

The Commands of Christ

Part Four

Why I'm a Theonomist—B

2 Timothy 3:16, 17

With Study Questions

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All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness,¹⁷ that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work (2 Timothy 3:16, 17)

Review

Having finished the Gospel of Matthew we've embarked upon that portion of the Great Commission where Jesus instructs us to teach His law—**“all things that (He) commanded” (Matthew 28:20)**. We discovered that Jesus equates the commands of God with love. When asked which is the great commandment in the law, Jesus answers it is to love God and love our neighbor (Matthew 22:37-40). To reject the law of God, at least in a certain sense, is to abandon God's definition and prescription for love.

We then examined some of the reasons James might call the law the **“perfect law of liberty” (James 1:25)**. The law of God liberates (or sets us free) from legalism and manipulation, consequences, bondage and, most importantly, pride (casting us to Christ for help).

The law of God reveals the righteousness of God (being an extension of His own nature and character), a holy and objective standard for ethics and, again, our need for a Savior. We spoke of how the law of God is fulfilled but not abolished (Matthew 5:17-19).

In our second message we reinforced the idea that without God's law there is no objective standard. We addressed the shortcomings of the idea of supposing that the leading of the Spirit is somehow at odds with being led or directed by God's law (that the spiritual man recognizes God's law as coming from God and seeks to walk in it).

The danger of the very subjective notion of a false understanding of what it means to be led by the Spirit results in an ethic which is neither universal nor transcendent (nothing can be said to be absolutely right or wrong). It also produces an ethic where the sins of others cannot be determined (thus halting us from seeking to lovingly correct the erring brother as the Scriptures call us to do). Walking in the Spirit means doing what is objectively right (according to God's law) opposed to what one feels like doing—or feels is right.

In our third message we addressed the topic known as theonomy.

Theonomy specifically addresses the extent of the application of the Old Testament civil codes to modern politics. I put forth four reasons why I think theonomy is important: 1. the preeminence of Christ in all areas, including politics; 2. it addresses the influx of relativism in the very large arena of civil law; 3. it is a key factor in the spreading of the gospel since it is generally civil leaders God uses to open or close doors to the preaching of the gospel; 4. it reveals the justice of the gospel (Proverbs 28:5), since there is no other arena which more clearly demonstrates the just and due penalty for sin than the civil arena—a society which loses its sense of justice will not so clearly perceive the due penalty for sin. We ended our least message with these questions:

How do we go about serving Christ in the political venue? What are the rules? What are the laws? Where are they to be found? How does the New Testament interact with the Old Testament to reveal this information to us?

It is this final question I would like to focus on this morning. How does the New Testament interact with the Old Testament when it comes to our Christian faith in general? If we can't answer that question, the issue of theonomy will surely be overwhelming. There is widespread confusion when it comes to grasping the extent that we, as New Testament/New Covenant Christians utilize the Old Testament/Old Covenant as a means to determine **“what man is to believe concerning God, and what duty God requires of man.”**^[1]

We seem to forget that when Paul writes:

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the New Testament had not yet been compiled. Virtually every reference given in the New Testament regarding the value of Scripture (for the New Covenant Christian^[2]) is a reference to the Old Testament. Yet many of us, upon reading the Old Testament, are perplexed.

Many modern-day Bible teachers encourage their students to, for all intents and purposes, stay out of the Old Testament entirely. They argue that the Old Testament, especially the Mosaic economy (the period between the time God gave the Law to Moses until the time of Christ) is simply a different era, or dispensation, that has little to do with gentile Christians. Even those who do not take such a radical approach of dividing up the dispensations find the Old Testament a difficult read. Unfortunately this has led to

a paralysis among many Christians when it comes to the Old Testament. We have a difficult time finding the application. We may enjoy a verse here or a verse there but must ignore so much—so much of what Paul told us to study (2 Timothy 2:15).

This shortcoming has serious implications when it comes to the issue before us, theonomy. It is in the study of the Old Testament civil codes that many who generally agree regarding the continuing value of the Old Covenant message of God's character and law, seemingly become dispensational in their approach—regarding the message of the Old Testament as either geographically or chronologically disconnected to today's Christian.

In light of this difficulty, I would like to present two points—points I think will help in terms of expanding our appreciation of the entire Bible as a source of light and truth. It will also help explain, whether you agree or not, why I find theonomy the most biblically tenable approach to ethics in the political arena (having already explained why I think this is of value in a previous message). The two points are: the continuity of the message found in the Old Testament as it folds into the New (I believe the Bible teaches continuity versus discontinuity). And, in a related subject, the way the New Testament interacts with the Old Testament when it comes to law and ethics.

1. Continuity Versus Discontinuity

The first question is continuity versus discontinuity. At the risk of oversimplification, the question is, 'Does God need to repeat Himself in the New Testament in order for His Old Testament instruction to be valid, or does the Old Testament instruction continue to be valid unless God so indicates?'

Should we assume some sort of sweeping abrogation of the entire Old Testament? Should we only embrace those portions of the Old Testament repeated in the New? It was recently pointed out to me that it wasn't the purpose of Jesus to repeat the entire Old Testament within the New Testament? Nonetheless, it's a fair question to ask if the New Testament teaches that we are to expunge the Old Testament, utilizing it only upon reference of the New Testament writers. I must argue that that is an inappropriate way to approach the Bible.

A Single Message

We must realize that the Bible essentially contains one message from a God **“with whom there is no variation or shadow of turning” (James 1:17)**. The message builds from Genesis to Revelation but is one message. Our

confession beautifully expresses that we ought have a “**high and reverend esteem of the Holy Scripture. And the heavenliness of the matter, the efficacy of the doctrine, the majesty of the style, the *consent of all the parts, the scope of the whole* (which is, to give all glory to God), the full discovery it makes of the only way of man’s salvation, the many other incomparable excellencies, and the entire perfection thereof, are arguments whereby it doth abundantly evidence itself to be the Word of God” (italics mine).[3]**

The consenting message from Genesis to Revelation is the message of man’s fall and God’s redemption of fallen man (truly all of creation) through His only son to His own glory.

This gospel message is first revealed in Genesis 3:15 where God proclaims the eventual and inevitable crushing of Satan by the seed of the woman—that seed being Christ.

This unfolding covenant of grace is revealed in God’s promise never to judge the earth again as He did during the time of Noah (Genesis 9:8-17)—a covenant signified by a rainbow (Genesis 9:13).

Further amplification of God’s glorious gospel promise is given to Abraham, to whom God promised that in him “**all the families of the earth shall be blessed**” (Genesis 12:3). The Apostle Paul reveals that this promise to Abraham foretold of God justifying “**the Gentiles by faith**” (Galatians 3:8).

God would continue to utilize, what we might call the ‘redemptive history’ of the Old Testament to reveal His plan of redemption in Christ. He would graciously hold the wayward Israelites within the boundaries of His wonderful promise by delivering detailed instructions to Moses regarding the depth of His law and grace. The Law of God was given in detail from Exodus through Deuteronomy, as was a Levitical system (a system of priesthood). In this priesthood we saw sacrifices, cleansing ordinances, temple rituals, etc. all designed to instruct us regarding God’s singular plan of redemption through our High Priest Jesus (the essential message of Hebrews).

Paul labors to point out that that law/Levitical system given to Moses (what we might call the Mosaic economy) was not “**against the promises of God**” (Galatians 3:21). In other words, God made this wonderful promise to Abraham (Genesis 12:1-3; Galatians 3:18), which was merely a fuller expression of the promise already made directly after the fall (Genesis 3:15), and all the Mosaic economy did was keep us “**under guard**” (Galatians 3:23) until the Christ would come.

In short, the prophets, priests and kings (especially David of whom it was foretold that Christ would sit on his throne—Acts 2:30) of the Old Testament served to

point to Christ. This is why Jesus taught that the Old Testament was essentially about Him (John 5:39; Luke 24:27).

My first point is that the promise of God—what we call the covenant of God—from Genesis 3 to Revelation 22 is a covenant of grace where God, through Christ restores that which was lost in Adam. When you're reading the Old Testament you're reading the same story as the New Testament.

The Continuity

I emphasize this to overcome our natural aversion for the length and complexity of the Old Testament—an aversion which often times contributes to our willingness to view the Old Testament as less significant or even insignificant. I emphasize this in order to bring to light the reasonableness of my thesis in this first point which is, 'only God can make laws^[4] and only God can repeal them.'

If I make rules at home, my children should view those rules as being in full effect when we go to the grocery store or the bank, unless I so indicate. I shouldn't be required to restate all my rules (no running, screaming, fighting and throwing stuff) for every venue. Nor should I be required to restate my rules every time they have a birthday.

The argument for the continuity of God's message (both in law and gospel) is twofold. One, it is based upon the character and nature of God:

Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, and comes down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow of turning (James 1:17).

God is not a man, that He should lie, Nor a son of man, that He should repent. Has He said, and will He not do? Or has He spoken, and will He not make it good (Numbers 23:19)?

My covenant I will not break, Nor alter the word that has gone out of My lips (Psalm 89:34).

Compare how Paul describes the law and how, in an ultimate sense, the words are descriptive of God.

Therefore the law *is* holy, and the commandment holy and just and good (Romans 7:12).

No one *is* good but One, *that is*, God (Mark 10:18).

God is “just” (1 John 1:9).

Holy, holy, holy *is* the Lord of hosts (Isaiah 6:3).

Certainly, it can be said, in a certain sense, that others are good, just and wise. But Paul’s use of these words, which are so powerfully assigned to God, to describe God’s law, is telling. God doesn’t flip a coin or research legal libraries for law. His law and His justice are found no further than His own character. A second argument for continuity is found in the New Testament itself and its continual use (and recommendation for use) of the Old Testament as our source for the faithful.

2. The New Testament Use of the Old Testament

Three times Jesus is tempted by Satan and three times His response begins with “**It is written**” (Matthew 4:4, 7, 10)—all references to the Old Testament. Referring to the Old Testament, Paul teaches that “**All Scripture is...profitable for reproof, correction and instruction in righteousness**” (2 Timothy 3:16, 17). Peter utilizes Leviticus 11:45 when instructing his readers to turn from their “**former lusts**” with the words “**Be holy, for I am holy**” (1 Peter 1:15).

When there was only an Old Testament in existence, Jesus teaches that we are “**live by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God**” (Matthew 4:4), then amplifies His point by stating that not “**one jot or one tittle**” has been abolished from the law (Matthew 5:18). Paul quotes the law as a justification for his argument for tithing, “**...does not the law say**” (1 Corinthians 9:8)? He also quotes the commandment in his instruction on how children ought to obey their parents (Ephesians 6:1-3).

Paul delighted in the law “**according to the inward man**” (Romans 7:22). In other words, even though he saw his flesh failing at keeping it, inwardly, similar to David (Psalm 1:2) he recognizes the law as a delight. James tell us to be doers of the law rather than “**judges of the law**” (James 4:11). Paul tells us that the

“carnal mind is enmity against God; for it is not subject to the law of God” (Romans 8:7).

Again, I say all this to highlight the general positive disposition New Testament Christians are to have regarding the abiding respect of the Old Testament. Yet at the same time, the New Testament has offers some dismissive and negative statements about the law.

Negatives statements about the law

Paul clearly didn't view himself as **“under the law” (1 Corinthians 9:20; Romans 6:14)**. Paul taught that Jesus, at least in a certain context, **“abolished...the law” (Ephesians 2:15)**. And clearly, the entire epistle to the Hebrews warns against going back to the law and states **“For the priesthood being changed, of necessity there is also a change of the law” (Hebrews 7:12)**. Paul compares the law to a tutor and then explains that **“we are no longer under a tutor” (Galatians 3:24, 25)**.

Either the writers of the New Testament are double-minded or there is a way to under the law (which can refer to the first five books of the Old Testament—not merely the Ten Commandments—which included both the commands and the gospel) which helps us to make sense of how we should read the Old Testament without violating the respect we should have for it, or have it become merely a **“ministry of death” (2 Corinthians 3:7)**.

Simply put, there are two aspects of the Old Testament/Covenant law to which the above passages speak. First (and this was never an accurate way to view the Old Testament law) is to view the law as a means by which we approve ourselves before God. I've addressed this more thoroughly elsewhere so I won't pursue this here. Secondly, was to view the ceremonial system as still binding upon Christians—this being the main point of Hebrews and the Galatians 3 passage. The context of the necessity of the **“change of the law”** which we saw in seventh chapter of Hebrews was a context of the priesthood. Many Hebrews, because of persecution and other temptations were re-involving themselves the temple practices—going back to Judaism. The author of Hebrews was laboring the point that all those Old Covenant ceremonial practices (priest, sacrifices, washings, etc.) were merely **“shadows of the good things to come” (Hebrews 10:1)**. In short, they all pointed to Christ.

Separation and Tribal Laws

One other point, a point which is not always easy to discern—in the Old Testament, since God’s covenant was restricted to one nation, there were separation laws as well. These things included diet, fabrics, grooming, etc. These were all designed to remind the Israelites that there were different from the world by which they were surrounded. It is in this context that Paul writes that Christ **“abolished...the law” (Ephesians 2:15)** which was designed to accent the separation between Israelites and the gentiles. Paul taught that both Jew in gentile who believe in Jesus are **“one new man” (Ephesians 2:15)**; there was no longer to be a distinction. This also abrogated whatever laws were unique to the land and the twelve tribes of Israel.

In conclusion, Christians are to assume continuity unless instructed otherwise. And when we see negative instruction regarding the law of God in the New Testament it is either addressing a misuse of the law as a means by which men approve themselves before God, or a temptation to continue in the ceremonial or separation laws. Ceremonial laws all pointed to Christ and are therefore no longer necessary (other than baptism and the Lord’s Supper which succinctly deliver the same message—looking back—as the ceremonial laws looking forward) since He came and separation laws no longer necessary since the New Covenant is an international covenant (as Jesus would put it **“all nations” [Matthew 28:10]**)—not merely tied to one nation.

How does this relate to theonomy? If one begins to see the way the Old Testament interacts with the New Testament. If we begin to understand the positive language the New Testament writers give the Old and the reasons particular laws are repealed, we begin to realize that the civil laws of Moses does not fall into any of those categories. The civil laws are never repealed in the New Testament. The civil laws were never designed to be a source of works righteousness (we’re not saved by them). The civil laws were not ceremonial (they didn’t prefigure the atoning work of Christ).

If you’ve been listening closely that leaves only two options: 1. that the civil laws of Moses were a part of the separation rituals—basically a tribal distinction between Israel and the surrounding nations or; 2. at some level, those civil laws are the best available wisdom given by God to man on how a nation is to be governed. This morning’s message has been a presentation, more or less, of a principle. Some questions still need to be answered: Were the civil laws given to Moses part of the tribal or separation distinctives of Israel or should be they viewed as

eternally just? And if they are eternally just, what does that mean to us in terms of any practical application or expectation?

Questions for Study and Meditation

1. How does the law of God relate to love (page 2)?
2. From what does the law of God liberate us (page 2)?

3. What are three main purposes for the law (page 2)?
4. Does being led by the Spirit contradict obeying the law of God? Explain (pages 2, 3)?
5. What is theonomy (page 3)?
6. Give four reasons why theonomy is important (page 3)?
7. What the Apostle Paul wrote of the value of Scripture, to what Scripture was he referring (pages 3, 4)?
8. Have you noticed the Old Testament either dismissed or downplayed? Discuss this (page 4).
9. What is continuity and discontinuity (page 5)?
10. Does the Old Testament contain a different message than the new? Explain (pages 5, 6).
11. Give some reasons for continuity (pages 7, 8).
12. How do the New Testament writers view the Old Testament Scriptures (pages 8, 9)?
13. Discuss some ways the law can be misused (page 9).
14. What are some principles used to determine whether Old Testament laws are still in effect (pages 9-11)?

[1] The Westminster Shorter Catechism; Question 3.

[2] That is, Christians during and after the birth of Jesus.

[3] *The Westminster confession of faith*. 1996 (Chapter I, 5). Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc.

[4] By “law” here I mean absolute standards, not the laws men might make (like a speed limit) in an effort to uphold God’s absolute standard.