The Old Testament Law and the New Testament Believer

Brian Trainer
Dean, Detroit Baptist Theological Seminary

Those who accept the historic fundamentals are quick to embrace and endorse the doctrine and significance of the inspiration of the Word of God. We note that the text of Timothy states that “All Scripture is given by inspiration (breathed-out) of God and is profitable . . .” (2 Tim 3:16). We readily defend each verse from Genesis 1:1 to Revelation 22:21. We speak of our commitment to God’s Word doctrinally and our love for it personally. This is right and appropriate. Yet this commitment to all of God’s Word is often accompanied by an internal preference for parts of God’s Word in our daily spiritual diet and an avoidance of other sections. This avoidance is not prompted by a lack of confidence in inspiration. In most cases it is generated by questions of personal profitability. We do not question that the text is from God, but we are not sure that certain texts are particularly profitable for us.

The Mosaic Law is one such section of the Scriptures.¹ Each year in our Bible reading, with steely resolve we pledge to get through Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. At times with personal willpower we navigate our way through each verse, but internally we long to move on to Psalms, Proverbs, or a NT text that seem to speak more directly to the Christian walk. We acknowledge that David loved the Law of God, but surely that was because he had few other reading options. We understand the moral imperatives of the Ten Commandments, but the thirty verses on the “laws of discharge” do not strike the same chord. How are we to respond to this practical dichotomy within our belief system? We acknowledge that all of Scripture is profitable, but we only profit or deem relevant some of Scripture.

The question of the profitability and place of the Mosaic Law in the life of a NT believer is a vital one in distinguishing dispensationalism from other systems of biblical interpretation. It is also a question that has engendered much debate. Two centuries ago Jonathan Edwards observed, “There is perhaps no part of divinity attended with so much intricacy and wherein orthodox divines do so much differ as stating the precise agreement and difference between the

¹ This presentation will focus exclusively on the Mosaic Law. Paul’s use of the term “law” is understandably broader. For an excellent summary of Paul’s use see, Douglas J. Moo, “‘Law,’ ‘Works of the Law,’ and Legalism in Paul,” Westminster Theological Journal 45 (Spring 1983): 73–100.
two dispensations of Moses and Christ.”

Views range from applying literally nearly all of the Law to the believer’s life, to applying select parts of the Law, to suggesting that the NT believer is completely free from all of the Mosaic Law. The goal of this summary is not to answer all of the questions, but to survey the theological landscape and to define a hermeneutical strategy which assists in understanding the role of the Mosaic Law in the NT believer’s life.

Two systems of interpretation view the Mosaic Law as directly binding or applying specifically to the NT believer today. The most extreme view is that of the Christian Reconstructionists or theonomists. They desire to make both moral and civil elements of the Law binding on believers and unbelievers alike. This view holds that the Mosaic Covenant is God’s divine mandate and ethic for all society. They see OT Israel as a model citizenship to which all cultures should aspire. There are significant and obvious implications of this view. Though few mainstream evangelicals embrace it, the adherents include Greg Bahnsen, Gary North, R. J. Rushdoony, and some members of the political Christian Right.

Covenant theologians also believe there is direct application of the Mosaic Law in the life of the believer. John Calvin wrote, “I understand by the word ‘law’ not only the Ten Commandments, which set forth a godly and righteous rule of living, but the form of religion handed down by God through Moses.”

Whereas dispensationalism distinguishes between the relationships that God had with ethnic Israel and the NT church, covenant theology identifies the Church as a continuation of one people group through whom God is working. They identify the church as “spiritual” Israel. As such, they recognize more continuity between the laws and promises to Israel and the standards and future of the Church.

For example, many covenant theologians delineate between what they define as three categories of law: civil, ceremonial, and moral. This three-fold scheme was introduced by the early church father, Tertullian (c. 160-220). Covenantists believe the civil and ceremonial were uniquely time-limited to the children of Israel. The civil law was a means by which God regulated His theocracy, and the ceremonial pointed to the coming Messiah. Yet, they deem all elements of the moral Law of Moses as trans-cultural and timeless and thus binding on all believers today. By many accounts Martin Luther departed from this idea and held that the believer is not bound by the Law in any sense. But Melanchthon, his successor, sided with Calvin and the Reformers in upholding the third use of the Law—that the Law is a norm or guide for the believer’s sanctification.

Moving forward, Bill Combs notes that the evangelical landscape began to change in the 1980s. Stephen Westerholm’s *Israel’s Law and the Church’s Faith* prompted a reevaluation of the issue among scholars. Westerholm “convincingly argues, in a well-written book, that Luther

---


was basically correct, and that the believer is not under the Law in any sense.”⁵ In a review in the 
*Trinity Journal*, Thomas Schreiner called it “the most helpful extant work on Paul’s theology of 
the law.”⁶ In the *Westminster Theological Journal*, covenant theologian, Moises Silva says, 
“Between the covers of this unpretentious paperback readers will find more exegetical common 
sense and theological sophistication than in the many erudite volumes (not to mention the vast 
number of articles) on Paul’s view of the law that have appeared during the past fifteen years.”⁷ 
And later he says, “Reformed scholarship may need to incorporate Westerholm’s criticisms so as 
to formulate a more coherent doctrine of the place of the law in the Christian church.”⁸ 
Westerholm’s volume in conjunction with the work of Doug Moo and Thomas Schreiner 
significantly impacted the contemporary thinking on the role of the Mosaic Law in the believer’s 
life.

Dispensationalists, on the other hand, do not see the Mosaic Law as binding in the life of 
the NT believer. The primary reasons are threefold. First, the Mosaic Law is viewed as a binding 
covenant between God and ethnic Israel. The Mosaic Law was given to Israel at Sinai: “These 
are the statutes and ordinances and laws which the LORD established between Himself and the 
sons of Israel through Moses at Mount Sinai” (Lev 26:46). “He declares His words to Jacob, His 
statutes and His ordinances to Israel. He has not dealt thus with any nation; And as for His 
ordinances, they have not known them” (Ps 147:19–20). Paul says “my kinsmen according to the 
flesh…are Israelites, to whom belongs the adoption as sons, and the glory and the covenants and 
the giving of the Law and the temple service and the promises” (Rom 9:4). That means that all 
the rest of humanity are “Gentiles who do not have the Law” (Rom 2:14). In Exodus 19:3ff God 
 instructed Moses to speak the words of the covenant to the people of Israel. Throughout the 
narrative in Exodus, God highlights the unique relationship that the people of Israel would 
have to the Mosaic Covenant. This is further highlighted at the second iteration of the Law in 
Deuteronomy 5. As a covenant document, we should expect the Mosaic Law to endure only so 
long as the Mosaic Covenant itself. Dorsey argues, “In sum, virtually all the regulations of the 
corpus—certainly ninety-five percent—are culturally restricted, geographically limited, and 
cultically and politically specific, and as a result are inapplicable to, and in fact unfulfillable by, 
Christians living throughout the world today.”⁹ As a covenant between God and Israel, and 
because ethnic Israel is distinct from the NT church, dispensationalists do not see the church as 
being under the obligations of the Law.

Second, a dispensationalist sees the Law as a unified whole. The covenant as given by 
God to Israel was a single covenant. Israel was to keep the Law in totality. There clearly are 
instructions which relate to human relations within the community, to priestly functions, and to

---

⁵ William Combs, “Paul, The Law, and Dispensationalism,” *Detroit Baptist Seminary 

⁶ 9 (Spring 1988): 123.


⁸ Ibid, 177.

⁹ See David A. Dorsey, “The Use of the OT Law in the Christian Life: A Theocentric 
moral imperatives. Yet, there is no indication that these were to be viewed as distinct from one another. In both the OT and NT, the Law is always referred to as singular. All 121 uses of the word *law* in Paul are singular, reflecting his thinking that the Law is a single entity. To suggest that parts of it are functional today while other aspects are non-functional is to dissect a single entity and to arbitrarily create divisions which are not suggested in the Scriptural text. It is inappropriate and unthinkable from a first-century Jewish perspective to divide the Law. Paul argues in Galatians 5:3 for the unity of the law, noting that the acceptance of one part of the Law (circumcision) makes one a debtor to the whole.

Third, a dispensationalist views the Law as being fulfilled via the life and death of Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ is presented in the Gospels as being the fulfillment of the Law (Matt 5:17) and in the epistles as being “the end of the Law” (Rom 10:4). He was the perfect completion of the Law, thus freeing those in Him from the obligations of all aspects of the Law. Chafer wrote: “Only those portions of the Scriptures which are directly addressed to the children of God under grace are to be given a personal and primary application. . . . It does not follow that the Christian is appointed to conform to those governing principles which were the will of God for people of other dispensations.”

Throughout Paul’s life and epistles he stresses the believer’s freedom from the Law. As noted above, Romans 10:4 is the climax of his teaching as it relates to the role of the Law in the believer’s life. The concept of “end” or *telos* can indicate “end” or “abrogation” of the Law, or also signify “goal,” or “culmination” – that which the Law anticipated. Arguing for this dual sense of *telos*, Moo says, “The analogy of a race course (which many scholars think *telos* is meant to convey) is helpful: the finish line is both the ‘termination’ of the race (the race is over when it is reached) and the ‘goal’ of the race (the race is run for the sake of reaching the finish line).”

Ryrie notes that this does not free the believer to live without any moral boundaries, but that we are bound only to NT commands and those OT directives that are restated in the NT as part of the law of Christ. The distinction between the Mosaic Law and the law of Christ is important. He states, “As a part of the Mosaic Law they are completely and forever done away. As a part of the law of Christ they are binding on believers today.” It should be noted that Paul refers to the “law of Christ” not in terms of a list of stipulations to be obeyed, but primarily of it being fulfilled by the power of the Holy Spirit as believers love one another.

This survey of the positions leads to the question of practicality. In what ways does dispensationalism view the Law of Moses as being beneficial in the life of a NT believer?

First, dispensationalists recognize that the Law cannot provide salvation for a man nor can it justify a man before God, but it is a “schoolmaster” which the Holy Spirit utilizes to convict men of sin. In Romans 7, Paul addresses the role of the Law within his own life as an Israelite who was under the Law. “Thou shalt not covet” was the commandment that convicted him of his sinful state and made him alive toward the realization of his spiritual death. The Mosaic Law, specifically the Ten Commandments, served as a written covenant for Israel of the

---


moral law of God that is placed within each man’s heart (Rom 3:19). In like manner, NT believers can utilize the Law as a tool in gospel proclamation. The Ten Commandments reflect the universal, timeless moral requirements that God places upon every man. A man’s conscience in conjunction with the Law exposes his shortcomings and renders him dead before God. As the Holy Spirit utilizes the Law in that manner, Paul calls the Law “holy, and just, and good” (Rom 7:12).

The NT believer is not under the Law, but under grace. Moo says, “The Mosaic Law has had a definite sin-producing and sin-intensifying function: it has brought ‘knowledge of sin’ (3:20), ‘wrath’ (4:15), ‘transgression’ (5:13–14), and an increase in the severity of sin (5:20).” The OT period was when most people were under the dominion of sin—unregenerate. And being “under the Law” did not really help things; it made them worse. “The law, as Paul puts it in 1 Cor 15:56, is ‘the power of sin.’ This means, then, that there can be no final liberation from the power of sin without a corresponding liberation from the power and lordship of the law. To be ‘under the law’ is to be subject to the constraining and sin-strengthening regime of the old era; to be ‘under grace’ is to be subject to the new era in which freedom from the power of sin is available.” It is grace that brings salvation, not Law.

Second, the reading of the Mosaic Law is profitable in the life of a NT believer if the exegete asks the right questions of it. As noted above, the believer should not seek to place himself under the Law as if it were binding upon him. Yet, the believer should recognize that the Law reveals the moral character of God. In the era of grace, Paul declares the Law as good (Rom 7:16; I Tim 1:8) and holy (Rom 7:12). As such, a believer should see the Law as a pedagogical tool, an asset to understanding the character of God and his expectation of righteous living. Communicated within the Law are timeless principles or transdispensational truths. These principles are not based exclusively within the Mosaic Law. They extended prior to the Mosaic Law and also into the NT era. The goal when reading the Mosaic Law is to recognize the

---

13 The fourth commandment regarding the keeping of the Sabbath is the exception. See From Sabbath to Lord’s Day, ed. D. A. Carson (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1982).

14 Romans, 389.

15 Ibid.

16 Early dispensationalists suggested that the Mosaic Law was of no benefit to believers. Stephen Westerholm denies the possibility that the Mosaic Law can provide even so much as general moral guidance to NT believers (Israel’s Law and the Church’s Faith, pp. 198–218). Lewis Sperry Chafer, in his attempt to distance NT theology from the necessity to obey the Law, also tended to ignore even indirect application of the Law to the NT believer (Grace [Findlay, OH, 1922]). However, this is not a necessary element of the dispensational position.

17 Dr. Mark Snoeberger suggests three key questions to determine a transdispensational principle: 1.) Is the principle part of the natural, created order? 2.) Is the principle commanded or practiced in multiple dispensations, and, specifically, in our present dispensation? 3.) For any practice that falls outside the creative order and outside the NT, is there an ethical principle that we may discern from the practice that can generally inform or supplement our contemporary ethic?
timeless principle upon which the Law is based. By doing so, the reader grows in his knowledge of the Divine Author.

For example, the following six questions may be helpful when reading the Law and then applying them to a specific text.

1. What did the text mean to the original readers?
   The starting point for all biblical interpretation is placing the text in its original context via the crossing of grammatical, cultural, geographical, and historical bridges. A clear understanding of the Law’s intent to the original listeners is vital.

2. What does the text teach us about ourselves (humanity)?
   All good laws reveal the shortcomings of the citizens to whom it applies. For example, speed limits remind us that we are naturally selfish and focused upon our own agenda instead of the safety of others. God’s laws do the same, but with clear perception and direct application.

3. What does the text teach us about God?
   The Mosaic Law is a revelation of the holiness of God (Lev 19:2). The foundation for ethical and moral actions prescribed in the Law is the character of God. He is the standard from which all thoughts, words, and deeds are based.

4. What does the text teach us about our relationships with each other?
   Much of the Mosaic Law relates to the affairs between fellow members of the people of Israel. Instruction is given on how people are to cooperate with their friends, neighbors, workers, and enemies.

5. What does the text teach us about justice?
   One purpose of the Law is to establish justice in the land. It provides a framework for understanding ethical priorities and penalties.

6. How can the principles that are derived from these questions be applied in our contemporary context?
   Direct application of specific Mosaic Law is not valid for a NT believer. Yet, the absolutes learned about God, humanity, relationships, and justice serve to equip the believer for good works (2 Tim 3:17).

Using these six questions when reading Deuteronomy 22:8 leads to simple applicable principles:

“When you build a new house, you shall make a parapet for your roof, that you may not bring the guilt of blood upon your house, if anyone should fall from it.” (ESV)

1. Original Readers: The original context instructed all Israelites to build a small wall as a barrier around the flat roof of their homes.

2. Human Nature: The command illustrates the natural selfishness and laziness of man. If no injunction were given, the natural proclivity of man would be to shortchange the building process for his own ease.

3. God’s Character: This command communicates that God’s love for mankind extends to all people in the smallest of details. This instruction is for personal protection and the defense of integrity. It connotes God’s concern for the sanctity of life. It also
portrays a God who will provide. The Sovereign who commands an action will equip one to accomplish it.

4. Man’s Responsibility: Man’s care for neighbors and friends should extend to a watch-care over their safety and a willingness to exert extra effort on their behalf. Loving one’s brother takes effort and cost, but it is rewarded.

5. Justice: Slothfulness and lack of foresight in caring for others can lead to significant consequences. One must fulfill all personal responsibilities lest he be liable for the actions of others.

6. Application: Building a parapet around a roof is not the most likely application of this text in our contemporary setting. One of several applications may be using my possessions in a manner that considers the welfare of my family, friends, and neighbors.

Asking the right questions allows the Holy Spirit to reveal both the fullness of God’s perfect character and the heinousness of man’s depraved nature. We see ourselves as selfishly motivated in need of directives that teach us to love God and love others. The Law reveals who we are. It is a mirror that exposes our sin and declares us dead.

In like manner, it displays who God is. Indeed His separateness from all manner of sin is highlighted, but also His grace as He seeks the best for His people in all matters of life. His mercy is meted out, and His justice is perfectly measured. It is no wonder that David said, “Oh how I love your law, it is my meditation all the day” (Psalm 119:97). David learned who his God was by God’s self-revelation in the Law of Moses.

The third way in which dispensationalists view the Law as being profitable to a NT believer is by celebrating this new era of grace. John says that “For the law was given by Moses, but grace and truth came by Jesus Christ” (John 1:17). The Law at its best exposed man’s sin and God’s holiness; by doing so it brought nothing but a curse to mankind. As we stand now in Christ, “the righteousness of the law” is fulfilled (Rom 8:4). We stand justified in Jesus. The ethical goals of the Law are fulfilled in the believer as he allows the Spirit of God to direct his life in a spirit of love (Gal 5:13-15; Rom 8:4; 13:8, 10). The Aaronic priesthood and sacrificial system have been replaced by a “new” and “living” way (Heb. 10:20). The Law has no more power over us. Dispensationalists recognize the Law as the Word of God to us making it profitable, but not as the Word of God for us as binding.

Mosaic Law is foundational for understanding the history of Israel, the love of the Psalmists, the message of the prophets, the life of Christ, and the epistles to the early churches. Law is not always easy reading or preaching. It demands additional study and persevering meditation to unlock its riches. It is not the yoke in which we as NT believers are bound, but it is a treasure trove of riches as we seek to know and love our God.