

CHAPTER 19

OF THE LAW OF GOD

Types of law

Our Confession recognizes three types of law in the Bible: moral law, ceremonial law, and civil law. Each of these types is dealt with in turn in the first four paragraphs.

The moral law given to Adam

“1. God gave to Adam a law, as a covenant of works, by which he bound him and all his posterity to personal, entire, exact, and perpetual obedience; promised life upon the fulfilling, and threatened death upon the breach of it; and endued him with power and ability to keep it.”

In addition to the command not to eat from the tree of knowledge of good and evil, Adam was to continue living a holy life, as he was created in the image of God. He had the ability to keep God’s law (Gen 1:26-27; Gal 3:10, 12). Adam’s conscience guided him to know what was God’s will and unchangeable law, even as all men still have some conscience (Rom 2:28-32). In addition, God may have communicated his moral law to Adam directly as well.

The terms of the covenant of works made by God with Adam have been covered already by the Confession (WCF 7:2).

The moral law put in the Ten Commandments

“2. This law, after his fall, continued to be a perfect rule of righteousness, and, as such, was delivered by God upon mount Sinai in ten commandments, and written in two tables; the first four commandments containing our duty towards God, and the other six our duty to man.”

It was not until Moses and the exodus that God wrote his moral law, so that people could read and memorize it as separate commands (Exod 20:1-17; Deut 5:6-21).

We know from the Bible that there were ten commandments (Deut 10:4). The only question is the manner in which the ten are divided. We follow the method used by the Jews in the time of Jesus, and by most Protestant churches today:

- Duty toward God:
- 1) No other Gods
 - 2) No images or idols in worship
 - 3) Name of God revered
 - 4) Sabbath day observed

- Duty toward man:
- 5) Honor parents
 - 6) No murder
 - 7) No adultery
 - 8) No stealing
 - 9) No false witness
 - 10) No coveting

After the time of Jesus the Jews insisted that the word “commandment” be translated as “word” (which is its literal meaning). Then they said that the preface to the commandments in Exod 20:2 was the first “word.” They then had to combine two other commandments into one, to make ten total. They combined the first commandment: (1) Identity of God and (2) No other gods or idols or images into a single second commandment. Commandments #3-10 continued as before.

Saint Augustine, about 400 years later, suggested that our first two commandments be combined into one, as the Jews were then doing. But he made up for the ten not by including the preface as a commandment, but by dividing the tenth commandment into two parts. He followed the order in Deuteronomy, and made the ninth commandment, “You shall not covet your neighbor’s wife”; the tenth commandment then was made to refer only to the neighbor’s property.

The church after Augustine’s day was encouraging the use of images in churches, supposedly to aid illiterate Christians. In that controversy many leaders used Augustine’s arrangement, since it linked the use of images in worship to the worship of other gods, not the true God. They reasoned that images could be used to worship the true God. Thus the Roman Catholic Church has adopted his scheme, except that it follows the order in Exodus rather than the order in Deuteronomy. It makes the ninth commandment, “You shall not covet your neighbor’s house,” and includes the neighbor’s wife along with his other property in the tenth commandment. Here is the resulting numbering:

- Duty toward God:
- 1) No other gods (images or idols are an explanation)
 - 2) Name of God revered
 - 3) Sabbath day observed

- Duty toward man:
- 4) Honor parents
 - 5) No murder
 - 6) No adultery
 - 7) No stealing
 - 8) No false witness
 - 9) No coveting neighbor’s house
 - 10) No coveting neighbor’s wife or other property

Beginning with Martin Luther, the Lutherans have continued to follow the Roman Catholic division of the ten commandments. But Reformed Protestants follow the old Jewish system, which seems to be the best. It probably is the system that Jesus used. The command not to covet should go together as one, not two commandments, especially since Exodus and Deuteronomy have different orders in the items not to be coveted. And our second commandment deserves its own position, since it forbids the false worship of the true God; God himself has forbidden the use of images as objects of worship, even when we are seeking to worship the true God.

Jesus spoke of the two parts of the law, by summarizing the ten commandments with the two great commandments. He quoted the two great commandments from the Old Testament (Deut 6:5 and Lev 19:18; see Matt 22:36-40).

The ceremonial law

“3. Besides this law, commonly called moral, God was pleased to give to the people of Israel, as a Church under age, ceremonial laws, containing several typical ordinances, partly of worship, prefiguring Christ, his graces, actions, sufferings, and benefits; and partly holding forth divers instructions of moral duties. All which ceremonial laws are now abrogated under the New Testament.”

Much of the Old Testament, particularly the books of Moses, is taken up with the ceremonial law. These laws number in the hundreds. They involve all the religious feasts and festivals, all the sacrifices, the orders and arrangements of the tabernacle and temple, the duties and regulations of the priesthood, the laws of clean and unclean, and even requirements of dress and grooming. Peter referred to them as “a yoke that neither we nor our fathers have been able to bear” (Acts 15:10).

All these commands had a purpose. Many of them pointed to the coming of the Messiah, and taught about him in types, such as the sacrifices and the Passover. Others, such as the feasts of tabernacles and Purim, were designed to recall their history to mind. Many laws taught special religious principles, as the principle of separation from sin and their heathen neighbors in the cleanliness laws.

When Christ came, he made it clear that ceremonial laws were not an end in themselves, and that they were less important than the moral law (Matt 12:3-4; 23:23). Old Testament prophets, as Amos and Isaiah, had already stated the same principle. Now, in the New Testament dispensation, we can be thankful that these ceremonial laws have been abrogated (Mark 7:19; 1 Cor 10:25; Col 2:14-17; Heb 8:13). We now have two special ceremonial laws, the commands for baptism and for the Lord’s Supper.

The civil law

“4. To them also, as a body politic, he gave sundry judicial laws, which expired together with the state of that people, not obliging any other, now, further than the general equity thereof may require.”

Many Old Testament laws regulated the social and civic life of the Jews. Some of them came directly from the moral law, as the command to use honest weights in business, or to judge cases honestly. Other civil laws specified punishments for breaking the moral law, as the death penalty for various sins or crimes (murder, kidnapping, adultery, blasphemy, idolatry, Sabbath breaking, cursing parents).

Other civil laws were not so directly related to the moral law. These include rules for warfare and spoil, organization of the branches of government, rules regulating disputes and civil cases, and laws relating to the sale and holding of property. Many of these regulations are based on the particular situation of the Jewish land as “devoted” to Yahweh, and of the Jewish people as his particular “slaves,” redeemed by God from Egypt.

Throughout the Old Testament civil legislation is a strain of kindness and humaneness far higher than that found in other ancient law codes. This strain is evident in the law’s treatment of the poor, widows, the weak, blind, and slaves.

When the Jews ceased to be an independent nation, before the time of Christ, these laws could no longer be enforced. And, apparently, Christ did not wish them to be enforced under those conditions (for example, see the account in John 8:11). The laws governing land use and ownership certainly could not be used then. Those laws all reflected the theocracy, the direct rule of God over the nation. If the people of Israel had obeyed God, that rule would have become more magnificent, leading to the great kingdom age (the millennium and beyond). But since they fell into apostasy, the theocratic kingdom has been delayed until after the second coming of Christ. Therefore, many special laws intended for that theocracy cannot and should not be in force until Christ returns. No sinful man or group of sinful men should claim the power over a nation that God and his representatives had in Israel.

The only civil laws from the Old Testament which we should adopt now are those which “the general equity thereof may require.” Such a law would be capital punishment for murder (confirmed in Rom 13:4). We should take the principles from Old Testament law and apply them in the light of the moral law, as Paul did in 1 Cor 9:8-10 (quoting Deut 5:4).

The place of the moral law

The rest of this chapter of the Confession deals with the moral law in particular, its subjects, its uses, and its relation to the gospel.

Subjects of the moral law

“5. The moral law doth for ever bind all, as well justified persons as others, to the obedience thereof; and that not only in regard of the matter contained in it, but also in respect of the authority of God the Creator who gave it. Neither doth Christ in the gospel any way dissolve, but much strengthen, this obligation.”

All people must strive to obey the moral law of God; no one is exempt (Rom 13:8-10).

This law is universal for two reasons:

1. The matter of the law is so true and excellent.
2. God the Creator, with all his authority, commands our obedience.

When Christ came, he did not abrogate or neutralize this moral law, as some claim (misusing verses like John 1:17). Rather, he strengthened our understanding of the moral law, as seen throughout Matt 5.

Uses of the moral law

“6. Although true believers be not under the law as a covenant of works, to be thereby justified or condemned; yet is it of great use to them, as well as to others; in that, as a rule of life, informing them of the will of God and their duty, it directs and binds them to walk accordingly; discovering also the sinful pollutions of their nature, hearts, and lives; so as, examining themselves thereby, they may come to further conviction of, humiliation for, and hatred against sin; together with a clearer sight of the need they have of Christ, and the perfection of his obedience. It is likewise of use to the regenerate, to restrain their corruptions, in that it forbids sin; and the threatenings of it serve to show what even their sins deserve, and what afflictions in this life they may expect for them, although freed from the curse thereof threatened in the law. The promises of it, in like manner, show them God’s approbation of obedience, and what blessings they may expect upon the performance thereof, although not as due to them by the law as a covenant of works: so as a man’s doing good, and refraining from evil, because the law encourageth to the one, and deterreth from the other, is no evidence of his being under the law, and not under grace.”

A true believer in Christ receives many blessings from the moral law, the Ten Commandments, even though he is not under that law as a covenant of works for his salvation.

Here are the uses of this moral law listed in our Confession:

- It informs people of God’s will for their conduct (Ps 119:4-6; Rom 7:12; Gal 5:14-25).
- It shows us our sins and pollutions (Rom 3:20; 7:7).
- It convicts us of sin and humbles us (Rom 7:9, 14, 24).

- It shows us how perfect Christ was, and our need for him (Rom 8:3-4; Gal 3:24).
- Its threatenings show us God's hatred for sin, and thus warn us against sin (Ps 119:101, 128; Ezra 9:13-14).
- Its promises show us God's love of obedience, and inspire us to live uprightly (Ps 19:11; Eph 6:2-3).

These uses of the law prove that the Christian should love God's moral law and should try to keep it. Just because we are under grace does not mean that we can disregard God's moral law (Heb 12:28-29).

The law and regeneration through the gospel

“7. Neither are the forementioned uses of the law contrary to the grace of the gospel, but do sweetly comply with it; the Spirit of Christ subduing and enabling the will of man to do that freely and cheerfully, which the will of God, revealed in the law, requireth to be done.”

We are saved by God's grace, through faith, not by keeping the law (Gal 2:16). But when we are saved, the Holy Spirit changes our attitude toward God and his law, so that we desire to please him and obey his law (Ezek 36:26-27; Jer 31:33).