

Applying OT Laws to Christians

I. Do OT laws apply to Christians, and if so, how?

Three basic perspectives among evangelical Christians:

1. Dispensationalism (strong discontinuity): The OT laws are for Israel (present-day Jews included); they do not apply to us as Christians. Christians should only look to the NT for how we should live. (For key texts, see Heb 8:6–13; 12:18–24; Rom 6:14; Gal 3:23–25; 4:21–31; Eph 2:14–15; 2 Cor 3:6).
2. Theonomy (strong continuity): We are bound to keep the OT laws in their entirety, except for those that are explicitly fulfilled in Christ (like the OT sacrifices). (For key texts, see Matt 5:17–20; 7:12; 19:17; 1 Cor 7:19; 1 Tim 5:18).
3. Covenantalism (continuity and discontinuity): we are no longer in the old covenant, but the OT laws reveal the unchanging character of God and hence are relevant to us who are living under the new covenant.

II. An argument for #3, covenantalism

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Old covenant (from Sinai until the Cross)	New covenant (from the cross and forever)
Underlying covenant of grace (the promises to Abraham and David)	
The unchanging character of God	

- Continuity:
 - The old covenant and the new covenant are both expressions of God’s grace for two different phases of history.
 - The old and new covenants are both expressions of God’s holy character
 - “Be holy, for I am holy”: both in Lev 11:45 and in 1 Pet 1:16
 - Love of God and love of neighbor is core for both covenants (Deut 6:5; Lev 19:18; Matt 22:36–40)
 - We are required to keep God’s commandments in the new covenant as well (Matt 22:36–40; 1 Cor 7:19; Gal 6:2; Jam 2:8)
- Discontinuity:
 - But the old covenant is “only a shadow of the good things to come” (Heb 10:1)
 - The old covenant lacked the power to enable Israel to obey.
 - The old covenant came to an end on the cross, when Jesus inaugurated the new covenant (Luke 22:20; Eph 2:14–15; Heb 8:6–13)
- Conclusion:
 - The old covenant has passed away as an institution that is in effect for the people of God.
 - However, the old covenant is good, and it will always remain a glorious, inspired expression of God’s gracious and holy character.
 - As an *institution* the old covenant is over; as *revelation* it will never end. “Abolish” in Eph 2:15 (the old covenant *order* has come to an end) is used differently than “abolish” in Matt 5:17 (the ethical standards will never end).
 - Therefore in the new covenant we are held to the same core ethic as the old (love of God and love of neighbor; be holy as God is holy), but this core ethic has different outworkings in the new covenant because of our different position in history (after Jesus’ death and resurrection).

III. How then do we apply OT laws to us?

- Short answer: use old covenant laws to understand what accords with God's character (continuity) and then imitate that character in accordance with the phase of God's plan for history that you are in (continuity and discontinuity).
- Basic thought process: each old covenant law must be thought through on its own terms:
 1. How do we see continuity? (especially, in the unchanging character of God)
 2. How do we see discontinuity? (how are things different now that Christ has come?)
 - This does NOT mean that we can dispense with laws as we wish!
 - If a law shows something of the character of God that is unpopular in our culture, we are still to imitate that part of who God is!
- Important differences between our time and OT times:
 - Christ, the ultimate sacrifice, has been offered (1 Cor 5:7; Heb 10:10). Hence we do not offer animal sacrifices any more.
 - Israel was a this-worldly government, but Christ's kingdom is not of this world (John 18:36). The church is not a state. Instead, the sword has been given to civil rulers (Rom 13). Hence the punishments for disobedience differs (see 1 Cor 5:11-13).
 - Israel was located in a holy land that was to be free of all idolaters, who were to be put to death (Deut 7:1-4). But now is the "year of the Lord's favor," when the offer of peace is given to all (2 Cor 6:1-3).
- What about cultural differences between our times and biblical times?
 - No law is given to go along with the cultural expectations of the times. The Bible consistently takes its stand against the culture (Exod 23:2).
 - The differences between old and new covenants are not cultural, but redemptive-historical (different phases of God's grand story).
 - The ethic of the early church is the same as ours today, even though our culture is different!
- Examples:
 1. Exod 12: Keep the passover in remembrance of the deliverance from Egypt
 - We are to remember God's saving acts.
 - Jesus has inaugurated the ultimate Exodus; not out of bondage to a ruler, but out of bondage to sin (Rom 6:17-18)
 - Christ is our passover lamb, who has taken away the sin of the world (1 Cor 5:7; John 1:29)
 - Hence we remember Christ's sacrifice not according to the Passover ordinance, but the new "Passover" remembrance, the Lord's Supper (Luke 22:19)
 2. Deut 21:18-21 If a son is stubbornly rebellious, he is to be stoned.
 - This law shows God's zeal for honoring one's parents.
 - We are to be similarly zealous for honoring our parents (Eph 6:1-3).
 - However, we "purge the evil from among us" by excommunication, not stoning (the church is not a state) (1 Cor 5:11-13).
 3. Deut 25:4 "You shall not muzzle the ox while he is threshing."

- This law prohibits greed and discourages cruelty toward animals.
- Paul uses this to show that we are to pay our pastors; the general principle is the same. (1 Tim 5:17-18; 1 Cor 9:9)
- 4. Sometimes laws show us something we might not have seen with equal clarity in the NT:
 - Exod 23:2 “You shall not follow the masses in doing evil”: we must be careful of letting the culture around us determine our sense of right and wrong!
 - Deut 25:1-3 When giving a judicial punishment, do not beat a man more than 40 times so that he is not despised in your eyes: punishments must not be too severe.
- General patterns:
 1. Laws with a moral component: pretty much a direct carry-over (e.g., “Do not commit adultery”)
 2. Laws with a civil component (i.e., related to Israel as a state): keep the general principles involved (e.g., removing evil from God’s people, but by excommunication, not execution)
 3. Laws with a ceremonial component: largely fulfilled in the sacrifice of Christ, but consider: “Therefore I urge you, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies a living and holy sacrifice, acceptable to God, which is your spiritual service of worship.” (Rom 12:1)