

THE USE OF GOD'S LAW

Rev. Dr. R. Dean Anderson (last revised 28 November 2018)

Every Sunday morning we hear the 10 commandments of our Lord. These commandments are also explained to us in the Heidelberg Catechism (Lord's Day 32-44) as the rule for our thankfulness. It is important to give practical and concrete application to this summary of the Law that God has given us in the 10 commandments. That is why the Catechism in its explanation makes good use of the rest of the Bible.

When the Lord gave the 10 commandments to Israel, he gave alongside them many other detailed laws in order that Israel might also know how to apply God's law in everyday life. Through these detailed laws God shows how his summary (the 10 commandments) ought to be practically applied. It is therefore important for us to pay attention to these detailed laws. The summary is often able to be interpreted in many different ways. Take, for example, the 6th commandment: "You shall not kill." There are those who cite this commandment in order to show that the death penalty is strictly forbidden by God. But God *himself* says that murderers must be *put to death* (cf. Num. 35:30-31; Heid. Cat. q/a 105). We learn from the detailed laws what God means by the summary; in this case: murder is not allowed, but a legally applied death penalty can be appropriate.

And yet if we ponder the detailed laws we rather quickly encounter a number of difficulties. These laws from the time of Moses seem to be so far removed from our own culture. Furthermore, there are a large number of laws which we no longer use in practice, for example the sacrificial laws. It is the intention of this article to discuss several aspects of God's laws in order to provide clarity in our thinking with respect to the detailed laws of Moses. It is hoped that through this study we may more clearly perceive which parts and aspects of God's laws are still applicable, and which have been abolished in Christ's coming.

1. Theocracy: "church" and "state"

Israel was a "theocracy" — a difficult word perhaps, but easily explained. "Theocracy" literally means "governed by God" (*theos* = God, *cratie* = government). Israel was therefore a nation governed directly by God. This fact arose because God had established a special relationship with the people of Israel, a relationship we know by the term "covenant". Israel's great King was therefore the Lord God himself enthroned upon the ark of the covenant in the tabernacle / temple. The Israelites lived with God on his land. Israel was in a certain sense *temple-land* and the land was therefore *holy*. You cannot say this of any other modern nation in the world, not even a nation which considers itself to be Christian. A Christian nation is not the same as a theocratic nation. And if we wish to apply the principles of God's Word to our society, then we need to have a clear grasp of the difference.

There are some who think that a theocracy is so different to modern society that you cannot make any application of God's laws from the Old Testament. Such people think that there was no distinction in the Old Testament between church and state. And yet such a blanket statement goes further than the truth of the matter. In Israel there was in fact a distinction between matters civil (e.g. civil jurisprudence) and matters ecclesiastical (i.e. matters to do with God's sacramental¹ worship and ritual law). As we shall see below, God's law, which is designed to apply to all aspects of man's existence, does make this distinction. Not that we then mean that civil jurisprudence has nothing to do with God! There is no sphere of life that remains neutral before God's presence. God's law makes a distinction between that which particularly refers to his worship and communion with him, and that which refers to the communion of men between themselves. Despite this distinction, however, the special status of Israel as a theocratic nation (i.e. directly governed by God) does need to be taken into account when we examine the laws given by God for Israel. This status does sometimes influence the legal framework of both "civil" and "ecclesiastical" law.

2. The distinction between "church" and "state"

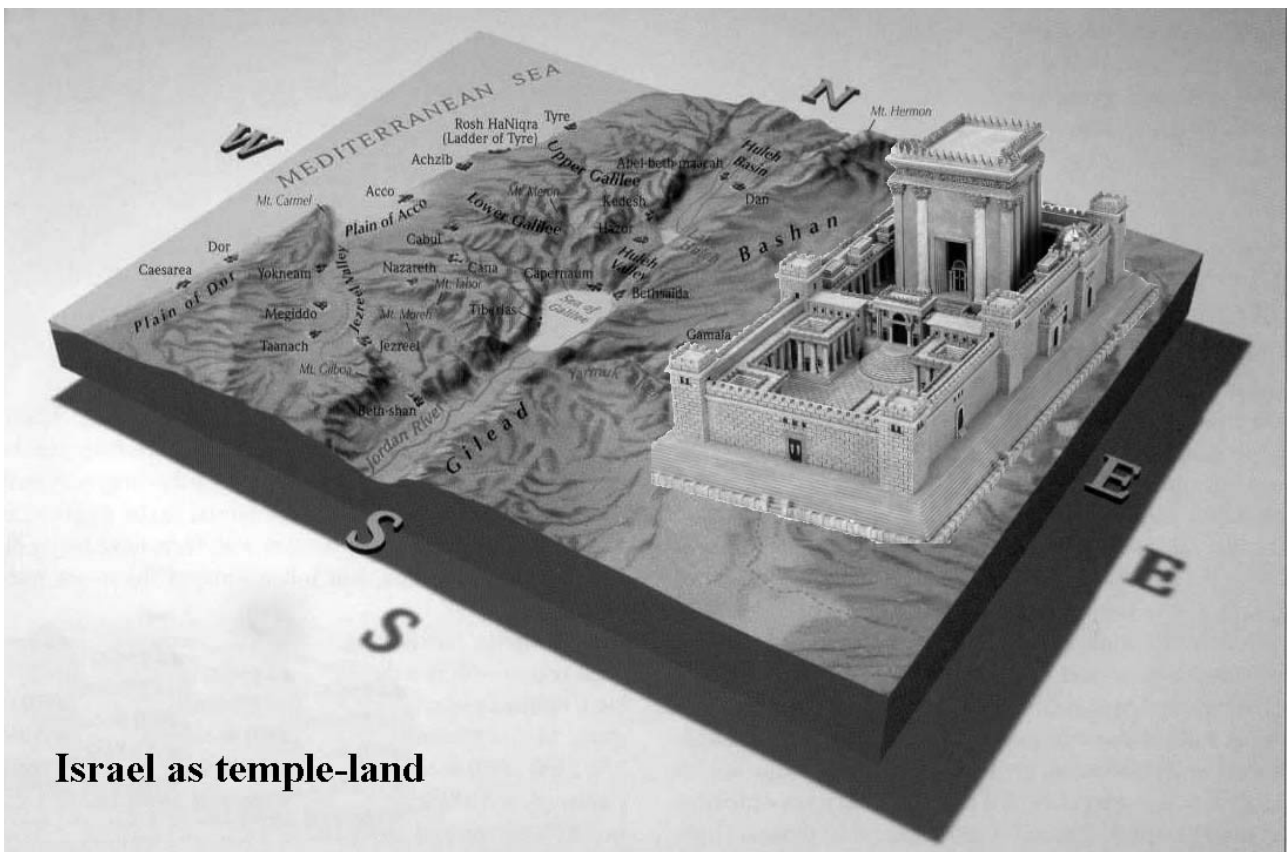
Because of the clear influence of Israel's special position as theocratic nation upon the laws, we cannot deduce abiding principles for our society from them without considering the impact of such influence. We ought not, however, to use this consideration as an excuse for not attempting to deduce any moral principles from Israel's law code and political system at all. Calvin and the Reformed tradition have rightly always seen

¹ "Sacramental" comes from the word "sacrament". In the Old Testament the sacraments were everything which had to do with the sacrifices.

the usefulness of the detailed laws for our ethics. Through careful reading of God's Word we ought to be able to discern which aspects of Israel's political system were especially bound up with their covenantal status as the chosen nation, and other aspects which are moral and abiding by nature.

In this respect we should consider the fact that Israel was beholden to living on the holy (temple) land which God had provided for them. We cannot claim that we are bound by God to live in the land in which we were born, nor that this land is in any special sense God's land. But this situation in Israel heavily influenced many of the laws on inheritance, which cannot be directly applied to our situation today. Because God had given them the land, nobody was allowed to sell that land (Lev. 25:23). Land could only be leased.

The fact that Israel was holy temple-land, also meant that the inhabitants were compelled to respect the public religion of Yahweh. Public idolatry could not be tolerated on God's temple-land. And therefore public idolatry was to be punished by death. Theft of God's property, as would be the case with sacrifices offered to other gods, was to be dealt with by the religious punishment of the ban. Everything that was placed under the ban had to be killed and burned in order to reclaim it for the Lord in the form of a burnt offering (see Exod.22:20; Deut.13:15-17; Josh.7).² Because a Christian country is not holy temple-land, public idolatry does not necessarily need to be severely punished. A modern country does not have the same holy status as Old Testament Israel.



Israel as temple-land

There is also the special nature of Israel's kingship to consider, a kingship which was given as a forerunner of the Messiah. The fact that Israel was granted a divinely appointed patriarchal line of kings does not mean that we are obliged to adopt such a form of government.

Yet the fact that Israel was a theocracy does not mean there was no distinction in God's law between the function of the church and of the state, although this distinction also functioned in a different way than in our Western society. This distinction is most clear at the national level in Israel. For civil jurisprudence the highest authority and court of appeal was the king. An Israelite king functioned as chief justice (consider Solomon's famous rulings, 1 Kgs 3:16-28). But his jurisdiction was quite distinct from that of the highest ecclesiastical leader in the nation, the high priest. The king had no priestly rights. In principle, despite the

² See further the commentary on Exod.22:20 in my article: "The Laws of the Book of the Covenant" to be found at: <http://anderson.modelcrafts.eu/articles>

fact that he had a special gate by which to enter the temple, his position was the same as any other Israelite. He could not offer sacrifice or perform any priestly ritual. The Lord punished king Uzziah when he tried this (2 Chron. 26:16-21). The king might provide leadership in building or repairing the temple, but he could do nothing in worship further than was permitted to any Israelite man. If we see the king leading the people in prayer, then it is only natural because he is the people's national leader (e.g. 1 Kgs 8); but we ought to remember that any Israelite male could in principle lead the people in prayer. In the dedication ceremony for the temple in 1 Kings 8 we see the cooperation between the king, who effectively leads the people in worship at that moment, and the priests who will have offered the sacrifices from the animals which the king provided. When the king pronounces a benediction over the people he does not use the Aaronic blessing formula of Numbers 6:22-27, but puts the object of the blessing in the first person plural (instead of the second person, 1 Kgs. 8:57-60).

This distinction also permeated the worship of God in Jewish synagogue traditions of a later time. The men who were present were responsible to choose someone to lead in worship (often a designated person within the synagogue community), but this person did not need to be a priest or a Levite. Any male over the age of 12 was permitted to read the Scripture in worship, or even given the opportunity to say an edifying word on the basis of this. But only a priest could pronounce the Aaronic blessing. It was also, of course, the specific duty of the priests and Levites to teach the people God's Word (see, e.g., Deut. 33:10), whether in or outside of the context of public worship. The elders of the community had general oversight of the community in all its activities, and so, of course, also the synagogue. But it was the nature of Israel's church that the sacramental and ritually holy elements of worship could only take place in the temple. And the holy ground of the temple was the domain of the priests and Levites.³

For these reasons the distinction between "church" and "state" (to put it in those terms) was most obvious at the national level especially in terms of the sacramental worship of the temple. Yet this distinction also flowed through to the judicial courts. As might be expected, a distinction was made between court cases which might arise in connection with ritual or temple law and those which might arise in the civil domain. This distinction explains the presence of both a chief justice *and* levitical priests in the central high court as legislated for in Deuteronomy 17:8-13.⁴ The task of this court was to pronounce judgement in cases which were too difficult for the local courts. Years later king Jehoshaphat reinstated this central high court as a part of his reforms heading it up with a chief justice and a high priest. The text in 2 Chronicles 19:11 makes quite clear that the high priest was responsible for "all that pertains to the LORD" whilst the chief justice was responsible for "all that pertains to the king" (i.e. civil matters).⁵

God's law shows that only civil cases involved the possible enactment of penal sanctions. Ritual infringements might require particular forms of extra sacrifice or other cleansing rituals.⁶ Certain cases of uncleanness may also involve banishment from the city or village until such time as a priest could pronounce someone clean (cf. Lev. 11). When hardening in sin for "matters pertaining to the LORD" occurred, the high court might have to declare someone excommunicated, a penalty which had far reaching social implications in that such a person was banished from the territory of Israel. In the time of Ezra it also meant confiscation of property (cf. Ezra 10:7-8). Certainly there are no penal sanctions for not attending synagogue or temple services, although refusal to attend Passover for no good reason did require immediate excommunication (an "ecclesiastical" sentence, Num. 9:13).⁷

³ In this respect the situation in the New Testament is clearly different. After Pentecost there is no central temple service anymore where only the sacraments (the sacrifices) could be brought. After Christ's work of salvation all his local worship services have a sacramental character, that is, the sacraments of baptism and Lord's Supper are celebrated in local worship services. Therefore there is now a clearer distinction between church and state on a local level. See further my article *Liturgical Principles* to be found at: <http://anderson.modelcrafts.eu/articles>

⁴ Without recourse to a note the NASB has altered the text of Deut. 17:9 in what seems to be an attempt to harmonise v.9 more fully with 2 Chron. 19:11. The Hebrew reads: "So you shall come to the Levitical priests and the judge ..." It is probable that both priests and Levites had duties in connection with the local courts, see Deut. 19:17; 21:5; 1 Chron. 26:29. It remains unclear from these texts what their function was.

⁵ The point of the reform was to take Israel back to the way things were supposed to be organised according to God's law, cf. 2 Chron. 19:4. The wording of the distinction in 2 Chron. 19:11 makes it improbable that the intention was that the college of priests should first investigate what God's law has to say about a particular case and that thereafter the college of judges (the heads of families) pronounce judgement on the basis of their findings.

⁶ See further *The Laws For Uncleanness In The Pentateuch and NT Baptism* to be found at: <http://anderson.modelcrafts.eu/articles>

3. The distinction between civil and ceremonial laws

We have seen that the distinction between civil and ecclesiastical laws was presupposed in Israel in that the central high court had distinct officers to deal with cases arising either from civil or ecclesiastical law. The distinction between civil and ecclesiastical matters is in one sense not difficult to make. Laws regulating God's worship in the tabernacle / temple are quite distinct from laws distinguishing different kinds of homicide, for example. And yet there is a difficult aspect in that much ritual law seems to be interwoven with civil law. Take, for example, laws reinforcing the separation of Israel from other peoples in various aspects of their daily life such as in Leviticus 19:19.

You are to keep My statutes. You shall not breed together two kinds of your cattle; you shall not sow your field with two kinds of seed, nor wear a garment upon you of two kinds of material mixed together.

Reformed theology has always distinguished between ceremonial aspects of God's law and moral aspects. In order to better be able to discern the distinction between the civil and the ecclesiastical in such cases as Leviticus 19:19 it is important to pay attention to this distinction between ceremonial and moral aspects. After briefly showing how this distinction is made in several Reformed confessions, I shall discuss several ways in which this distinction is defined within the Bible itself.

The distinction between ceremonial and moral aspects in the laws help us to define the civil and ecclesiastical aspects. Ceremonial aspects are always ecclesiastical in nature, because they are concerned with rituals that have to do with the temple or with symbols that teach God's people fundamental truths. In addition, ceremonial laws are never coupled with civil punishments (i.e. penal sanctions).

Article 25 of the Belgic Confession, for example, states the following:

We believe that the ceremonies and symbols of the law have ceased with the coming of Christ, and that all shadows have been fulfilled, so that the use of them ought to be abolished among Christians. Yet their truth and substance remain for us in Jesus Christ, in whom they have been fulfilled.

In the meantime we still use the testimonies taken from the law and the prophets, both to confirm us in the doctrine of the gospel and to order our life in all honour, according to God's will and to his glory.

These "ceremonies and symbols of the law," which are further called "shadows" (following Hebr. 10:1), had the function of proclaiming the Gospel before the time of the coming of Christ, according to the Heidelberg Catechism, q/a 19.

From where do you know this?

From the holy gospel, which God himself first revealed in Paradise. Later, he had it proclaimed by the patriarchs and prophets, and foreshadowed by the sacrifices and other ceremonies of the law. Finally, he had it fulfilled through his only Son.



The catechism here distinguishes the "ceremonies of the law" from the moral law (summarised in the ten commandments) which it later expounds as the rule of thankfulness for the Christian. The ceremonies are abrogated with the coming of Christ because those aspects of the Gospel which they foreshadowed have become reality in Christ's person and work.

The idea that these ceremonies "foreshadowed" the Gospel comes from Hebrews 10:1 where this image is used of the laws concerning the earthly tabernacle, which was a "shadow" of the heavenly tabernacle (Hebr. 8:5) and of the various sacrificial laws which were a "shadow" of the great sacrifice of Christ himself (Hebr. 10:1; cf. Col. 2:16-17). A shadow only gives a vague image of the reality

⁷ For a further discussion of disciplinary procedures in the Old Testament see my article *The Sinews of the Church* to be found at: <http://anderson.modelcrafts.eu/articles>

behind it. How many details can you discern of the person behind the shadow in the picture here? In this way the sacrificial laws show us, albeit vaguely, something about the person and work of Christ.

This distinction between the ceremonial and the moral is also mentioned in the Old Testament itself. The psalms and prophetic writings not infrequently speak of God's will and law in a way which distinguishes God's abiding moral commandments from the ceremonies and ritual laws. We may take Jeremiah 7:21-23 as an example. God tells his people (through Jeremiah) that he did not give their fathers at Mt. Sinai commandments about burnt offerings and sacrifices. He commanded them to obey his voice and to walk in all the way which he commanded. Which "way" is God then referring to? The way of his commandments of course, but which commandments? Obviously not those commandments concerned with sacrifice. The Lord emphasises here his abiding moral commandments by opposing them to the ceremonial, symbolic and ritual laws. The same distinction is found in many other texts which may be summarised as follows:

The abiding moral law	opposed to symbols and ceremonies
<p>Ps.40:6-8 God's will and law is to be found in the scroll of the book. In v.9 this is equated with <i>righteousness</i>.</p>	<p>Sacrifice, meal offering, burnt offering, sin offering</p>
<p>Ps.50:7-15 Giving God thanksgiving Paying your vows to God Prayer for salvation</p>	<p>Various kinds of animal sacrifice</p>
<p>Ps.51:16-17 A broken spirit and contrite heart</p>	<p>Sacrifice and burnt offerings (but see also v.19 where sacrifice does belong to God's law)</p>
<p>Prov. 21:3 Doing righteousness and justice</p>	<p>Sacrifice</p>
<p>Jer. 7:21-26 Obedience to the law and the prophets</p>	<p>The law at Sinai did not concern burnt offerings and sacrifices</p>
<p>Hos. 6:6 (= Matth. 9:13) Loyalty and knowledge of God</p>	<p>Sacrifice and burnt offerings</p>
<p>Mich. 6:6-8 Do justice, love kindness, walk humbly with your God</p>	<p>Burnt offerings, sacrificial animals, oil, first-born offerings</p>

From this table we can see that the distinction cannot be summarised in terms of a contrast between written laws and abstract qualities such as loyalty and justice. Psalm 40 shows that the abiding moral law is a *written* code. This much is also clear from Jeremiah 7 where God's abiding law is quite clearly the law of Moses. And yet this law is also broader than the law of Moses since Jeremiah also includes the prophets.

The distinction is also clearly not that between the ecclesiastical and the civil. The abiding moral commands include both the civil and the ecclesiastical. Worshipping God by paying vows and rendering thanksgiving belong to the ecclesiastical realm, whilst doing justice by not stealing or committing adultery belong to the realm of civil law.

The distinction is rather one of symbols and rituals in opposition to commandments which have a moral character.⁸ The same distinction is made by the Lord Jesus in Mark 7:14-23 when he insists that food does *not* really make a person ‘unclean’, but the (moral) sins of the heart which proceed out of a person are what make a person ‘unclean’. As a result, for the apostles, writing after Pentecost, the concept of ‘uncleanness’ becomes completely *moral* and the Mosaic ritual uncleanness laws have fallen away. Nevertheless, we can still make a similar distinction in the New Testament between moral commands on the one hand and symbols such as baptism and the Lord’s Supper on the other hand.

The letter to the Hebrews also addresses this distinction between the ceremonies and symbols of the Old Testament law which are abrogated in Christ, and its moral commands. The sacrifices and other rituals are shown to be shadows which Christ has fulfilled. The old “testament” is characterised in terms of these ceremonies and symbols and contrasted with the new “testament.” The New Testament comes with a “new” temple in the heavens and a new high priest, Jesus Christ, who remains for ever. The inadequacies of the first temple (which was continued in the second temple, although this second temple remained without the ark of the covenant) are removed in Christ. Christ does priestly service in the heavenly temple which is permanent and provides a real reconciliation. The perfections of the new testament are, according to Hebrews, not so much to be found in the believer himself, but in the new temple and its new high priest.

1. Christ remains high priest forever (there is no succession of priests anymore)
2. The heavenly temple was made by God himself.
3. Christ is always in God’s presence (the Levitical high priest came once a year in God’s presence)
4. Christ offered his own blood, not that of animals.
5. Christ’s sacrifice is once for all, and needs no repetition.
6. Christ’s blood made entrance into the holy of holies possible for us (not the case in the old testament)

The believers are now directed much more pointedly to God’s work of salvation. The punishments for breaking God’s covenant are therefore more severe (Hebr. 10:29). But the same righteous law is maintained. The letter teaches all these things on the basis of Jeremiah 31 (quoted in Hebr. 8:8-12). The New Testament is characterised by the fact that God’s laws are truly written upon the hearts of the believers. But which laws are referred to here? Certainly not the laws concerning the ceremonies, symbols and rituals. Hebrews refers here to God’s moral commandments just as the texts cited in the table do.

The Lord Jesus also speaks in the sermon on the Mount concerning God’s law as an abiding moral law. He even goes so far as to say that not one jota or tittle from the law will fall before heaven and earth pass away. It should be clear from the preceding discussion that Jesus presupposes here the distinction between the abiding moral law and the ceremonial or symbolic laws. In the sermon on the Mount he only discusses moral laws and not the symbolic laws. When Jesus encourages us to pay careful attention to God’s law, even the most detailed little law, he must be referring to these moral laws. After all, Mark 7:19 makes quite clear that Jesus intended to abolish the dietary laws. In Matthew 5:17 ff. he says:

Do not think that I came to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I did not come to abolish, but to fulfil.

Now there are those who say that because Jesus fulfilled the law for us, we no longer have to pay any attention to it. If Jesus had meant this then we should expect that in what follows he would show *how* he has fulfilled this law, and *how* he fulfils the various prophecies concerning his person. But that is certainly not the subject of the sermon on the Mount. He even warns in the following verse:

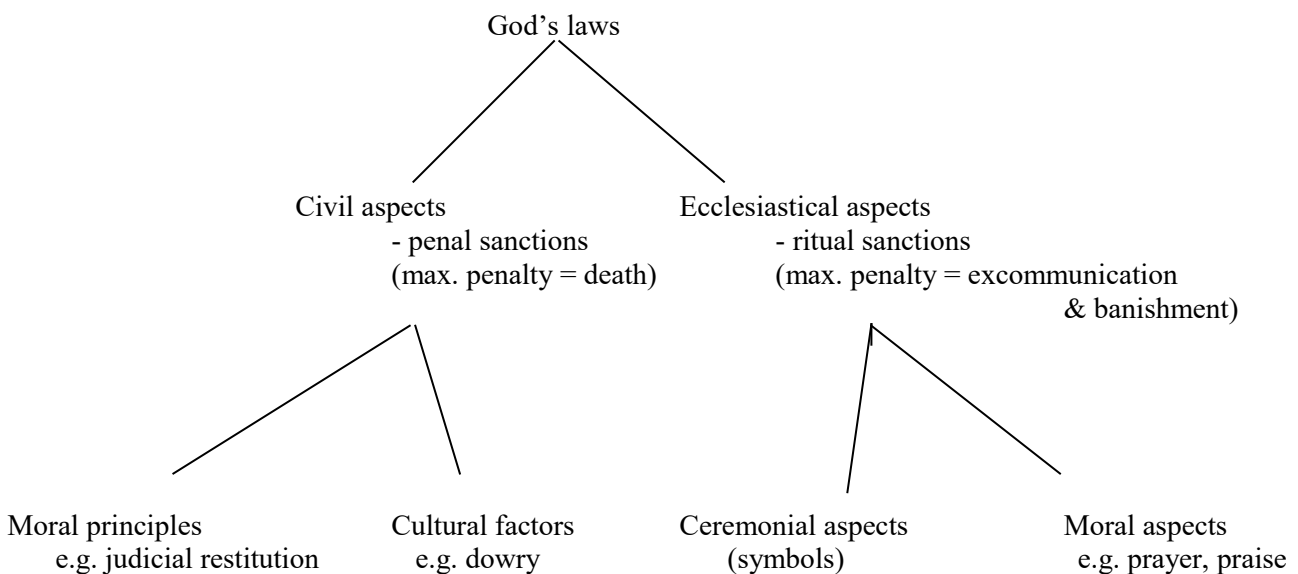
For truly I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not the smallest letter or stroke shall pass away from the Law, until all is accomplished. Whoever then annuls one of the least of these

⁸ This distinction was also made by Jews in Hellenistic times. In the Greek translation (LXX) of Prov. 28:4b the Hebrew *gwr* was read as *gdr* (wall) with as translation: “Those who love the law build a wall around themselves.” The letter of Aristeeus 139-43 (second cent. BC) says for example: “Now our Lawgiver [i.e. Moses] being a wise man and specially endowed by God to understand all things, ... fenced us round with impregnable ramparts and walls of iron, that we might not mingle at all with any of the other nations, but remain pure in body and soul, ... Therefore lest we should be corrupted by any abomination, or our lives be perverted by evil communications, he hedged us round on all sides by rules of purity, affecting alike what we eat, or drink, or touch, or hear, or see.” (cf. Eph. 2:14-15) Philo, *Mig.* 89-93 (first cent. BC) also speaks of those laws which are outward symbols of a figurative truth, such as circumcision, temple ceremonies etc.

commandments, and so teaches others, shall be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever keeps and teaches them, he shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven.

And Jesus continues in exhortation to follow the moral commands of God’s law and to abandon Jewish traditions which stand in the way of God’s law.

We see, therefore, that God forbids that we neglect the details of his law. The very smallest commandment is important. It shows us the righteousness of our Lord. Moses could say: “What great nation is there that has statutes and judgements as righteous as this whole law which I am setting before you today?” (Deut. 4:8) *This law, God’s law*, allows us to see just what righteousness is. If we confess that God is righteous, then we shall only be able to understand this by studying his law very carefully in order to see what righteousness is all about. Disobedience to *this law of the Lord* is what cost the Lord Jesus his own life in order to save us. Now that he has freed us from the condemnation of this law we are able, in the power of his Spirit, to take this law as the guide for our thankfulness to him.



4. Paul and the Law of Moses

At this point we need to ask ourselves the question how all this relates to the way in which Paul talks about the “law”. It should, of course, at the outset be realised that for Paul the term “law” is synonymous with the law of Moses. The way in which Paul chose to formulate matters is strongly influenced by his struggle against Christian Pharisees who insisted that circumcision and obedience to the whole law of Moses be laid upon Gentile converts. Without this there could be no salvation in their view (cf. Acts 15:1, 5). For Paul, Christ’s work of salvation was “the end of the law” (Rom. 10:4). In Romans 7:1-6 he compares people without Christ to those who are married to the law. In other words, before Christ’s work of salvation every man (both Jew and Gentile, for this is the point of Romans 2 – 3:20) was duty bound to fulfil a law he could never hope to completely obey. For this reason the law only served to condemn him. But, Paul reasons, when a person unites himself to Christ by faith, he becomes one with Christ both in his death and resurrection (cf. Rom. 6:3-11). And because he then dies in Christ, this death dissolves the marriage-bond with the law. He now lives *in Christ*, freed from the condemnation of the law. A believer then walks as Christ walks and certainly does not have a license to sin. However, sin is no longer defined by obedience to the law of Moses. When Paul defines Christian living he speaks of the “fruit of the Spirit” (Gal. 5:22-23) outlining Christian virtues. He speaks of the law of love which fulfils the moral laws of Moses (Rom. 13:8). Paul’s great concern is to show that in Christ, both Gentiles and Jews are no longer bound to the system of the law of Moses. This becomes particularly clear in the letter to the Galatians. The law remained valid *until* Christ (Gal. 3:19, 23-25).

Having said this, it is nevertheless quite clear that the virtues and fruit of the Spirit of which Paul speaks equate to what we generally mean when we speak of the moral law of God. Paul, himself, demonstrates this when he says (Rom. 13:8-10):

8 Owe no one anything, except to love each other, for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. 9 For the commandments, “You shall not commit adultery, You shall not murder, You shall not steal, You shall not covet,” and any other commandment, are summed up in this word: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” 10 Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore love is the fulfilling of the law. (ESV)

5. The relation between the 10 commandments and the civil laws

This question was already addressed at the beginning of this article. The detailed laws help us to better understand the summary of the 10 commandments. But it is perhaps advisable to say something more of the relation between the 10 commandments and the civil laws of Israel. In the first place we need to understand that the civil laws of Israel indeed were laws of *Israel*. We are not ancient Israel and for that reason alone we cannot simply read such laws as if they were written for the modern state — even should such a modern state desire to be Christian. Furthermore, although the distinction between the moral and ceremonial is certainly to be found in Scripture, this does not mean that the laws of Moses can all be neatly fitted into separate categories. The so-called “civil” laws often have ceremonial aspects, that is, aspects which are closely connected to the shadow-service of worship in Israel. Take, for example, the laws concerning manslaughter whereby the guilty party must flee to a city of refuge until the death of the high priest. We no longer have a high priest, let alone cities of refuge of the sort which could be found in Israel, namely, cities where there was no normal concept of private property because only the special servants of the Lord were permitted to live there (the Levites). Despite this we should realise that the civil laws of Israel were given by the Lord as a divine outworking of the moral principles summarised in the 10 commandments for his people. In this respect they have a definite exemplaric function for us and can serve us with *principles* for the application of God’s law in our time. We cannot escape this. Our Lord has left us many of these laws in his Word in order to teach us better and provide a guide for our ethics.

6. The importance of understanding these laws

An understanding of the working, effect and purpose of these laws in Israel is therefore of great importance for the way in which we experience our faith. In the first place, in our own time with its own *shibboleths* (Judg. 12:6), we can all too easily get the idea that the God of these laws must be a strange and primitive God. And yet we know that this God is also our God. If we want to avoid a Marcionite idea of God (one god of the Old Testament, another god for the New Testament), then we need to confront ourselves with the data which God provides for us — also in the Old Testament — in order to learn to know him better. *He* gave these laws through Moses to his people. Scripture does not allow us to think that the New Testament brings a *higher* or *better* moral code to us. In the second place, we refer to the above-mentioned quotation from article 25 of the Belgic Confession. In the last sentence we confess that we still make use of the testimonies from the Law and the Prophets in order, among other things, “to order our life in all honour, according to God’s will and to his glory.”

7. Practical considerations

When we proceed to exegete the details of the laws of Moses we will need to take account of several factors which will influence our application such as the difference in time and culture. The culture in Old Testament times, for example, was one in which the dowry was a given norm. Several laws take account of this cultural phenomenon, but nowhere do we find the dowry stipulated as a divine principle to be reckoned with in marriage. If we desire to understand the function of the laws which take account of dowries, then we will need to understand how the dowry system at that time worked. Only after we think we understand how God’s laws for marriage worked in the time and culture in which they were given, are we able to think about how the principles contained in them may be important for us in a culture which no longer uses a dowry-system.

We will also have to take account of ceremonial aspects of these laws, aspects which touch the person and work of Christ such as discussed above.

When we go to God’s law for information on a particular subject we ought not to forget that the specific laws which the Lord has preserved for us are in no way *all* the laws which he gave to Israel. The Bible contains a selection of these laws. This selection is sufficient for the doctrine and life of our faith (see Belgic Conf. art.

7), but we will often notice that there must have been more.⁹ Those laws which the Lord has seen fit to preserve for us must not, however, be neglected. These are precisely the laws that he wishes to bring to *our* attention.

When our exegesis of various detailed laws has been completed we will often be left with a number of principles which can be applied to certain questions of ethics. We will then need to honestly strive to put these principles into practice in our own time. But we shall also discover that our own time poses problems and questions which the detailed laws of Moses do not seem to address. It should be clear that study of the detailed laws of Moses provide us an important aid to ethics but are not an ethics textbook! And yet, the principles which we learn from these laws, and other considerations which come from all of Scripture, will enable us to know the will of God for our lives here and now. The Lord sets us to work. It is not for nothing that the apostle Paul exhorts us:

Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what the will of God is, that which is good and acceptable and perfect. (Rom. 12:2)

8. Christian freedom

What can we then say about Christian freedom? Biblical Christian freedom takes two different forms. Firstly, it is only in Christ and in the power of his Spirit that we are free to make a real start obeying God's law. In Romans 8 Paul contrasts the mind set on the (sinful) flesh against the mind set on the Spirit. The mind set on the flesh is hostile toward God because it does not subject itself to God's law (Rom. 8:7). In contrast it is the mind set on the Spirit which pleases God and follows his law, the law which Paul earlier proclaimed is "of the Spirit" (Rom. 7:12, 14). For this reason the Scripture speaks of God's law as "the law of freedom". James says it this way (1:25):

But one who looks intently at the perfect law, the law of liberty, and abides by it, not having become a forgetful hearer but an effectual doer, this man shall be blessed in what he does.

The second form of Christian freedom is that which has already been discussed above, namely, the freedom from the symbolic or ceremonial laws which foreshadowed Christ's person and work.

This term ("Christian freedom") is greatly misused when people speak of "Christian freedom" to suggest that Christians are somewhat free from an all too literal binding to the rules of God's law. God's law has been given to us as the rule of thankfulness for the salvation granted in Christ. Our Lord wishes to bless us through this thankful service of walking in the ways of his law. God's law protects us in this life. If we learn to see the grace of God in the details of his holy law, then we shall be able to sing psalms such as Psalm 19 and 119 with confidence and with hearts of joy.

O how I love Thy law! It is my meditation all the day. (Ps. 119:97)

⁹ We know, for example, that God gave many laws to Abraham (Gen. 26:5), but not one of them has been preserved for us (although we may presume that the laws given to Israel were not in contradiction to those give to Abraham). Compare also the many laws which are known before the giving of the law on Mt. Sinai, e.g., sabbath, burnt offerings, peace offerings (Exod. 24:5). In the second place many passages in the Old Testament mention "laws of Moses" which cannot be located in the first five books of the Bible, cf. 2 Chron. 30:16; Ezra 6:18; Neh. 10:32 ff.