

# The Role of the Law in Christian Teaching

## Introduction.

Leviticus is part of the Law of Moses. 19:19 would forbid my wearing this jumper today because it's 50% cotton/acrylic. Or does it? = kind of Q we shall consider.

Topic is '**The Role of the Law in Christian Teaching**', specifically 'the Law of Moses'.

Bible words for Law cover range of meanings. One early use: Joseph's land tax on produce of Egypt. Law also = first 5 books of OT, Ten Comds & civil courts in Gk city of Corinth. Can't base conclusions on Hebrew words, at least 4 with TORAH & MISHPAT interchangeable, while Ps 119 uses 7 different words.

## A. Some Key texts, with brief comments

### 1. OT

- i) Gen 26:4-5; God speaks of his law long before Moses. God's inherent authority gives all his words the force of law, just as Adam was legally guilty of disobedience before Sinai. Without this how could sinners be accounted guilty for the centuries between creation and Sinai? This reminds us Mosaic law is one specific law code for his covenant people. John Murray bases his excellent work on Xtn ethics not on Mosaic law but on 'Creation Ordinances' in Genesis.
- ii) Exod 20:1-17; Covenant context clear 19:5, 24:7 Book of the Covenant. Ten Comds begin with relationship with God & moral life [steal] but also extended to worship culture, 20:24+. That later detail, limited to OT dispensation, equally called '*the law God gave Moses*' Lev 27:34.
- iii) Ps 119:1+; 7diff words used for law. Important as shows already in OT obedience is not out of legalistic bondage & fear of punishment but heart's '*delight in your decrees*' v16.
- iv) Jer 31:31-4; Like all prophets, Jer shows God holds Israel guilty bec they '*rejected my law*' so their failure to keep his cov will lead to punishment in the exile. But God's mercy promises restoration and radically the New Cov when he '*will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts*'. This motivation will be true of all members of the New Cov community.

### 2. NT Gospels

- i) Mt 5:17-20; Background is Pharisees additions to & literalising of Moses. Negatively, not to abolish because the spiritual core of the Old Cov still holds good under the New. [No conflict with Eph 2:15. Mt 5 = καταλύω = *destroy* but Eph 2 = καταργέω = *render inoperative*] Positively, to fulfil = in himself. Some liken it to difference between engagement & marriage, the former is real but incomplete, the latter continues an existing relationship but is a genuinely new experience. Jesus inaugurates this entirely new age, with continuity and discontinuity, some features being timebound in social customs of OT Israel and some timeless as the moral principles which remain intact under the New Cov, as seen in v 21-48.
- ii) Mt 22:34-40; Jesus himself goes behind 10 Comds to show most important principle is love, for God and for our neighbour, repeated by Paul, Rom 13:10, '*Love is the fulfilment of the law*'. Gal 5:14, '*The entire law is summed up in a single command.*' Heart of New Cov morality.
- iii) Lk 16:16; expresses the critical new feature inaugurated by Jesus, '*The law and the prophets were until John*', no verb in Greek. Some supply, 'in force', NRSV has 'in effect'. Discontinuity.
- iv) John 14:15; reflects Jer 31 promise, '*If you love me you will obey what I command*', as HS provides inner motivation.

### 3. NT Epistles

- i) Rom 2:12-29; Gentiles '*apart from the [Mosaic] law*' are still guilty because they know enough about God to have a conscience that they are under obligation to him & will be judged by him. Not unlike the situation of people living before Sinai.
- ii) Rom 6:14; Background of much NT teaching about law is perverted Pharisaic view that sinners are justified by obeying the law, or as much as they could. Even Xtn converts still under pressure to be loyal Jews so Paul has made clear our righteousness is '*apart from law*' and '*comes by faith in Jesus*' 3:21-2. The life & saving work of Jesus also delivers us from the

dominion of sin so 6:14 insists we are not under any legal obligation to the 'ritual law of the Mosaic economy [which] bondage has been terminated by the epochal events of Calvary' [John Murray]. But we are under a new obligation to respond to grace by willing submission, 'the new way of the Spirit' 7:6, even called being slaves to Christ. Law remains holy & good in showing us our sin & our need of Jesus, 7:7+, 1 Tim 1:8.

- iii) 1 Cor 9:20-21; Paul not discussing the ground of his justification but his flexible approach to different audiences in preaching the gospel. Significant that he is 'not free from God's law' but is 'under Christ's law' as his slave.
- iv) Heb 7:11-19; Again genuine converts are being tempted to drift away from sole confidence in Jesus back to OT bondage. The author repeatedly displays the superiority of the New Cov because under the former dispensation 'nothing was made perfect'.

## B. Three significant issues

### 1. Antinomianism

= against law, those teaching Xtns now free from any responsibility to keep Mosaic law are accused of being indifferent to life of holiness. RC church charged Reformers with this but Reformers never taught that justification or sanctification are achieved by our keeping the law. One extreme to avoid is legalism, the other licence e.g. recreational sex outside marriage. New Covenant Theology is afraid of legalism, R T Kendall is quoted in BofT: 'The moral law is not the Christian's code of conduct. It will make you a legalist, long-faced, grouchy, without joy or peace'. But E F Kevan strongly defends Reformed view that the OT law is a reflection of the unchanging character of God but that love now binds Xtns to observe the law so this bondage is perfect freedom. 'The Xtn now does as he likes but he has a new and powerful set of likes'. New Cov insights are useful in that they free Xtns to interpret the Mosaic law from it's central NT principle of love as a key to moral conduct today, Rom 13:8, 'he who loves his fellow man has fulfilled the law'. The question we need to discuss is how we apply these principles to moral situations today [e.g. my pullover] [Q1].

### 2. Legalism

Remains problem, not just for Romanism, where sanctification is conflated with justification and Xtns obligated to keep the law [in their case = to obey the Church]. Reformers rightly insisted this always endangers Xtn assurance & joy as it diverts attention from Xt's finished work to our inadequate obedience. The New Perspective on Paul [N T Wright] tends to legalism. 'Covenanted nomism' says God's mercy belongs to those maintained in the covenant by their obedience to the law. Concern nearer at hand is when preachers [& especially children's workers] urge the unsaved to obey charges in OT or Epistles which are addressed to people already in covenant. Surely they must be told that only in Xt will they find the motive & power to obey these laws. When we tell unsaved children to 'do this' & please God, with no reference to Xt we are being legalists not evangelists. Another question then is how can we explain the Bible's moral challenges to those not yet converted? [Q2]

### 3. Preparationism

No one disputes vital role of Mosaic law to convict sinners and show them their need of Jesus. But natural man wants to be a law unto himself [autonomy] & especially our generation resents any outside authority. Desire not to put needless barriers to seekers has led many preachers to underplay the NT call to repent & cost of discipleship, showing only its benefits. More serious preachers who insist on preaching the law before the gospel, face charge of Preparationism, that they're only ready to offer the gospel to 'prepared sinners' and are denying the free offer of the gospel. Was big issue in Strict Baptist churches but remains question for us. How can we keep the balance of looking for conviction of sin while still offering the gospel to everyone? [Q3]

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After any Qs for clarification, we could discuss Qs 1, 2 or 3 and then these texts in groups:

Prepare notes on how you would relate your text to the Mosaic law and show its relevance today.

A] Micah 6:8

B] Gal 3:23-25

C] Col 2:16-17

D] James 2:8-12

## Notes on selected texts

### A] Micah 6:8

Who is the 'O man' ? One of cov people Israel.

Context? Charge against Israel who had confidence in outward worship of sac system but indifferent to moral demands of OT law. 2:2, 6:11.

The L requires:

Justice [=righteousness] against 3:9, in horizontal dealings with society.

Mercy [not mere pity but covenant love] as response to God's love 6:4. Vertical before horizontal.

Humility, before God, submission to chastening as well as fear, 6:9.

Key text of 'Micah Challenge' to socially relevant churches but often misused as social gospel. Without preaching the Cross by which alone we can enter the covenant = legalism. The unregenerate can't do it.

### B] Gal 3:23-25

Gal Xtns tempted to return to confidence in law-keeping for their standing before God. Bugt Abr was justified 430 yrs before Sinai law given 3:18. Purpose of Mosaic law? 19 to create conviction of sin in preparation for Xt, 22.

23 not personally of an indiv but corporately of Israel. OC dispensation when law was put in charge, we were locked up, under it's supervision.

Blessings include sonship, baptism, unity, heirs, 26-9.

Relevance: feel Paul's deep longing for them, how much do we feel for confused, ill-taught Xtns?

5:13, don't let your freedom become licence to sin.

### C] Col 2:16-17

Xtns under pressure to conform to man-made rules, 20-23 so Paul shows where Xtn freedom comes from. They were being judged on basis of rules of religious conduct from OT era.

But superiority shown by shadow/reality analogy.

Q – does 16 mean Xtns need not observe Sabbath? Gal 4:10. If try to establish own righteousness by doing it, No. That is unspiritual, 18. Change to Lord's Day shows how Xtns have moved from law. LDOS position. But how shd we observe Sunday today?

### D] James 2:8-12

Context, warning Xtns against favouritism in the church, 2:1. Authy is Scripture = OT. Royal law = of the king in his kingdom. Lev 19:18, not one of 10 Comds but Mt 19:19, Gal 5:14, '*the entire law is summed up in a single command, love your neighbour as yourself.*'

To break this law is as serious as breaking one of 10 comds, 11. Nothing less than perfect obedience can satisfy God. We cannot do it, Xt can and did. We shall be judged by this law.

'the law that gives freedom' = freedom from bondage to sin, free to follow Xt, growing in likeness to him.

Freedom of British Rail must still keep within lines, no line comes along Blenheim Road.

Relevance? Humility, value every fellow Xtn, whatever social, cultural differences.