

Few topics are as hotly debated among conservative evangelical Christians as the place of the law of Moses in the life of the believer. More often than not the focal point of the debate has been the Ten Commandments. These were the subject of Table Talk No.4 (November 2001), in which the author outlined several divergent views including his own.

One major reason for our differences is that we seldom establish a proper theological framework for discussion. The right framework is the relationship between the old covenant and the new. It will be instructive to compare these two covenants with engagement and marriage.

When a couple decide to marry, they usually express their desire tangibly in the form of an engagement ring. The ring points to a commitment which though significant and real, is not complete. Only marriage will make it complete. As soon as the marriage takes place, the engagement period ends, never to be revived. The engagement ring will nevertheless be kept as a permanent reminder of a promise now fulfilled. Such fulfilment is symbolized by the wedding ring. The marriage continues an existing relationship, but it is at the same time a genuinely new experience.

This illustration tells us about continuity and discontinuity, promise and fulfilment. All these features can be seen in the relationship between old covenant and new. How they work will now come to light as we explore one classic case: the law of Moses. The central, coordinating theme in what follows will be that of fulfilment.

“Fulfilment” is a thread that runs right through the New Testament. When Jesus inaugurated the new covenant era, he thereby signalled the arrival of *the age of fulfilment*. It brought to fruition all that had been anticipated in the age of promise – the period governed by the Mosaic law (otherwise known as the old covenant).

We who enjoy the privilege of living in the age of fulfilment have corresponding responsibilities. One of

them is to *fulfil the law* (Rom. 8:4, 13:8-10, Gal. 5:14 see Greek text/AV translation). We need to recognize that *fulfilment* (a profoundly theological term) is not the same as *obedience*. They are nevertheless closely related in the sense that obedience is the natural sequel to fulfilment. Once we grasp what fulfilment means *theologically*, it should lead to obedience as a *moral obligation*.

Fulfilment draws attention to the movement from the old covenant to the new. Numerous examples could be given to show that such movement frequently entails some re-shaping of old covenant perspectives to produce the “form of teaching” which we must obey as new covenant believers (Rom. 6:17). This teaching comprises “new treasures as well as old” (Matt. 13:52), the old being the spiritual core of the old covenant, which still holds good under the new.

My aim in this article is the limited one of explaining the fulfilment process in relation to the law and its implications for our Christian lives. We will tackle this task by setting out the development of biblical teaching step by step from Moses to the apostles. Here are a few points which we will need to bear in mind along the way:

First, the Bible habitually describes the old covenant as God's law, the law of the Lord, the law of Moses or simply “the law”, without distinguishing between moral and ceremonial aspects. Such distinctions may be helpful for discussion purposes; but biblical usage conveys the impression of a single unified code. The Mosaic law incorporated the Ten Commandments, which were the heart of the old covenant (Ex. 34:28, Deut. 4:13) and therefore inseparable from it.

Second, the old covenant stemmed from and always looked back to a unique event – the deliverance of Israel from Egypt. This historical association indicates that the law of Moses was designed specifically for God's old covenant people. It therefore belonged in its entirety to the old covenant era and was *timebound* in this sense. But in a more limited way it was also *timeless* inasmuch as

some parts of it consisted of or embodied abiding moral precepts which remained intact under the new covenant. These timeless aspects can be understood in terms of continuity between the old covenant and the new; the timebound elements represent discontinuity.

Third, full weight should be given to Jesus' key statement that the two greatest commandments in the law are those urging wholehearted, unqualified love for God and neighbour (Deut. 6:5, Lev. 19:18, Matt. 22:34-39). Such a verdict becomes even more important when we accept that everything else in the Mosaic law, as well as the Old Testament prophets, is derived from these all-embracing moral principles (Matt. 22:40). This means among other things that *the two greatest commandments are more fundamental than the Ten Commandments*. They also merit the description timeless. Indeed, the continuing validity of "Love your neighbour as yourself" is well illustrated by its repeated use in the New Testament. No wonder love has such a high profile in the apostolic writings (e.g. John 13:34, Rom.13:8-10, 1 Cor. 13, Eph.5:2, Col.3:14. 1 Thess. 1:3,3:12,4:9-10, James 2:8. 1 Pet. 4:8, 1 John 3:11-23. 4:7-21).

Fourth, what the Bible tells us about the law is woven into the unfolding story of our salvation. Like all stories, the one told in God's Word is characterized by progression and change. It should therefore come as no surprise to discover that these two features are also evident in many biblical themes, including the law. Progression and change can be seen most clearly in the Ten Commandments, which are treated by the apostles in a number of different ways. Some are quoted verbatim (Rom.13:9); others are quoted with significant modifications or omissions (Rom.7:7, Eph.6:1-3). A few only appear in the form of allusions. It is, for instance, possible to detect the First Commandment behind John's exhortation not to love the world or anything in it (1 John 2:15-16). Despite this diversity there is one common factor - a *continuity factor*. For each of the Ten

Commandments, what carries over from the old covenant to the new is the inner spiritual kernel or moral instruction pertinent to God's people in every age. These constitute the *timeless* aspects of the Ten Commandments.

Fifth, although "law" in the New Testament usually means the law of Moses, there are several cases where the meaning is either patently different or not immediately apparent. One such case is the reference to "laws" (plural) in Hebrews 8:10. How are we to interpret the affirmation "I will put my laws in their minds and write them on their hearts"? This was a prophecy uttered in the age of promise and coming to pass in the age of fulfilment. The most natural interpretation is therefore to take "laws" here as ethical precepts appropriate to a new covenant setting.

All the above points are important for a proper understanding of the law. We will now see how they find expression in our summary of biblical teaching. It is essential to take the summary as a whole, rather than piecemeal, in order to gain a panoramic view and appreciate how it all fits together.

1. In delivering Israel from Egypt, God established a relationship with his people based on sovereign grace (Ex. 20:2). The divinely appointed expression of that relationship was the law of Moses (or old covenant), and the Israelites promised to keep its many commandments and ordinances (Ex. 24:3-8).

2. The greatest commandments in the law were: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind" and "Love your neighbour as yourself" (Deut. 6:5, Lev. 19:18). The entire old covenant depended on those two moral requirements (Matt. 22:34-40). As abiding spiritual principles they were valid *for all time*. The highest expression of love for God and neighbour *at that time* was in the Ten Commandments.

3. The Old Testament prophets ministered to the Israelites within the framework of the law, sometimes

rebuking the people when they disobeyed it (Is. 24:5, Jer. 11:1-10, Ezek. 16:59, Hos. 8:1). The prophets could therefore be described as God's old covenant policemen, who arrested the people by their preaching.

4. God's people were under the authority of the law and the prophets right up to the time of John the Baptist (Matt. 11:13). This is why Jesus said unequivocally, "The law and the prophets were until John" (Luke 16:16a - literal translation).

5. John the Baptist, being the last of the Old Testament prophets and also Jesus' forerunner, stood on the threshold between the old covenant and the new. He marked the movement from one to the other by heralding God's heavenly kingdom at the dawn of the new covenant era (Luke 16:16b, Matt. 3:1-2). Jesus then carried on what John had begun (Matt. 4:17, 23).

6. Despite the radical change introduced by John and Jesus through their preaching of the kingdom, the law of Moses continued to be in force throughout the transitional period of our Lord's earthly ministry (Matt. 8:1-4, 23:1-3). There was therefore a three-year overlap between old and new.

7. The overlap period ended when the law was, metaphorically speaking, nailed to the cross at Calvary (Col. 2:14). It was not thereby destroyed or abolished. But the verb used by Paul in Ephesians 2:15 shows that it was rendered inoperative. The reason? Jesus was "the end of the law" (Rom. 10:4), i.e. both its termination and its goal. The law had been no more than a "shadow" pointing forward to the substance, which is found in Christ (Col. 2:16-17, Heb. 10:1).

8. Christ came not to overthrow the law but to *fulfil* it (Matt. 5:17). Several examples of fulfilment are presented to us in Matthew 5:21-48. They all involve doing to others what we would have them do to us, which is the spiritual essence of the law and the prophets (Matt. 7:12). They also show how the enduring principles of love for God and love for our neighbour should be applied in a

new covenant setting.

9. One conclusion that we can draw from the story so far is that we are not subject to any part of the law of Moses *as it stands in Exodus-Deuteronomy* because we are not Israelites living under the old covenant. Paul's argument in Galatians 3:15-25 shows that the law was an interim measure between Abraham and Christ the promised Seed, and was "added.. *until* the Seed... had come" (Gal. 3:16-19). The cryptic Greek text of verse 24, properly understood, conveys essentially the same message: the law was a "custodian" restraining God's people "*until Christ*" or "*with a view to Christ*". It would be perfectly legitimate to combine these two possible meanings. Paul would then be saying in different language what he later wrote in his letter to the Romans about Christ as both the termination and the goal of the law (Rom. 10:4 - see point 7 above). The law's custodial role ended when the age of faith in Christ began (Gal. 3:22-25). Being united to Christ in his death (Rom. 6:3-8), we are dead to the law and serve God in the new way of the Spirit rather than the old way of an external written code (Rom. 7:4,6, Gal. 5:18). The Spirit empowers us to keep God's new covenant laws, which are written not on stone but on our hearts (Ezek. 36:26-27, 2 Cor. 3:7-8, Heb. 8:10).

10. Many of the laws we are to obey reveal continuity from old covenant to new. Thus stealing, lying, slander and revenge were sinful in Moses' day and are still sinful now (Lev.19:11,16,18, Rom.12:19, Eph.4:28, Col. 3:8-9). The underlying reason for these and other continuities is that they all express the permanently valid commandment "Love your neighbour as yourself". This commandment encapsulates the "righteous requirement of the law", which is to be *fulfilled* in those who walk according to the Spirit (Rom. 8:4, 13:9).

11. Paul summed it all up by affirming that *the law is fulfilled through manifestations of Christian love* (Rom. 13:8,10). In practical terms, such fulfilment entails refraining from adultery, murder, theft and covetous

desires - unchanging spiritual maxims drawn from the Ten Commandments - and in addition keeping "whatever other commandments there may be" that fulfil the crucial law "Love your neighbour as yourself" (Rom. 13:9, Gal. 5:14). To "serve one another in love" and "live a life of love" (Gal. 5:13, Eph. 5:2) is the heart of new covenant morality. It implements Jesus' "new commandment", based on his own supreme example, that we should love one another (John 13:34).

12. This new commandment is the bedrock of the law of Christ, to which Paul willingly submitted (I Cor. 9:21). The love it enjoins is down-to-earth and robust, being defined solely by the standards of God's Word, not by any notions of "loving conduct" espoused by the world around us. One way to fulfil the law of Christ is to bear one another's burdens (Gal. 6:2). There are many other ways, all equally practical and presented to us in the ethical teaching of Jesus and the apostles (e.g. Matt. 7:1-5, Col. 3:5-14, Heb. 13:1-5, James 2:1-13, 1 Peter 3:1-12, 1 John 3:16-18). Such teaching fixes for us our new covenant moral boundaries. These are sometimes the same as old covenant boundaries. But they may be different. The Sixth, Seventh and Eighth Commandments are left unchanged in the New Testament (pure continuity). But the Fifth and Tenth Commandments are modified in a manner that befits the new covenant era (continuity only where the basic moral principles are concerned, otherwise discontinuity).

That completes our step-by-step summary. It tells us that, if we display practical Christian love, we will *fulfil* the law of Moses and at the same time obey the law of Christ, which is to love one another as Christ has loved us (John 13:34). This fundamental and comprehensive law will itself be *fulfilled* when we obey the moral teaching of Jesus and the apostles in all its ramifications.

How should we respond to this exposition?

Here is just a handful of suggestions:

a) Let us always remember that the old covenant

represents the "engagement period" of God's people. Believers today wear the "wedding ring" of the new covenant and cannot move backwards to an engagement status without running counter to the biblical flow of promise and fulfilment.

b) Let us take seriously the crucial importance, underlined by Jesus himself, of the two greatest commandments, which involve love for God and neighbour (Matt. 22:34-40). Our approach will be truly biblical when we treat these, rather than the Ten Commandments, as the foundation for all Christian ethical conduct.

c) Let us handle the Ten Commandments in the way that the New Testament handles them - in terms of continuity and discontinuity. It is not difficult to ascertain that both aspects are present if we compare the original Ten Commandments in Exodus 20 and Deuteronomy 5 with their New Testament counterparts.

d) Let us repel any accusation that we are being "antinomian" (against law) if we oppose the idea that the Ten Commandments constitute God's moral law and the rule of life for Christians today. By adopting Paul's position and joyfully accepting that we are subject to the law of Christ (1 Cor. 9:21), we will actually be more "law-abiding" than anyone who tries to keep the Ten Commandments.

e) Let us, if we have teaching responsibilities, give clear direction on the proper Christian response to both old covenant and new covenant law. Instruction along the lines proposed in this article ought to arm believers with a theologically coherent understanding of these issues, thereby providing a firm foundation for Christian discipleship.

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This and other issues are fully discussed in the author's book In Pursuit of the Truth. It is available for £6.30, post free, from 41 Barnmead, Haywards Heath, West Sussex RH16 1UY.