

The Law and the Gospel

Part I

John Colquhoun

(1748-1827)

John Colquhoun was born in Scotland in January 1748. His early education was from the local school supported by the Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge (SPCK). At the age of 20, Colquhoun began his studies at the University of Glasgow. Once his pastoral ministry began, he labored faithfully for almost 50 years, and died in 1827.

John Colquhoun was one of the greatest of Scottish preachers and writers. His works, including this present title, are: *A Treatise on the Covenant of Grace*, *A Catechism for the Instruction and Direction of Young Communicants*, *A View of Saving Faith*, *A Collection of the Promises of the Gospel*, *A View of Evangelical Repentance*, *Spiritual Comfort*, and a collection of sermons entitled *Sermons Chiefly on Doctrinal Subjects*.

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The Law of God, or the Moral Law in General

The term "law" in Scripture is to be understood either in an extended or in a restricted sense.

In its extended or large acceptance, it is used sometimes to signify the five books of Moses (Luke 24:44), at other times all the books of the Old Testament (John 10:34), sometimes the whole Word of God in the Scriptures of the Old and the New Testament (Psalm 19:7), in some places the Old Testament dispensation as distinguished from the New (John 1:17), in others the Old Testament dispensation, as including prophecies, promises, and types of Messiah (Luke 16:16; Hebrews 10:1) and in several the doctrine of the gospel (Isaiah 2:3 and 42:4).

In its restricted or limited sense, it is employed to express the rule which God has prescribed to His rational creatures in order to direct and oblige them to the right performance of all their duties to Him. In other words, it is used to signify the declared will of God, directing and obliging mankind to do that which pleases Him, and to abstain from that which displeases Him.

This, in the strict and proper sense of the word, is the law of God; and it is divided into the natural law and the positive law. The natural law of God, or the law of nature, is that

necessary and unchangeable rule of duty which is founded in the infinitely holy and righteous nature of God. All men, as the reasonable creatures of God, are, and cannot but be, indispensably bound to it. The positive law of God comprises those institutions which depend merely upon His sovereign will, and which He might never have prescribed and yet His nature always continued the same; such as the command not to eat of the forbidden fruit; the command during the period of the Old Testament dispensation to keep holy the Sabbath of Jehovah, the seventh day of the week, which under the New Testament is altered to the first day; the ceremonial law given to the Israelites which prescribed the rites of God's worship, together with many of the precepts of their judicial law; and the positive precepts concerning the worship of God under the gospel.

The dictates of God's natural law are delivered with authority because they are just and reasonable in their own nature previous to any divine precept concerning them, inasmuch as they are all founded in the infinite holiness, righteousness, and wisdom of His nature (Psalm 3:7-8). On the contrary, the dictates of His positive law become just and reasonable because they are delivered with authority. The former are "holy, just, and good," and therefore they are commanded; the latter are commanded, and therefore they are "holy, just, and good." Those commandments of God which are founded in the holiness and righteousness of His nature are unalterable and perpetually the same; whereas these which are founded on the sovereignty of His will are in themselves alterable, and He may, by His own express appointment, alter them whenever He pleases. But till He Himself alters them, they continue to be of immutable obligation (Matthew 5:18).

Although the positive precepts of God are capable of being changed by Him, yet our obedience to them is built upon a moral foundation. It is a moral duty, a duty of perpetual obligation, to obey in all things the revealed will of God. It was upon a moral ground that Christ as Mediator proceeded when He changed the seals of the covenant of grace, altered the Sabbath from the seventh to the first day of the week, and instituted new ordinances of worship and government for His Church. And it is upon the same ground that we are bound to obey the positive commands of Christ respecting those ordinances.

The law of God strictly taken in the aspects which it bears on mankind is to be considered in a threefold point of view: first, as written on the heart of man in his creation; second, as given under the form of a covenant of works to him; and third as a rule of life in the hand of Christ the Mediator to all true believers.

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Section 1. The law as inscribed on the heart of man in his creation

God, in creating the first man, made him after His own moral image (Genesis 1:27). This image, as the Apostle Paul informs us, consists of knowledge, righteousness, and true holiness (Colossians 3:10; Ephesians 4:24). God, then, created man in His own moral image by inscribing His law, the transcript of His own righteousness and holiness, on man's mind and heart. The law of God is to be taken either materially, as merely directing and obliging the rational creature to perfect obedience, or formally, as having received the form of a covenant of works. Now it is the law not formally, but materially considered, that was inscribed on the heart of man in his creation. Man, therefore, as the creature of God, would have been obliged to perform perfect obedience to the law in this view of it, though a covenant of works had never been made with him. This law, and sufficient power to obey it, were included in the image of God, according to which He created man (Ecclesiastes 7:29). Although the law, in this view of it, contained no positive precepts, yet it required man to believe everything which God should reveal, and to do everything which He should command (Deuteronomy 12:32).

Since the first man, on whose heart his Creator had inscribed this law, was not confirmed in rectitude of nature and life, and so was fallible; it implied a sanction of eternal punishment to him, as the just recompense of his disobedience, if he should at any time transgress it (Romans 1:32 and 6:23). I say, it implied this sanction, for as it was never designed by God to be in that simple form either a rule of duty to man or of judgment to himself, and as Adam was not permitted to transgress till after the covenant of works was made with him, there does not seem to have been any express threatening of eternal punishment annexed to it. But though it implied a penal sanction, and though disobedience to it would deserve even eternal death, yet there is no ground from the Scripture to conclude that a penal sanction or a threatening of eternal wrath is inseparable from it. For glorified saints and confirmed angels in heaven are all naturally, necessarily, and eternally bound to perform perfect obedience to it as the law of creation; but to affirm that they have a threatening of eternal punishment annexed to it would be rash and unscriptural. The truth is, there is no place for a penal sanction where there cannot be a possibility of sinning. Besides, if a threatening of eternal punishment was inseparable from the law of creation, true believers, who are and always must be under this law, should inevitably remain under that threatening. Although their justification for the righteousness of Jesus Christ, received by faith and imputed by God, is perfect and irrevocable, yet if, even in that state, they committed but a single sin, it would lay them afresh under condemnation to eternal wrath. And that would be contrary to these consoling passages of Scripture: "He that heareth My Word, and believeth on Him that sent Me, hath everlasting life, and shall not come into condemnation" (John 5:24). "There is therefore now no condemnation to them which are in Christ Jesus, who walk not after the flesh, but after the Spirit" (Romans 8:1). Indeed, if a penal sanction were inseparable from the law of creation, believers would at once be both justified and condemned. For as all men, considered as creatures of God, are subject to the law of creation (Romans 2:15), so this law cannot but forbid the smallest

degree of sin, and cannot but require perfection of obedience from all believers as well as all unbelievers. It may be proper here to remark that no mere man, even by perfect obedience to the law in that simple form, could ever have merited from God eternal life. It therefore implied no promise of eternal life, even no promise that mankind should ever be confirmed under it as a rule of life. It was only when it received the form of the covenant of works that a promise of life eternal and, consequently, of confirmation in holiness and happiness, was annexed to it.

The law, as written on the heart of the first man, is often called the law of creation, because it was the will of the sovereign Creator, revealed to the reasonable creature, by impressing or engraving it on his mind and heart. To this law, so inlaid in the mind and heart in creation, as to the natural instinct and moral rectitude of the rational creature, every person, as a reasonable creature, is indispensably bound. It obliges to perfect and perpetual obedience in all possible states of the creature, whether he be on earth, in heaven, or even in hell. Since man is the creature of God, and since, in his creation, he was made in the image of God, he owes all possible subjection and obedience to God, considered as his benign Creator.

The same law is also called the law of nature because it was founded in the holy and righteous nature of God, and was interwoven with the nature of the first man; because it corresponds both to the nature of God who is the author of it, and to that of man who is subjected to it; because to act according to this law is the same as to act naturally and reasonably; because writing it on the heart of Adam was so distinct, and the impression of it on his nature was so deep, that they were equal to an express revelation of it; because the dictates of this law are the very same that the dictates of natural conscience in the first man were; and, because the obligation to perform perfect obedience to it proceeds from the nature of God and lies on the nature of man. The knowledge which man in innocence had of this law was cemented with his nature.

It is sometimes called the moral law, and is so-called because it was a revelation of the will of God as his moral governor to the first man, and was the standard and rule of all the man's moral qualities and actions; because, while it was manifested to his reason, it represented to him the moral fitness of all his holy inclinations, thoughts, words, and actions; because while it regulates the manners or morals of all men, it is of perpetual obligation; and because it is summarily comprehended in the ten commandments, which are usually called the moral law. The Ten Commandments are the sum and substance of it. There is, however, this difference between it and them: in it there is nothing but what is moral, but in them there is something that is positive.

The obligation of the law of nature results both from the nature of God and the nature of man; and from the relation between God the Creator, Proprietor, Preserver, Benefactor, and Governor of man, and man the creature, the property, and the subject of God. The immediate ground of the obligation of the natural law upon man is the sovereign authority of God, or His absolute right to command the perfect obedience of man. This sovereign authority of the Lord flows from the infinite supereminence or supreme excellence of His nature above the nature of man; from His being the Creator of man

and man's being His creature; from His being the Preserver and Benefactor of man, and man's being dependent upon Him for life and all the comforts of life; and from His being, therefore, the sole Proprietor and sovereign Ruler of man, and man's being His property and in absolute subjection to Him.

The obligation of the natural law upon mankind, then, as resulting from the nature of God and from the relations between God and man, is such that even God Himself cannot dispense with it. It cannot cease to bind so long as God continues to be God and man to be man — God to be the sovereign Creator and man to be His dependent creature. Since the authority of that law is divine, the obligation flowing from it is eternal and immutable. It must continue forever without the smallest diminution, and that upon all men, whether saints or sinners; at all times, from the moment of man's creation before the covenant of works, under the covenant of works, under the covenant of grace, and even through all eternity. Man has no being, no life, no activity without God. So long, therefore, as man continues in existence, he is bound to have no being but God, and no activity but such as is according to His will.

That fair copy of the natural law which had been transcribed into the nature of the first man in his creation was, by the fall, much obliterated; and it continues still to be, in a great degree, defaced and even obliterated in the minds of all His unregenerate offspring. And, indeed, if it was not in a great measure obliterated, what need could there be of inscribing it anew on the hearts of the elect? What occasion would there be for such a promise as this: "I will put My laws into their mind, and write them in their hearts" (Hebrews 8:10)? What necessity could there be of writing it in the Sacred Volume in order to make it known to men in all generations? Indeed, so obliterated was it that the Lord saw it necessary to make it known to His people by both external and internal revelation. But although this natural law inscribed on the heart of Adam was much defaced by the Fall, yet it was not wholly obliterated. Some faint impressions or small relics of it remain still in the minds of all men. Indeed, with respect to its general principles and the immediate conclusions obviously deducible from them, it is not and cannot be totally effaced; but with regard to such conclusions as are more or less remote, it is, by the darkness of the mind and the depravity of the heart of man, wholly perverted (Romans 1:21, 32). The general principles which, in some measure, are still inscribed on the minds of men, even where they have not the benefit of the written law, are such as these: there is a God; that God is to be worshipped; that none are to be injured; that parents ought to be honored; that we should do to others what we would reasonably wish that they would do to us; that such general principles as these are, still in some degree, engraven on the minds of all men, is evident from these words of an apostle: "The Gentiles, which have not the law, do by nature the things contained in the law." This shows the work of the law written in their hearts, their conscience also bearing witness, and their thoughts the meanwhile accusing or else excusing one another (Romans 2:14-15). The same is also manifest from the laws which, in countries destitute of the light of revelation, are commonly enacted for encouraging virtue and discouraging vice, and for preserving the rights of civil society. Men in heathen countries can have no standard for those laws but the relics of natural law, which all the descendants of Adam bring with them into the world.

The remains of the law of nature in the minds of men are commonly called the light of nature, sometimes the light of reason. They are the dictates of natural conscience, and they contain those moral principles respecting good and evil which have essential equity in them. The law of nature, as engraven on the heart of Adam in his creation, should always be distinguished from the light of nature as now enjoyed. The former is uniform and stable, of universal extent, and of perpetual obligation; the latter, being that knowledge of the nature of God, and of their own nature, as well as of the duties resulting from the relations between them which men since the fall actually possess, is greatly diversified in its extent and degree, according to their different opportunities, capacities, and dispositions. In some parts of the world, where the light of nature is not assisted by the light of revelation, it does not appear superior to the sagacity of some of the inferior creatures. How far, then, must it be from being sufficient to guide men to true virtue and happiness; or to afford them in their present depraved state proper views of the wisdom, power, justice, goodness, and mercy of God!

So much for the law of nature, which is the law of God in its primitive, simple, and absolute form.

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