeping of all the Jewish feast days and holy days, the observing of the dietary laws, and some of the ceremonial laws.¹⁶

Instead of offering a critique of each of these approaches I would like rather to suggest yet another view, a compromise view that in my opinion is more in keeping with the spirit of both the OT and NT, is less encumbered by inherent

¹¹ *Seventh-day Adventists Answer Questions on Doctrine* (Washington: Review and Herald, 1957) 121–134, 149–176.

¹² *Ibid.* 622–624. It should be noted that the reason given for observance of these dietary laws is for health rather than theological considerations: "It is true we refrain from eating certain articles . . . , but *not because* the [ceremonial] law of Moses has any binding claims upon us" (*ibid.* 623).

¹³ R. J. Rushdoony, *The Institutes of Biblical Law* (Nutley: Craig, 1973); G. L. Bahnsen, *Theonomy in Christian Ethics* (Nutley: Craig, 1977); G. North, "Common Grace, Eschatology, and Biblical Law," *Journal of Christian Reconstruction* 3/2 (1976–77) 13–47. See also the reviews in *WTJ* 38 (1976) 195–217; 41 (1978) 172–189.

¹⁴ Bahnsen, *Theonomy* 207–216.

¹⁵ *Ibid.* 427, 439, 445, 466–467.

¹⁶ H. W. Armstrong, *Which Day Is the Christian Sabbath?* (Pasadena: Ambassador College, 1962); "Is All Animal Flesh Good Food?" (Ambassador College reprint; Pasadena: Ambassador College, 1958); J. Hopkins, *The Armstrong Empire: A Look at the World-Wide Church of God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974) 135–151, especially bibliography.

logical fallacies, and best accounts for the apparent ambivalence of the NT on the issue of the law. Simply stated it holds that, legally, none of the 613 stipulations of the Sinaitic covenant are binding upon NT Christians, including the so-called moral laws, while in a revelatory and pedagogical sense all 613 are binding upon us, including all the ceremonial and civic laws.

To take the negative aspect first: The NT does teach that Christians are not bound by the stipulations of the old covenant—or, at the very least, by the great majority of the stipulations (see the passages mentioned above). From a genre-critical viewpoint this is not surprising, for the 613 laws were stipulations of a suzerainty-vassal treaty that Yahweh made with a particular West Semitic nation living along the southeastern coast of the Mediterranean Sea. According to the OT writers this treaty was violated and in fact repudiated by that nation (e.g. Jer 11:10; 22:9; 31:32; Ezek 44:7), and according to the NT writers God has consequently abrogated the treaty and has established a new (not a “renewed”) treaty with a reconstituted covenant people (1 Cor 11:25; 2 Cor 3:6; Heb 8:6–13; 9:15–18; etc.; cf. Jer 31:31–34). When a new treaty or contract replaces an older one, as in modern labor contracts, the terms of the older contract are normally nonbinding upon the parties. Granted, parties might be interested in the terms of a former contract for various reasons. But as far as legal applicability is concerned, it is the terms of the new contract, not the old, that are binding.

That Christ’s covenant was understood by the NT writers to be both new and different from the Sinaitic treaty is shown by the fact that it is called a “better covenant” (Heb 7:22) and a “superior covenant” (8:6), that it is made with a reconstituted covenant people (Matt 21:33–43; Romans 9–11; etc.), that it involves a “new order” (*diorthōsis*, Heb 9:10) and a new body of governing laws and principles (e.g. regulations concerning the Lord’s supper and baptism; selection of elders; living under pagan magistrates and laws; regulations governing the use of spiritual gifts within the Church), and that the establishment of the new covenant has made the “old covenant” or “first covenant” with its constituent stipulations (*dikaiōmata*) “obsolete” (*pepalaiōken*; *palaioumenon*; cf. 2 Cor 3:14; Heb 8:13; 9:1; etc.).

That the collection of 613 regulations comprising God’s covenant with ancient Israel is not intended to legally govern the Church would seem obvious on another count: The vast majority of the laws are simply nonapplicable to and unfulfillable by the NT Christian. Consider the following points:

1. *The corpus was designed to regulate the lives of a people living in the distinctive geographical and climatic conditions found in the southern Levant, and many of the regulations are inapplicable, unintelligible, or even nonsensical outside that regime.* Take, for example, the law in Exod 29:22 regulating the offering of the “fat tail” (*ʿalyā*) of the ram. This ruling would be unfulfillable for peoples dwelling in the many regions of the world where the Palestinian fat-tailed sheep, with its unique ten- to fifteen-pound fatty tail, is unknown—to say nothing of the tribes of the earth who have never seen a sheep of any sort.

The corpus is filled with such regulations, such as those governing (1) the cultivation of the Mediterranean olive tree and the use of its fruit (e.g., Exod 23:11; 27:20; 29:40; Lev 2:4; 8:30; 24:2; Num 28:5; Deut 24:20), (2) the production of emmer wheat—including plowing (Deut 22:10), sowing (Exod 23:10; Lev 19:19; 25:3 ff.), plucking (Deut 23:25), harvesting (Exod 34:22; Deut 16:9), threshing (Num 15:20; 18:27; Deut 25:4), and gleaning (Lev 19:9; Deut 24:19)—and its various religious uses (Exod 23:15; 25:30; 29:32 ff.; 34:18; 40:23; Lev 2:1–16; 6:14–23; 7:12–13; 8:26, 32; 21:6 ff.; Num 4:7; 28:5 ff.; Deut 16:3, 8; etc.), (3) the cultivation of vineyards (Exod 22:5; 23:11; Lev 19:10; 25:3–5; Deut 20:6; etc.), (4) the use of grapes and wine (Exod 29:40; Lev 23:13; Num 6:3–4; 15:5 ff.; 28:14; etc.), (5) the production and use of flax (Lev 13:47–48, 52, 59; Deut 22:11)—including its products, such as “linen” (*bad*; Exod 28:42; 39:28; Lev 6:10 [Heb. 6:31]; 16:4) and “fine linen” (*šēš*; Exod 25:4; 26:1, 31 ff.; 27:16, 18; 28:5 ff.; etc.), (6) the pomegranate, date palm, acacia, almond, cassia, cinnamon, galbanum, frankincense, hyssop, Near Eastern poplar, bitter herb (Exodus 25–29; 30:22–38; 39:24 ff.; Lev. 14:49; etc.), (7) the raising, safekeeping, slaughtering, eating, and uses of such Palestinian—and nonuniversal—animals as the Near Eastern ox (Exod 20:17; 21:28–22:15; 23:12; 34:19; Lev 3:1; 9:4; 22:23; 27:26; Deut 5:14; 14:4; 22:10; etc.), the Syrian black goat (Exod 25:4; 26:7; 36:14; Lev 1:10; 3:6, 12; 4:23 ff.; 5:6; 7:23; 16:1 ff.; 17:3; Num 18:15–17; Deut 14:4; etc.), the donkey (Exod 23:4, 12; Deut 22:10), the camel (Lev 11:14; Deut 14:7), the “turtledove” (*tōr*; Lev 1:14; 5:7, 11; 12:6, 8; 14:22, 30; 15:14, 29), and the “pigeon” (*yônâ*; Lev 1:14; 5:7, 11; 12:6, 8; 14:22, 30; Num 6:10; etc.), (8) the eating of dozens of various and sundry animals, listed in Leviticus 11 and Deuteronomy 14, many of which are found only in the Levant or in the Mediterranean world—and nearly half of which have not been identified by modern scholars (such as the *dūkîpat* in Deut 14:18).¹⁷ Also impossible to fulfill would be (9) the numerous climatically limited laws requiring a Levantine, Mediterranean, or at least a northern hemispheric geoclimatic setting—for example, the commandment to begin harvesting the standing grain seven weeks after Passover, in May/June (Lev 23:5–20; Deut 16:1, 9), or the ordinance that a feast be held in September/October at the end of the harvesting of crops (Lev 23:33–39; Deut 16:13–15). Such regulations would be nonsensical for Christians living in southern hemispherical nations, tropical islands, and the like.

The very fact that the majority of the stipulations of the corpus are geographically and climatically limited and would be inapplicable, unintelligible, and even unfulfillable to a large percentage of the Christians living outside Palestine suggests, a priori, that this corpus was never intended to be the normative body of laws governing the Christian Church, scattered as it is throughout every clime of the inhabited earth, from Polynesia and the Amazon jungle to the Russian tundra.

¹⁷ G. J. Wenham, *The Book of Leviticus* (NICOT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979) 32–37.

2. *The corpus was designed by God to regulate the lives of a people whose cultural milieu was that of the ancient Near East.* The stipulations of the corpus regulate cultural practices, institutions and customs unknown or little known outside the ancient world of Israel and would be inapplicable and in many cases meaningless outside that world. For example, the regulation in Deut 22:8 requiring a parapet around the roof of one's house, while perfectly meaningful in the cultural context of ancient Israel where roofs were flat and functioned as extra accommodations for guests, would be pointless in most cultures of the world where house roofs are neither flat nor used to entertain company.

Most of the laws of the corpus are culturally specific. Consider the general irrelevancy or inapplicability of the multitude of stipulations in the corpus that regulate ancient Near Eastern institutions and customs, including regulations governing or involving (1) the style of slavery found in the Near East (Exod 20:8–10; 21:1–11, 20–21, 26–27, 32; Lev 25:8–17, 39–55; Deut 5:14–15; 15:12–18; 16:11, 14; 23:15–16), (2) polygamy and the custom of levirate marriage (Deut 17:17; 21:15–17; 25:5–10), (3) the bride price (*mōhar*; Exod 22:16–17), (4) concubinage (Lev 19:20), (5) the institution of the “kinsman-redeemer” (*gōʿēl*; Lev 25:25–49; etc.), (6) the practice of giving garments in pledge (Exod 22:26; Deut 24:10–13), (7) the institution of gleaning (Lev 19:10; Deut 24:21), (8) the practice of stoning (Deut 13:10; 17:5; 21:21; 22:21, 24; etc.), (9) the custom of swearing oaths by invoking the deity (Lev 5:4; 19:12; Deut 6:13; 10:20; etc.), (10) the style of hereditary kingship practiced in the ancient Near East (Deut 17:14–20), (11) city gates functioning as courtrooms (Deut 21:19; 22:24; 25:7; etc.), (12) stone houses with plastered interior walls (Lev 14:33–53), (13) “town squares” (*rēhōbôt*; Deut 13:16 [Heb. 17]), (14) the institution of forced labor (*mas*; Deut 20:11), (15) ancient Near Eastern siege practices (Deut 20:10–15, 19–20), (16) tasseled garments (Num 15:38–40), (17) the custom of granting a double inheritance to the firstborn son (Deut 21:15–17), (18) the tribal organization of society (Exod 28:21; Num 33:54; Deut 12:5, 14; etc.), (19) the institution of the blood avenger (Deut 19:6 ff.).

3. *The Mosaic corpus was intended to regulate the lives of people whose religious milieu was that of the ancient Near Eastern world (particularly Canaan) and would be more or less inapplicable outside that world.* Consider for example the various laws concerning the priestly ephod (Exod 25:7; 28:4 ff.; Lev 8:7; etc.). These laws were meaningful in Israel's religious world where ephods were well-known, but NT Christians, living in very different worlds, do not even know exactly what an ephod was, much less its function, so that we could not fulfill any of the laws regarding it even if we wished to.

The corpus is filled with laws regulating or dealing with such culturally-limited cultic/religious phenomena, including regulations governing or involving (1) Near Eastern cultic sanctuaries (cf. the tabernacle regulations), (2) the cultic altar, particularly the horned altar (Exod 20:24; 21:14; 29:37, 44; 30:27; 34:13; Deut 7:5; 12:13; etc.), (3) cultic incense (Exod 30:8–9; Lev 16:13; etc.), (4) Levantine-style cultic offerings and sacrificial meals,

including the *ḥōlā*-offering, the *minhā*-offering, the *ḥaṭṭā't*-offering, the *ʿāšām*-offering, and the *šelem*-offering (Leviticus 1-7 and throughout the corpus), (5) religious vows and votive offerings (Lev 7:16-17; 22:18-23; etc.), (6) cherubim (Exod 25:18-20; 26:1, 31), (7) the institution of the Nazirite (Numbers 6), (8) the Near Eastern institution of the prophet (Deut 18:14-22), (9) the Near Eastern institution of the cultic priest (Exodus 28-29; Leviticus 6-10 and throughout the corpus).

4. *The code of laws was issued by God to lay the detailed groundwork for and regulate the various affairs of an actual politically- and geographically-defined nation.* The corpus regulates, for example, Israel's national and internal boundaries, its system of government, its judicial system, and its foreign and domestic policy. A corpus such as this could not possibly be legally pertinent to the Church, since the latter is not a politically- and geographically-defined nation but is composed of pockets of believers living as minorities throughout virtually all the (pagan) nations of the earth, believers who have been instructed in their new covenant (e.g. Romans 13) to comply with the established forms of government and legal systems of their respective nations.

Laws in this category include (to mention only a few) regulations governing (1) the selection and behavior of the nation's king (Deut 17:14-20); (2) the preservation and maintenance of the tribal system of internal organization and the tribal divisions of the land of Canaan (Num 34:13-18; etc.); (3) the appointment of officials and judges over each of the twelve tribes (Deut 16:18-20; etc.); (4) the legal functions of the Levitical priests (Deut 17:8-13); (5) the choosing, function, and maintenance of the three Transjordanian and three Cisjordanian cities of refuge (Deut 19:1-13); (6) the nation's ancient Near Eastern style of judicial system (Exodus 21-23; etc.); (7) the rather stern foreign policies to be followed with the countries of Ammon and Moab (Deut 23:3-6); (8) the more amicable foreign policies to be maintained with the Edomites and Egyptians (Deut 23:7-8); (9) the *herem* procedures to be followed against the Amalekites (Deut 25:17-19) and Canaanites (Exod 23:23-33; etc.); (10) Israel's practice of foreign warfare (Deuteronomy 20; etc.); (11) the treatment of captive women (Deut 21:10-14).

5. *The corpus was formulated to establish and maintain a cultic regime that has been discontinued with the Church* (cf. Heb 8:18; etc.). In light of the fact that the great majority of the 613 stipulations of the code either regulate or involve this defunct cultic regime, the corpus cannot possibly be intended as the body of laws legally governing the Church. Consider the hundreds of laws in the corpus regulating the tabernacle (Exodus 25-40; etc.), the Levitical/Aaronic priesthood (Exodus 28-30; Leviticus 1-9; etc.), and the sacrificial system (Leviticus 1-7; 16-17; 22:17-30; etc.). Furthermore, without these three interrelated cultic institutions many other related laws become unfulfillable. For example, the prescribed procedures for observance of Sabbath, New Moon, Passover, Feast of Weeks,

Feast of Tabernacles and Day of Atonement all involve animal sacrifices (e.g. Lev 23:12, 18, 25; Num 28:9–29:40; etc.), Levitical priests (Lev 23:11, 20; etc.) and the tabernacle (Deut 16:5–6, 11, 15).

In sum, the Sinaitic law code was very specifically designed by God to regulate the lives of the West Semitic inhabitants of the southern Levant. Nearly all the regulations of the corpus—over ninety-five percent—are so culturally specific, geographically limited, and so forth that they would be completely inapplicable, and in fact unfulfillable, to Christians living throughout the world today. This fact alone should suggest that the corpus is not legally binding upon Christians and that it cannot possibly represent the marching orders of the Church.

One could argue at this point (as covenant theologians do) that the above considerations support only the nonnormativity of the time-bound laws of the corpus but that there are within the corpus a number of timeless moral laws that apply to all God's people of all times. Certainly, for example, there will never be a time when it is right to murder, commit adultery, steal, or covet another man's wife. Moreover the NT, while not requiring us to be circumcised (Acts 15; etc.), does call us to fulfill the two great commandments—namely, to love God with all one's heart and to love one's neighbor as one's self. In fact Paul encourages Christians to keep the Mosaic command to love one's neighbor in the same book in which he passionately warns against practicing circumcision and observing "special days and months and seasons and years" (Gal 5:14; 3:23–25; 4:9–11). While the NT declares the sacrificial system obsolete (cf. Hebrews 8–10), it reiterates and reinforces the Ten Commandments—or at least nine of them. And while the tripartite division of the law, with a special "moral" category, is not delineated in the NT, Kaiser has recently pointed out that Jesus himself encouraged his followers to make a distinction between the "weightier" and "lighter" matters of the law (Matt 23:23), which, Kaiser argues, provides a Biblical basis for special treatment of certain laws.¹⁸

This theory, proposing the normativity of a set of so-called "moral" laws from the corpus, represents a praiseworthy effort to account for the Biblical data. Under closer scrutiny, however, it lacks convincing support.

1. *The scheme of a tripartite division is unknown both in the Bible and in early rabbinic literature.* Its formulation appears rather to be traceable to modern Christian theology.¹⁹ Kaiser is certainly correct in emphasizing

¹⁸ W. C. Kaiser, Jr., "The Weightier and Lighter Matters of the Law: Moses, Jesus and Paul," in *Current Issues in Biblical and Patristic Interpretation: Studies in Honor of Merrill C. Tenney Presented by His Former Students* (ed. G. F. Hawthorne; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975) 176–192.

¹⁹ Increasingly the validity of this tripartite division of the law is being challenged. Ryrice ("End of the Law" 239–244) argues that the division is the product of Christian theology and has no roots in the Jewish concept of the law. G. J. Wenham (*Leviticus* 32) calls the threefold division "arbitrary and artificial" and one not attested in the NT. For a list of other commentators who have challenged this popular scheme (including H. A. W. Meyer, John Knox, G. B. Stevens, Godet, and W. R. Nicoll) see Kaiser, "Weightier and Lighter Matters" 179–180 n. 15.

Jesus' distinction between the "weightier" and "lighter" matters of the law, but Jesus is speaking in this passage about weightier "matters" of the law (*ta barytera tou nomou*), not weightier "laws" (note the gender). Jesus, in agreement with the OT writers (cf. Deut 10:12; 1 Sam 15:22-23; Isa 1:11 ff.; Hos 6:6; Amos 5:21-24; Mic 6:6-8; etc.), is simply arguing that the overarching principles and purposes of the corpus as a whole, as well as the underlying principles and purposes of each individual law (of whatever category), are more important ("weightier") than the minor verbal details in the wording of specific regulations and the accompanying minutiae of oral traditions.

The NT, to the contrary, speaks of the law in quite monolithic terms. Legal obligation to only a portion of the corpus is nowhere suggested. If one is legally bound to the law, it is to the entire law, including every "minor" stipulation, that he is bound. Paul writes: "I declare to every man who lets himself be circumcised that he is obliged to obey the whole law" (Gal 5:3). James states that the violation of one law makes one guilty of the whole law (Jas 2:10). And Jesus taught that "the one who breaks the least of these commandments . . . will be called least in the kingdom of heaven" (Matt 5:19). In Gal 3:24-25 Paul declares that "the law"—not just one category of laws—was a schoolmaster whose task was to bring us to Christ, and now that it has completed its task "we are no longer under the law." In none of these or similar passages is there any statement regarding categories of laws.

2. *The categorizing of certain selected laws as "moral" is methodologically questionable.* Which of the 613 laws is not "moral"?²⁰ The Sabbath, the parapet law, the prohibition against muzzling of the treading ox—all the so-called "ceremonial" and "civic" laws embody or flesh out eternal moral and ethical principles. Conversely a number of the laws popularly categorized as "moral" contain time-bound and culture-bound elements. The fourth commandment (Deut 5:12-15) is expressed in terms involving ancient Near-Eastern-style slavery, geographically limited animals, and an ancient fortification system featuring city gates. The mention of the *gēr* in the commandment (v. 14) implies the existence of the geographically and politically defined nation of Israel. Moreover the motive clause in v. 15 refers exclusively to the Israelites. Likewise the legal applicability of the fifth commandment assumes the existence of the theocratic state of Israel in the land of Canaan ("that it may go well with you in the land that the Lord your God is giving you"). The tenth commandment (Deut 5:21) is formulated for a people living with ancient Near-Eastern-style slavery and possessing animals common to the Mediterranean world ("You shall not covet your neigh-

²⁰ This point is made by Wenham (*Leviticus* 32, 34 ff.) and others; cf. most recently D. J. Moo, "The Law of Moses or the Law of Christ," in *Continuity and Discontinuity: Perspectives on the Relationship between the Old and New Testaments* (ed. J. S. Feinberg; Westchester: Crossway, 1988) 217-218.

bor's . . . manservant, or his maidservant, his ox, or his donkey"). The second commandment is designed for a people whose culture features cultic idols (Deut 5:8–10). Even the "moral" command—"Be holy" (Lev 19:1)—is inextricably tied to Sabbath observance (v. 2), the sacrificial system (vv. 5–8), and the type of cloth used in weaving one's clothing (v. 19). In fact, one wonders if most of the so-called "moral" laws have achieved their special status among modern theologians simply because of a literary happenstance: These several regulations are the ones in the corpus that happen not to include a time-bound word, phrase, or clause in their verbal expression. Would the fifth commandment have been selected if the purpose clause at its end had been slightly different: "Honor your father and mother, that you may live long in the land of Canaan that I am giving to your twelve tribes" (which is certainly the intent of the command)? Or the sixth commandment, if it had been more fully stated: "You shall not murder, and he who does shall be tried in one of the six cities of refuge"?

3. *The attempt to formulate this special category in order to "save" for NT Christians a handful of apparently universally-applicable laws—particularly the ones quoted in the NT—is an unnecessary effort.* There is a more logical, Biblically supported approach to the law that retains for Christians not only the very heart of the so-called "moral" laws but also the underlying moral truths and principles, indeed the very spirit, of every one of the 613 laws.

Having suggested that the Mosaic law in its entirety be removed from the backs of Christians in one sense, I would propose that the corpus be placed back into their hands in another sense: the entire corpus—not just the "moral" laws but all 613—moral, ceremonial, civil. If on the one hand the evidence strongly suggests that the corpus is no longer legally binding upon Christians, there is equally strong evidence in the NT that all 613 laws are profoundly binding upon Christians in a revelatory and pedagogical sense.

That all the Mosaic laws are applicable to Christians in this latter sense is implied by Paul's well-known statement in 2 Tim 3:16: "All Scripture is inspired by God and is profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work." This assertion, referring as it does to the OT, presumably applies to all the OT Scriptures, including all the 613 laws, which suggests that each of the laws is inspired by God and that each is valuable for determining theological truths, for correcting misconceptions, for exposing and rectifying wrong behavior, and for training and equipping the Christian in practical, personal righteousness.

When Paul addresses himself specifically to the question of the value (and not the legal applicability) of the law, he expresses nothing but the highest regard for it. He considers the laws to be God's laws (Rom 7:22, 25; 8:7; 1 Cor 7:19). They are "good" (Rom 7:12–13, 16; 1 Tim 1:8), "holy

and righteous" (Rom 7:12), and "spiritual" (7:14). He views the laws as embodying a standard of righteousness that we Christians are called upon to achieve by walking in the Spirit (8:4). He considers the laws valuable in the identification and conviction of sin in one's life (3:20; 7:7 ff.). He teaches, as did Jesus, that each individual law of the Mosaic corpus (and not just a certain category of laws) fleshes out the one overarching law: "Love your neighbor as yourself" (13:9; Gal 5:14). Paul holds the corpus in such high esteem that his inner being delights in it. Most significantly for the present inquiry, he maintains that the individual laws (speaking specifically of the law dealing with muzzling the ox; Deut 25:4) were given "for us" and are written "for us" (1 Cor 9:8-10). In no instance does he imply that only a particular category of laws possesses such high value.

Even without supporting statements from the NT it should be apparent to Christians that the Mosaic laws, though not legally binding, comprise a treasure of insights and information regarding the very mind and ways of God and therefore, a priori, will be binding upon Christians in precisely the same sense as are all other portions of the OT, such as God's messages to Israel in the prophetic books. If it is true that these stipulations are not our stipulations, it is equally true that they were issued by our God, who does not change. If the corpus was tailor-made for another people in another situation, it was tailor-made by the One we seek to know and serve.

It is here that the point of profound applicability for the Christian is found. A law reflects the mind, the personality, the priorities, the values, the likes and dislikes of the lawgiver. Each law issued by God to ancient Israel (like each declaration by God through the prophets) reflects God's mind and ways and is therefore a theological treasure. Moreover the theological insights we gain from a particular OT law will not only enhance our knowledge and understanding of God but will also have important practical implications for our own lives if we are patterning them after our heavenly Father and modifying our behavior and thinking in response to our knowledge of him and his ways (Paul argues along these very lines in 1 Cor 9:9-10). It is in this sense that every one of the 613 laws of Moses is binding upon the NT Christian.

I would suggest the following theocentric hermeneutical procedure for applying any of the OT laws, whether the law be deemed ceremonial, judicial, or moral:

1. *Remind yourself that this law is not my law, that I am not legally bound by it, that it is one of the laws God issued to ancient Israel as part of his covenant with them.* When I look at this law I am looking over the shoulder of the Israelite (just as I am, for example, when I consider one of God's messages through Jeremiah to the inhabitants of Jerusalem during the final days before the city's fall).

2. *Determine the original meaning, significance and purpose of the law.* What was its point? Why did God issue it? What apparently were his motives

in giving it? (Allegorizing, spiritualizing and typologizing here are counter-productive, succeeding only in obscuring the original significance and purpose of the law.)

3. *Determine the theological significance of the law.* What does this law reveal about God and his ways? A law, as mentioned, reveals a great deal about the lawgiver. What does this law reflect about God's mind, his personality, his qualities, attitudes, priorities, values, concerns, likes and dislikes, his teaching methodologies, the kinds of attitudes and moral and ethical standards he wants to see in those who love him? In spite of the fact that these 613 laws were issued to another people who lived at another time under very different circumstances than ours (again, like the prophetic oracles of Jeremiah), they come from the God whom we too serve, and they represent a vast reservoir of knowledge about him and his ways.

4. *Determine the practical implications of the theological insights gained from this law for your own NT circumstances.* To take an example from the civil laws, Exod 22:25 states: "If you lend money to one of my people among you who is needy, do not be like a moneylender; charge him no interest." First, this law is not my law. It was part of Israel's covenant with God (Christian bankers can relax—for a moment). Second, as far as the point of the law is concerned, it forbids the charging of interest when lending to a poor person, presumably to assist the person who is in a financial crisis in such a way that his recovery will be possible and the repayment will not be overly burdensome. A second purpose is undoubtedly to encourage the individual Israelite to be openhanded and generous, to be sensitive to the needs of the poor, and to be ready and willing to help needy people in practical ways even when it will not result in one's own financial gain.

What theological insights come from this law? The Person who issued this law is obviously concerned about the physical and emotional well-being of the poor. Moreover he apparently wants his people to have a similar sensitivity toward the poor, to be willing to help the needy sacrificially.

In light of what I, a NT Christian, learn about God and his ways from this particular law, many practical implications present themselves, including various specific ways in which I myself might help needy people that I know or know of. Interestingly a Christian banker, confronted by the request of a struggling young woman of an ethnic minority who has been turned down by several other banks, could, on the basis of what he learns of God and his ways from this very law, graciously grant her a needed loan—indeed, a loan with interest. In so doing he might very well be working out the practical implications of the theological insights rising from this law while at the same time treating the regulation as legally nonbinding.

Examples such as this could be multiplied. The approach proposed here completely avoids the logically unsolvable question of which laws were "fulfilled in Christ." In a sense it bypasses the thorny debate over continuity/

discontinuity altogether and enables the Christian to appropriate and apply to his or her own life the very heart and spirit of every one of the laws given by God at Sinai. It provides a way for the Christian to truly "fulfill" each law in a manner that would delight the OT prophets, so that in a real sense we can declare with Paul: "Do we then overthrow the law? By no means! On the contrary, we establish the law." In the OT laws we find, after all, the marching orders for the Church.