

Sanctification: Calvin's System

Though many are completely unaware of it, Calvin's system dominates Reformed and evangelical thinking on sanctification and antinomianism. It is important, therefore, that we should all be clear about Calvin's position on this vital matter. Let me give a sample of the sort of thing Calvin said on the question of the law and sanctification:

The third use of the law (being also the principal use, and more closely connected with its proper end) has respect to believers in whose hearts the Spirit of God already flourishes and reigns. For although the law¹ is written and engraved on their hearts by the finger of God, that is, although they are so influenced and actuated by the Spirit, that they desire to obey God, there are two ways in which they still profit from the law. For it is the best instrument for enabling them daily to learn with greater truth and certainty what that will of the Lord is which they aspire to follow, and to confirm them in this knowledge... Then, because we need not doctrine merely, but exhortation also, the servant of God will derive this further advantage from the law: by frequently meditating upon it, he will be excited to obedience, and confirmed in it, and so drawn away from the slippery paths of sin... The law acts like a whip to the flesh, urging it on as men do to a lazy sluggish ass. Even in the case of a spiritual man, inasmuch as he is still burdened with the weight of the flesh, the law is a constant stimulus, pricking him forward when he would indulge in sloth... It cannot be denied that it [the law] contains a perfect pattern of righteousness... one perpetual and inflexible rule... The doctrine of the law... remains... that... it may fit and prepare us for every good work... The general end contemplated by the whole law [is] that man may form his life on the model of the divine purity... The law... connects man, by holiness of life, with his God.²

The law... not only contains a rule of life as to outward duties, but... it also rules their hearts before God and angels.

¹ Begging the question as to which law is written on the heart in the new covenant; and getting it wrong – see my *Christ*.

² Calvin, John: *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, James Clarke and Co., Limited, London, 1957, Vol.1 pp309-311,356.

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The law is the everlasting rule of a good and holy life. By the word "law"... we understand what peculiarly belonged to Moses; for the law contains the rule of life... and in it we find everywhere many remarkable sentences by which we are instructed as to faith, and as to the fear of God. None of these were abolished by Christ.³

The law... is given for the regulation of the life of men, so that it may be justly called the rule of living well and righteously... It can alone direct us to the mark.⁴

[The law] exacts much more of [believers] than they are able to offer... This is vital... Day by day the law exposes his ungodliness... The function of the law [is] to sustain [the sense of need], bringing it home to us continually that all our righteousness is as filthy rags... It also exasperates and stirs up our depravity... The effect of the law upon our depraved hearts is akin to the effect of the sun on any putrid organism. The law suggests sins, even in the very act of forbidding them. It provokes resentment of God's authority. It creates a slavish fear of penalty which itself is incompatible with love, the very essence of obedience.⁵

Martin Bucer said as much before Calvin:

The law... to those who are endowed with the Spirit... is in no sense abolished, but is so much the more potent in each one as he is richly endowed with the Spirit of Christ.⁶

And many have followed Calvin:

The moral law does for ever bind all, as well justified persons as others, to the obedience thereof... The law... is of great use to [believers]... as a rule of life, informing them of the will of God and their duty, it directs them and binds them accordingly.⁷

³ Calvin, John: *Commentaries*, Baker Book House, Grand Rapids, reprinted 1979, Vol.15 Part 2 p220; Vol.21 Part 1 p119; Vol.22 Part 1 p167.

⁴ Calvin, John: 'The Use Of The Law' (sacred-texts.com).

⁵ Calvin's Genevan Catechism (quoted by Donald Macleod: 'Luther' p9).

⁶ Wendel, Francois: *Calvin: The Origins and Development of his Religious Thought*, Collins, London, 1963, p205.

⁷ Westminster Confession chapter 19, sections 5 and 6.

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The decalogue, or ten commandments... is called the moral law because it is the rule of life and manners... The Scripture is a banquet, and the moral law is the chief dish in it... It is an exact model and platform of religion; it is the standard of truth... Though the moral law is not a Christ to justify us, it is a rule to instruct us... The law of God is a hedge to keep us within the bounds of sobriety and piety... We say not that [the believer] is under the curse of the law, but the commands... The moral law... remains as a perpetual rule to believers... Every Christian is bound to conform to it... Though a Christian is not under the condemning power of the law, yet he is under its commanding power... They who will not have the law to rule over them, shall never have the gospel to save them.⁸

The law was given to be a spur to quicken us to duties. The flesh is sluggish, and the law is... a spur or goad... to quicken us in the ways of obedience.⁹

Although true believers are not under the law as a covenant of works, to be thereby justified or condemned, yet it is of great use to them as well as others, in that as a rule of life, informing them of the will of God and their duty, it directs and binds them to walk accordingly... It... is of use to the regenerate to restrain their corruptions... the law encourages to [their doing good] and deters from [their doing evil].¹⁰

[The law] is of use to saints and true believers in Christ... to point out the will of God unto them; what is to be done by them, and what to be avoided; to inform them of, and urge them to their duty... to be a rule of life and conversation to them; not a rule to obtain life by, but to live according to... It continues as a rule of walk and conversation to them.¹¹

A believer... is under perpetual and indissoluble obligation to conform to [the law] as a rule of conduct... If the [moral] law be not

⁸ Watson, Thomas: *The Ten Commandments*, The Banner of Truth Trust, London, 1959, pp10,34.

⁹ Bolton, Samuel: *The True Bounds of Christian Freedom*, The Banner of Truth Trust, London, 1964, p83.

¹⁰ The Baptist Confession of 1689, chapter 19.6.

¹¹ Gill, John: *A Complete Body of Doctrinal and Practical Divinity...*, W. Winterbotham, London, 1796, Vol.2 pp39,41.

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a rule of conduct to believers, and a perfect rule too, they are under no rule; or, which is the same thing, [they] are lawless.¹²

A third... and essential use appears to the believer... The believer's sanctification can only be attained in practice by giving him a holy rule of conduct. Such a rule is the law. It is to be assiduously observed as the guide to that holiness which is the fruit of adoption.¹³

The law is a rule of life for believers... [While] the Reformed do full justice to [Calvin's] second use of the law... they devote even more attention to the law in connection with the doctrine of sanctification.¹⁴

[The law shows] the believer the will of God and his duty to his fellows.¹⁵

The law of the Lord is not only for the soul that needs conversion, but also for the nurture and warning of the converted.¹⁶

Avoid as you would a deadly snake any man who denies the law of God is the Christian's rule of life. The law, not the gospel, is the rule of our sanctification.¹⁷

¹² Fuller, Andrew: *Antinomianism Contrasted with the Religion Taught and Exemplified in the Holy Scriptures*, in *The Complete Works of... Andrew Fuller, With a Memoir of his Life*, edited by Andrew Gunton Fuller, Henry G. Bohn, London, 1866, p339; *The Moral Law the Rule of Conduct to Believers in Miscellaneous Tracts, Essays, Letters &c.*, in *The Complete Works of... Andrew Fuller, With a Memoir of his Life*, edited by Andrew Gunton Fuller, Henry G. Bohn, London, 1866, p891.

¹³ Dabney, R.L.: *Systematic Theology*, The Banner of Truth Trust, Edinburgh, 1985, p354.

¹⁴ Berkhof, Louis: *Systematic Theology*, The Banner of Truth Trust, London, 1959, p615.

¹⁵ *We Believe: Strict Baptist Affirmation of Faith 1966*, second edition 1973, pp26-27.

¹⁶ Tow, Timothy: *The Law of Moses and of Jesus*, Christian Life Publishers, Singapore, 1986, p29.

¹⁷ A.W. Pink quoted by Murray, Iain H.: *The Life of Arthur W. Pink: His Life and Thought*, The Banner of Truth Trust, Edinburgh, 1981, p104; quoted by Daniel, Curt D.: *Hyper-Calvinism and John Gill*, an unpublished Ph.D. thesis, University of Edinburgh, 1983, p638.

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The pedagogic work of the law is not... confined to the unbeliever nor is it confined to our pre-conversion experience. It is vitally important, also, in the life of a Christian.¹⁸

[Believers] have returned to the moral law for direction in sanctification... Nothing but the moral law can define for us what sanctified behaviour is... As New Testament writers discuss the moral law they frequently and naturally turn to the ten commandments... How is love to God and neighbour to express itself?... To answer this the apostles always return to the ten commandments... How readily the New Testament binds the ten commandments upon Christian consciences.¹⁹

There it is! This, I submit, is a fair representation of the Reformed system on the law – that system which dominates much of the evangelical world. A grim system, to be sure! And an unbiblical system, to boot!

Reader, before you accept the Reformed way of sanctification, may I suggest you ask for the scriptures which establish the case? Take that last from Chantry: 'The apostles *always* return to the ten commandments... How *readily* the New Testament *binds* the ten commandments upon Christian consciences'. May we be shown this – *from the apostles themselves*?

And, taking my own medicine, that is precisely what I ask you to do with me as I now give a few brief expositions of passages from the apostles' writings, plus one from Christ's own great high-priestly prayer for all his people. Making due allowance for the extempore nature of the material, check to see if what I say is a proper exposition of the biblical texts.

And, if you are persuaded that what you read here has got to the heart of New Testament teaching on this vital matter, I urge you to reject man-made systems, and adopt the scriptural way of sanctification and assurance for the believer. It will cost you

¹⁸ Macleod, Donald: 'Luther and Calvin on the Place of the Law', The Westminster Conference, 1974: *Living the Christian Life*, p9.

¹⁹ Chantry, Walter J.: *God's Righteous Kingdom: Focussing on the Law's Connection with the Gospel*, The Banner of Truth Trust, Edinburgh, 1980, pp72,84-86,96-97,114.

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dear – in terms of rebuke, ostracism and the like – but it will bring you gospel relief and joy. More, it will encourage, stimulate and help you in your daily sanctification and assurance. And it will do this because – instead of directing your mind and heart to the law, to rules, and to looking only at yourself – it will take you to Christ, it will set your heart and mind on him.

And this is precisely what the apostle commands all believers to do: ‘Since, then, you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things. For you died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God... Christ is all, and is in all’ (Col. 3:1-3,11).