
Law and the Christian life

a primer on the current debate

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Introductory considerations

There are not two views on the relationship of the law to the Christian life, but a whole range of them. If you are going to say, “This detailed position of mine is the right view, and I am going to regard all who do not adopt it as baddies”, you are not going to have fellowship with a large percentage of Christians!

And even if we group the various views into kinds of views, I would suggest that there are not two but three: legalistic ones, Biblical ones (of course there is only one really Biblical view, but there are probably a few that we should regard as right or fairly near), and antinomian ones. Furthermore, even when you have identified a view of the law and the Christian life that is, in your opinion, legalistic or antinomian, it is not necessarily right or fair to regard all who hold it as spiritual lepers. We have got to ask, “How do they hold this view? Are they making it the centre-piece of their theology and then bringing everything else round into conformity with it? Is it their big thing – or not?” If it *is* their big thing and they are bringing their other views and teaching round to fit in with it, they are probably well on the way to departing from Biblical Christianity as a whole; but if they are not, they may just have a little quirk. And if on the law or any other point we cut off all the people we regard as having quirks, we are going to end up in a pretty small circle! Spiritual discernment is necessary.

A range of views of law and the Christian life

1. We are justified by faith, but faith includes repentance, love for God or at least delight in him, and a heart commitment to obey him. This is not the same as saying that saving faith is always accompanied by repentance or at least a repentant attitude; it is going a significant step further. (Even John Piper wants to smuggle love into faith in ch.15 of *Future Grace*; it sounds as if his mentor (?) Daniel Fuller gives some theological underpinning to this in his *Unity of the Bible*, and denies the distinction between the covenant of works and the covenant of grace).

2. We are justified by faith alone but sanctification means keeping God’s law and this is the OT law in detail – apart from the ceremonial part (so G. Bahnsen’s ch. 2 – see bibliography – is entitled *The abiding validity of the law in exhaustive detail* (Mat. 5:17-19)). This view is known as *theonomy*.

3. We are justified by faith alone but sanctification is necessary and it means keeping the Ten Commandments (with the Sabbath transferred to Sunday) as well as NT commands. This view often goes along with the view that it is by keeping our eye on the law that we are able to keep in step with the Spirit and show love to others; ie the law is important in sanctification (see eg Calvin and W Hendriksen on 1 Tim. 1:9 – they are contending for Calvin’s so-called *third use of the law*). This would be the traditional

Reformed view from Calvin and the 17th century to the present day – see John Murray et al. I have heard this referred to as the Reformed, non-theonomic view of the law.

4. We are justified by faith alone, and sanctification is also largely by faith; ie the main way to promote holiness is to look at Christ as revealed in the gospel; meanwhile the Spirit will use the whole Bible, including the law, to write the law on our hearts, but we act from moment to moment out of communion with God, not from the law as regulations we are following. (So, in Gal. 5, if we keep in step with the Spirit and love others, this will lead, almost incidentally, to keeping the law). Interestingly, Herman Bavinck, who was from pretty much the Reformed mainstream at the turn of the century, in his wonderful summary of doctrine called *Our Reasonable Faith*, teaches something in this direction in chs. 6 and 22, though he does not go as far as view 5.

5. This view is often held by those who hold no. 4: the Christian is not directly under an obligation to keep the Ten Commandments, but only the reissuing of the law of God in the NT, *the law of Christ*. (So Sunday is the Lord's Day but not the Sabbath; it is not sinful to work on Sunday). Views 4 and 5 together constitute what could be called *the modern redemptive-historical reformed view*, and in one form or another is taught by people like Don Carson, Douglas Moo et al. This view says that the whole Mosaic law needs to be contextualised into the new covenant era; we are at a significantly different point along the line of redemption history from Israel between Moses and Christ; and it is textually unnatural and naïve to try and cope with this simply by dividing Mosaic law into moral, civil and ceremonial parts. On this, see Chris Wright, *Living as the People of God*, 1983.

6. Holiness or obeying God's law (usually understood as NT commands) is good and is promoted by faith in the gospel, but is not necessary in the sense that most since the Reformation have believed: to say that assurance of our own salvation depends at all on holiness of life is legalistic. (The evangelicals who hold views 4 and 5, by contrast, normally preserve a fairly traditional understanding of the necessity of holiness and of the relationship between holiness and assurance). This is the view of Michael Eaton and RT Kendall in the books cited in the bibliography.

7. The Christian should never feel guilty; we are not under law in any sense; don't worry about sin much, if at all.

Comments

on view 1:

There is a crumb of legalism here; ie the moment we start defining faith as more than knowing that Christ has died for sinners and consequently resting in him for salvation/holding out empty hands to receive/counting on him to do something very big and very important for us, we are going down the road to salvation by works.

The NT guards against presumption and superficial profession of faith by demanding that we turn from sin to Christ as Lord. Our lives must change and repentance must bear fruit, but not by getting us to look at our faith to see if it contains love for God! Yes, repentance accompanies saving faith, but when the NT answers the questions, "How can I be forgiven?" it says simply, "Believe in the Lord Jesus" (Acts 16:31).

on view 2:

We are in Christ, not under Moses (see the contrast in John 1:17). The details of the law given to Moses was applied directly to God's people in a very different situation from ours, and at a very different point along the line of the unfolding history of redemption. Also, don't forget Gal. 3:25! Of course we should learn things from all the laws of Moses.

on views 3, 4 and 5, taking 4 and 5 together:

There is a major debate among evangelical scholars as to whether the 17th century view of the law (can we distinguish the Ten Commandments from the rest of Mosaic law as they did?) and the Christian life is right or not. It would appear that many good commentators and writers who follow a *redemptive-historical* understanding of Scripture now feel that view 3 is wrong and something like 4 and 5 together is right. I gather that Richard Gaffin at Westminster Theological Seminary, Philadelphia is an exception to this. My own view now is that Carson, Moo et al must be going along the right line: we are motivated by the Spirit and by knowing the love of Christ, so the gospel needs to be a lot more prominent in our minds and ordinary meditation than the law. After all, knowing right from wrong is not our main problem! Why?

1. Because the old view does not fit with Paul's letters, especially Galatians and Romans. Paul does not counter selfishness by saying "You are under law as a rule of life" or "You must keep the Ten Commandments." Instead he goes back to grace (Rom. 6:1-2; Gal. 5:16ff). Furthermore he says we are not under the law, and never says we are under it (1 Cor. 9:21 is no exception, when you look at the Greek). And finally, taking Sunday as the Sabbath just will not wash exegetically, because of Col. 2:16-17 and Rom. 14.

2. The redemptive-historical approach to the doctrine of salvation in Scripture means we fall in between the typical baptist and paedobaptist interpretations: there is *one* covenant of grace and even the Mosaic era was part of this in a way; but at the same time there is development, change, new things – a dynamic unfolding of the covenant right into the NT. Jesus himself brings the kingdom, which is new.

3. The old division of the Mosaic law into three elements will not work; it is all fulfilled in Christ and must all be viewed through him.

4. Trusting the Spirit to sanctify us is not as dangerous as some good men think!

So my advice is: keep up close fellowship with Christ; do this partly by reading the whole Bible and being much in the gospel. Make glorifying God and doing to others as you would want them to do to you your rules of thumb, and you will end up keeping the law, which the Spirit will write on your heart while you think about the whole Bible and keep in fellowship with God.

on view 6:

While this is an understandable reaction to an introspective and rather legalistic note in the Puritans, exegetical gymnastics are needed to sustain view 6 (see eg Eph. 5:5; 1 Jn. 2:3, etc). Furthermore, what is it going to lead to? Presumably this, that people who have prayed a prayer of commitment to Christ, or have had an experience of some kind in a Christian meeting, or have been told by a pastor that they are Christians now,

will feel quite immune to the warnings of Scripture even if ten years after “conversion” their lives remain unchanged. Is this helpful? I don’t think so.

on view 7:

This must be counted as some kind of antinomianism, and can easily lead to the kind of things warned against in 2 Peter 2 and Jude.

Six clear Scriptural principles on avoiding antinomianism:

The following I would suggest as things to regard as particularly important for avoiding antinomianism, whereas most other points (apart of course from justification by faith alone, which keeps us from legalism), being less obvious, can be taught, but should not be held as “disfellowshipping issues”! And even on these six, I would caution against being “trigger-happy”.

1. We have moral obligations.

2. The Spirit uses Scripture to guide and sensitise our consciences concerning these obligations.

3. When we have done wrong – or our consciences tell us we have – we should feel pain, sorrow, negative emotion.

4. When we know we have sinned, we should, as well as looking to Christ our advocate, seek to obey God in future – ie we should repent, and true repentance will issue in the fruit of repentance.

5. If 4 is not happening and we are not obeying God, sooner or later we should start to wonder if we are really saved.

6. If we don’t think that breaking the Ten Commandments as republished in the NT is wrong, something is wrong with us.

A small bibliography:

The law, the gospel, and the modern Christian – 5 views ed.W.Strickland (Zondervan)
For a view that some would see as tending towards legalism, see D Fuller, *Unity of the Bible*.

For theonomy, see Bahnsen in Strickland (above) and G Bahnsen, *Theonomy in Christian ethics* and R Rushdoony, *The Institutes of Biblical Law*.

For a Reformed answer to theonomy, see *Theonomy: a Reformed critique*, ed. Barker and Godfrey.

For a traditional Reformed view, see Vangemeren in Strickland (above) but also J Murray, *Collected Writings*, vol. 1, pp 193-228. See also Walter Chantry, *God’s Righteous Kingdom*, which deals in part with theonomy.

For the modern redemptive-historical view, see Moo in Strickland (above) and his commentary on Romans, and Carson (ed.) *From Sabbath to Lord’s Day*. See also Edgar Andrews’ commentary on *Galatians* in Welwyn Commentary Series (Evangelical Press), and various modern comms. on Galatians (Longenecker in *Word Bibl. Comm.* series, Bruce in *NIGTC* series, Fung in *NICNT* series ...).

For the disconnection of holiness and assurance, see Michael Eaton, *A theology of encouragement*, and RT Kendall, *Once saved, always saved*.

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