

The End of the Law

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The discussion of the end of the Mosaic law and the ramifications involved is one which usually bogs down in confusion. All interpreters of the Scripture are faced with the clear teaching that the death of Christ brought an end to the Mosaic law (Rom 10:4) while at the same time recognizing that some of the commandments of that law are restated clearly and without change in the epistles of the New Testament. Or to state the problem in the form of a question, it is this: How can the law be ended if portions of it are repeated after it supposedly ended?

The Concept of the Law

The law which is involved in this question is the Mosaic law. Although the word “torah” was used quite widely in Judaism, it especially referred to the code that was given at Sinai. The lives of outstanding rabbis were sometimes called “torah.” The whole of the Old Testament was so designated, but particularly the Pentateuch was the Torah. This superiority of the Pentateuch was linked directly to the greatness of Moses (Num 12:6–8; Deut 34:10), though the rabbis were careful to point out that any difference was only in matters of detail not of principle.

The law is generally divided into three parts—the moral, the ceremonial, and the judicial. The moral part is termed “the words of the covenant, the ten words” (Exod 34:28)—from which Greek equivalent we derive the label *decalogue*. The judgments begin at Exodus 21:2 and determine the rights between man and man with attendant judgments on offenders. The ceremonial part, which commences at Exodus 25:1, regulated the worship life of Israel.

Although this threefold division of the law is quite popularly accepted in Christian theology, the Jews either did not acknowledge it or at least did not insist on it. They first counted all the particular precepts; then divided them into families of commandments. By this method they counted 613 total laws and twelve families of commandments. “The numeral letters of torah denote six hundred and eleven of them; and the other two, which, as they say, are the first words of the decalogue, were delivered by God himself to the people, and so come not within the compass of the word Torah in that place: whence they take this important consideration, namely, Deut 33:4, ‘Moses commanded us the law,’ that is, of six hundred and eleven precepts; two being given by God himself, completes the number of six hundred and thirteen.”

These 613 individual laws were further divided into negative and positive commands, and it was said that there were 365 negative ones and 248 positive ones. This meant that there was one command for each day of the year, in order to keep man from temptation, and one command for each member of the body of man to remind him to obey God with his whole being.

In commenting on this, Schechter tries to minimize the actual numerical count in order to vitiate the Christian's use of this large number to emphasize the burden of the law. He says that the numbers are relatively unimportant; this division into negative and positive commandments was largely homiletical—the sermon to beware of temptation and obey God with one's entire body was what mattered, not the numbers.

The twelve families into which the law was categorized were according to the number of the twelve tribes of Israel. These were further subdivided into twelve families of affirmative and twelve of negative commands. The affirmative families concerned: (1) God and His worship, (2) the sanctuary and priesthood, (3) sacrifices, (4) cleanness and uncleanness, (5) alms and tithes, (6) things to be eaten, (7) passover and other feasts, (8) rule and judgment, (9) truth and doctrines, (10) women and matrimony, (11) criminal judgments and punishments, and (12) judgments in civil causes. The negative families concerned: (1) false worship, (2) separation from the heathen, (3) things sacred, (4) sacrifices and priests (5) meats, (6) fields and harvest, (7) house of doctrines, (8) justice and judgment, (9) feasts, (10) chastity, affinity and purity, (11) marriages, and (12) the kingdom. The total number of the commandments, which is far above the usual ten that the average person remembers when he thinks of the law, and the intricate dividing of them, easily and effectively illuminates several New Testament passages which speak of the detail and burden of the law (cf. Heb 9:1, 10; Acts 15:10; Eph 2:15).

The fact that the specific laws which made up these families were drawn from all parts of the Pentateuch emphasizes another very important fact which must not be obscured by the dividing of the law which the Jews did—and that fact is that the law was also considered as a unit. Commandments from every part were equally important and binding on the life of the Israelite, and the grouping of the various laws under each of the families proves this.

This unitized character of the law is further seen by noticing the penalties which are attached to certain commands in each of the three categories of the law—the commandments, judgments, and ordinances. One of the laws in the first division of commandments required the keeping of the Sabbath day. When a certain Israelite transgressed this command by gathering sticks on that day, the penalty was death by stoning (Num 15:32–36). One of the precepts in the category of judgments concerned letting the land have its sabbatical year of rest. For 490 years Israel ignored that command, and God settled the account due His land by sending the people into Babylonian captivity, where many of them died (Jer 25:11). In the third category, one of the regulations concerned the proper way to worship. This was transgressed by Nadab and Abihu, who were punished with immediate death when they offered strange fire before the Lord (Lev 10:1–7). In each of these three examples the punishment for disobedience involved death, even though the violation was of a different part of the law. The commandments concerning the land or worship were no less binding, nor was the punishment less severe than the commandment to keep the Sabbath, which was one of the first ten. The law was given as a unit. (One might be facetious and remark that it was too bad that Nadab and Abihu were not Christians so that they could have claimed that they were not under any of the law except the Ten Commandments and thus have been spared!)

James's use of the law is based on this same concept of the unitary nature of the law. When dealing with the problem of partiality in the synagogues, James decries it on the basis that it is in contradiction to the law of loving one's neighbor as one's self (Lev 19:18; Jas 2:8). The single violation, he says, makes them guilty of the whole law (Jas 2:10). He could not make such a drastic statement if the law were not considered as a unit. All of this, of course, has a very important bearing on the doing away of the law; for it seems to point to the fact that, unless the

New Testament expressly says so, part of the law cannot be ended without doing away with all of it.

Spiritual Evidence

The earliest specific declaration in New Testament times that the law was ended came in the discussions of the Jerusalem council. The question before the council was whether or not circumcision was necessary to salvation. After hearing the evidence from Peter and Paul that God was saving Gentiles apart from the law and its ordinances, James declared emphatically that circumcision was not required in order that the Gentiles be saved (Acts 15:19). In testifying concerning the problem, Peter had described the law as “a yoke upon the neck of the disciples, which neither our fathers nor we were able to bear” (vs. 10). The necessity of circumcision was not the only matter with which the Judaizers were troubling the Gentile converts, for they were also trying to make them obliged to keep the whole law (cp. vs. 24). In the letters which the council authorized to be sent to the churches, James clearly stated that this was not obligatory for the Gentile converts (vs. 24). He asked them to curb the exercise of their liberty in certain practices, but not on the basis that they were under the law, simply on the grounds of love for their Jewish brethren and for the sake of the unity of the church. If there was ever a good opportunity to say that the Gentiles were under the law, this was it; for that would have settled the matter simply and quickly. But the apostles, who were Jews themselves, recognized that the law had no force any longer, and they did not try to impose it.

The council recognized what Paul stated later in his great doctrinal Epistle to the Romans, namely, that “Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to every one that believeth” (Rom 10:4). This is the same theme which Paul had preached earlier in the synagogue at Antioch in Pisidia on his first missionary journey, when he summarized his sermon by stating: “And by him all that believe are justified from all things, from which ye could not be justified by the law of Moses” (Acts 13:39). In these passages, as in others in the writings of Paul (cf. Gal 5:1; Rom 3:21–22; 7:6), it is made clear that whatever the law could or could not do came to an end with the work of Christ on the cross. Commenting on the specific phrase “the end of the law,” Chafer concluded: “Some see only that He, by His suffering and death, paid the penalty the law imposed and thus discharged the indictment against the sinner, which is comprehended in forgiveness. Others see that Christ fulfills the law by supplying the merit which the holy Creator demands, which is comprehended in justification. Doubtless both of these conceptions inhere in this passage; but it will be observed that whatever is done is done for those who believe—with no other requirement added—and that belief results in the bestowment of the righteousness of God.”

There is one other passage in the writings of Paul which, because it is more particular, is even more emphatic concerning the ending of the law. In 2 Corinthians 3:7–11 Paul makes the comparison between what is ministered through Moses and what is ministered through Christ. That which Moses ministered is called a ministration of death and it is specifically said to have been written and engraved in stones. The only part of the Mosaic law which was written in stones was the Ten Commandments—that category which some designate as the moral part of the law. Thus, this passage says that the Ten Commandments are a ministration of death; and furthermore, the same passage declares in no uncertain terms that they are done away (vs. 11). Language could not be clearer, and yet there are fewer truths of which it is harder to convince

people. All kinds of exegetical maneuvering goes on in the attempt to make this passage say something else.

The writer to the Hebrews is also clear in teaching that the law has been superseded (Heb 7:11–12). In this chapter the writer has shown that the priesthood of Melchizedek is greater than that of Aaron, and the proof he cites relates to tithing. Abraham gave a tithe of the spoils to Melchizedek, and since Levi—Abraham’s great-grandson, out of whom came the Levitical priesthood—also paid tithes on that occasion in Abraham, the whole Levitical priesthood is seen as subordinate to Melchizedek. Then the writer concludes that if the Levitical priesthood could have brought perfection to the people, there would not have been a need for the priesthood of Melchizedek. “For the priesthood being changed, there is made of necessity a change also of the law” (Heb 7:12). If Christ is our high priest today, then there has to be a change in the law, since He could not qualify as a priest under the Levitical arrangement (being of the tribe of Judah). If the law has not been done away today, then neither has the Levitical priesthood; but if Christ is our high priest, we cannot be under the law. Every prayer offered in the name of Christ is an affirmation of the end of the law.

Thus, the evidence of the New Testament forces to the conclusion that the law—all of it, including the Ten Commandments—has been done away.

The Problem

But the New Testament also includes in its ethic many of the specific commandments that were originally a part of the Mosaic law. If the law has been done away in Christ, then why and on what basis are these Mosaic injunctions more binding on the Christian? Is the Christian under the law (or at least certain of its commandments) or has it really been ended?

If the New Testament would simply quote the Ten Commandments, then the solution of the problem would be easy.

One would conclude that the passages which teach that the law is done away refer to all parts except the moral law. But the New Testament only reiterates nine of the ten commandments and it also quotes commands which are outside the moral part of the law (cp. Rom 13:9; Jas 2:8). Thus the New Testament establishes no pattern whereby one may conclude that only the judicial and ceremonial parts of the law were ended; and the problem remains. How can the entire law be done away and parts of it be repeated in the New Testament epistles?

Some Solutions

One solution to the problem is simply to ignore it. The article on law in *Baker’s Dictionary of Theology* does this. The writer states that Christians are reminded of “their duty in terms of the law ... The Christian is under the evangelical obligation of love and the written law becomes his guide, a rule of gratitude.” The only aspect of the law which ended was its condemning power. Second Corinthians 3:7–11 and Hebrews 7:11–12 are ignored in the discussion.

A more usual solution is that of Calvin, which is followed by many in the Reformed tradition. Calvin taught that the abrogation of the law had reference to liberating the conscience from fear and to discontinuing the ancient Jewish ceremonies. He then distinguishes between the moral law, which he said was abrogated only in its effect of condemning men, and the ceremonial law, which was abrogated both in effect and in its use. In discussing 2 Corinthians 3 he only distinguishes the general differences of death and life in the old and new covenants. He

has a very fine exposition of the Ten Commandments, and it is interesting to note that in his discussion of the fourth commandment he did not consider Sunday as a continuation of the Jewish Sabbath (as the Westminster Confession did).⁶ Thus Calvin, as many who have followed him, considered part but not all of the law as ended and the Ten Commandments as binding on the church today (although the fourth commandment concerning the Sabbath had to be interpreted nonliterally). This still does not solve the dilemma or relieve the tension between the law as a unit being done away and some commandments being retained.

The solution proposed in this essay is basically one which distinguishes between a code and the commandments contained therein. The Mosaic law was one of several codes of ethics which God has given throughout history. That particular code contained, as we have seen, 613 specific commandments. But there have been other God-given codes. The laws under which Adam's life was governed combine to form what might be called a code for the Garden of Eden. There were at least two commandments in that code—dress the Garden and avoid eating the fruit of one tree. Noah was given commandments which included, after the Flood, the permission to eat meat (Gen 9:3). God revealed many commandments, statutes, and laws to Abraham which guided his life; together these may be called the Abrahamic code of conduct. The laws through Moses were codified formally and fearfully by being handed down from Mount Sinai. The New Testament speaks of the “law of Christ” (Gal 6:2) and the “law of the Spirit of life” (Rom 8:2). In the law of Christ are the hundreds of commandments of the New Testament epistles, and together these form a new and distinct code of ethics.

The Mosaic law has been done away in its entirety as a code. God is no longer guiding the life of man by this particular code. In its place He has introduced the law of Christ. Many of the individual commands within that law are new, but some are not. Some of the ones which are old were also found in the Mosaic law and they are now incorporated into the law of Christ. As a part of the Mosaic law they are completely and forever done away. As part of the law of Christ they are binding on the believer today. There are also in the law of Christ commandments from pre-Mosaic codes, as, for instance, the permission to eat meat (1 Tim 4:3). But the inclusion of this one, for example, does not mean that it is necessary to go through theological contortions in order to retain a part of the Mosaic code, so that that particular permission may be retained in this New Testament era. Likewise, it is not necessary to resort to nonliteral exegesis of 2 Corinthians 3 or Hebrews 7 or the fourth commandment in order to understand that the code is ended and familiar commandments are included in the new code.

May this procedure not be likened to the various codes in a household with growing children? At different stages of maturity new codes are instituted but some of the same commandments appear often. To say that the former code is done away and all its commandments is no contradiction. It is as natural as growing up. So it is with the Mosaic law and the law of Christ.

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