

Fulfilling the Law of Christ

Toward a Truly Christian Ethic

I. Introduction – Framing the Issues

In the arena of biblical and theological studies, there is arguably no more challenging or controversial topic than the nature and role of law in Christian faith and practice. Often treated under the heading of biblical law and ethics, this is a subject matter which Christians have grappled with from the earliest days of the New Testament Church.

- Jesus' death and resurrection brought about profound and sweeping changes which confronted the understanding, sensibilities and expectations of the Jewish believers who comprised the vast majority of the first generation Church. They had to come to grips with what these changes meant, not only for the Israelite people, but the Gentiles who were increasingly coming to faith in Israel's Messiah. The God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob was forming a new covenant household upon the foundation of His Messiah, and this raised obvious questions concerning the Mosaic Law which had defined and governed Israel (including its Gentile proselytes) since its constitution as a nation.
- Three centuries later law and ethics again came to the forefront in the Church's life when Constantine set in motion a series of changes which resulted in *Christendom* – the church-state hybrid that was the Holy Roman Empire. By the sixth century Christ's Church had been effectively transformed into a theocratic state with all people under Rome's authority bound together by the same Christian religion.

This new ecclesiastical definition found a counterpart in Old Covenant theocratic Israel, and over time many of the distinctions between the Old and New Covenant communities became blurred and even obscured. By the time of the Reformation, the theocratic church-state had been in place in the western Church for a thousand years. *Christendom* – Christian empire – was the accepted definition of Christ's Church with the result that theocratic Israel was commonly viewed as the prototype and ecclesiastical model for the New Covenant Church. This perspective underlies the common Puritan practice of using the title *Church* to refer to Old Covenant Israel. The Reformers' ecclesiology closely connected Israel and Christ's Church and this affected their perception of law and its role in the Church and the life of the individual. (It also enabled other doctrines, including the unity of the old and new covenants and the Church as both visible and invisible.)

- But beyond ecclesiology, the central concern in the Medieval period and Reformation was the role of law in the *soteriological* issues of righteousness, justification and sanctification. Questions surrounding the atonement and the application of Christ's merits were a focal point of scholastic theology in the high Middle Ages and throughout the Reformation era. Many of those same questions and concerns – often framed in terms of *law* and *grace* – continue to dominate the Church's doctrinal and practical life, being reflected in the emphases and orientations of various traditions and theological systems.

These observations highlight the fact that theology is never done in a vacuum, but always within an historical, cultural and religious context. This means that the task of Christian ethics must begin with the recognition that it is always framed by a broad set of premises and assumptions, some of which may not be consciously apparent. Roman Catholics and Protestants bring differing presuppositions to the questions of law and ethics, but the same is true of various traditions and sects within Roman Catholicism and Protestantism. Reformed and dispensational Christians differ in their doctrinal and interpretive premises, but so do theonomists and more traditional covenantalists, though both are within the Reformed tradition.

Every premise and presupposition colors one's consideration of this (and every) doctrinal topic, but arguably the most significant one is the *de-Judaizing of the Scriptures* – the removal of the Scriptures from their Jewish context – that began early in the Church's history. Two primary factors drove this process:

- 1) The first was the increasingly Gentile composition of the Church. Initially, the Church was composed of Jews and Gentile proselytes to Judaism, but Jewish persecution saw the dispersion of believers from Judea and the beginning of the Gentile mission (ref. Acts 8:1ff). As the gospel spread across the Roman Empire, the number of Gentile believers soon surpassed the number of Jewish ones.
- 2) The second factor was the Jews' fierce and enduring opposition of Christians and the Christian faith. It was Jewish hostility that largely provoked Rome's persecution of Christians (cf. John 18:28-19:16 with Matthew 10:16-18 and Acts 17:1-13, 18:1-17, 21:17-25:12) and waves of state persecution continued through Diocletian's reign, ending only with Constantine's formal recognition of Christianity in the early fourth century.

These circumstances distanced the Christian community from Jewish culture and nurtured increasing suspicion of all things Jewish. Over time, this led the Church to lose sight of the fundamental Jewishness of the Scriptures and of God's purposes for the world. Eventually the key component of *Israel* was lost from the biblical scheme of *creation-fall-Israel-redemption*. The Greco-Roman worldview supplanted the Jewish one in the Church, even as the Greek Septuagint took the place of the Hebrew Scriptures. By the time Jerome produced his Vulgate version of the Bible at the end of the fourth century, many took offense that he would even consider using the Hebrew text for his Old Testament translation.

Stripping the Bible of its Hebraic (Israelite) context had many adverse consequences, among them the redefinition of scriptural terms and concepts. This was certainly the case with the concept of law (*torah*). Separated from its Jewish, salvation-historical framework, it increasingly assumed a legal and moral connotation that redefined its fundamental covenantal and relational significance. By the high Middle Ages, *law* was understood primarily in terms of a prescribed moral standard on the basis of which human beings either stand right with God or condemned by Him. Although the Reformers and Roman Church gave different answers to the central Reformation questions of justification, imputation, sanctification, etc., *both worked from the same fundamental conception of law*; both sought to answer the question of how sinful, law-breaking human beings come to possess the moral perfection demanded by the impeccable God.

All of this underscores the critical importance of our understanding of the concept of biblical law: Most recognize the impact it has on our *practice* as Christians, but fewer discern how broadly it affects our *doctrinal* understanding. The subject of law is typically treated as central to the doctrines of salvation, sanctification, obedience and righteousness, but it is equally basic to such larger issues as the nature of humanness, the nature, scope and goal of the atonement and salvation, the character of God and His purpose for His creation. A flawed or deficient understanding of law as a biblical concept insures misunderstanding in every biblical doctrine.

How, then, should this topic be approached? Christians typically start with presuppositions derived from a particular theological system or tradition, especially those who've been in the faith for some time. Less mature believers lacking a defined theological framework have their own presuppositions, but ones derived from personal and cultural factors. But regardless of what a person's presuppositions happen to be, *everyone has them and so must identify them and set them aside if an honest inquiry is to be made*. The biblical text – allowed to speak in its own right according to its own structure and manner of presentation – must provide the premises and data the Christian works with. The obligation, then, is to be truly *Berean*, and this means consciously resisting the tendency to import into the Scripture or impose upon it that which is already assumed. Thus some general observations regarding a proper method of inquiry:

- 1) The process must begin with the Christian identifying his presuppositions. What do I understand and believe about the subject of biblical law? Is my understanding derived from confessional, systematic or traditional considerations? What is my train of thought when the subject of law and ethics comes up and how do I support my views?
- 2) Secondly, the Christian must consider his use of the Scriptures (not just with this topic, but every topic). What texts do I draw on to support my understanding? Are those texts individual, isolated proof-texts or part of a *canonical* interpretation that accounts for the overall scope and flow of salvation history as recorded in the Scriptures and centered in Jesus the Messiah? In other words, do I take a piece-meal approach or an organic one? (That answer reflects a person's general perception of the Scriptures and how they're to be read – i.e., as a collection of theological and doctrinal propositions, a handbook for effective living, a compilation of historical accounts conveying moral instruction, etc.)
- 3) Rightly examining this, or any, scriptural topic depends upon approaching the Scripture correctly, and that means learning to listen to its voice in order to actually hear and discern what it's saying. We must silence our own voice and let the Scripture inform us in its own way according to its own concerns and perspective. And we learn to listen to the Scripture by getting to know it, learning its mind and way of speaking. That involves walking with it along its path – i.e., engaging and tracing out its story as it advances toward its grand subject of the Messiah and His triumphal accomplishment.
- 4) And because Jesus is the goal of the salvation history and the point of its fulfillment (2 Corinthians 1:20), every matter of concern in the Scriptures must be understood as having its true meaning and ultimate significance in relation to the Messiah and the fulfillment that has come in Him. Thus the New Testament writers didn't jettison the Scriptures (Old Testament), but learned to read them through the lens of Jesus' person and work.