

The Moral Law

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The Law not Abrogated by Christ to Believers

The basic question of the historic antinomian controversy was whether or not the moral Law of God is abrogated in the Gospel; and it was the assertion that it is thus abrogated which gave Antinomianism its name. This issue is presenting itself again in connection with some of the current and popular expositions of the doctrine of sanctification.

The answer to the question about the abrogation of the Law is given categorically by Paul when he writes, "Do we then make void the law through faith? God forbid: yea, we establish the law" (Romans iii. 31). In the preceding verses he lays down the nature of justification so exactly that all the causes — efficient, meritorious, formal, instrumental, and final — are clearly described, as also is the consequent of this truth, namely, the excluding of all self-confidence and boasting in what a man does. He then draws a conclusion which he states both positively and negatively (Romans iii. 28). The positive statement is that justification is "by faith," the negative statement is that it is "without the deeds of the law." When all this is said, the apostle brings forward an objection in order to refute the charge that he was destroying the Law. He asks, "Do we make void the Law?"¹ The only reply which the apostle makes to this is an ejaculation of abhorrence, "God forbid," by which strong expression it is clear how intolerable such a doctrine ought to be. Paul not only repudiates the insinuation that he is destroying the Law, but substitutes an assertion in its place. He adds, "Yea, we establish the law", using a metaphor from the strengthening of some structure that was likely to fall.

Many interpreters have been perplexed that Paul can thus say that he establishes the Law, especially considering those many places in his epistles which seem to abrogate it. One suggestion is that Paul means no more than that the Law is now established in the sense that the truth to which it bore witness has now come to pass. (See ver. 21.) This interpretation, however, is plainly insufficient. Another suggestion, based on the view that these words refer to the ceremonial Law, finds their meaning in the fact that the ceremonies and types were fulfilled in Christ. This, again, is not quite adequate, for when the apostle speaks about the Law in this place he most certainly includes the Moral Law.

¹ The word employed by the apostle was previously used by him in ver. 3 and means to make "empty" and of "no effect".

The Law is established by the Gospel in three ways. Firstly, in respect of its penalties: this aspect was established in Christ, who satisfied the justice of God. Secondly, in respect of its requirement of perfect obedience: this also was fulfilled in Christ.² Thirdly, and what seems to be Paul's chief purpose in this passage, the Law is established by the Gospel because the believer obtains grace in some measure to fulfil the Law. The believer thus still keeps the Law in its preceptive part, and by faith in Christ is helped to a life of obedience to it. The truth which emerges from a right understanding of Paul's words in this passage is, therefore, that the doctrine of grace, when seen at its highest and fullest, does not overthrow the Law, but rather establishes it.

There is, nevertheless, a further question to be discussed, namely, whether Christ, having established the Law in the manner already observed, then abrogated it so far as its authority over the believer is concerned. It would seem at first as if the Scripture contains some contradictions on this subject. For example, in the passage under examination Paul denies that his teachings "make void the law"; yet in another passage he expressly uses the word³ which is here denied and speaks of the Law as "that which is done away" (II Corinthians iii. 1).

There is no abrogation of the Law in the Gospel. A careful distinction must be made between the abrogation of a law and its relaxation. Relaxation supposes a law still standing in force, but abrogation means that a law is totally taken away. Such abrogation arises sometimes from the original constitution of the law, which limited and prescribed the time for which it should continue; and sometimes it arises from an explicit revocation of the law by that authority which made it. It may be easily proved that there has been an abrogation of the ceremonial and judicial laws; but there is no such abrogation of the moral Law. It is true, of course, that there is some mitigation of the severe application of the Law in respect of the person of the believer; but this is not an abrogation of the Law, for Christ vindicated the Law on the sinner's behalf and bore its curse as the sinner's Surety. The change that comes about through the grace of God is not a change in the Law, but a change in the sinner towards the Law.

Closer attention, however, has still to be paid to the concept of the Law as a covenant. The covenant of Law is now ended, but the rule of Law is eternal. There is some difference of judgment among expositors about the nature of the covenant of Law. Some make the Law a Covenant of Works and hold that it is upon the ground that its covenant aspect is ended; others call it a subservient covenant to the Covenant of Grace, and regard it as introduced only to enhance the glory of God's grace; there is a third group who call the covenant of Law a mixed covenant of works and grace, but this can scarcely be comprehended as possible, much less as true. The view which seems

² It is a question worth pursuing, whether the righteousness by which a believer is justified is in any way the righteousness of the Law. Within the right understanding of the terms employed there can be no hesitation in affirming that this is so. The doctrine of the imputation of Christ's active obedience to the believer is beyond all doubt an establishing of the Law in this manner.

³ The word is *katargéo*.

most likely to be correct is the one which understands that since the Fall God never entered into covenant with man on any other basis than that of grace, and that therefore the Law given by Moses was itself part of the Covenant of Grace. The covenant of Law, even as an expression of the Covenant of Grace, is brought to an end because though the essence of the former covenant and that of the one that replaced it are the same, yet the administration of the former is altogether outmoded.⁴ It is perfectly clear, therefore, that whoever looks to the Law for life and justification abuses the Law and turns it into a man made covenant of works.

One of the attempts to expel the Law of God from the life of the believer is based upon the illogical assertion that the Law as such is abolished but its substance remains obligatory. But how can obligation be present without the presence also of that which is essentially law? Law and obligation imply each other. For if the continuing substance of the Law carries obligation with it, then when a believer does not walk according to his duty he sins. Not to comply with the obligation is not to comply with the Law. Again, to say that the matter of the Law binds, but yet not as a law, is a contradiction in terms; for what is a law if it is not something laid down by the command and will of a superior? If this be pressed to a particular application, it may be asked whether love for God, which is the substance of the Law, is not also the will of God. It would seem to be illogical to assert that love to God should bind believers merely because the matter itself is good, but that it should not on any account bind them because God wills them to love Him. Furthermore, views which deprecate the Law of God must necessarily deny not only the obligatory nature of the Law, but even the will of God in requiring believers to love Him; for a law is nothing but the will of the Law-giver.

The premise which asserts the abrogation of the Law to the believer quickly leads to an impossible conclusion, for if the Law is abrogated to believers under the New Covenant it must be regarded as equally abrogated to believers under the Old. There is no halfway position in this argument, for either it must be denied that there were any believers under the Old Covenant, or, if there were, then they were freed from the Law as much as believers are now. If the Law be taken for the entire administration of the Old Covenant then, of course, believers under the Gospel are free from it in such a way that believers of earlier times were not: but if the Law be understood in respect of its essential parts in directing and commanding, then these things are either still equally in force, or else equally abrogated to all believers, whether under the Old Covenant or the New. The arguments against the subjection of believers to the Law under the New Covenant are equally as strong against the subjection of those who were under the Old.

From some points of view it is possible to make what might be called concessions to the idea of the abrogation of the Law, but it cannot be insisted upon too strongly that in the proper sense of the word there is no abrogation whatsoever. The concession may be made in a purely verbal respect because so many reformed theologians have spoken of the abrogation of the Law, though not with that erroneous meaning attaching to the

⁴ This appears from Hebrews vii. 18,19 and viii. 7, 8.

word which is here being refuted. In a loose way of speaking it may also be conceded that there is an abrogation of the Law to believers in respect of justification, but, strictly the Law was never designed by God to be an instrument of justification, and so it is not properly relevant to speak even of the mitigation of the Law. In fact, in all aspects of salvation, if the Law is "established" as the apostle says, then there can be no talk of its "abrogation". The far better word, therefore, is mitigation.

It is when the believer's walk with God is considered that some mitigation of the Law may be acknowledged. The believer is freed, for example, from the burdensomeness of a rigid obedience, though there must be no misunderstanding here, for the deliverance of Christ is not of such a sort that the believer is no longer under obligation to render a perfect obedience. It must be maintained that for the believer not to obey the Law of God to its utmost perfection is a sin, and that every believer sins in this respect; nevertheless, such is the mercy of God in Christ that the believer's obedience to the Law, which is but inchoate and imperfect, is accepted by God through the merits of Christ. This is a mitigation which arises solely from the fact of grace in Christ, for the Law, strictly taken, would still condemn the sinner.

This mitigation may also be seen in respect of the way in which the Law no longer provokes sin in the believer as it does in the unbeliever. In the Epistle to the Romans the apostle complained that the Law of God had the bitter effect of making him the worse (Romans vii. 8). The more spiritual and supernatural the Law was, the more his carnal and corrupt heart resented it: so that the more the Law would dam up the torrent of sinful lusts, the higher they rose. But this painful experience is not to be ascribed to the Law, but to Paul's corruption. It is not the brightness of light that dims the sight or blinds the eyes, for light was especially created by God for them, but the infirmity and weakness of the eyes, which are not able to endure such brightness. The experience of the Law in the heart of the believer may be illustrated from nature. As the thorns that are cut down sprout again even more abundantly, so do corruptions while cut off by the Law, because they remain fixed and rooted in the sinner's heart. In the godly, however, because there is a new nature and a principle of love and delight in the Law of God created within him, his corruption does not increase and grow by the Law but is rather subdued and quelled. The provocative power of the Law is thus mitigated by the effect of grace within the heart.⁵

Although the Law is mitigated or relaxed in relation to believers in the ways now noticed, it must nevertheless be affirmed that the Law perpetually continues as a rule of life to them. In support of this it must be observed, first of all, that the different phrases that the Scripture uses concerning the ceremonial Law and its abrogation⁶ are nowhere applied to the moral Law. It has never been said of the moral Law, that it is changed, or

⁵ In the experience of the wholly unregenerate, it should be noted, it is not only the commandment of the Law that stirs up evil in his heart, but also the promises of the Gospel. The difference of effect depends, therefore, on the difference in the persons.

⁶ See Ephesians ii. 14,15; Hebrews vii. 12,18 and viii. 13.

becomes old, or is abrogated, which expressions denote a change in the Law; but when the Scripture speaks of the moral Law it says that the believer is "dead" to it and that he is "redeemed" from the curse of it, which phrases imply that the change is in the believer and not in the Law.

A second consideration is that the holiness required of the believer is nothing but conformity to the Law. It is perfectly clear that when the apostle spoke against the Law, he was not speaking of it as the rule which obliges the believer to its obedience. For example, in writing to the Galatians, he plainly warns those who desire to be justified by the Law of their hopeless condition (Galatians v. 4), but he immediately proceeds to urge them not to use the liberty which Christ gives as an occasion to the flesh, and he gives this reason, "For all the law is fulfilled in one word, even in this, Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself" (Galatians v. 14). Is the apostle contradicting himself in the same chapter? Is he urging them to obey the Law and yet at the same time reproving them for desiring to be under it? Certainly not; the circumstances were different. When they desire to seek justification by the Law, then he warns them; but when they are neglectful of their obligation to obey the Law, then he rebukes them.

Further, disobedience to the Law is still a sin in the believer. If there is sin there must also be Law, for sin is transgression of a law (I John iii. 4). When David commits adultery, or when Peter denies Christ, are not these sins in them? If so, is not David's adultery a sin because it is against a particular commandment? It is an evasion to say that it is a sin only against the love of Christ, for then there would be no sins but sins of unkindness or unthankfulness. Christ's love may indeed be the supreme reason for obeying the commands of God, but that does not hinder the command itself from binding the believer as the expression of the will of the Law-giver.

Finally, it is obvious that there are many reasons why the ceremonial Law should be abrogated which can in no way apply to the moral. In the first place the object of the ceremonial Law was not something perpetual, nor was it in itself true holiness. To circumcise and to offer sacrifices were not in themselves holy and good, nor is the leaving of them a sin; whereas the matter of the moral Law is perpetually good, and failure to perform it is necessarily a sin. Can it be thought that it was all the same to God whether a man was an adulterer or chaste, as it was whether a man was circumcised or not circumcised? Again, the ceremonial Law was typical and foreshadowed Christ who was to come; but now that He is come there is no use for these ceremonies. Lastly, the Jews and the Gentiles were to be joined into one body, with no difference between them; and to effect this it was necessary that the partition-wall of ceremonies should be pulled down; but no such circumstance affects the permanence of the moral Law.

It is necessary to pay some attention to those Scriptures which seem to indicate that the moral Law was to endure for a limited time only and in the same manner as the ceremonial Law. The first of these for consideration is the statement, "The law and the prophets were until John,"⁷ words which are sometimes understood to mean that the

⁷ Luke xvi. 16, and see also Matthew xi. 13.

Law was to continue only until John's time. This passage, of course, provides no proof at all that the Law was to be abrogated when John the Baptist came; for, lest any should misunderstand His words in such a way the Lord immediately adds, "It is easier for heaven and earth to pass, than one tittle of the law to fail" (Luke xvi. 17). The meaning, therefore, is that the Law was to cease in so far as it prefigured Christ, that is to say, in its ceremonial and typical aspect. For this reason the Law and the prophets are put together, as agreeing in one general thing, namely, to foretell of Christ and to typify Him.

The next Scripture to be considered is that well-known sentence so much used in this controversy, which reads, "For ye are not under the law, but under grace" (Romans vi. 14). For the exposition of these words it must be asked in what sense Paul is arguing against the Law and what is the proper subject under discussion. This inquiry runs back to the question raised by some believing Pharisees in Jerusalem who so pressed the necessity of circumcision that they joined Moses and Christ together (Acts xv). It seems that in spite of the decision of the council which condemned that opinion, there were nevertheless many who persisted in requiring circumcision, and this, in turn, necessitated the refutation by the apostle of such a false view of the Gospel. As has been observed in an earlier chapter in this discussion, although the keeping of the ceremonial Law was the occasion of the controversy in the first place, yet Paul now extends his arguments to include the moral Law, because of the widespread assumption among the Jews that the observance of the moral Law without Christ was enough for their salvation. It is plain, however, that the apostle is arguing against the Law not in its own nature and glory, but only in the Jewish abuse of it. The argument transferred itself, as it were, from the ceremonial Law to the moral Law because of the false reasoning of the Jews. If the Jews could persuade themselves that the external performance of the ceremonial Law was enough to make them acceptable with God, even though they lived in gross disobedience to the moral Law, how much more would they deceive themselves about their acceptance with God when they lived a life externally conformable to the moral Law! It is in a context of this kind that the apostle seems to speak things derogatory to the Law, because the Jews took it without Christ; just as he likewise calls the ceremonies beggarly elements, when he knew, of course, that they were signs of an evangelical grace.

It is extremely important to observe that the apostle uses the word "law" in different senses, because failure to discern these differences has been the occasion of much misunderstanding. In most of the passages where the Law seems to be abolished, it is taken in one of two senses. Sometimes it is used synecdochically, in which the whole is put for part, that is to say, the word Law has been used for only that part which condemns. An example of this is the passage where the apostle says, "Against such there is no law" (Galatians v. 23), and speaks as if there were nothing in a law but condemnation. On other occasions the word "law" is put for the ministry of Moses, as a dispensation that was far inferior to the ministry of the Gospel (See Galatians iv. 25, v. 1-4). Before any conclusions are drawn, therefore, about Paul's view of the abolition of the Law, the first task is that of defining the sense in which the term is being employed.

Another important task in this respect is to determine the different meanings of such phrases as, "without the law", "in the law", "of the law", and "under the law". "Without the law" is to be understood in two ways: first, a man is "without the law", in the sense of being without the knowledge of it; thus the Gentiles are "without the law" (Romans ii. 12); and second, a man is "without the law" when he is without the experience of the accusing and terrifying power of the Law (Romans vii. 9). Opposite to the phrase "without the law", is the expression "in the law" (Romans ii. 12), and in this passage it signifies those who possess the knowledge of the Law and yet sin against it. Much to the same purpose is the phrase "of the law" (Romans iv. 14) which sometimes is equivalent to "of the circumcision" (Colossians iv. 11; Titus i. 10), namely, those who are initiated into the ministry of Moses. The apostle uses also another phrase, "by the law" (Galatians ii. 21), meaning by works done in conformity to the Law; and it is in this sense that the apostle urges that righteousness is not "by the law". All the difficulty in the present controversy, however, is about the phrase, "under the law", and it is to this that special attention has to be given.

It is, of course, possible for a believer to put himself "under the law" in a voluntary manner. Christ put Himself under the Law in this way, and so also did Paul. The apostle refers to this when he says that he became to some "as under the law" (I Corinthians ix. 20), though in this case it was the ceremonial Law under which he was prepared to place himself. Paul also describes himself as "in the law to Christ" (*énnomos*), for though a godly man is not properly "under the Law" (*hupó nómon*), he is nevertheless "in the law" (*énnomos*), and he adds the words "to Christ", however, so that none should think that he spoke of the whole Law, including the ceremonial part of it which was abolished by Christ. In this well explained sense, then a godly man may be said to be under the Law.

How far may the phrase "not under the law" and "not under the curse" be equated? There is one sense in which they might appear to have the same meaning, as in the question, "Shall we sin, because we are not under the law, but under grace?" (Romans vi. 15) Because Paul is here speaking of sanctification, however, both in this chapter and the chapter following, it seems preferable to make the phrase "under the law" to mean the same thing as the phrase "under sin"; for the apostle, speaking of himself as carnal, says that the Law wrought in him all manner of evil (Romans vii. 8). This, indeed, is the work of the Law in every unregenerate man; so that the more the Law is applied to him the more does his corruption break out. The apostle's argument, then, is this: "Let not sin reign in you, for now you are not under the Law stirring up sin and provoking it in you, but under sanctifying and healing grace".

The third passage that seems to teach that the moral Law was to endure for a limited time only is that in which Paul says, "Ye also are become dead to the law" (Romans vii. 4). The apostle explains what it is to be under the Law by an analogy from a married woman who is bound to her husband as long as he lives, but who, when her husband dies, is free. In the exposition of this analogy there is some difference among commentators, but the following seems to be the meaning. The former "husband" whom the soul had was not the moral Law, but sin — which by means of the Law is

provocative of evil corruptions within the soul. When the believer is regenerated, then the soul is married to another, that is, to Christ. It is important also to observe that in working out the application of this analogy, the apostle does not say, the Law is dead, but that the believers have "become dead"; for, indeed, the Law is never so much alive as in the godly who constantly obey it and live according to it. Farther on in this passage Paul turns the thought around and speaks of "that being dead wherein we were held" (Romans vii. 6). The thing which is here referred to as having died is interpreted by many commentators as being sin. Sin having been put to death — by Christ — the condemning and enslaving power of the Law is at an end, and the believer becomes "married" to another.

There is nothing in the Scripture, therefore, to give ground for the assumption that believers have no obligation and relation to the Law of God. The entire representation of the Christian life in the epistles proves the contrary and calls for the believer's loving obedience to that holy Law.

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