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Writing group

Denis Alexander PhD
John Coffey PhD
Caroline Eade MA
Julian Rivers PhD
Michael Schluter PhD
Christopher Townsend MA
Christopher Watkin PhD
James Williams MA MPhil
Kate Williams MA
Margaret Wilson BA DipTh

Published by

The Jubilee Centre
3 Hooper Street, Cambridge CB1 2NZ
Tel: 01223 566319
Fax: 01223 566359
E-mail: info@jubilee-centre.org
www.jubilee-centre.org/cambridge_papers
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The law of love

by David McIlroy

... so is love a ledere and the lawe shapeth'

For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.

John 1:17

Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom.

2 Corinthians 3:17

Summary

The Bible is clear that to love God involves seeking to be obedient to God. Being God's people involves seeking to make wise decisions about the way in which God wants us to live. Jesus commands his followers to love God and our neighbours. In working out what that means, followers of Jesus need to take into account what God has revealed in the Torah about what it means to love him and to love another, as fulfilled, interpreted and modelled by Jesus. The Holy Spirit is given to us to enable us to grow in love. In order to make wise decisions we need to have internalised God's law and to meditate on it with the help of the Spirit. In heaven, doing what God wants will be second nature. Till then, reflection on God's law is an indispensable part of discerning what it means in practice to love God and to love our neighbour.

Introduction

'If you love me, you will obey what I command' (John 14:15). Jesus' words to his disciples at the Last Supper include the uncomfortable thought that there is an intimate link between love for Jesus and obedience to his commands. His disciples today are not so used to thinking of a connection between love and obedience or between love and law.

Perhaps even more uncomfortably, Jesus took the Torah (the Mosaic law) seriously. He challenged contemporary interpretations of it but he never denounced it.² How does Jesus' attitude towards the Torah square with what appears to be Paul's teaching that Christians are freed from the obligation to follow the Torah?³

Those questions are not theoretical; they are immensely practical. In a heavily indebted economy, is the ban on interest merely a dead letter? Ought Christians to be marking one day in seven as special, putting aside work for the whole day? Does it matter if a man and his niece get married? Is there anything wrong with cross-dressing? Should Christians tithe? Should Christians not eat meat with blood in it?⁴

The argument in this paper is that Christians should still reflect on the Torah, in the light of Christ's life and teaching,⁵ under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, and learn from it how to make wise decisions about how to love God and to love our neighbours today.⁶

The love of God involves the love of Torah

The Bible is clear from beginning to end that to love God involves seeking to be obedient to God. God invites humankind to participate in intimate communion with him. In the Garden of Eden, God walked with Adam in the cool of the day.⁷ God gave Adam commands too.⁸ Obeying God would enable Adam to enjoy all the goodness

1 William Langland, *The Vision of Piers Plowman*, Passus I, line 161. Everyman 2nd edition, London: J. M. Dent, 1995, p.22.

2 P. G. Nelson, in 'Christian Morality: Jesus' Teaching on the Law', *Themelios* 31, 2006, pp.4-17, explores how Jesus insisted on a strict interpretation of God's will regarding divorce and a radically different understanding of the Sabbath from the rigid pharisaical approach.

3 Rom. 6:14; Gal. 3:25.

4 A suggested approach to answering these last two questions is available at www.jubilee-centre.org

5 Christ's fulfilment of the moral, ceremonial and civil aspects of the Torah is not the subject of this paper. I have explored how he did so in McIlroy, *A Biblical View of Law and Justice*, Carlisle: Paternoster, 2004, pp.122-130.

6 There is a longstanding debate about the status of the Torah for Christians: see Greg L. Bahnsen, Walter C. Kaiser, Douglas J. Moo, Wayne G. Strickland and Willem A. Van Gemeren, *Five Views on Law and Gospel*, Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996. The argument of this paper is that a trinitarian perspective re-frames that debate.

7 Gen. 3:8.

8 Gen. 1:28; 2:17.

of the Garden of Eden. Adam was called to be obedient to God because that was what was expected of humankind in the relationship of love to God which God wanted Adam to enjoy. This anchors obedience to God within a relational context, as an essential fact about human life.

Loving God means following God's law, as it has been revealed to God's people.⁹ In the contemporary West, where hyperactive governments are constantly changing the rules, we think of law as specific prescriptions to be considered in isolation. The Torah is far more than that. The Torah is not just a collection of individual rules, nor is it a comprehensive legal code. The Torah is the five books of Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy which do not just contain Israel's laws, but also stories which tell Israel who they are as a people, what their God is like, and how they are to live.¹⁰ Israel is to be God's people (Exodus 19:6). The Ten Commandments and the rest of the Mosaic law show them how God's people ought to behave. For Old Testament Israel, the Torah was God's law.

The Torah was relational in its intention. Thus, as Jesus taught, the Torah is built around two Great Commandments: the command in Deuteronomy 6:5 to love God and the command in Leviticus 19:18 to love one's neighbour. The Ten Commandments sketch out for us what those loves look like. They tell us that we love God by giving him our sole allegiance, by not reducing him to images of things in the created order, by not using his name in vain, by setting aside regular time in our week to engage in the conscious worship of him. The Ten Commandments tell us that we love our parents by honouring them, that we love our spouses by being faithful to them, that we love our neighbours at a most basic level by not intentionally killing them, by not stealing from them, by not lying about them, by being content with what we have and not coveting what our neighbours have. This description of what love looks like continues to be indispensable today.

The Torah as a whole provides us with a paradigm, showing what loving God and loving our neighbour would look like in a particular, pre-industrial nation in the ancient Middle East.¹¹ The written Torah did not aspire to be comprehensive. It provided a narrative framework within which a series of practical examples showed how and how not to live out the love of God and the love of neighbour in a specific social context.

The Torah was a guide for the Israelites, an ethical manual to be meditated upon by the whole community,¹² designed to be capable of application by the people themselves.¹³ God's people were to take God's commandments to heart (Deuteronomy 6:6). By internalising the Torah, Israel was to learn the ways of the Lord, to discover wisdom and to avoid folly (Proverbs chapters 1–9). Once the Torah is understood as guidance, incorporating binding principles and specific applications, then it becomes easier to understand how the Psalmist could write Psalm 119 as a rhapsody about the importance of meditating on the Torah. The ideal is that a community which lives its law will not need judges to resolve disputes because people will live wisely by the Torah, in *shalom* with one another.

Much of the remainder of the Old Testament is, however, a sad commentary on how Israel failed to do this. Israel proved to

be incapable of loving God and obeying God's law. What was needed was definitive forgiveness, a new heart (Jeremiah 24:7; Ezekiel 11:19) and a new empowerment to live wise love-filled lives (Jeremiah 32:39).

The Trinity as the solution to the problem of Israel's disobedience

Understanding the Trinity is crucial to explaining how God has responded to Israel's failure to follow the Torah.¹⁴ Christians approach the Old Testament in the light of Jesus who claimed to be its author, its definitive interpreter, and the fulfilment of its promises. The crucifixion and resurrection are, taken together, God's decisive action to deal with the consequence of humankind's rejection of a relationship with God and the failure of sinful human beings to keep God's laws. Jesus' sacrifice on the cross is the sacrifice which was so complete that it ended the need for any other sacrifices of atonement. His was the complete sin offering (Romans 8:3). His resurrection demonstrated that the curse which fell on those who disobeyed the Torah had been exhausted for those in relationship with Christ.

The giving of the Spirit at Pentecost is the fulfilment of the prophecies of Jeremiah 31:33 and Ezekiel 36:26. God promised that, under the new covenant, he would put his Spirit in his people and move them to follow his decrees and to be careful to keep his laws.¹⁵ Now God would write his law in the hearts of his people.

Following Jesus means knowing forgiveness of sins and developing a relationship with the triune God. Because of what Jesus has done, those who are in Christ are being transformed by the Spirit into the likeness of the Son (Romans 8:29), and are placed within the Son's relationship to the Father. The Holy Spirit is God's empowering presence, the One through whom Christians are enabled to live in right relationship with God, loving God and obeying God.¹⁶

Our transformation into Christ-likeness involves the work of the Holy Spirit in our lives so that they are more closely patterned after the loving obedience to the Father which was the hallmark of Jesus' walk on earth.

Obedying the commands of Jesus and learning what it means to love

At the Last Supper, Jesus explained his decision to go to the cross by saying 'the world must learn that I love the Father and that I do exactly what my Father has commanded me' (John 14:30). He went on to make an explicit link between his obedience to the Father and our obedience to him: 'If you obey my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have obeyed my Father's commands and remain in his love' (John 15:10).

But what exactly did Jesus command? On the night of the Last Supper, Jesus told his disciples three times, 'Love each other as I have loved you.'¹⁷ If Jesus has commanded us to love one another, do we need any more guidance than that? Is there any need to take account of how love was to be expressed in the community of Israel in the Old Testament?

14 Articles by *Cambridge Papers* authors with a clear Trinitarian theme include Michael Ovey, 'The human identity crisis: can we do without the Trinity?', *Cambridge Papers*, Vol. 4 No. 2, June 1995; Michael Schluter, 'The relationships option', *Engage* 1, Spring 2003; and 'Three relational dimensions of justice: defining the moral order, upholding the moral order, and putting things right', in Paul Beaumont and Keith Wotherspoon (eds.) *Christian Perspectives on Law and Relationism*, Carlisle: Paternoster, 2000, pp.1–18; as well as McLroy, 'The Trinity, Politics and the Law', *Whitefield Briefing* 10(1), 2005, and 'A Trinitarian Reading of Aquinas's Treatise on Law', *Angelicum* 84, 2007, pp.277–292.

15 Ezek. 36:27.

16 C. J. H. Wright, *Knowing the Holy Spirit through the Old Testament*, Oxford: Monarch, 2006, pp.129–31.

17 John 13:34; 15:12, 17. Of course, Jesus gave other commands too, not least the Great Commission in Matthew 28:19, but the command to love one another is the one which appears repeatedly in John's account of the Last Supper which I am exploring here.

9 This is true in both the Old and New Testaments, though the understanding of God's law changes. The position taken in this paper is opposite to that of Anders Nygren who, in *Agape and Eros*, London: SPCK, 1953, argued that the Old Testament revealed a God of law and justice and the New Testament the God of love not law.

10 On the complexities of the meaning of Torah, see Jonathan Burnside, *God, Justice and Society*, Cambridge University Press, forthcoming, 2009.

11 Christopher J. H. Wright, *Old Testament Ethics for the People of God*, IVP, 2004, pp.65–73.

12 Deut. 6:6–9; Pss. 19, 119.

13 J. Burnside, 'Criminal Justice', in M. Schluter and J. Ashcroft (eds.), *Jubilee Manifesto*, IVP, 2005, pp.234–54, at pp.245–36.

We need to look at the Old Testament to help us to discern what the loving action would be. Is it loving to give money to a homeless drunk? Is it okay if a man sets up home with his step-mother, provided her relationship with his father is already over? Is it loving to offer people work which is well-paid but involves extremely long hours? How do we answer these questions and others like them?

We also have problems because thinking about love alone does not give us much concrete guidance about what is right and wrong. The idea that love is all you need for decision-making gives rise to the sort of thinking that says ‘provided it feels right, and so long as nobody is obviously and immediately getting hurt, anything goes.’ This is a serious mistake, illustrated by statistics which show that just 8 per cent of married couples split up within five years of the birth of a child, compared with 25 per cent of those who marry after birth and 52 per cent of cohabiters.¹⁸ The children get hurt, but so do the couples themselves, parents, relatives, friends, and future partners. The public commitment and community support involved in a marriage make a significant difference.

Finally, sinful human beings have an enormous capacity for self-delusion and to find rationalisations when they fall prey to temptation. If Christians today do not learn from Israel and from the New Testament churches how to develop biblical ethical standards, they will inevitably end up with worldly standards. Unless Christians reflect seriously on what the Bible shows us about God’s standards the Church is unlikely to be able to maintain a distinctively Christian morality for very long.

The relevance of the Torah as a practical guide to loving one another

For Christians, following Jesus is what matters. The priority of Jesus over the Torah and the Prophets was shown to his disciples in the Transfiguration (Matthew 17:5). In working out how to love in practice, the first place to look is to look to Jesus. As Tom Wright puts it: ‘the creator God has unveiled his genuine model for humanity in Jesus the Messiah, and there are certain ways of behaving which just won’t fit.’¹⁹ But in looking to Jesus, we need to reflect especially carefully on what he taught us about the Torah.

Jesus himself points us towards the Torah as part of the revelation of God through which we may discover what it means to love one another. Jesus’ best-known moral teaching and guide for life in the Kingdom of God, the Sermon on the Mount, is also an extended reflection on the Torah: exploring the commandments against murder (Matthew 5:21–26), adultery (5:27–32), bearing false witness (5:33–37) and coveting (6:19–24). Here Jesus is affirming the importance of the Torah by laying bare the moral principles which lay at its heart.

Far from abolishing the moral demands of the Torah, in fact Jesus radicalised them. 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 hearts. Truly ‘Christian morality’ must be heartfelt obedience to God’s good moral laws under the Holy Spirit’s moral guidance. In order to make wise moral decisions we need to have internalised God’s law and to meditate upon it with the help of the Holy Spirit.

That Jesus’ teaching is the fulfilment of the Torah ought not to surprise us: both were given by the same God. Jesus was the one

towards whom the Torah was pointing.²⁰ Paul says in Romans 7:14 ‘The law is spiritual’, by which he means that the Torah belongs to the Holy Spirit.²¹ The Torah is a particular part of the revelation of God’s law, which is to be understood by Christians through the power of the Spirit in the light of the work of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

Both the Torah and Jesus’ teaching are built around the love of God and the love of one’s neighbour. These are the most important elements of the moral order, and this underlying moral order is the same in the Old Testament as in the New Testament. The personal character of our God has not changed and, despite different cultures and social conditions, the fundamental nature of human beings has not changed either. However, Christians live after the establishment of the new covenant, by which we have a relationship with God based on Christ’s obedience and sacrifice in our place. We are God’s people not because we obey the rituals given by Moses but because we have a relationship with Christ.

The example of the Sabbath

How might I follow God’s law, reflecting on both NT and OT ethics when deciding what to do? As Calvin recognised, the Sabbath is not just about the worship of God. It is also about rest and about community.²² In the Old Testament, foreigners, servants and animals are all to be given one day of rest from work each week. In Deuteronomy 5:14 it is explicitly stated that the Sabbath must be observed by all ‘so that your servants may rest, as you do’. It is not just about each person having one day of rest in seven; it is about having a communal break from work and trade²³ so that people can enjoy and strengthen their relationships with one another. By reflecting on the OT material, we can deepen our understanding of what Jesus meant when he said ‘The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath.’²⁴ Recognising love as the motivating reason behind the Sabbath command enables us to understand its rationale, and why it might be of continuing relevance to our lives. Of course, Paul in Romans 14:5 recognises the possibility of Christians holding diverse views on this topic, but in making up our minds how we should live we ought to take into account the impact of our choices on those around us. If, as a busy lawyer, I don’t mark out some regular time in my week to see my wife and children, our relationships quickly suffer. If as a consumer, I do my shopping on Sundays, someone else has to work that day to sell me the goods. Their ability to sustain relationships with their family and friends is affected by having to work that day to serve me.

The two Great Commandments do not make all other moral principles redundant. Instead, they *sum up* the rest of the Torah (Romans 13:9). Attention to what God has revealed about what pleases him is a key part of learning what it means to love God and to love our neighbour. Jesus’ example and the priority of love rule out blind copying of the Torah as an option for Christians. What we are called to is the more difficult, creative task of understanding the moral principles to be found throughout the whole Bible, reflecting on those principles in the light of Christ and with

20 Rom. 10:4 is better translated ‘Christ is the goal of the law’ rather than ‘Christ is the end of the law.’

21 Gordon D. Fee, *God’s Empowering Presence*, Hendrickson, 1994, pp.29, 510. See also Neh. 9:13.

22 John Calvin, *Instruction in Faith* (1537), tr. by P. Fuhrmann, Westminster John Knox Press, 1992, pp.30–32.

23 See Neh. 10:31 and 13:15–22.

24 Mark 2:27.

18 John Ermisch and Marco Francesconi, ‘Patterns of Household and Family Formation’, in Richard Berthoud and Jonathan Gershuny, (eds.), *Seven Years in the Lives of British Families*, Bristol: The Policy Press, 2000, pp.21–44.

19 Tom Wright, *Paul for Everyone: 1 Corinthians*, SPCK, 2004, p.67.

the help of the Spirit and the community of the Church, in order to make wise decisions as to how to apply those principles in our lives today.²⁵ This is God's law for us, or we might say, the law of Christ.

Paul grounds his instructions for Christian living on his teaching about Christian identity. Christians need to learn to live in ways which accord with their new identity as Sons of God and as temples of the Holy Spirit.

Paul knew that Christians were not under the Torah (Romans 6:15) but instead under Christ's law (1 Corinthians 9:21). That did not mean the Torah was irrelevant when deciding how to live. Paul cites Deuteronomy 32:35 in Romans 12:19 when talking about vengeance. He quotes Deuteronomy 25:4 'Do not muzzle an ox while it is treading out the grain' when writing about pay and conditions for Christian workers,²⁶ taking a principle from the Torah and applying it creatively to a new context. When Paul is writing to the Corinthians about the effects of sleeping with prostitutes, he brings together reasons related to their relationship with God through Christ and in the Spirit²⁷ along with Genesis 2:24, quoting from the Torah.²⁸

The role of the Holy Spirit in Christian obedience

Christians have been given the Holy Spirit to help them internalise God's law and to guide them as they reflect upon it. The Spirit transforms our understanding of God's law. The Christian understanding is that God is the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, united in love for one another, and reaching out in love to the world which God has made. Although Judaism and Islam can take God's law seriously, and might even be able to think in terms of obedience to God's law as an expression of love for God, neither of these non-Trinitarian religions can offer either the assurance of God's forgiveness or the promise of God's personal, empowering presence, equipping us to live more godly lives. Because they do not know God to be Trinity, these religions are bound to have difficulty in understanding law other than in authoritarian terms, whereas Christians, knowing God to be love, can understand God's law as an expression of that love, offering us God's wise guidance for our lives together.

At the Last Supper, Jesus explained the relationship between loving him, obeying his laws, and experiencing the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit. He said: 'If you love me, you will obey what I command. And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Counsellor to be with you forever – the Spirit of truth. ... [H]e lives with you and will be in you' (John 14:15–17).

Jesus is plain that obedience to his commands is the expected evidence of our love for him. Whilst their obedience in this life will never be perfect,²⁹ it is to be expected that with the Holy

Spirit's assistance, Christians will grow to become more Christ-like. As Jürgen Moltmann put it in a sermon he preached on Jeremiah 31:33, because of the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, Christians no longer live 'under' the law but instead 'in' the law.³⁰

But how can this living 'in' the law be understood as Christian freedom? This can perhaps best be explained by giving an analogy. Imagine you are a fan of the music of Bach. You want to introduce your friend to that music so you ask them to listen to it. At first they listen to it because you have asked them to. Your hope would be that as they listen to it more and more, so they would discover for themselves the beauty in the music. The Christian life is a bit like that: at first we live by God's laws simply because they are God's laws, but as we go on so we discover that they are good, that they show us healthy patterns of living, which enable every member of the community to flourish in their unique identity before God.³¹

Christian freedom is not the aimless licence of having the right to do absolutely anything; it is the joyous discovery of our true humanity which results from our relationship of love with a God who is triune. Through the guidance of the Spirit, we learn wisdom, we discover that God's laws are good, and we discern what it means to love God and to love others. If we were to co-operate fully with the Holy Spirit, Christians would be beyond the law, in the sense that we would freely and fully obey all that God's laws require, because we would have perfectly internalised God's law and integrated it into our lives.

However, only when the Spirit's work of sanctification comes to completion in our glorification will we experience the full reality of God's solution to the experience of law as an extrinsic burden. Through Jesus we are brought into a relationship of sonship with God the Father.³² Christians are predestined by the Father to be conformed to the likeness of his Son (Romans 8:29). Our resurrection into Christ-likeness is assured by the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit.³³

One day, because we will be indwelt by the fullness of the Holy Spirit we will become totally holy, that is to say our wills will be wholly aligned with the will of the Father. Our love for God, empowered and mediated by the Spirit, will be perfectly expressed, so that the possibility of sinning will simply be unthinkable. Doing what God wants will be second nature. Till then, however, reflecting on God's law, including the Torah, is an indispensable part of the Spirit-guided wisdom of discerning what it means in practice to love God in this world.

30 Jürgen Moltmann, *The Power of the Powerless*, tr. by M. Kohl, London: SCM, 1983, p.42. Regrettably this insight is not followed through consistently by Moltmann in his other work: see ch. 2 of McIlroy, *A Trinitarian Theology of Law*, Paternoster, forthcoming.

31 Hence the emphasis on being taught God's laws: see Exod. 33:13; Deut. 4:10; 1 Sam. 12:23; and, above all, Ps. 119.

32 John 20:17; 16:10, 17, 28; 14:1–3.

33 Rom. 8:11; 1 Cor. 15:42–53.

Dr David McIlroy, a guest contributor to Cambridge Papers, is a practising barrister and a theologian. He has recently completed a PhD on 'A Trinitarian Theology of Law'.

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