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# The Law and the Christian

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The law of God is a very important concept in Scripture - one that we need to understand. It is an area of theology on which Christians differ, and unfortunately one that often creates a great deal of heat. Epithets such as 'antinomian' or 'legalist' are sometimes hurled at those who differ with each other. 'Antinomian' means 'against law'. One might be justified in thinking that it means that someone receiving that title opposes any form of law being applied to them. However that is rarely true. The great majority of Christians believe that a child of God is duty bound to observe God's commands in some form or other. The term 'legalist' is used against those who supposedly give too much attention to God's law. What is important is not what labels are attached to a person, but what they actually believe about God's law as it applies to the Christian. I will attempt to set out as simply as possible in point form what I believe on this subject. Although the term 'law' is sometimes used of either the books of Moses or the whole of Scripture, I will use it in the broad sense of God's commands or regulations for people.

## **1. All people are at all times subject to God's laws.**

From the beginning of creation, God has laid down laws for people. Adam and Eve were given laws in the garden of Eden: Abraham was given laws regarding circumcision: the Israelites were given laws at Sinai: Christians are given laws - see the Sermon on the Mount (Mt.5-7). Jesus said, 'If you love me, you will obey what I command.' (Jn.14:15). John said, 'This is love for God: to obey his commands.' (1 Jn.5:3). No one is ever free from the obligation to keep God's commands.

## **2. Sin is defined in terms of law.**

'Everyone who sins breaks the law; in fact sin is lawlessness.' (1 Jn.3:4). There can be no measure of what sin is without standards. That standard is God's law. So no one at any time in this world can live without being under God's laws.

## **3. We must not equate God's unchanging laws with the law of Moses.**

The same could be said of the laws given to Adam and Eve, or the laws given to Abraham. Those were a particular expression of God's laws given to particular people at particular times. The Mosaic laws were given to one nation at one point in time. It may be true that much of what was given to Israel was of an abiding nature and applies to all people, but still we must avoid making Mosaic law the same as God's abiding law.

The obvious proof of this is that many of the laws given to Israel do not apply to us today. We don't offer sacrifices. We don't have to avoid garments of mixed fibres. The way that many reply to this is to divide the Mosaic law into three parts: moral law (the ten commandments), ceremonial law (sacrifices etc.) and civil law (laws that applied to Israel as a nation, such as commands about reaping, government etc.). This might seem an obvious and natural division, and may serve for a general discussion of the law, however, the Bible never divides the Mosaic law in this way.

## **4. The whole Mosaic law is abrogated or cancelled under the new covenant.**

'He (God) forgave us our sins, having cancelled the written code, with its regulations, that was against us and that stood opposed to us; he took it away, nailing it to the cross.' (Col.2:13,14). This is clearly talking about the whole Mosaic law. Paul says elsewhere that God has abolished in Christ's flesh the law with its commandments and regulations (Eph.2:15). In Hebrews 8, the author compares the two covenants, the Mosaic and the New, and concludes, 'By calling this covenant

'new', he has made the first one obsolete.' (Heb.8:13). So the law is abrogated: it is cancelled: it is abolished: it is obsolete.

Whenever the Mosaic or Old Covenant is evaluated in the New Testament writings, it is always in negative terms. It condemns, it was fading (2 Cor.3:9,11). It is inferior (Heb.8:6). There was something wrong with it. (Heb.8:7). The wrong part of course was due to its inability to bring about the obedience of the people. Like the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, it was good, but not good for people to live by. Partaking of it brought death.

Of particular relevance is Galatians 4:21-31. Paul is talking about Abraham's two sons, Ishmael and Isaac, and their mothers, Hagar and Sarah. These are figurative of the two covenants, one an earthly one, made at Sinai and now centred in the earthly Jerusalem, the other a heavenly one, the new covenant, pertaining to the heavenly Jerusalem. Those under the old covenant are represented as being in slavery (verse 25).

Another comparison of the two covenants is made in Hebrews 12:18-24. The old covenant is associated with terror - even Moses trembled with fear, whereas the new covenant is associated with joy, glory and perfection.

The New Testament never says that part of the Mosaic law (the civil and ceremonial) is abrogated - it is treated as a whole. It is cancelled: it has passed away: it is obsolete.

### **5. As already stated, this does not leave the believer without law.**

Notice carefully Paul's words in the following passage:

*To the Jews I became like a Jew, to win Jews. To those under law I became like one under law (though I myself am not under the law), so as to win those under the law. To those not having the law I became like one not having the law (though I am not free from God's law but am under Christ's law), so as to win those not having the law. (1 Cor.9:20,21)*

Note the three things that Paul says about himself in relation to the law:

1. I am not under the law.
2. I am not free from God's law.
3. I am under Christ's law.

1. To win Jews Paul would sometimes observe parts of the Mosaic law. For example he circumcised Timothy to avoid offence (Acts 16:3). He became involved with a group who had taken vows at the temple (Acts 21:20-24). But he makes it clear that he was not under the law (of Moses). As far as he was concerned, it was cancelled.

2. To win Gentiles (those not having the law) Paul identified with them as far as possible. Certainly he did not observe the Mosaic law. But he never cast off all restraint and lived as the Gentiles did. He says he was not free from God's law. He makes a distinction between 'the law', that is Moses' law, and God's Law. He does not equate God's law with Moses' law, as mentioned earlier. He is not under Moses' law, but he is under God's law.

3. Paul states that he is under Christ's law. It would appear that he equates 'God's law' with 'Christ's law'.

Coming back to my earlier statement in point 3, we must not make the mistake of equating Moses' law with God's law. The Mosaic law was the form in which God's law was given to that nation at that time. It was a particular application of God's law for the Jewish people. As new covenant believers we would expect to have God's law given to us in a particular form suited to our needs. Where do we find it? Paul, as we saw, speaks of Christ's law. If Christ is our new covenant King and Lawgiver, we should expect to look to Him to direct our lives and to give us commandments suited to our position, not only as new covenant believers but as children of God. Indeed as the Bride of Christ and the fulfilment of God's eternal purposes for His people, we believe that the commands given to believers in the New Testament Scriptures represent the

highest and ultimate form of God's law, and that is surely why Paul equates Christ's law with God's law.

#### **6. God's moral requirements for people do not change substantially.**

What He requires of us is essentially conformity to Himself. God's eternal purpose for His people is likeness to His Son (Rom.8:29, Eph.1:4). That being so we should not be surprised if many of the commands given to Israel in the old covenant are repeated in the new. It is always wrong to worship idols, to misuse God's name, to kill, to commit adultery, to steal. These commandments are repeated as if they were known and recognized as right. Paul tells us that the essence of these laws is written upon the heart and conscience of all people (Rom.2:14,15). So if I steal from someone and am accused of breaking the law, I could not say 'That doesn't apply to me, I am not under the Mosaic law.' It is as wrong for a new covenant believer to steal as it was for a Jew.

All this leads us in one direction - to the 4th commandment. How does the Sabbath commandment apply to Christians? This is always at the heart of controversies over the law, so we shall proceed to examine this.

#### **7. The place of the Sabbath.**

Let me state some facts that are incontrovertible.

1. The Jews had to keep the Sabbath. The 4th commandment was clear - 'Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy.' (Ex.20:8).

2. This meant keeping the seventh day (Saturday) from sunset to sunset with no unnecessary work. Even gathering sticks for a fire was forbidden (Num.15:32-36). They were not allowed even to speak their own words on the Sabbath (Isa.58:13).

3. Breaking the commandment was punishable by death (Ex.31:14, Num.15:36). It was regarded as of great importance. I have not counted, but I am sure that there are more references to the 4th commandment (the Sabbath) than any other commandment in the books that deal with the law - Exodus to Deuteronomy.

4. There is not a single command in the New Testament for Christians to keep the Sabbath. In the light of the previous point this is surprising if the Sabbath were still in force today. There are a number of references to the other commandments, but never one about the Sabbath. There are numerous references and warnings about sexual sins, but not a single one about Sabbath breaking. There are several lists of sins in various books, but none of the lists mention the Sabbath. If believers are to live according to the commandments of our new covenant King, then it would appear that the Sabbath is not nearly as important as some would make it.

The response of those who say the Sabbath is still in force today, is that the command was so well known and accepted that there was no need to reinforce it. But the same could be said of all the commandments. They were written on people's hearts and everyone knew it was wrong to blaspheme or kill or commit adultery, yet these commands are often given in various forms in the New Testament and they are put down in lists of sins. In fact the one command where it is hard to see how it could be written on people's hearts, is the Sabbath. Gentiles would know little or nothing about the Sabbath. Most of the epistles are written to Gentile churches and it is astonishing that there is no mention of the Sabbath if they were expected to keep it. It would be the commandment where they would most need instruction.

We are often told that the Sabbath is 'God's abiding, unchanging moral law.' My response to that is to ask who really believes that? The Mosaic command, as we saw, was to keep the seventh day holy. Who does that apart from Seventh Day Adventists and a few others? Those who broke the command were to be stoned to death. Who applies that today? Whatever people say, those who believe the Sabbath applies to Christians, change it from the form in which it was given, so how can it be abiding and unchanging?

A common answer is that the day was changed by the apostles, and that the sanctions were dropped, but there is no teaching to this effect in the Bible. We do see a prominence of the first day

of the week, but the New Testament never says there was a change. Nor does it say that Sabbath breakers are no longer to be stoned. Given the importance of the command in the Old Testament, this is strange indeed. I believe the reason is that already set forth above - the whole of the Mosaic law is obsolete.

When Jesus was on earth, He was a Jew and, being under the law, kept the Sabbath, but with the coming of the new covenant age in fulness at Pentecost, there were no commands to keep the Sabbath. There are a few references in Acts to things done on the Sabbath, but in terms of any teaching about it, there are only two references after Pentecost:

In Colossians 2, after the passage already quoted, that speaks of the law being cancelled (v.14), Paul goes on to say, 'Therefore do not let anyone judge you by what you eat or drink, or with regard to a religious festival, a New Moon celebration or a Sabbath day. These are a shadow of things that were to come; the reality however, is found in Christ.' (v.16,17). Food, festivals, special days and the like are ceremonies and shadows of what was to come. They all point to Christ. When you have the thing that casts the shadow you don't bother with the shadow, just as when you have beside you a person you love, you don't need a photograph of them. The Sabbath is a picture of eternal rest found in and through Christ. That comes out in the only other post-Pentecost teaching on the Sabbath. Hebrews 4:9 reads: 'There remains, then, a Sabbath-rest for the people of God.' The writer has been discussing Israel's sin and God's threat to deny them His rest. He shows that the rest was not really fulfilled in Canaan (Joshua did not give them rest - v.8), but in Christ. Resting in Christ means resting from our own works and trusting in the Lord (v.10). There is also the eternal fulfilment in heaven, and this is spoken of in v.11.

So the only two passages on the Sabbath in the epistles point to it as a type or shadow of Christ and eternal things. The Sabbath was not abiding, unchanging law. It has changed: it is fulfilled.

What about the Sabbath being moral law? Is there anything moral about a day? If Saturday was a holy and special day, how could it be changed to Sunday? Those who argue for a Sabbath today say that the day is not important. All that matters is to observe one day in seven. But is that true? Could an Israelite change the day? We have in Numbers 15 the record of a man being stoned to death for gathering sticks on the Sabbath. If the day was not important he could have said to Moses, 'You misunderstand me, I am not breaking the Sabbath, I will be keeping my Sabbath tomorrow.' Of course that wouldn't be good enough. The day was specified and never changed.

So was the Sabbath commandment moral or ceremonial? It is an important point. I believe a New Testament passage is helpful here.

*At that time Jesus went through the grain fields on the Sabbath. His disciples were hungry and began to pick some heads of grain and eat them. When the Pharisees saw this, they said to him, 'Look! Your disciples are doing what is unlawful on the Sabbath.' He answered, 'Haven't you read what David did when he and his companions ate the consecrated bread - which was not lawful for them to do, but only for the priests. Or haven't you read in the Law that on the Sabbath the priests in the temple desecrate the day and yet are innocent?'*

*(Mt.12:1-5)*

That is an amazing statement. Jesus said that the priests desecrate the Sabbath, yet are innocent. Could Jesus have said that the priests could break any other commandment and be innocent? Could they commit adultery and be innocent? Could they worship idols and be innocent? That is unthinkable. No moral commandment can be desecrated and leave the offender without blame. Yet the priests could break the Sabbath and be innocent, because their priestly duties required them to work on the Sabbath. This surely removes the Sabbath commandment from the realm of moral to ceremonial as the later New Testament references so clearly show.

One other question that needs to be addressed is the prominent place of the Sabbath commandment in the Mosaic law. I have already said that there are more references to it than to

any other command. Why is this? Because the Sabbath was the sign of the covenant. The covenants that God made with His people were usually marked by a sign. The covenant with Noah had the sign of the rainbow (Gen.9:12). The covenant with Abraham was marked by the sign of circumcision (Gen.17:11). The covenant with Israel was marked by the sign of the Sabbath (Ex.31:12-17).

To break the sign was as good as saying that they rejected the whole covenant. Circumcision was obviously a ceremonial command, but as it was the sign of the covenant, it was a serious offence to omit it. Note the words of Genesis 17:14:

*Any uncircumcised male, who has not been circumcised in the flesh, will be cut off from his people; he has broken my covenant.*

Likewise to break the Sabbath was to break the covenant.

*Then the LORD said to Moses, 'Say to the Israelites, 'You must observe my Sabbaths. This will be a sign between me and you for the generations to come, so that you may know that I am the LORD, who makes you holy. Observe the Sabbath, because it is holy to you. Anyone who desecrates it must be put to death; whoever does any work on that day must be cut off from his people. For six days, work is to be done, but the seventh day is a Sabbath of rest, holy to the LORD. Whoever does any work on the Sabbath day must be put to death. The Israelites are to observe the Sabbath, celebrating it for the generations to come as a lasting covenant. It will be a sign between me and the Israelites forever, for in six days the LORD made the heavens and the earth, and on the seventh day he abstained from work and rested.'* (Ex.31:12-17)

To break the Sabbath was to say to God, 'We will not keep your covenant.' Therefore it was punishable by death. It was the sign and the very heart of the covenant.

This comes out clearly in Ezekiel 20.:

*I gave them my decrees and made known to them my laws, for the man who obeys them will live by them. Also I gave them my Sabbaths as a sign between us, so that they would know that I the LORD made them holy.* (Ez.20:11,12)

Throughout the chapter there is a distinction between breaking God's laws and desecrating the Sabbath - see also v.13, v16, v19,20, v21, v24. It was not that breaking the Sabbath was less serious - it was more serious because it was the sign of the covenant, but it was in a different category from breaking God's laws.

If you look at the 10 commandments (Ex.20:1-21, Dt.5:6-21), you will see that the Sabbath is the longest commandment and also right in the centre of the writing of the commandments. Apparently that was usual in covenants of that day. The sign of the covenant, involving some ceremony, was in the centre of the covenant document. It was actually the most important part of the covenant document, and in the covenant document of the Mosaic covenant - the 10 commandments (Ex.34:28), the Sabbath was central.

Now that the Mosaic covenant is obsolete, the Sabbath is not binding on us, just as circumcision is not binding on us because it was the sign of the covenant with Abraham. There is nothing magic about there being **10** commandments. The phrase 'The Ten Commandments' is in fact only used three times (Ex.34:28, Dt.4:13, 10:4). In the first two references the ten commandments are said to be the covenant. The third reference simply refers to the writing of the ten commandments on tablets of stone. There were 10 special commands for Israel, but there is nothing to say that these were the ultimate statement of God's requirements for all mankind forever. I repeat, they were an expression of God's law for Israel.

Some say derisively that we have reduced God's commands from 10 to 9, but on the contrary there are hundreds of new covenant commands for the believer to keep. It would be a bit strange to talk about the 378 commandments, or however many there are, but we are certainly not looking to reduce our obligation to obey the Lord. The believer today does not keep these commands to gain acceptance with God as the Jews were to do - 'The man who does these things will live by them' (Gal.3:12), but he obeys to show his love to Christ (Jn.14:23).

### **8. The Lord's Day**

John Calvin believed the Mosaic Sabbath was abrogated, but said that as it is useful to have one day a week for rest and for worship, it is good for us to keep the Lord's Day (Institutes, Book II, Chap.8, para.32). Basically I agree with Calvin's position.

The teaching on the Lord's Day is not clear: there is only one reference to it in the New Testament - Revelation 1:10. We do seem to see a pattern of believers meeting on the first day of the week in Acts, but again there are few references. Historically it does appear that believers considered the first day of the week to be the Lord's Day and met together on that day. It may be that there is a connection with the seventh day rest in Genesis, but there was never a command to observe that day before the time of Moses, and as we have seen there is no command for new covenant believers to keep a day in seven. The one command that can be related to this is in Hebrews 10:25: 'Let us not give up meeting together'. Of the benefit of a day free from normal activities, there can be little doubt. Of the importance of meeting with God's people for worship, fellowship and hearing the Word of God, there can be even less doubt. So it is good for us to use this day and to give it a high priority for the benefit of our bodies and souls. Certainly we should whenever possible make sure that we do not neglect the means of grace.

### **9. Summary**

The Mosaic law was given to Israel in the form of a covenant, the essence of which was the ten commandments.

This law has been abrogated by Christ. Believers today are not under Moses' law but under Christ's law. This entails obedience to all the commands given under the new covenant, although much of that which is binding on Christians is the same as that which was binding on Israel. The Christian keeps these commandments, not to gain acceptance with God, but out of love and gratitude to Christ for His redeeming work.

The Sabbath which was the sign of the Mosaic covenant, is never put before new covenant believers as an obligation - it was abrogated along with the rest of the Mosaic law.

The Lord's Day is a day for us to meet together with other believers and take advantage of the means of grace. These means should never be neglected.

### **10. Closing thoughts**

I hope I have made it clear that the view presented does not in any way seek to get the believer 'off the hook' as far as having an obligation to keep God's commands. God has given us many commands and if we love Him we will seek earnestly to keep them.

Having set out briefly what I believe about the place of the law in a believer's life, I would also like to make the point that it should not be a point of great contention and certainly not a test of fellowship. This is a complex issue and one that has divided Christians for centuries. You could add it to the list of such matters as baptism, church government, eschatology (last things) and the gifts of the Spirit. In all these issues there are people committed to the inspiration of Scripture and the evangelical faith, yet who differ with other Christians in one or more of these doctrines. Of those who held at least the same view of the Sabbath as is presented here are: most of the Reformers, including Luther and Calvin; John Bunyan, John Gill, and more recently, notable men like James Montgomery Boice and Don Carson. The fact that such notable theologians held or hold

the view does not make it right, but it does show that it is an orthodox view, not antinomian and certainly not heresy.

In Romans 14 Paul deals with what he calls ‘disputable matters’, that is secondary issues over which believers should not fight. In verse 5 he says:

*One man considers one day more sacred than another; another man considers every day alike. Each one should be fully convinced in his own mind.*

We may be fully convinced of our own view, but we must also allow others to be fully convinced of a different view. As Christians, we can often agree to differ over baptism; we can agree to differ on views of the Lord's return: surely we can agree to differ over the Lord's Day/Sabbath issue. With a perishing world around us that needs the gospel, we must not spend time fighting over secondary matters. Love must prevail.