

THE RELEVANCE OF THE OLD TESTAMENT LAW FOR TODAY

“There is no point upon which men make greater mistakes than upon the relationship which exists between the law and the gospel”¹

As so often in Christianity, there are two opposite errors with regard to the Mosaic Law². One is to regard each and every part of it as applicable today in each and every detail, right down to not mixing two kinds of cloth (Deuteronomy 22:11) and hanging phylacteries on your clothing (Deuteronomy 6:8). The other is to treat each and every part of it as equally irrelevant, right up to the commandments against theft, adultery, murder and the worship of idols.³

It was the conviction of the Apostle Paul, with the Old Testament primarily in mind, that the Scriptures are “able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus.” (2 Timothy 3:15). However, he went on to add “**All Scripture** is God-breathed and **is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness**” (2 Timothy 3:16). It is not the focus of this essay to consider the place of the Old Testament and its law in God’s plan of salvation, but rather to explore whether, and if so, in what sense, Paul was right to assert that the Scriptures which contain the Mosaic Law are useful for training in righteousness⁴. In other words, does the Mosaic law have a continuing ethical validity?

For the Christian lawyer, there are two distinct questions which have to be addressed. Firstly, what relevance, if any, has the Mosaic Law for Christians today? Secondly, what relevance, if any, has Mosaic law to non-Christians and to wider society? In order to answer those questions, it is necessary to begin by considering the place of the Mosaic Law in its original context, the Old Testament, that is to say the Old Covenant.

PART I: THE RELEVANCE OF THE MOSAIC LAW TO CHRISTIANS TODAY

¹ Charles Spurgeon *The New Park Street Pulpit* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 1963) 1:285.

² By which I mean the law to be found in the books of Exodus through to Deuteronomy.

³ Walter Chantry *God’s Righteous Kingdom* 11, 73.

⁴ This was the aim which Christopher Wright set himself in writing on a larger canvas *Living as the People of God* (Leicester: IVP, 1983) 16.

I. **The Mosaic Law and the Old Covenant**

A. The place of Mosaic Law within God's covenant with his people

From Marcion to William Blake and many others beside, there have been those who have assumed that the Mosaic Law IS the Old Covenant. The Apostle Paul argued against such a position in his letter to the Galatians, placing the Mosaic Law within a framework of covenant theology that began with the promises made to Abraham and the faith demanded of Abraham. The Apostle writes in Galatians 3:17 “What I mean is this: The law, introduced 430 years later, does not set aside the covenant previously established by God and thus do away with the promise.”

Norman Anderson rightly stresses that “it is essential to see the Mosaic law as a whole, and the Decalogue in particular, as the stipulations attached to a covenant originally made with Abraham, and renewed to Israel as a people redeemed by the Exodus from slavery in Egypt.”⁵

God renewed the covenant of grace with his people on Mount Sinai. In Deuteronomy 4:11-14, Moses recalls the event as follows: “You came near and stood at the foot of the mountain while it blazed with fire to the very heavens, with black clouds and deep darkness. Then the Lord spoke to you out of the fire. You heard the sound of words but saw no form; there was only a voice. **He declared to you his covenant, the Ten Commandments**, which he commanded you to follow and then wrote them on two stone tablets. **And the Lord directed me at that time to teach you the decrees and laws you are to follow in the land that you are crossing the Jordan to possess.**” The record of the Decalogue in Exodus 20 begins with the vital preface “I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery.” (Exodus 20:2).⁶ The Mosaic Law was given by God to his people, within the context of a pre-existing relationship between them.⁷ Having said that, an essential part of the covenant relationship was the obligation to serve the Lord God alone in obedience to his declared will, as a response to what God had already done for his people.⁸

⁵ Norman Anderson *Freedom under Law* 105; W.J. Dumbrell *Covenant and Creation* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 1984, 2000) 91; Graeme Goldsworthy *Gospel and Kingdom* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 1994) 61; Christopher Wright *Living as the People of God* 22.

⁶ Christopher Wright *Living as the People of God* 22.

⁷ Christopher Wright *God's People in God's Land* 21; *Living as the People of God* 160.

That this understanding of the place of the Law within the divine economy of salvation was still present in Judaism in the first century A.D. has been demonstrated by E.P. Sanders⁹.

B. The centrality of the Ten Commandments

While the Mosaic Law is a unity, there was something special about the Ten Commandments¹⁰, which Moses himself recognised. Only the Ten Commandments were not only given to Moses by God but also inscribed in stone by God's finger. Only the Ten Commandments were spoken audibly by the voice of God so that all the people of Israel could hear them (Exodus 31:18, Exodus 34:1, Deuteronomy 4:12-13, Deuteronomy 10:2)¹¹. In Deuteronomy, at the end of the recital of the Ten Commandments, Moses says: "These are the commandments the Lord proclaimed in a loud voice to your whole assembly there on the mountain from out of the fire, the cloud and the deep darkness; **and he added nothing more.**" (Deuteronomy 5:22). There are therefore strong grounds within Scripture itself to support what the Jews and the Christian Church have traditionally understood to be the case, namely that the Ten Commandments represent in a special way the declared will of God for his people.

"On Mount Sinai the God of all the earth delivered his moral law in a unique fashion. The Ten Commandments are peculiarly objective. In them alone has the moral law been given as a penetrating and brief summation in human language."¹² The Ten Commandments are at the heart of the Mosaic Law¹³.

The Mosaic Law was a total code for life in the promised land, given to govern the Israelite people's religious practices, social, family and economic relations. It covered everything

⁸ W.J. Dumbrell *Covenant and Creation* 98., 143; Christopher Wright *God's People in God's Land* 34; *Living as the People of God* 23.

⁹ Although if the evidence of the ferocity of Paul's and Jesus' attacks on nomism and legalism is remotely reliable, although there were those within Judaism whose theology was theoretically accurate; in practice first century Judaism was characterised by a reliance on being a Jew as the proof of divine favour (nomism) or meticulous observance of the Law, including the sacrifices for atonement, as the necessary and sufficient condition for righteousness (legalism).

¹⁰ Christopher Wright *God's People in God's Land* 131-2; *Living as the People of God* 149; Brevard S. Childs *The Book of Exodus* 397

¹¹ Walter Chantry *God's Righteous Kingdom* 87-8.

¹² Walter Chantry *God's Righteous Kingdom* 80; see also A.W. Pink *The Ten Commandments* (Swengel, Pennsylvania: Reiner, 1961) 5; Joseph Blenkinsopp *Wisdom and Law in the Old Testament* (OUP, 1995) 103..

¹³ W.J. Dumbrell *Covenant and Creation* 93 argues that the Decalogue is primary and permanent, the covenant code of Exodus 21-23 which follows is contextual exposition based upon the general social demands of the Decalogue and is derivative and valid only for its age.

from diet and hygiene to capital offences¹⁴. It was built around the Ten Commandments, which stood as its centrepiece, directly given by the Lord God himself¹⁵.

However, when modern, Western, urban readers turn from the Ten Commandments to the rest of the Mosaic Law we discover a world which we simply do not recognise. We do not keep slaves, the women in our society participate fully in its public arena, our agriculture is highly mechanised, land is not the major basis for our economic system, and to think in terms of individuals comes more easily to us than identifying with our extended family group. How do we make sense of it?

There is a long tradition of dividing the Mosaic Law into moral rules, ceremonial rules and judicial rules¹⁶, a division which has attractions for modern minds as we readily think in the categories of private morality, communal religious observance and public laws. This tradition asserts that some parts of the Mosaic Law set out moral principles, values which the people of Israel were called to live up to because they were God's people. Some provide details on a priestly, ritual, sacrificial system. Some are laws in the sense that modern lawyers would understand the term, in that they identify standards of behaviour and prescribe penalties to be applied by judges.

The difficulty with this theoretical distinction is in the way the material is presented in the Pentateuch, where the various rules are deeply interwoven not to say entangled¹⁷. After stoutly defending the distinction, Walter Chantry has to concede "It would be a mistake to read through Exodus or Deuteronomy attempting to label one verse ceremonial and another moral. In many instances all three are intertwined so that it is seldom possible to make such neat identifications. The glaring exception is the Ten Commandments."¹⁸

¹⁴ W.J. Dumbrell *Covenant and Creation* 91 "What is primarily involved in [the] Hebrew term [for law *torah*] is direction for life within the framework of [a] presupposed relationship" not the idea of regulations imposed by authority and backed by sanctions which is the connotation of the English word *law*.

¹⁵ Walter Chantry *God's Righteous Kingdom* 118; Graeme Goldsworthy *Gospel and Kingdom* 62; see also Ernest Reisinger *The Law and the Gospel* 52, 56, 70 and Christopher Wright *Living as the People of God* 185-6.

¹⁶ A division identified by Aquinas in one of his inaugural sermons in 1256: Aquinas *Selected Writings* (Penguin: London, 1998) 9. See also Walter Chantry *God's Righteous Kingdom* 113.

¹⁷ Ernest Reisinger *The Law and the Gospel* 57; see also the fictitious exchange in the Prologue to Christopher Wright's *Living as the People of God* (Leicester: IVP, 1983) 14.

¹⁸ Walter Chantry *God's Righteous Kingdom* 119.

Those who maintain the traditional distinction point to the Ten Commandments themselves as the one area where it is possible to be sure that what is being considered is *pure* moral law and not something more temporally limited to Israel. The result of such an analysis is that, in order to be sure we are on solid ground in our exegesis, the only thing which can be safely retained from the Mosaic Law is the Ten Commandments¹⁹. In consequence, all the rest of the Mosaic Law is of limited, if any, ethical relevance.

Christopher Wright would dispute even the identification of the Ten Commandments as *pure* moral law: “Not even the Decalogue is ‘simple moral law’. It contains requirements which Israelites would have regarded as cultic (First to Fourth), family (Fifth), and civil (Sixth to Ninth) in their legislative outworking, whilst they all remain ‘criminal law’ ...”²⁰ As a tool for *interpreting the Old Testament text*, therefore, the theoretical distinction between moral, ceremonial and civil law appears flawed. What is valid, however, is the recognition that there are ceremonial, moral and civil aspects to the prescriptions of the Mosaic Law.

C. Conclusions on the Mosaic Law and the Old Covenant

The Mosaic Law was given in the context of a covenant relationship which God had already established with his people. The Ten Commandments have unique status within the Mosaic Law. The rest of the laws governed the whole of the Israelite people’s lives, yet the text cannot be neatly divided into the categories of ceremonial, moral and civil law, in which we tend to think today. Each prescription may have moral, ceremonial and civil aspects to it.

Before considering further the relevance of the Old Testament Law for Christians today, it is necessary to understand the attitude which was adopted to it by the early Church and by Jesus and Paul in particular. It is important, for present purposes, to have some understanding of the place of the Mosaic Law within the New Covenant, not in its relation to salvation but in terms of its ongoing ethical relevance, if any, for Christians.

¹⁹ Christopher Wright *Living as the People of God* 14.

²⁰ Christopher Wright *Living as the People of God* 158.

II. The Mosaic Law and the New Covenant

A. Jesus and the Mosaic Law

The Apostle John wrote: “Everyone who sins breaks the law; in fact, sin is lawlessness” (1 John 3:4). The Gospel is founded on the Law. “Were it not for offences against the righteousness of God (moral law), there would have been no need for a Saviour and his great salvation.”²¹ Christians believe that Jesus was the Saviour, who was born as a Jew, among the people to whom the law had been given, because that law had not been perfectly kept as God required.

How did Jesus himself relate the Mosaic Law to his mission? In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus gave an exposition of those of the Ten Commandments which his generation had particularly misunderstood²². Before exploring the true meaning and depth of the Six Commandment against murder (Matthew 5:21-26), the Seventh Commandment against adultery (Matthew 5:27-32), and the Ninth Commandment against bearing false witness (Matthew 5:33-37), he made his position plain:

“Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; **I have not come to abolish them but to fulfil them.** I tell you the truth, until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished. Anyone who breaks one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever practises and teaches these commands will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. For I tell you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven.” (Matthew 5:17-20).

The word “fulfil” is an interesting one in this context. In English, it carries with it the idea of filling up to the brim. For New Testament scholars, there has been much debate about the precise nuances to be attached to the Greek word *plerosai*. Perhaps here it has a double meaning “to complete and to transcend”, for Jesus understood himself to be giving the final revelation of God’s will to which the Old Testament pointed forward, and yet to be

²¹ Walter Chantry *God’s Righteous Kingdom* 118.

²² Walter Chantry *God’s Righteous Kingdom* 95.

transcending the Old Testament's approach to God.²³ What Jesus then goes on to do, in Matthew 5:21 ff., is to go behind the scribal traditions and the Old Testament text, and to draw out the powerful ethical principles which lay at the heart of the Old Testament injunctions. Jesus expounded the reasons behind the rules.

It is clear that Jesus regarded himself as having come to fulfil the law. But how did he do that? Here the distinction between the three types of law: moral, ceremonial and judicial (civil), is a helpful exegetical tool. All three aspects of the Old Testament Law were fulfilled in Christ but in different ways²⁴. He kept every requirement of the moral law and expounded its true application in the Sermon on the Mount. He is the High Priest, who offered the perfect, eternal sacrifice of which all the Old Testament sacrifices were only shadows (Hebrews 10:1, 3-14, 18)²⁵. He is the King, who will one day usher in the perfect theocracy²⁶. Just as Israel the nation, was descended from the one man Jacob, whom God renamed²⁷, so Israel's destiny was fulfilled in Jesus. He was "the embodiment of what Israel was supposed to have been but had failed to be, namely a manifestation of God himself."²⁸

B. The superseding of the ceremonial rules in the Mosaic Law

The ceremonial rules in the Mosaic law were demonstrations of God's holiness and his requirements for purity.²⁹ So all the sacrifices were simply shadows of the great sacrifice which Jesus would make on the cross³⁰. Once he had died, the meaning of the sacrifices had been fulfilled. There was no longer any need for them. They were completed³¹. This much is abundantly clear from the letter to the Hebrews.

However, that is not the end of a consideration of the ceremonial law, if Wright is correct to place the 'ceremonial' law rendered obsolete by Christ's priestly work within a broader category of "cultic law", which included matters such as dietary and hygiene regulations,

²³ R.T. France *Tyndale New Testament Commentary on Matthew* (Leicester: IVP, 1985) 113-4, 119.

²⁴ Nothing, not even "the least stroke of a pen" can "drop out of the Law" without its fulfilment in "the good news of the kingdom of God" Norman Anderson *Freedom under Law* 122; see also Walter Chantry *God's Righteous Kingdom* 123; Ernest Reisinger *The Law and the Gospel* 115-7.

²⁵ Letters of John Newton 43.

²⁶ Until then, he declared to Pilate (John 18:36), his kingdom is not of this world.

²⁷ Genesis 32:28.

²⁸ Christopher Wright *Living as the People of God* 41-3.

²⁹ Norman Anderson *Freedom under Law* 111; Walter Chantry *God's Righteous Kingdom* 115.

³⁰ Ernest Reisinger *The Law and the Gospel* 52, 55; the technical theological word for these "shadows" is "types".

³¹ Walter Chantry *God's Righteous Kingdom* 115-6; Ernest Reisinger *The Law and the Gospel* 53-4.

sabbaths and other festivals and the rules on offerings, tithes, first-fruits and gleanings which had practical benefits attached to them.³²

There is a powerful contrast between the concerns of the Jewish purity laws and the attitude of Jesus. Whereas the Holiness Codes of the Old Testament exhibited a fear that uncleanness would contaminate the purity of the people of God, Jesus ate with the tax collectors and sinners, touched the lepers and healed them. Jesus turned the Law's concern for purity inside out. Whereas *Torah* observance focussed on external purity; Jesus made it clear that it was not what was on the outside that made a man pure, but rather what was in his heart³³. Jesus taught that at the heart of the commands "Do not murder" and "Do not commit adultery" was an obligation not to cherish anger and lust in our hearts³⁴.

In fact, one of the first questions which the Early Church had to address was the validity of the Mosaic Law, and in particular its ceremonial aspects, for Gentile converts to Christianity. Acts 15:5 "Then some of the believers who belonged to the party of the Pharisees stood up and said, 'The Gentiles must be circumcised and required to obey the law of Moses.'" A Church Council was called to resolve the issue. The Apostle Peter made an impassioned plea against the imposition of the Mosaic Law on the Gentiles: "God, who knows the heart, showed that he accepted [the Gentiles] by giving the Holy Spirit to them, just as he did to us. He made no distinction between us and them, for he purified their hearts by faith. Now then, why do you try to test God by putting on the necks of the disciples a yoke which neither we nor our fathers have been able to bear? No! We believe that it is through the grace of our Lord Jesus that we are saved, just as they are." (Acts 15:8-11). The Council determined the issue in accordance with a proposal put forward by James: "It is my judgement, therefore, that we should not make it difficult for the Gentiles who are turning to God. Instead we should write to them, telling them to abstain from food polluted by idols, from sexual immorality, from the meat of strangled animals and from blood." (Acts 15:19-20). What the Church Council resolved to do was to refrain from imposing on the Gentiles the ceremonial requirements of the Jewish law. The early church's discovery that what God wanted was circumcision of heart not circumcision of foreskin³⁵ was in line with Jesus' teaching that what

³² Christopher Wright *Living as the People of God* 156.

³³ Matthew 15:11, 16-20.

³⁴ Cf. Matthew 5:21-22 and 27-28 respectively.

³⁵ Acts 15.

mattered to God was not (or was no longer) external ritual purity but rather inward purity of heart.

It would be extraordinary, however, given the clear stance on morality which Paul³⁶ and others present take in their letters, if what was meant by that Council was that none of the Mosaic law, not even the moral imperatives of the Ten Commandments needed to be obeyed by the Gentiles³⁷.

C. The non-applicability of the judicial (civil) aspects of the Mosaic Law

In Galatians 3:24-25, the Apostle Paul writes: “So the law was put in charge to lead us to Christ that we might be justified by faith. Now that faith has come, we are no longer under the supervision of the law.” Part of the difficulty of discerning what Paul’s approach to the Law is, is that what is meant by “law” or “the Law” in the New Testament differs from place to place³⁸. Walter Chantry argues “Paul’s meaning [in Galatians 3:24-25] is that the Mosaic order (covenant administration, economy, dispensation) was a schoolmaster to bring men to the New Covenant in Christ.”³⁹ He asks: “what purpose did the law (the Mosaic covenant administration) serve? ... Was the Mosaic system presented as God’s model for all world governments? Was it introduced as the perfect ideal for social management in all ages? Was this dispensation God’s blueprint for social reconstruction which, when vigorously executed, would usher in millennial victory? Was it a pattern of social and political philosophy for all ages? ‘It was added ... till the seed should come.’” (Galatians 3:19)⁴⁰ “... the Mosaic economy is no longer appropriate to us. Its usefulness passed away with the coming of Jesus Christ.”⁴¹

The judicial aspects of the Mosaic law were rules specifically given to the Israelites “to follow in the land that you are crossing the Jordan to possess” (Deuteronomy 4:14). Under the New Covenant, not only was the early Church not in a political position where it could re-

³⁶ For example, for Paul see Romans 1:29-32; 6:15-16; 1 Corinthians 5:1-2; 6:18; Galatians 5:19-21; Ephesians 4:25-31; Colossians 3:5-10; 1 Thessalonians 4:3-8. For other New Testament writers, see James 2:9-11; 1 Peter 2:1, 4:3; 1 John 2:9, 3:4; Jude 4-8, 16.

³⁷ Ernest Reisinger *The Law and the Gospel* 134-5.

³⁸ Walter Chantry *God’s Righteous Kingdom* 101; Reisinger *The Law and the Gospel* 47-57.

³⁹ Walter Chantry *God’s Righteous Kingdom* 101-2.

⁴⁰ Walter Chantry *God’s Righteous Kingdom* 104.

⁴¹ Walter Chantry *God’s Righteous Kingdom* 106; R.T. France *Tyndale New Testament Commentary on Matthew* (Leicester: IVP, 1985) 115 writes “The [Mosaic] law is unalterable, but that does not justify its application beyond the purpose for which it was intended.” – see also 117

establish the Old Testament theocracy of Israel, but had Jesus not himself said: “My kingdom is not of this world”?⁴²

So, if the ceremonial aspects of the Mosaic Law were no longer binding, and the judicial aspects of the Mosaic Law were no longer applicable, what about the moral aspects of the Mosaic Law?

D. The enduring validity of the moral teaching of the Mosaic Law

The New Testament provides us with no indications that Jesus ever had anything other than the highest regard for the Mosaic Law and for its moral teaching. Jesus himself set out the Ten Commandments in Mark 10:19 to the rich young man: “You know the commandments: ‘Do not murder, do not commit adultery, do not steal, do not give false testimony, do not defraud⁴³, honour your father and mother.’”

But did Jesus not also summarise the law as “Love God” and “Love your neighbour” (Mark 12:29-31)? Isn’t love alone enough? Can we not say with Luther, “Love God and do what you like”?⁴⁴ But that immediately begs the question: What will we like to do if we love God? “...what constitutes a devout person? Someone who is seeking to do the will of God, someone who is instructed in sanctified behaviour. And ... in what does that behaviour consist? In doing the will of God as summarised in the Ten Commandments.”⁴⁵ As Ernest Reisinger puts it: “The law is love’s eyes, without which love is blind.”⁴⁶

Cranfield argues: “... since Paul was apparently well aware that Christians can very easily persuade themselves that they are loving when they are not ... it seems most unlikely that he would have countenanced the idea that Christians should forget the particular commandments

⁴² John 18:36.

⁴³ Jesus gave the rich young man a narrow definition of this commandment to the rich young man, then challenged him “to give all his possessions to the poor”, thereby extending the Tenth Commandment to its logical extreme. In so doing, he exposed the rich young man’s inner lust for possessions - Christopher Wright *God’s People in God’s Land* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 1997) 138-9.

⁴⁴ William Temple ascribes the remark to St. Augustine in *Christianity and Social Order* (London: Penguin, 1942; London: Shephard-Walwyn, 1976) 76 and he explains the remark on the basis that “of course, if he loved God he would like and could do the right thing, and if he did not love God he could not do it however much he tried.”

⁴⁵ Ernest Reisinger *The Law and the Gospel* xix.

⁴⁶ Ernest Reisinger *The Law and the Gospel* 95; see also Christopher Wright *God’s People in God’s Land* 264-5; and I. Howard Marshall “Using the Bible in Ethics” in *Essays in Evangelical Social Ethics* 52; John Warwick Montgomery debated Joseph Fletcher on this issue – *Situation Ethics* (Minneapolis: Bethany House, 1972).

and rely on the commandment of love as a sufficient guide. Is it not more likely that he recognized that, while Christians certainly need the summary to save them from missing the wood for the trees and from understanding the particular commandments in a rigid, literalistic, unimaginative or loveless way, they also need the particular commandments to save them from resting content with vague and often hypocritical sentiments which ... we are all of us prone to mistake for Christian love?"⁴⁷

"[H]ow is love to God and neighbour to express itself? ... To answer this the apostles always return to the Ten Commandments."⁴⁸ In case there was any doubt on this point, the Apostle Paul in Romans 13:8-9 "...he who loves his fellow-man has fulfilled the law. The commandments, 'Do not commit adultery', 'Do not murder', 'Do not steal', 'Do not covet' and whatever other commandments there may be, are summed up in this one rule: 'Love your neighbour as yourself.'"⁴⁹. Luther could say what he did because he understood that the person who loved God would desire to please God and that desire to please God would lead to obedience to God's commandments⁵⁰. Both the Apostles John and Paul knew and explored in their writings the close relationship which necessarily exists between love for God and obedience to God. They expressed themselves in similar terms: John wrote "This is the love for God: to obey his commands." (1 John 5:3), while Paul said "Love does no harm to its neighbour. **Therefore love is the fulfilment of the law.**" (Romans 13:10).

"There is no hint anywhere in the New Testament that the Law has lost its validity in the slightest degree, nor is there any suggestion of its repeal. On the contrary, the New Testament teaches unambiguously that the Ten Commandments are still binding upon all men."⁵¹

But what about Jesus' own ethical teaching? Jesus was radical in his treatment of the Mosaic Law, both in the sense of bringing a new and a fresh approach to it, and in the sense of returning to its roots. In his exposition of the Sixth, Seventh and Ninth Commandments in the Sermon on the Mount, he expands on those commandments, and points to the importance

⁴⁷ Cranfield *On Romans* 111-2.

⁴⁸ Walter Chantry *God's Righteous Kingdom* 96-7; Ernest Reisinger *The Law and the Gospel* 91-6.

⁴⁹ Walter Chantry *God's Righteous Kingdom* 85.

⁵⁰ Ernest Reisinger *The Law and the Gospel* 89-90.

⁵¹ Ernest F. Kevan in the Tyndale Biblical Theology Lecture of July 4, 1955, quoted by J.W. Montgomery in Montgomery/Fletcher *Situation Ethics* 37.

before God, who sees the heart, of internal conformity to the requirements of God (Matthew 5:21-37). However, he then goes on to propose a new ethic in place of the *lex talionis*, urging his disciples to turn the other cheek rather than insisting on an eye-for-an-eye (Matthew 5:39-48).

To the woman caught in adultery, Jesus did not demand the penalty prescribed in the Mosaic Law, but invited any one of the woman's accusers who was without sin to be the first to stone her. When the others had, one by one, walked away; Jesus who alone was qualified to cast the stone, declared "neither do I condemn you. Go now and leave your life of sin." (John 8:11). There was something more powerful than the rigours of the letter of the Mosaic Law at work in the saving actions of Christ, the grace of God reconciling the world to himself in Christ (Colossians 1:20).

Christopher Marshall writes: "... in Matthew's account of the teaching of Jesus, mercy and love serve as the hermeneutical keys for accessing the true meaning of the fulfilled law. ... It is the primacy of love and compassion over the letter of the law that also explains Jesus' own conduct with respect to the law – his preparedness to eat with sinners, to neglect external purity stipulations, to heal and harvest on the Sabbath, and so on. Mercy is the true meaning of the law; mercy is at the heart of God's justice; mercy 'fulfills all righteousness' (Matthew 3:15)."⁵²

And yet, there is a clear relationship between Jesus' ethical teaching and the Mosaic Law. Towards the end of the discourse of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus states the Golden Rule: "So in everything, do to others what you would have them do to you, for this sums up the Law and the Prophets." (Matthew 7:12). That is Jesus' authoritative interpretation of the Old Testament in its fullness⁵³. Later on in the gospel, when asked which was the greatest commandment in the Law, he replied "'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.' This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbour as yourself.'⁵⁴ All the Law and the Prophets hang on

⁵² Marshall *Beyond Retribution* 229.

⁵³ R.T. France *Tyndale New Testament Commentary on Matthew* 145.

⁵⁴ "Love your neighbour as yourself" is also identified as the heart of the law in Matthew 19:19, Luke 10:27, Romans 13:9, Galatians 5:14 and James 2:8.

these two commandments.” (Matthew 22:37-40). Both of those formulations were drawn from the Old Testament text itself⁵⁵.

When Jesus went beyond those formulations, it was by reference to his own example. At the Last Supper, Jesus told his disciples: “A new command I give you: Love one another. **As I have loved you, so you must love one another.** By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.” (John 13:34)(John 15:12). In going beyond the Old Testament revelation, Jesus completed it by his self-revelation of God and God’s standards. His own life and death provide a new motivation for ethical excellence. Because God has loved us so much that Jesus came to earth, lived as a man, and died on a cross, because God has loved us that much, we must love one another. Because God has forgiven us because of what Jesus has done, so we must forgive one another. Following Jesus, ‘love your neighbour as you love yourself’ becomes ‘love your neighbour as you yourself have been loved’⁵⁶.

This in no way weakens the ethical validity of the Mosaic Law. Jesus’ own example provides both an additional motivation for moral behaviour, and beyond the natural ethic of do as you would be done by, a supernatural ethic of self-sacrifice for others⁵⁷. He establishes a standard of ethical excellence which in no way detracts from the obligatory force of the moral law within the Old Testament. To adapt Jesus’ own illustration in the Sermon on the Mount, to ‘love your neighbour as yourself’ is to go the first mile, to ‘love your neighbour as Jesus has loved you’ is to go the second mile. You cannot walk the second mile without having travelled the first. The divine command to love one another is drawn out to its infinite extent by the teaching of Jesus⁵⁸.

Within the Bible there are therefore two ethical standards: one revealed in the Law and the Prophets, i.e. the Old Testament, and expressed in the twin maxims: “Love the Lord your

⁵⁵ From Deuteronomy 6:5 and Leviticus 19:18 respectively.

⁵⁶ See J.H. Yoder *The Politics of Jesus* 2nd edn. (Carlisle: Paternoster, 1994) 119.

⁵⁷ Matthijs de Blois "The Foundation of Human Rights: A Christian Perspective" in Paul Beaumont (ed.) *Christian Perspectives on Human Rights and Legal Philosophy* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 1998) 11 writes "All human beings are responsible to their creator for the way they comply with God's commandments (Rom. 1:18-32). This being said on the moral responsibility of all human beings, it is at the same time clear from the New Testament that of the disciples of Christ a more excellent life is required than the life to be expected from other human beings." This ethic of self-sacrifice which Jesus urges on his followers can be seen as the inward sacrifice of the Body of Christ which is itself a fulfilment of the heart of the Law, just as inward obedience to the Law by the Body of Christ is a fulfilment of the heart of the Law. See also

⁵⁸ Christopher Wright *Living as the People of God* 158.

God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength” and “Love your neighbour as yourself.” (Matthew 22:37-40); and the other revealed by the Son of God himself – “Love one another as I have loved you.” (John 13:34). The former is an ethic of sharing, based on a recognition of our common humanity as fellow creatures made in the image of God. It is a creation ethic⁵⁹. The latter is an ethic of self-sacrifice borne out of our grateful response of love to the example of the Master⁶⁰. It is a redemption ethic⁶¹, exemplified by the lives of men and women such as Francis of Assisi and Mother Theresa of Calcutta.

Calvinist writers at times deny or appear to deny that there is such a distinction. Because God’s moral law flows from God’s moral nature⁶², as God is eternal and his nature immutable⁶³, so it follows that his ethical standards must be the same for all time⁶⁴. So Reisinger writes “[T]he Christian is not under the law as a covenant of works, ... but he is under it as a rule of life and an objective standard of righteousness for all people for all times. ... The law of Moses⁶⁵ is not other than the law of Christ; it is an objective standard just as Christ is our pattern.”⁶⁶ He buttresses this position by arguing that as the Ten Commandments were given by God himself, they must have been given by the whole Trinity. For the Christian, the *sensus plenior* of the assertion in the Prologue to the Ten Commandments that “I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery” (Exodus 20:2) is that “the revelation of the Mosaic law came from the Son of God no less than from the Father and His Spirit. The law of Moses is the law of Christ.”⁶⁷ This is

⁵⁹ But not just a creation ethic, for it was given to the Israelites as a people whom God had redeemed from slavery in Egypt. This would accord with Oliver O’Donovan’s argument that creation and kingdom are not independent of one another, so that we are forced to choose between them, but rather that the creation is restored and fulfilled in the kingdom: Oliver O’Donovan “The Natural Ethic” in David J. Wright (ed.) *Essays in Evangelical Social Ethics* (Exeter: Paternoster, 1979) 19-35. For a summary of the debate about the relevance of ‘creation ethics’ and ‘kingdom ethics’ approaches see Timothy Chesters *Awakening to a World of Need* (Leicester: IVP, 1993) 179-181.

⁶⁰ R.V.G. Tasker *The Tyndale New Testament Commentary on John* (Leicester: IVP, 1960) 161; John Stott *The Tyndale New Testament Commentary on the Letters of John* 2nd edn. (Leicester: IVP, 1988) 98; Jacques Ellul *Le Fondement Théologique du Droit* (Neuchâtel: Delachaux & Niestlé, 1946) 63-4. Tr. *The Theological Foundations of Law* (London: SCM, 1961).

⁶¹ But arguably not just a redemption ethic, depending on the interpretation to be given to Matthew 5:48 “Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.”

⁶² Thomas Aquinas would agree with this proposition: *The Inaugural Sermons* (1256) (in Thomas Aquinas *Selected Writings* (London: Penguin, 1998) 6.

⁶³ Malachi 3:6 “The Almighty changes not.”

⁶⁴ This is not to give the moral law a life of its own, as something co-eternal with God. It is only because God is always true to his own nature that the moral law is unchanging.

⁶⁵ By which he means the moral law.

⁶⁶ Ernest Reisinger *The Law and the Gospel* xvii, see also Letters of John Newton 43; R.T. France *Tyndale New Testament Commentary on Matthew* 130.

⁶⁷ Ernest Reisinger *The Law and the Gospel* 26, 138-45.

true as far as it goes. The moral aspects of the law of Moses were not repudiated by Jesus, but they do not exhaust the law of Christ. Jesus' own ethical teaching surpassed the Mosaic Law in its scope and challenge. This is exactly what one would expect given that Jesus was the culmination of God's progressive revelation of himself to humankind.

Nonetheless, because there is nothing repugnant in them to the teaching of Jesus, the Christian is subject to the moral imperatives of the law of Moses, just as the Israelites were, and for the same reason. "In both the Old and New Testaments the principle operates that the people of God should exhibit a holiness which is consistent with their calling. ... In both Testaments the demand to be holy stems from the prior saving activity of God."⁶⁸

What is made explicit in the New Testament is that Christians are not to be slaves to the law, but to obey God's law because we love him⁶⁹. "The obedience which God's children yield to Him must be *loving* obedience. Do not go about the service of God as slaves to their taskmaster's toil, but run in the way of His commands because it is your *Father's way*."⁷⁰ "[I]t is the *love* of God that the *laws* of God are all about."⁷¹

Christians therefore have a new motivation to be moral (obedience to Christ); and a new empowering to be moral (the indwelling of the Holy Spirit). For some theologians, particularly but not exclusively from a Lutheran background, this new motivation means that the Law itself has ceased to be binding, but that its moral content is duplicated in the New Covenant teachings of Jesus and Paul⁷². For others, particularly but not exclusively Reformed⁷³, it is the moral law *per se* which continues to apply, because it has been validated by Jesus Christ himself through his Sermon on the Mount and his example. This distinction may be largely semantic as on either account, the acts which God requires of us are those which accord with the moral principles in the Mosaic law.

⁶⁸ Graeme Goldsworthy *Gospel and Kingdom* 64; see also Christopher Wright *Living as the People of God* 23, 160.

⁶⁹ Christopher Wright *God's People in God's Land* 265; Don Carson *Jesus and His Friends* (Leicester: IVP, 1986 and Carlisle: Paternoster, 1995) 99.

⁷⁰ Charles Spurgeon *Morning and Evening* (Uhrichsville, Ohio: Barbour, 1998) January 25 Evening, January 26 Morning

⁷¹ Tony Campolo *Was Jesus a Moderate?* (Dallas: Word, 1995) 110.

⁷² Westerholm *Israel's Law and the Church's Faith* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988); J.A. Ziesler *Pauline Christianity* (OUP, 1990) 112, 117, 120-1 (**CHECK THIS IS NOT AN UNFAIR EXPRESSION OF ZIESLER'S POSITION**).

⁷³ C.E.B. Cranfield holds to this view, although he is an Anglican.

Thus, against the antinomians, it can be asserted that “When someone becomes a new creature in Christ, he or she does not cease to be a creature under God's authority. A person's basic moral duties do not change.”⁷⁴ “[O]ur freedom is from the curse and the penalty of the law, not from the guidance, direction and commands of the law.”⁷⁵

What changes under the New Covenant is not that the ethical demands of the Mosaic Law no longer apply to Christians (they continue to apply but are super-added to by Jesus' new commandment) but that thanks to the Holy Spirit, our Lord's commands (which as we have seen include the ethical demands of the Mosaic Law) are written on his people's hearts and minds (Hebrews 10:16; Jeremiah 31:33).⁷⁶ In the words of Philip E. Hughes⁷⁷ “The difference between the old and the new covenants is that under the old that law is written on tablets of stone ... whereas under the new the law is written internally within the redeemed heart by the dynamic regenerating work of the Holy Spirit, so that through faith in Christ ... man no longer hates but loves God's law, and is enabled to fulfil its precepts.”⁷⁸ Ezekiel proclaims that under the New Covenant, God's people will “walk in my statutes and keep my ordinances and obey them” (Ezekiel 11:19-20 and cf. 36:26-27)⁷⁹. “There is a mighty Spirit dwelling in saints to empower them to righteousness. But what is the pattern after which the Holy Spirit works? It is that “the righteousness of the law might be fulfilled in us” (Romans 8:4). ... One glorious promise of the new covenant is fulfilled by the Spirit: ‘I will put my laws into their hearts, and in their minds will I write them.’ (Hebrews 10:16)”. After all, the Spirit given to Christians is the Holy Spirit.

As Reisinger puts it: “Christians are delivered from sin, not from what is holy, just and good (Romans 7:12). They are freed from their disobedience to the commandments, not from the commandments themselves. The believer is not redeemed from what is right; his relationship

⁷⁴ Ernest Reisinger *The Law and the Gospel* 22, 23.

⁷⁵ Ernest Reisinger *The Law and the Gospel* 68. See also C.E.B. Cranfield *On Romans* [COMPLETE CITATION]

⁷⁶ W.J. Dumbrell *Covenant and Creation* 199.

⁷⁷ Whether or not this empowerment by the Holy Spirit to do right means that we can ever attain perfection in this life is, of course, another debate entirely – as to which see Kenneth Prior *The Way of Holiness* (Carlisle: OM Publishing, 1969, rev. 1982, 1994) 71ff.

⁷⁸ Philip E. Hughes *Commentary on Paul's Second Epistle to the Corinthians* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1980) 96ff, quoted in Ernest Reisinger *The Law and the Gospel* 147; see also Christopher Wright *Living as the People of God* 160.

⁷⁹ Kenneth Prior *The Way of Holiness* (Carlisle: OM Publishing, 1969, rev. 1982, 1994) 121.

to what is right has changed. In particular, what has changed is his power and desire to do right, not his duty to do right.”⁸⁰

Given that Jesus’ new commandment goes beyond even the demands of the Golden Rule, it is highly significant that Jesus’ new commandment is given to the disciples in the upper room just before his extended teaching on the Holy Spirit, through whom alone can any attempt be made to fulfil that commandment.

Nigel Wright *The Radical Kingdom: Restoration in Theory and Practice* (Kingsway, 1986) p.22-3 "... the Old Testament, **of itself**, is not to be normative for us. This is an important point which goes to the heart of the restoration principle itself. Jesus and the New Testament are normative for us, so no part of the Old Testament can be treated a-Christologically and accorded this status. ... This does not mean that the Old Testament is of no value; far from it. It does mean, however, that **Old Testament material is illustrative rather than normative and that it must always be interpreted through Christ**, who is the fulfilment of the law, and not apart from him." (emphasis mine).

D: The *Torah* is therefore *relevant* but not binding.

God does not speak with a forked tongue. His revelation of himself in nature is compatible with his revelation of himself in *Torah*.

E. Christopher Wright’s approach to the relevance of the Old Testament Law

Thus far, the traditional distinction between moral, ceremonial and civil aspects of the Law appears to work well as a tool for understanding the New Testament’s attitude to the Mosaic Law. The problem is that, as we have seen, such a distinction cannot be read back into the Old Testament. If the Old Testament contains ideas of enduring moral validity, where are these to be found?, how are they to be isolated from the rules of only temporary validity?

Christopher Wright argues that the Old Testament law is relevant for the Christian in three ways: as a type⁸¹, as a paradigm and as an eschatological vision⁸². Its typological relevance stems from the fact that “In New Testament theology the Christian Church, as the community of the Messiah, is the organic continuation of Israel. It is heir to the names and privileges of Israel, and therefore also falls under the same ethical responsibilities – though now

⁸⁰ Ernest Reisinger *The Law and the Gospel* 19.

⁸¹ Ernest Reisinger agrees that the ceremonial and civil laws were types and figures: *The Law and the Gospel* 55.

⁸² Christopher Wright *Living as the People of God* 88, although he concedes that not all of the Mosaic Law is relevant in all 3 ways.

transformed in Christ.”⁸³ Its paradigmatic relevance results from the fact that “Israel, as God’s redeemed community, was to have been a ‘light to the nations’ – not just the vehicle of God’s redemption, but an illustration of it in actual historical life. Israel’s socio-economic life and institutions ... are models within a particular cultural context of principles of justice, humaneness, equality, responsibility and so forth which are applicable, *mutatis mutandis*, to all people in subsequent cultural contexts.”⁸⁴ Its eschatological vision is that of God’s redemptive purpose embracing all nations and the whole earth, in a transformed and perfect new creation.⁸⁵

Wright argues that instead of attempting to distil a separate element of moral law from the Pentateuch, instead our focus should be on “looking for moral principles that underlie any or all of the laws – whatever category we think they come into.”⁸⁶

Among the moral principles Wright finds in the Mosaic Law are, to quote the words of another writer, “Insistence upon kindness to the poor, justice to strangers, and compassion for the fatherless and widows.”⁸⁷ There is a clear sense of social solidarity and of compassion for the weak and the disadvantaged⁸⁸. Overall, “[the Mosaic Law] suggests how a people who have received grace should be gracious in their laws and social order.”⁸⁹

There is a strong emphasis on the integrity and cohesion of the family.⁹⁰ A detailed series of rules was designed to ensure that land was not lost outside the family, so that each family

⁸³ Christopher Wright *God’s People in God’s Land* xvii-xviii.

⁸⁴ Christopher Wright *God’s People in God’s Land* xviii. As an example of this paradigmatic approach, Wright cites the Apostle Paul’s use of the instruction not to muzzle the oxen while it is threshing the corn (Deuteronomy 25:4) in 1 Corinthians 9:7-12: *Living as the People of God* 161; *God’s People in God’s Land* 262. A contemporary example of the paradigmatic use of the Mosaic Law would be the Jubilee 2000 campaign for the cancellation of Third World debt, although Paul Mills in “The Divine Economy” *Cambridge Papers* (2000) Vol.9 no. 4 rightly makes the point that the idea of Jubilee has been used by the modern day campaigners analogically rather than in a way directly comparable to its use in Old Testament Israel.

⁸⁵ Christopher Wright *Living as the People of God* 90.

⁸⁶ Christopher Wright *Living as the People of God* 14, 152. Similarly, I. Howard Marshall argues that when dealing with any biblical exhortation “we must inquire into the underlying theological and ethical principles which are expressed in it and then proceed to work out how to translate those principles into appropriate exhortations for today.”: “Using the Bible in Ethics” in David F. Wright (ed.) *Essays in Evangelical Social Ethics* (Exeter: Paternoster, 1979) 50.

⁸⁷ As do Norman Anderson *Freedom under Law* 110 and Walter Chantry *God’s Righteous Kingdom* 122. The quote is from Chantry.

⁸⁸ Wright finds this illustrated in the Sabbath legislation, part of the cultic law, as well as other charitable and humanitarian instructions: *Living as the People of God* 156-7.

⁸⁹ Walter Chantry *God’s Righteous Kingdom* 122.

⁹⁰ See Christopher Wright *God’s People in God’s Land* chapters 2 and 3, and Norman Anderson *Freedom under Law* 110.

would retain a stake in and a place in society. Each generation was to have access to and involvement in society.⁹¹ A variety of provisions lead Wright to the conviction “That all people should have access to some of the resources of the earth that is God’s gift is a basic human right which takes priority over the unchecked accumulation of private ownership.”⁹²

There are moral principles to be found in the civil aspects of the Mosaic Law. Human life was sacred to God, and an accounting would be demanded for it.⁹³ The Ninth Commandment against bearing false witness and the detailed procedural and evidential rules demonstrate a concern for “due process”.⁹⁴ The “sentencing” for offences reveals that offences against the person are punished much more severely than those against property, thus highlighting God’s relative scale of values.⁹⁵

Wright himself adopts for a holistic approach to the interpretation of the Old Testament in seeking to identify the principles which underlie the Mosaic legislation. “the laws are not always sufficient in themselves; we need the narrative in which they are set to understand the principles on which they operate, and we need the later narratives, prophets, psalms and wisdom literature to see how they were taken up into the life of the nation.”⁹⁶ Thus he argues that Leviticus 25:42, Nehemiah 5:1-12, Job 31:15, Jeremiah 34, and Amos 2:6 are all passages in the Old Testament which question and undermine the institution of slavery, although the Mosaic Law on its face, permits the possession of slaves.⁹⁷

Neither does Wright fall into the trap of becoming obsessed with the ethical teaching of the Old Testament at the expense of the New, rather he seeks to establish a balance between the two, by setting the “Old Testament social paradigm alongside the paradigm of the social life of the early church as well as the explicit social teaching of Jesus and the apostles.”⁹⁸

⁹¹ Christopher Wright *Living as the People of God* 183, 190-92; *God’s People in God’s Land* 124.

⁹² Christopher Wright *God’s People in God’s Land* 177.

⁹³ Christopher Wright *Living as the People of God* 163-4.

⁹⁴ Christopher Wright *Living as the People of God* 168-71.

⁹⁵ Christopher Wright *Living as the People of God* 163; Norman Anderson *Freedom under Law* 110.

⁹⁶ Christopher Wright *Living as the People of God* 32.

⁹⁷ Christopher Wright *Living as the People of God* 154, 182.

⁹⁸ Christopher Wright *Living as the People of God* 45.

III. Conclusion

There is a fundamental unity between the Old and New Covenants. Ever since the Fall of Adam, God has always dealt with humankind on the basis of grace.⁹⁹ Under the Old Covenant, grace came first to Abraham, and then to God's people as they were led out of slavery in Egypt by Moses; only then was the Mosaic Law given. Under the New Covenant, grace comes to God's people as we are led out of slavery to sin by Jesus, and empowered by the Holy Spirit – empowered to obey God's moral law. That moral law is to be found in the Ten Commandments, whose validity is affirmed by Jesus; in the moral principles which underlie the rest of the Mosaic Law; and in Jesus' own ethical teaching which goes beyond the Mosaic Law in its demands for inner conformity to God's righteous standards and its challenge to self-sacrificial love.

But understanding grace to come first and the law to be given and affirmed in the context of a covenant of grace raises this disturbing theological question: if the Law is given to God's people, on what basis does God judge those outside the Church? Alongside that grand theological question lies one of more narrow compass which will concern us in the second part of this article: is the Mosaic law of any relevance to the non-Christian or to wider society? Should Christians ignore it, seek to legislate in full or use it in some other way in our attempts to influence and critique the law-making process?

⁹⁹ Walter Chantry *God's Righteous Kingdom* 45.