

Law - Civic, Ceremonial and Moral

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The term 'Antinomian' was coined by Martin Luther from the Greek word meaning 'against law'. He used it of those who thought that with the coming of the Christian gospel, God's law could now be safely relegated to oblivion. There is a sense in which this heresy arose from a misunderstanding of the Apostle John's statement, 'The law was given by Moses, but grace and truth came by Jesus Christ' (*John 1:17, AV*). This was interpreted to mean that Moses and his law have now been superseded by Jesus Christ and His grace. Other statements about Christians not being 'under law' but 'under grace' lent weight to this view. The fact that there is no 'but' in the Greek original of John 1:17 should have given the Antinomians pause, quite apart from many other New Testament statements which establish the moral law as an essential element in the life of grace.

As we shall see, there is law in the life of grace just as there was grace in the giving of the law. Indeed the law is so much a part of the Christian life that John insists that those who do not keep God's law have no reason to suppose that they are Christians at all. Says John, 'The man who says, "I know him," but does not do what he commands is a liar, and the truth is not in him' (*1 John 2:4*). In the words of Dr Lloyd-Jones, 'If the "grace" you have received does not help you to keep the law, you have not received grace'.¹ As we shall see, this thesis is developed at great length in the New Testament by all the inspired writers.

'TO THE GALLOWS WITH MOSES!'

¹ Lloyd-Jones, D. Martyn. *Studies in the Sermon on the Mount* (1959), vol. I, p. 197. Inter-Varsity Fellowship.

The apparent conflict between law and grace, law and gospel, faith and works was raised in acute form at the time of the Reformation, when Luther introduced his term 'Antinomian'. It was directed against Johann Agricola, High Priest of modern Antinomianism, who took a very radical stance and placed an unbridgeable gulf between law and gospel. 'It is better', he asserted, 'for Christians to know nothing about the law; evangelical preachers should preach the pure gospel and no law; Christians by good works are of the Devil.'² In the intemperate language all too common in theological controversy, he thundered, 'The Ten Commandments belong to the law courts, not in the pulpit . . . To the gallows with Moses!'³ This aroused the wrath of Martin Luther, who proceeded to hang Agricola — or at least his heretical views — on the gallows erected by the New Testament for those who reject God's holy law.

If it is true that Antinomians are 'against law', we must first ask what is meant by 'law'. Any student of the Old Testament soon realizes that the word is used with very different connotations. There are, in fact, three basic categories of law, traditionally known as civic, ceremonial, and moral.

CIVIC LAW

As regards the civic law, it is clear that Israel was originally a theocracy — ruled by God, who communicated His will directly to prophets like Moses. In this way, a large body of legislation was laid down, governing such matters as murder, theft, immorality and, in fact, misdemeanors of all kinds. The Israelite state had divine sanction to impose every type of punishment from the death penalty downwards. As God's plenipotentiaries, they were often punishing not so much 'crime' as 'sin'.

Has the Israelite civic law passed away? It is clear that the answer must be 'yes' for it was bound up with the Old Testament economy. Our Lord announced the demise of theocracy when the kingdom passed from Israel to the church. 'The kingdom of God', said Jesus to the Jews, 'will be taken away from you and given to a people who will produce its fruit' (*Matt. 21:43*). That 'people' is the church which is to be found among all nations. The Mosaic civic law belonged in its binding authority to the period when one nation was ruled by God as its immediate head and judge.

Any attempt to reinstate theocratic rule — and there have been many — must therefore be adjudged misconceived. This applies equally to Calvin's Geneva and the Puritan experiment in New England. A militant Islam is attempting in our day to impose 'theocratic' control in some countries — with capital punishment for adultery and amputation for theft. This is a far more terrible error than any temporary Christian attempts at theocracy.

² Agricola, Johann. Quoted in *The Protestant Theological and Ecclesiastical Encyclopedia* (1856), ed. Bomberger, vol. I, p. 180. T. & T. Clark.

³ Agricola, Johann. Quoted in *The New Encyclopedia Britannica: Micropaedia*, vol. I, p. 144.

CEREMONIAL LAW

What of the ceremonial law? Is it still in force? The New Testament is much more explicit about this. Christ came to fulfill it in every detail. He was the Antitype of all the types and shadows of the ceremonial law — the tabernacle and temple with their furnishings and especially their sacrificial offerings. By one sacrifice for sins for ever, our Great High Priest has done away with the need for the ceremonial law — as we shall see in detail later.

The attempt by Christian converts from Pharisaism to impose on Gentile Christians the intolerable yoke of Old Testament ceremonial law was decisively defeated at the Council of Jerusalem (*Acts 15*). This was legalism. The Colossian converts were charged by the Great Apostle not to submit to such legalistic bondage as regulations about food, drink, religious festivals, the new moon and the sabbath (*Col. 2:16*). Christians are not bound by that kind of law.

And we in our day need to resist attempts by latter-day legalists to enslave us by man-made regulations and shibboleths. These self-appointed popes assure us that God has revealed to them His displeasure with those Christians who possess a television set, keep pets, read for university degrees, associate with believers outside their own party — the list is endless. The Apostle Paul has already answered all such impositions: ‘Do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery’ (*Gal. 5:1*).

MORAL LAW

All modern works of reference, both Christian and secular, agree in defining Antinomianism as the view that the Moral Law (the 10 Commandments) is not binding on Christians as a rule of life. In the words of one of its modern spokesmen, Professor Sperry Chafer, who espouses this position: ‘No Christian is under the law as a rule of life’.⁴ We here present the biblical view — that the Moral Law, spiritually understood, is God’s blueprint for Christian living.

In the first place, the Moral Law reflects God’s own essential attributes. As God is spiritual, so is His Law. Since God is holy, His Law is also holy (*Rom. 7:12, 14*). As God cannot change, it follows that His Law cannot change. It has eternal validity and can never be abrogated.

God the Creator has imposed His Law on all created beings — angels and men alike — as the objective expression of His will (*Psa. 103:20; Rom. 2:15*). As Moral Governor of the universe, He is entitled to the unquestioning obedience of all His creatures.

⁴ Chafer, Lewis Sperry. *He that is Spiritual* (5967), p. 64. Zondervan.

Obedience to God (because He is Creator) and to His Moral Law (because it reflects His sovereign will) lies at the heart of all true religion — and thus of sanctification. Becoming a Christian does not alter the fact that I am still a created being under obligation to obey. What conversion does is to enable me to render to God that obedience of which I was incapable as an unbeliever. What is more, it grants me an overriding desire to obey, since God is now also my Redeemer in Christ Jesus.

It is clear that God imposed His Moral Law on man from the very beginning. Adam and Eve suffered for breaking it, as did Cain. That Law was written on the hearts of all men (*Rom. 2:14-15*). It was re-instituted in the time of Moses in order to define and condemn sin (*Rom. 4:15; 5:13*). John actually describes sin as 'lawlessness' or 'the transgression of the law' (*1 John 3:4*). To be saved from sin therefore means to be saved from transgressing the law — and thus enabled to keep it.⁵

The Ten Commandments were explicitly applied to God's redeemed people (*Exod. 20:1-17*). Antinomians have argued that, with the advent of the New Covenant, those commandments lapsed. But this is patently untrue. Our Lord Himself asserted their perpetual validity: 'Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have not come to abolish them, but to fulfill them. For 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' (*Matt. 5:17-18*). He then issued a very solemn warning against becoming Antinomian and commended those who practice and teach the law: '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 practices and teaches these commands will be called great in the kingdom of heaven' (*Matt. 5:19*).

What Christ did was to rid the commandments of the misinterpretations of the Pharisees. Dr Kevan points out that our Lord did not say 'unless your righteousness surpasses that of Moses' but 'that of the Pharisees' (*Matt. 5:20*).⁶ Christ proceeded to show the essential spirituality of the law. It is concerned primarily with men's motives, and not merely with their actions. So when God said, 'You shall not murder,' there was also included its source —unrighteous anger. And when He said, 'You shall not commit adultery,' the command also prohibited all lustful thoughts. These things exposed men to the condemnation of God and they still do!

THE ROYAL LAW

James urges on his Christian readers the need to obey the law. 'If you really keep the royal law found in Scripture, "Love your neighbor as yourself", you are doing right' (*Jas. 2:8*). The Royal Law is in fact the Moral Law given to Moses by God in Leviticus 19:18,

⁵ See, e.g., Macleod, Donald in *Living the Christian Life* (1974), pp. 5ff. Westminster Conference Report.

⁶ Kevan, Ernest F. *The Moral Law* (1963), p. 71 Sovereign Grace Publishers, U.S.A.

which James quotes. The 'law' which the apostle warns his readers not to break, and which he calls 'the law of liberty', is nothing other than the Ten Commandments (*Jas. 2:11-12*). For the Christian, obedience and liberty belong together, the requirements of the Moral Law being exactly suited to his moral nature.

Paul makes no apology for imposing the Fifth Commandment on his Ephesian readers: 'Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right. Honour your father and mother — which is the first commandment with a promise — that it may go well with you and that you may enjoy long life on the earth' (*Eph. 6:1-3*).

Even where the New Testament does not explicitly quote the law of the Ten Commandments, it everywhere reflects its exact prohibitions. Like their Old Testament counterparts, New Testament believers are exhorted not to worship idols, or misuse God's name, or murder, or commit adultery, or steal, or give false testimony, or covet. Gospels and epistles alike are replete with other commands also addressed to God's people — to give, to pray, to fight, to work, to love, to obey, to resist Satan and his temptations — and a host of other such things. These exhortations are all the law of Christ for Christians — and they are to be obeyed. Paul, the apostle of grace, puts it quite bluntly: 'Circumcision is nothing and uncircumcision is nothing. Keeping God's commands is what counts' (*1 Cor. 7:19*).

Paul explicitly denies that he is 'free from God's law'. He asserts positively that he is 'under Christ's law' (*1 Cor. 9:21*). The Greek literally reads 'in the law (or 'in-lawed') to Christ'. So as 'Christ's law-abiding one', he is 'under the law's authority and teaching'. It is the sinful Antinomian mind that hates God and refuses to submit to His Law (*Rom. 8:7*). The Christian has a renewed mind that delights in that Law and is, in fact, its willing slave (*Rom. 7:22, 25*). He has the mind of Christ — and Christ loved and obeyed His Father's Law (*Psa. 40:8*). Those who are Christlike must therefore of necessity love and obey that Law also (*1 John 5:3*). Indeed, the Holy Spirit writes it in the minds and hearts of all God's children (*Heb. 8: 10*). He would scarcely do so if it were no longer binding on Christians! In fact we know that the Father's very purpose in sending the Son to die for sin was 'that the righteous requirements of the law might be fully met in us (Christians)' (*Rom. 8:4*).

On this subject Octavius Winslow speaks as follows to fellow Christians:

'Saints of God, keep the eye of your faith intently and immoveably fixed upon Christ, your sole pattern. Our Lord did not keep that law that his people might be lawless. He did not honour that law that they might dishonour its precepts. His obedience provided no licence for our disobedience. His fulfilment releases us not from the obligation, — the sweet and pleasant, yet solemn obligation — to holiness of life. Our faith does not make void the law, but rather establishes the law. The "righteousness of the law is fulfilled in us" when we "walk after the Spirit," in lowly conformity to Christ's example. Was he meek and lowly in heart? Did he bless when cursed? Did he, when reviled, revile not again? Did he

walk in secret with God? Did he always seek to do those things which pleased his Father? Did he live a life of faith, and prayer, and toil? So let us imitate him, that of us it may be said, "These are they who *follow the Lamb* whithersoever he goeth."⁷

Such words were once the universally accepted conviction of those who taught historic Christianity, but they have been challenged again in England in recent times. The Rev Michael Eaton, for example, is one who sees no need for Christians to honour the law. He writes, 'Christians are in no way under this tyrannical figure, the law.'⁸ Agricola, he added, had got it right, but unfortunately as Agricola did not have the kudos of Luther, his view was squashed! Dr R. T. Kendall, who published Mr Eaton's article and who claims to be the source of his views, writes in similar vein. He complains that, when he preaches that Christians 'are not under the law and don't need the Ten Commandments, some people panic and become hysterical.'⁹

John Calvin certainly remained perfectly calm. Familiar as he was with the views of 'that arch-Antinomian, Agricola', he wrote, 'Certain ignorant persons rashly cast out the whole of Moses and bid farewell to the two Tables of the Law. . . Let us banish this wicked thought from our minds.'¹⁰ Professor John Murray concurs: 'In the denial of the permanent authority and sanctity of the Moral Law there is a direct thrust at the very centre of our holy faith, for it is a thrust at the veracity and authority of our Lord Himself.'¹¹

GENUINE DIFFICULTIES

One can sympathize with those sincere Christians who have been misled regarding the place of Law in the believer's life. They may have been taught that, since Christians are justified by faith alone without the deeds of the Law, then works can have no place in the Christian life. They may have been led to think that obedience to the Moral Law is sheer legalism — justification by works.

Some such Christians may have been terrified by a law which thundered its terrors and condemnation from Sinai. Then, once they have found refuge in Christ from the curse of the Law, they may wrongly feel that they are still to regard the law as their enemy. And they may suppose that they find support for this attitude in verses which declare that they are 'not under law' and are 'dead to the law'.

⁷ Winslow, Octavius, *No Condemnation in Christ Jesus*, As unfolded in Romans Chapter 8, 1853, pp. 50-55.

⁸ Eaton, Michael in *Westminster Record* (Oct. 1984), Westminster Chapel, London, p. 14.

⁹ Kendall, R. T. in *Westminster Chapel News* (Apr/June 1984), p. 3.

¹⁰ Calvin, John. *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (1961), vol. I, p. 365. Student Christian Movement.

¹¹ *Collected Writings of John Murray* (1976), vol. I, p. 202. Banner of Truth.

Confusion sometimes arises because of a failure to realise that these verses are dealing with justification. Thus, when a verse like Romans 6:14 asserts that Christians are 'not under law but under grace', the writer means that Christians are not required to keep the Law in order to obtain justification. Since it is a spiritual impossibility to justify ourselves by works, we must be justified by grace through faith alone. If any obedience of our own rendered to the law could justify, then Christ died in vain (*Gal. 2:21*). The Law *cannot* justify, but the fault lies not in the Law, which is holy, but in man's sin (*Rom. 7:7-14*).

Galatians 3:13 asserts that 'Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law'. This has been interpreted to mean that the Law can do nothing but curse. But here again, Paul is dealing with justification. Certainly, the Law pronounces a curse on all who are misguided enough to seek justification by their own works. Those under conviction of sin view the Law as a cruel tyrant and taskmaster threatening eternal punishment for failure to do the impossible. But the converted man sees the curse as a blessing in disguise, for it drove him to the Christ who bore that curse for him. Again, this is no reflection on the Law as such. It is from the curse of the Law that we are redeemed, not from the Law itself.

When Romans 7:14 says that we died to the Law, it does not mean that the Law died. It is we who died to the Law — the Law is very much alive! The change that occurs is not in the Law but in us. Raised with Christ to new life, we now love the same Law which once we hated. It is a sign of true conversion when a man's heart is melted to love God's eternal Law and when his will is bent to obey it.

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