

What God Has Joined... Covenant and Law Inseparable

Let me begin with the old covenant; that is, the Mosaic covenant.

Covenant theologians take the Mosaic covenant and say that while believers are not under that covenant, nevertheless they are under the law of that covenant as their perfect rule of life. In addition, they divide the Mosaic law into three parts, say that more than 99% of it is abolished, leaving what they call ‘the moral law’, comprising the ten (or nine or nine and a half) commandments, as the believer’s perfect rule of life. I have fully documented this in my works. This, of course, is just the sort of conjuring trick or wastepaper basket covenant theologians have devised to get round plain biblical teaching.

Leaving aside, for the sake of this article, and only for the sake of this article, the tripartite division of the law, and sticking with the first point, I want to show the wrongness of trying to separate the Mosaic covenant and its law. The fact is, such a separation cannot be done biblically speaking. The Bible never allows such a practice. The Mosaic covenant and its law are intimately bound together – so much so, it is impossible to separate them. The terms ‘covenant’ and ‘law’ (or its equivalents) are almost interchangeable:

And Moses wrote down all the words of the LORD... Then he took the book of the covenant and read it in the hearing of the people... ‘Come up to me on the mountain and wait there, that I may give you the tablets of stone, with the law and the commandment, which I have written for their instruction’ (Ex. 24:4,7,12).

And the LORD said to Moses: ‘Write these words, for in accordance with these words I have made a covenant with you and with Israel’... And he wrote on the tablets the words of the covenant, the ten commandments (Ex. 34:27-28).

You shall bind them as a sign on your hand, and they shall be as frontlets between your eyes. You shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates. (Deut. 6:8-9; see also Deut. 11:18-20).

Take this book of the law and put it by the side of the ark of the covenant of the LORD your God, that it may be there for a witness against you (Deut. 31:26).

Hence the stone tablets, the book of the law, and the household and personal writing of the words of the law, were integral to the covenant.

This very point is made time and again. When Scripture speaks of the Mosaic ‘covenant’ and the Mosaic ‘law’, the two are bound together, virtually one and the same (Ex. 19:3-8; 24:4,7,12; 34:27-28; Deut. 4:13-14; 6:8-9; 9:9-17; 11:18-20; 31:26; 1 Chron. 16:15-17; Ps. 105:8-10; Isa. 24:5; Hos. 8:1; Mal. 2:8-9; Gal. 3:17-18). The Mosaic ‘covenant’ and ‘law’ cannot be divorced. So when the Reformed attempt to prise the law – at least, what they call ‘the moral law’ – away from the covenant, holding onto the rule of the law without its role in the covenant, they are acting contrary to Scripture.

Following the apostle’s example (Gal. 3:15), let us take an everyday example. If I buy a parcel of land, I have to agree to the covenant imposed on the land, and I have to keep the rule, law and ordinance integral to the covenant. I cannot pretend to keep the covenant and break its law, nor can the law be laid on me until I have agreed to the covenant. The covenant and its law are inseparable. They form but one instrument, one deed.¹ The same goes for the Mosaic covenant: the covenant and its law are inseparable.

I now want to take this a little further. Before I do, however, I need to deal with what I can only call a quibble. I assert that to try to say that ‘commandments’ do not form a ‘law’ is a quibble. If commandments do not make a law, and if a law does not consist of commandments, words have lost all meaning. More important, Scripture treats the two as virtually interchangeable. Consider:

Now this is the commandment – the statutes and the rules [or decrees] – that the Lord your God commanded me to teach you, that you may do them in the land to which you are going over, to possess it, that you may fear the Lord your God, you and your son and your son’s son, by keeping all his statutes and his

¹ See J.C.Philpot’s illustration in my *Christ is All* p402.

commandments, which I command you, all the days of your life, and that your days may be long (Deut. 6:1-2).

According to Vine's *Expository Dictionary*, 'statute' means 'prescription, rule, law, regulation'. All four of these Hebrew words are used throughout the writings of Moses to refer to commands from God to be obeyed by Israel. Distinctions are sometimes made regarding one word from the other, yet the overall principle is one of obedience to all that the Lord commands, whether it is a general command, a prescribed law, a legal verdict, or a religious festival or ritual. Taking it for granted, then, that talking about 'law' is tantamount to talking about 'commandment', and *vice-versa*, let us go on.

Moreover, in talking about 'sin', 'law' is never far away. Sin, we know, is transgression of law (1 John 3:4).² Where there is no law, there is no transgression (Rom. 4:15). So when we are thinking about sin, we are thinking about breaking a covenant and transgressing its law.

The Mosaic covenant and law are virtually one and the same. That is my thesis. Let me demonstrate this by taking two examples from the book of Malachi. God, through the prophet, exposed the sin of the people.

First, the priests:

The lips of a priest should guard knowledge, and people should seek instruction from his mouth, for he is the messenger of the Lord of hosts. But you have turned aside from the way. You have caused many to stumble by your instruction. You have corrupted the covenant of Levi, says the Lord of hosts (Mal. 2:7-8).

And then the husbands:

The Lord was witness between you and the wife of your youth, to whom you have been faithless, though she is your companion and your wife by covenant... And what was the one God seeking? Godly offspring. So guard yourselves in your spirit, and let none of you be faithless to the wife of your youth. 'For

² See my *Believers Under the Law of Christ* for my arguments refuting those who do not like this translation.

the man who does not love his wife but divorces her, says the Lord, the God of Israel, covers his garment with violence, says the Lord of hosts. So guard yourselves in your spirit, and do not be faithless' (Mal. 2:14-16).

Is it not clear enough? The priests and the husbands were breaking their respective covenants; namely, the covenant of priesthood and the covenant of marriage. That is to say, they were breaking the law, the commands of God integral to each covenant. And by their action and by their instruction, they were causing many to stumble at the law – that is encouraging lawbreaking among the Israelites.

Of the breakdown of the covenant of priesthood, Nehemiah complained of the priests that:

They have desecrated the priesthood and the covenant of the priesthood and the Levites (Neh. 13:39).

As Malachi said, the priests by their instruction – by life and lip – were causing the people to stumble; in other words, causing them to sin by breaking the covenant and transgressing its law. As Isaiah long before had put it:

Those who guide this people have been leading them astray (Isa. 9:16).

If I may accommodate the words of Christ (Matt. 15:6):

For the sake of your [carnality] you have made void the word of God.

And, in accordance with some manuscripts, I could have written:

For the sake of your [carnality] you have made void the law of God.

As for marriage, we know that God complains that the adulteress 'forsakes the companion of her youth and forgets the covenant of her God' (Prov. 2:17). And adultery certainly is a transgression of the seventh of the ten commandments. So, transgression of the marriage law is a violation of the marriage covenant. The two, covenant and law, are intimately connected.

So what? So much for the Jews and the old covenant! The Mosaic covenant and the Mosaic law were inseparable. End of story!

Oh? So this is how we are treat the Bible? All the above shows the Mosaic covenant and its law were inseparable, and further shows how carnal the Jews were, and how draconian and killing the old covenant was – and that’s all? A mere historical catastrophe? Nothing more, nothing less?

True enough, the old covenant was a killing covenant, ‘the ministry of death’ (2 Cor. 3:7), ‘the ministry of condemnation’ (2 Cor. 3:9); the law certainly brought wrath (Rom. 4:15), and death with it (Rom. 7:5), and a curse to all under it (Gal. 3:10). Of that there is no doubt!

But this is not the point I want to make here. Rather, I am trying to show the connection between – the inseparability of – the old covenant and the Mosaic law, the commandments of God to Israel through Moses. All I am saying is that a covenant and its law cannot be divided.³ Breaking the covenant was breaking the law; disobedience to the commandment was to break the covenant. That is the point.

I now want to take this a little further. Although I have been confining my remarks to the Mosaic covenant, the principle goes far wider than that. Indeed, as we have seen, Malachi complained of transgression of the marriage covenant. And this is highly suggestive. It suggests that the principle applies to every covenant – not merely the Mosaic. Covenant and law cannot be divided, whatever the covenant. And so we find it in Scripture. Covenants have their commandments or laws, and they cannot be divided. The marriage covenant and its law went hand in hand.

Take the Noachic covenant (Gen. 9). This covenant had glorious promises, but also contained commandments: man had to be fruitful, not to eat blood, not to shed blood.

The Abrahamic covenant (Gen. 12, 15 and 17). This covenant had glorious promises, but also contained commandments: Abraham had to leave his paganism, he had ‘to keep the way of

³ Take the covenant made between David and Jonathan. It had its conditions and rules as well as promises, rules – law – which had to be kept (1 Sam. 18:1-4; 20:1-23,42; 23:15-18; 2 Sam. 9:1,7).

the Lord by doing righteousness and justice' (Gen. 18:19), he had to obey God's word (Gen. 22:16-18). God was explicit:

I am God Almighty; walk before me, and be blameless, that I may make my covenant between me and you, and may multiply you greatly... You shall keep my covenant, you and your offspring after you throughout their generations. This is my covenant, which you shall keep... Any uncircumcised male... shall be cut off from his people; he has broken my covenant (Gen. 17:1-2,9-10,14).

Take the Davidic covenant (2 Sam. 7). It is often said that the Davidic covenant was unconditional. Not so! This covenant had glorious promises, but also contained commandments: David and his sons had to walk before God and obey his commandments. As David, when he was dying, charged Solomon:

Keep the charge of the Lord your God, walking in his ways and keeping his statutes, his commandments, his rules, and his testimonies, as it is written in the law of Moses, that you may prosper in all that you do and wherever you turn, that the Lord may establish his word that he spoke concerning me, saying: 'If your sons pay close attention to their way, to walk before me in faithfulness with all their heart and with all their soul, you shall not lack a man on the throne of Israel' (1 Kings 2:3-4).

Do not miss the 'if'. As the psalmist records:

The Lord swore to David a sure oath from which he will not turn back: 'One of the sons of your body I will set on your throne. If your sons keep my covenant and my testimonies that I shall teach them, their sons also forever shall sit on your throne' (Ps. 132:11-12).

Do not miss the 'if'. And as God himself charged Solomon:

If you will walk before me, as David your father walked, with integrity of heart and uprightness, doing according to all that I have commanded you, and keeping my statutes and my rules, then I will establish your royal throne over Israel forever, as I promised David your father, saying: 'You shall not lack a man on the throne of Israel'. But if you turn aside from following me, you or your children, and do not keep my commandments and my statutes that I have set before you, but go and serve other gods and worship them, then I will cut off Israel from the land

that I have given them, and the house that I have consecrated for my name I will cast out of my sight, and Israel will become a proverb and a byword among all peoples. And this house will become a heap of ruins. Everyone passing by it will be astonished and will hiss, and they will say: ‘Why has the Lord done thus to this land and to this house?’ Then they will say, ‘Because they abandoned the Lord their God who brought their fathers out of the land of Egypt and laid hold on other gods and worshipped them and served them. Therefore the Lord has brought all this disaster on them’ (1 Kings 9:4-9).

Grievously, Solomon failed to keep the covenant, and so the Lord carried out his word:

Since this has been your practice and you have not kept my covenant and my statutes that I have commanded you, I will surely tear the kingdom from you and will give it to your servant. Yet for the sake of David your father I will not do it in your days, but I will tear it out of the hand of your son. However, I will not tear away all the kingdom, but I will give one tribe to your son, for the sake of David my servant and for the sake of Jerusalem that I have chosen (1 Kings 11:11-13).

Even as God was carrying out his judgment, God gave his promise to Jeroboam son of Nebat:

If you will listen to all that I command you, and will walk in my ways, and do what is right in my eyes by keeping my statutes and my commandments, as David my servant did, I will be with you and will build you a sure house, as I built for David, and I will give Israel to you (1 Kings 11:38).

Note the ‘if’. Alas, Jeroboam sinned, broke the covenant, did not keep the law, and from then on the phrase ‘Jeroboam son of Nebat’ became a byword for sin and covenant breaking. After the division of the kingdom, a few kings of Judah were more righteous than others, but no king in Israel was ever righteous. In due time, of course, great David’s greater Son (to adopt the poetic language of Isaac Watts) came into the world to fulfil the Mosaic covenant and bring the Davidic covenant to its culmination (Jer. 23:5-6; 33:21,25-26), doing so by obeying the law in every respect and fulfilling it (Matt. 5:17-18; Rom. 10:4; Heb. 8:13; 10:7) in accordance with David’s prophecy (Ps. 40:7-8).

I have been speaking about the old covenant and its law, the Mosaic law, and about the Noahic, Abrahamic, Davidic and marriage covenants, and their laws. And in each case the principle of inseparability applies – a covenant and its law cannot be separated.

Now, are we to believe that this principle – which applied to every covenant in the Old Testament – has no relevance to us in the days of the new covenant? Of course not! The principle applies to the new covenant and its law. In particular, the old covenant had the Mosaic law; the new covenant has Christ's law. In both cases, the covenant and its law are inseparable.

That the new covenant is a new covenant, a covenant unlike the old covenant, is clear (Jer. 31:31-32; Heb. 8:8-9).⁴ We are talking about new wine in new wineskins (Matt. 9:17). Yes, all that is true. But, as I will now show, that same prophecy in Jeremiah spoke of the law of the new covenant (Jer. 31:33). Oh yes, the new covenant has its law; a new law, to be sure, but it has its law! As I say, the prophets foretold that it would have its law:

The Lord is our Judge; the Lord is our Lawgiver; the Lord is our King; he will save us (Isa. 33:22).⁵

Behold, the days are coming, declares the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah, not like the covenant that I made with their fathers on the day when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt, my covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, declares the Lord. For this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, declares the Lord: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts. And I will be their God, and they shall be my people. And no longer shall each one teach his neighbour and each his brother, saying: 'Know the Lord', for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, declares the Lord. For I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more (Jer. 31:31-34).

⁴ For much more on this, see my *Christ*.

⁵ I take this to be a prophecy of the new covenant. See my 'Thoughts on Isaiah 33:22'.

That this prophecy spoke of the coming of the new covenant, no-one can doubt (Heb. 8:6-13; 10:14-18).

The prophet Ezekiel:

And I will give them one heart, and a new spirit I will put within them. I will remove the heart of stone from their flesh and give them a heart of flesh, that they may walk in my statutes and keep my rules and obey them. And they shall be my people, and I will be their God (Ezek. 11:19-20).

I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses, and from all your idols I will cleanse you. And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules (Ezek. 36:25-27).

Thus the prophets predicted the new covenant with its full panoply of law and commandments.

And the apostle – in the days of the new covenant – was not shy of talking about being under the law of God:

For though I am free from all, I have made myself a servant to all [men], that I might win more of them. To the Jews I became as a Jew, in order to win Jews. To those under the law I became as one under the law (though not being myself under the law) that I might win those under the law. To those outside the law I became as one outside the law (not being outside the law of God but under the law of Christ) that I might win those outside the law. To the weak I became weak, that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all people, that by all means I might save some. I do it all for the sake of the gospel, that I may share with them in its blessings (1 Cor. 9:19-23, ESV).

Let me quote the pertinent words in other versions:

I am not free from God's law but am under Christ's law (NIV).
Not being without the law of God but under the law of Christ (NASB).
Under the law to Christ (AV).

I am well aware of the escape routes which some use to avoid that which, according to virtually all the major versions, is translated 'under the law of or to Christ', but as I have argued

elsewhere,⁶ the Greek – being ‘in-lawed’ to Christ – makes the point even stronger than the use of ‘under’.

The truth is, Paul was not reticent about using the phrase ‘the law of Christ’ in connection with the new covenant (Gal. 6:2).

And when James spoke of ‘the perfect law, the law of liberty’ (Jas. 1:25), ‘the royal law’ (Jas. 2:8), and commanded believers to ‘speak and so act as those who are to be judged under the law of liberty’ (Jas. 2:12), I have no doubt he was referring to the law of the new covenant. As James went on to declare:

Do not speak evil against one another, brothers [or brothers and sisters]. The one who speaks against a brother or judges his brother, speaks evil against the law and judges the law. But if you judge the law, you are not a doer of the law but a judge. There is only one Lawgiver and Judge, he who is able to save and to destroy. But who are you to judge your neighbour? (Jas. 4:11-12).

Be patient. Establish your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is at hand. Do not grumble against one another, brothers, so that you may not be judged; behold, the Judge is standing at the door (Jas. 5:8-9).

Oh yes, the new covenant has its law. See it spelled out, for instance, in Matthew 5 – 7, John 12:48 – 16:33, later fleshed out by the apostles in the post-Pentecost Scriptures in accordance with Christ’s promise (John 15:16-17;16:12-15). See also Matthew 28:18-20.

Consider the series of commandments within Christ’s final discourse before his crucifixion:

You call me Teacher and Lord, and you are right, for so I am. If I then, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another’s feet. For I have given you an example, that you also should do just as I have done to you... If you love me, you will keep my commandments... Whoever has my commandments and keeps them, he it is who loves me... Whoever does not love me does not keep my words. And the word that you hear is not mine but the Father’s who sent me... Abide in me... If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father’s commandments and

⁶ See my *Believers*.

abide in his love. These things I have spoken to you, that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full. This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you... These things I command you, so that you will love one another (John 13:13-15; 14:15,21,24; 15:4,10-14,17).

If this is not the law of the new covenant, I should like to know what it is.

I say that the covenant/law principle applies in the New as well as the Old Testament. The covenants are different, the laws are different, but the inseparability principle abides.

On what grounds do I assert this? Well, on what grounds can it be denied? Let me deal with this by asking some questions: Do we not take it as a basic, if unwritten, principle that we can only understand the New Testament by grasping the Old? Is the God of the Old Testament not the God of the New? Has he changed? If the principle of the inseparability of a covenant and its law does not apply to the new covenant, I for one would expect to find this made very clear in the New Testament. But I do not find it written there at all! Rather, I do read the following, first in the Old Testament:

I the Lord do not change (Mal. 3:6).

Then, in the New, God is described as:

...the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change (Jas. 1:17).

Others must speak for themselves, but I find this conclusive. I am utterly convinced that the new covenant has its law, and that the two cannot be separated. God has joined them together. And what God has joined together, let no man try to put asunder.

Digressing slightly, but in order to further illustrate the point, we know that some want the Christian ethic without the gospel. It cannot be done. What God has joined together... According to Romans 7:4-6, there is no possibility of anyone living a godly life unless he or she is union with Christ by faith. Consequently, to

talk of the Christian ethic without the glories of the new covenant is utter madness.

So it is wrong to try to talk about the new covenant, and deny its law, or try to drive a wedge between the two. The principle that has run thus far throughout Scripture, runs here too. Covenant and law cannot be separated. To break the covenant is to break its law. To transgress its law is to break the covenant. And this applies to both old and new covenants.

I draw three conclusions.

1. I believe that what I have set out answers those who claim that believers are under the Mosaic law but not its covenant. The truth is, the two cannot be separated. Above all, believers have died to both the Mosaic covenant and its law, and are under neither.

2. I believe that what I have set out answers those who say that believers are in the new covenant but under no law. Believers are in the new covenant, and this inevitably means they are under the law of Christ.

3. I believe that what I have set out answers those who dismiss new-covenant theology as antinomianism. Such an accusation is a travesty of the truth. How can a man be justly accused of antinomianism when he argues vigorously that believers are under the law of Christ?