

Dear colleagues in the DDG:

Melinda and I are looking forward to hosting our DDG meeting December 13th at our home in Pleasant Prairie/Kenosha. The paper I am offering for your reading and interaction is the first chapter in a book on “The OT Law for the NT Church.” I am attempting to write it with both the scholar and pastor in mind (and other really serious students of the Bible). Not assuming too much, but not avoiding any of the real knotty problems either. The full proposal is in the last stages of consideration by IVP for publication. This chapter is part of that official proposal. Please pray with me about that.

You will see that the chapter lays out the basic approach I am taking to the subject, as an introduction should. The next draft of this introduction will include a great deal more footnoting of the relevant secondary literature and positioning of my approach within it, as well as perhaps a few more biblical references in pivotal places. This current draft is only my attempt to state what I am doing as clearly as possible to begin with. Clarity and perspective are important to me. I am very much looking forward to your very valuable interaction and suggestions.

Thank you,
Dick

INTRODUCTION
Old Testament Law for the New Testament Church
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The OT Law is one of the major biblical and theological “problems” the church has had to deal with since it began. Even at the first church council the primary issue was whether or not “The Gentiles must be circumcised and *required to obey the law of Moses*” (Acts 15:5b, emphasis mine). In one form or another, since those early days in Jerusalem the OT Law has been a subject of confusion, debate, and outright theological and ecclesiastical division across the centuries. There is good reason for this. The way we deal with the issue has massive implications for the church as a whole and the life of the individual Christian. It effects both our orthodoxy (what we believe) and orthopraxy (how we live what we believe).

What specifically is the Old Testament Law? How did the Law reflect the literary, historical, cultural, and covenantal context of the day in which it was composed? How would people in that day have understood the Law overall, and specific elements within it? How does all this relate to the usefulness of the Law today in the redemptive community of the church and in the life of the Christian? These are some of the main questions.

Again, this subject was important right from the inception of the church and continues to be so today. There has been a good deal written about it over the centuries. Much of it is well done and of enduring value. I will be standing on the shoulders of earlier scholars who have dared to enter these waters, including some of my contemporary colleagues. The major problem that I see in the discussion as it has been carried on over the years is the tendency to write on the NT use of the OT Law without expending the necessary time and effort to know the Law well in the first place, in its OT context. This is

one of the ways I hope to contribute to the discussion in the present volume. The first half of the book, therefore, focuses primarily on the OT Law itself: understanding its literary, historical, cultural, and theological context, its basic content, and how it was intended to work in ancient Israel. We will look forward toward the NT from the OT perspective. The second half of the book will turn that around. We will look back at the OT Law from the NT perspective. Our goal will be to understand how the OT Law does and does not come through into the NT for the church and the Christian life.

“Old” Testament and “New” Testament

The topic is, of course, part of the larger subject of the relationship between the Hebrew Bible – the “Old” Testament – and the Greek “New” Testament. Note that even the terms “Old” and “New” Testament can be taken in at least two different ways. For some “Old” simply means that the Hebrew Bible is more ancient, but for others the terminology suggests that it is used up, worn out, set aside, and, basically, needs to be replaced by the “New.” Some who hold the latter view nuance it more carefully than others, but the basic outcome is essentially the same. The problem is that this perspective comes from exactly the opposite point of view held by the Apostles and the people in the first century church.

The Apostles, who wrote the NT, like Jesus, were Jewish. The Bible of the “New” Testament church in the first century was the “Old” Testament, whether in Hebrew or translated into Greek or some other language. Paul, the Jewish Apostle to the gentiles, wrote to Timothy, his half-Jewish protégé, whom he had left in charge of the largely gentile church at Ephesus:

. . . *from infancy* you have known the holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. ¹⁶ All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, ¹⁷ so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work. (2 Timothy 3:15-17)

Timothy could rely on scripture as his divine authority in teaching, exhorting, and training people to live godly in Christ Jesus.¹ It is especially interesting that, according to the passage, he had known these writings “from his childhood” (v. 15). This passage, therefore, is talking (at least primarily and most directly) about the OT scriptures, since the NT had not been written yet when Timothy was a child. It is also significant that Paul was near the end of his ministry when he penned these words (this is probably the last NT letter he wrote). Nevertheless, he still viewed the whole OT as not only inspired but useful for instructing and guiding Christians. These were still the inspired “scriptures” as far as he was concerned.

Paul never came to the point of leaving the “Old” Testament behind in favor of the “New.” Neither Jesus nor the Apostles would have ever conceived of, or put up with, such a thing. Neither should we. We need the whole Bible. The NT was never intended to be read without the OT, since it relies so heavily on it. All the writers of the NT assumed that their

¹For more detailed remarks on 2 Timothy 3:15-17 and the 2 Peter passages treated here see Richard E. Averbeck, “The Bible in Spiritual Formation,” in *The Kingdom Life: A Practical Theology of Discipleship and Spiritual Formation*, ed. Alan Andrews (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2010), 279-81. Parts of that discussion have been adopted or adapted for this one.

readers were devoted to the OT as the scriptures of the church. To ignore the OT is to misunderstand the NT. They wrote the NT on the basis of the OT. But now they saw it in light of the coming of the Messiah Jesus who was anticipated in the OT; the Holy Spirit had been poured out at Pentecost as anticipated in Joel 2; the Kingdom of God had now taken the form of the church, and so on. And they increasingly recognized that both Jewish and gentile believers in Jesus were now included in that Kingdom as a unified whole.

Yet, there is also the other side of the matter – the NT as a guide to the way we read the OT as Christians. Another key NT passage comes into play here. 2 Peter 1:21 reads: “. . . prophecy never had its origin in the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit.” So the inspiration of the OT prophets as writers of scripture came through the Holy Spirit carrying them along, like the wind in the sails of a boat (cf. the “driving along” of the boat in Acts 27:15; the same word is used here as in 2 Peter 1:21). In its context, Peter’s main point is that the apostolic eyewitness of the transfiguration (2 Peter 1:16-18; cf. Matthew 17:1-13 and its parallels) results in “the word of the (OT) prophets made more certain” (v. 19a), to which the readers need to pay close attention until it actually comes to pass (v. 19b). Jesus is yet to come in all his glory and power. We need to be ready for that coming, knowing first of all “that no prophecy of scripture is a matter of one’s own interpretation” (v. 20b, NRSV).

Two main interpretations of this part of v. 20 have been proposed: (1) The NIV renders v. 20b as follows, “no prophecy of Scripture came about by the prophet’s own interpretation,” which seems to refer to how the prophet interpreted what he saw and/or heard in the *past*, as recorded in the scriptures. (2) The NRSV reads instead, “no prophecy of scripture is a matter of one’s own interpretation,” in the sense that no one in the *present* has the right to interpret the prophetic writings according to their own human will (i.e., according to whatever they want it to say). It was not given according to anyone’s human will, but under the guidance of the Holy Spirit with divinely intended meaning (v. 21), so it must be read accordingly. The latter view is followed here because, in my opinion, it follows the line of argument in the passage more closely. Let me explain.

The point of the passage as a whole is that interpreters need to follow the apostolic witness in their interpretations rather than their own opinions. No one has the right to read the prophetic scriptures just any old way; that is, according to his or her own will. This is because it was not written just any old way. The apostolic (eye)witness recorded for us in the NT is the inspired guide to the interpretation of the inspired OT prophetic word. The NT apostles and the OT prophets are bound together in 2 Peter 1:16-21. The following verses take this one step further: “But there were also false prophets among the people (in the OT), just as there will be false teachers among you (in the NT church)” (2 Peter 2:1a). The following lines bring home the point of all this: “They (the false teachers) will secretly introduce destructive heresies, even denying the sovereign Lord who bought them—bringing swift destruction on themselves. Many will follow their shameful ways and will bring the way of truth into disrepute” (2 Peter 2:1b-2).

The remainder of the book addresses the problem of these false teachers and the effects of their teachings. The prophets and apostles are also paired together in 2 Peter 3:2, “I want you to recall the words spoken in the past by the holy [OT] prophets and the command given by our Lord and Savior through your [NT] apostles.” Peter even brings the apostolic authority of Paul’s writings into the discussion near the end of the letter: “Bear in mind that our Lord’s patience means salvation, just as our dear brother Paul also wrote you with the wisdom that God gave him” (3:15). He points out that some of what Paul writes contains “some things that are hard to understand” [who among us has not observed that?!], and alerts them to the fact that some

“ignorant and unstable people distort” Paul’s writings too, “as they do the other [OT] Scriptures, to their own destruction” (v. 16). Again we see the problem of wrong and destructive readings of scripture. And it is worth noting here that since the OT writings are referred to here as the “other” scriptures, therefore, the writings of Paul (and by implication Peter himself, and the other Apostles too) are considered to be inspired “scripture” as well.

The Hebrew OT scriptures are not “old” and “worn out.” They constitute the “word of God” which is

. . . living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart. Nothing in all creation is hidden from God’s sight. Everything is uncovered and laid bare before the eyes of him to whom we must give account. (Heb. 4:12-13)

Observe the number of previous quotes from the Old Testament in Hebrews 3-4. It was those scriptures that served as the basis for the point made about the penetrating power of God’s word.

OT passages like Joshua 1:8, Psalm 1:2, and Ezra 7:6-10 emphasize the central importance of study and meditation on the OT Law for the life of the believer. The Hebrew canon of the OT is arranged differently than our English Bibles. There are three sections: the Law (= “instruction”; also referred to as the Torah, the five books of Moses, the Pentateuch), the Prophets (the Former Prophets = Joshua-Kings less Ruth, and the Latter Prophets = Isaiah through Malachi, less Lamentations and Daniel), and the Writings (starting with Psalms, then comes Job and Proverbs, the five scrolls [Ruth, Song of Songs, Ecclesiastes, Lamentations, and Esther], and Daniel, Ezra-Nehemiah, and Chronicles). Note that the Joshua 1 is the divide between the Torah and the Prophets, and Psalm 1 is the divide between the Prophets and the Writings. Thus, precisely at the seams between the three major units of the canon both Joshua 1:8 and Psalm 1:2 emphasize the importance of meditation on the Law the Lord day and night as a way of life. The combined expressions in these verses is unique in the Bible – intentionally so.

Similarly, Ezra 7 introduces Ezra himself into the book. It presents him as “a teacher well versed (lit. ‘quick, ready’) in the Law of Moses, which the LORD, the God of Israel, had given” (v. 6b). As a result “the hand of the LORD his God was on him” (v. 6d). Later verses expand on these points. In leading a contingent of pilgrims back to the land we are told that Ezra “arrived in Jerusalem on the first day of the fifth month, for the gracious [lit. ‘good’] hand of his God was on him.”¹⁰ For Ezra had devoted himself [lit. ‘established his heart’] to the study [lit. ‘seek out’ the meaning] and observance of [lit. ‘do’] the Law of the LORD, and to teaching its decrees and laws in Israel” (vv. 9b-10). Who of us would not want “the good hand of God” upon us? This thought and expression is a favorite one of the post-exilic writers (cf. Ezra 7:28; 8:18, 22, 31; Nehemiah 2:8, 18). And notice the order of what Ezra had set his heart to do: first study the Law, then practice it in his own life, and based on that teach it in Israel. The sequence is important.

There are, of course, many more passages and principles of scripture that one could bring to bear here. Psalm 119 is the longest “chapter” in the Bible, and all 176 verses of it are devoted specifically to the goodness and greatness of the Law of Moses. The point is that if we are going to understand the New Testament we must first understand its Old Testament foundation, and take it seriously as authoritative scripture for the church. The Old Testament was the Bible of the New Testament church, and even of the authors of the New Testament. The books of Moses, in which we find the Law, were the foundation that set the direction of the whole rest of the Old Testament – a concept that was never lost among the godly in ancient Israel. The NT writers

argued from it and expected their readers to honor, value, study, practice, and teach it as authoritative for life and godliness. We need to do the same today.

Preview and Overview

The reader will notice that even when focusing on the OT Law itself in the first part of the book, we will also, in a rather natural way, extend the discussion from their forward into the NT along the way. This means that a good deal of New Testament citation and discussion will find its way into this discussion as a matter of course. In the discussion of the OT Law and Christian it is just as important to look forward to the NT from the OT perspective as it is to look back at the OT from the point of view of the NT. Nevertheless, the whole first half of the book will focus our attention on the Mosaic Law as it is found in the Pentateuch. The second half of the book will turn out attention more directly to the NT.

The Old Testament Law in the Old Testament

In my view, understanding the Mosaic covenant and how it relates to the Abrahamic, Davidic, and New covenants is absolutely essential to the topic. It sets the Law in its natural context and relates it to the overall redemptive plan of God as it plays out in the Bible and up to the present day. The Mosaic covenant that the Lord made at Sinai with the Israelites after he brought them out of Egypt provides the most immediate literary, historical, and theological context for the OT Law. The Mosaic Law is imbedded within the Mosaic covenant (see Exod. 19:5; 24:7-8; 26:9, 42-45; Deut 5:2-3; 29:1, 9). In turn, the Mosaic covenant is part of a much larger complex of covenants between God and his people in the Bible. For this reason a serious look at these covenants is essential background for our understanding the OT Law. We will begin with an examination of the historical, cultural, theological, and textual foundations for the study of the covenants in the OT and the ancient Near East (ANE). This will naturally lead to an overall discussion of what I will call “redemptive covenant structure” in the Bible, focusing specifically on the Abrahamic, Mosaic, Davidic, and New covenants. The way the Mosaic covenant fits into those covenantal movements of God will provide an important underlying perspective for grasping what the Law is, what it contains, how it was intended to work in ancient Israel, and how it relates to New covenant believers today.

The first eleven chapters of the Bible lay the primeval background for understanding mankind’s predicament in the world. They level the ground of our human experience, so to speak. They tell us who we are, how we got here, and how we got ourselves into the troubling situation in which we find ourselves in this world. The point here is that, basically, God originally designed us in his own image and likeness to have dominion in the world (Genesis 1-2), but through the first human couple’s violation of God’s original design we and our world became corrupt (Genesis 3-11). This leaves us in the midst of terrible struggles not just for dominion, but even for survival – personal, emotional, relational, vocational, economic, and physical survival. These are true realities in our world. We groan, and the rest of God’s creation groans along with us. Paul himself reflects on this state of affairs in Romans 8:18-26.

The correspondences between the creation and corruption in Genesis 1-3 and the new (or re-)creation without corruption in Revelation 21-22 provides the wider framework into which God’s historical program of creation and redemption fits. The parallels between the created

paradise in Genesis 1-2 and the new heaven and earth in Revelation 21-22 are particularly instructive. The flowing waters (Rev 22:1) and the tree of life (vv. 2, 19), among other things, reappear, and once again mankind is in paradise. Similarly, contrast the fall and curses of Genesis 3 with the new heaven and earth in which there will “no longer . . . be any curse” (22:3a), and no more tears, pain, and death (21:4). Thus, there is an envelope around the Bible: Genesis 1-3 <> Revelation 20-21. The rest of the Bible fits into this envelope not only in literary terms but also historically. We are heading back to where we came from, eventually. In the meantime, we are part of the story, God’s story, the history and the ongoing story that is His—story.

The original creation mandate of Genesis 1:28 (“be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it”) is renewed in Genesis 9:1-7. The latter passage begins and ends with “be fruitful and increase in number and fill the earth” (Gen 9:1 and 7). This provides the background for the Noahic covenant in Genesis 9:8-17, in which the Lord declares in no uncertain terms that he is committed to maintaining his involvement with all flesh, including mankind, within a relatively stable world order: “Never again will all life be cut off by the waters of a flood; never again will there be a flood to destroy the earth” (9:11; cf. 8:21-22). In fact, he is committed to redeeming all of it, eventually (see the new heaven and earth introduced above).

One helpful way of looking at the remainder of the Bible, beginning in Gen 12 and ending in Rev 20, is to view it as God’s historical plan and procedure for the resolution of the sinful corruption of his creation. He is working his plan of redemption for those who “call upon the name of the Lord” from the midst of the corruption (Gen 4:26b; cf., e.g., Gen 12:8; 1 Kings 18:24; Joel 2:32 with Acts 2:21; Rom 10:13, and many other passages). To “call on the name of the Lord” is the only real answer to the fallen condition and situation in which we find ourselves. It is through his program of redemption that God now restores those who turn to him in the midst of the struggles of life. One of the major terms used for that restored relationship is “covenant” (Hebrew *bērît*; 283 occurrences in the OT Hebrew Bible).

The “redemptive covenants,” therefore, constitute a literary, historical, and theological framework and guide through God’s redemptive program, and the Mosaic covenant is one of them. The Mosaic Law is embedded within the Mosaic covenant. The establishment of the Mosaic covenant in Exodus 19-24 (actually 19:1-24:11, strictly speaking), therefore, is the most natural place to start a study of the OT Law. It is the first main unit of the Law in the Pentateuch, and there are two units of law embedded within it: the Ten Commandments (Exod 20:1-17) and the Book of the Covenant (Exod 20:22-23:33). Exodus 19-24 as a whole constitutes a covenant making narrative. Incorporated within it are these two covenant documents – the basic foundations of the OT Law.

Thus, the law is actually embedded within the Mosaic covenant as the stipulations of the covenant, and should not be treated in isolation from it. As we treat the law in particular, it is important to remember that the law was given in the service of the covenant relationship between God and Israel as part of the fulfillment of the Lord’s previous covenant commitment to the patriarchs – Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob – the Abrahamic covenant. The Abraham and Mosaic covenants, therefore, are bound up with each other. Moreover, since the law is bound up with the Mosaic covenant, it is therefore bound up with the outworking of the Abrahamic covenant too.

Exodus 19:3b-8 sets out the basic nature of the covenant relationship between the Lord and Israel established at Sinai. The Lord proposed a covenant (vv. 3b-6) in which he promised that if they kept his “covenant” (*bērît*; i.e., the obligations of the covenant), then “out of all nations (lit. ‘peoples’ *ammîm*) you will be my treasured possession (*sĕgullāh*).” In fact, they

would be his special “kingdom (*mamleket*) of priests (*kōhānīm*) and holy (*qādōš*) nation (*gōy*)” (vv. 5b-6a). The people, in turn, voiced their initial acceptance of the proposal, “We will do everything the LORD has said” (v. 8). They agreed to keep the obligations of the covenant.

Some of the same essential terms and expressions found in Exodus 19:5-6 occur at the very end of the law section of the Book of Deuteronomy, the last unit of law in the Torah – in fact, the last two verses. They serve as an echo surrounding the law from the very beginning to the very end:

¹⁸ Today the LORD has obtained your agreement: to be his treasured (*sēgullāh*) people (*‘am*) as he promised you, and to keep his commandments; ¹⁹ for him to set you high above all nations (*gōyīm*) that he has made, in praise and in fame and in honor; and for you to be a people (*‘am*) holy (*qādōš*) to the LORD your God, as he promised. (Deut 26:18-19, NRSV).

Compositionally and canonically, therefore, the end of the covenant law returns to its beginning. This establishes the primary focus of the covenant and the law within it. In fact, the command to keep the covenant law is present there also in Deuteronomy 26:16, so once again – in Moab as at Sinai – the people declared their covenant commitment to the Lord and to the covenant obligations: “You have declared this day that the LORD is your God and that you will walk in his ways, that you will keep his decrees, commands and laws, and that you will obey him” (v. 17). The Lord, in turn, declared his commitment to them as his “treasured possession” and his “holy nation” (vv. 18-19; cf. also Deut 7:6 and 14:2). The expression “kingdom of priests,” however, occurs only in Exodus 19:6 and carries with it special implications for them as a “holy nation.” Stated briefly, as a “kingdom of priests,” the Mosaic covenant and the law within it views ancient Israel as a nation of worshippers first of all, and above all. Everything else depended on that.

There is no escape from worship in the law. After all, Israel was a theocratic kingdom (*theo* = God and *cratic* = rule). Yahweh their God was their king, and the king is the one who gets to promulgate the law of his kingdom. Worship law is primary and pervasive. Israel was a theocratic nation so the most important thing was to worship the theocratic Lord well. Recognizing and understanding this will help us overcome a great deal of the confusion and misunderstanding surrounding how the Mosaic law worked in the OT and how it should be applied to us in the church and the Christian life according to the New Testament.

Three Main Theses:

The Goodness, the Weakness, and the Unity of the Law

There are three main interdependent biblical theological theses that are essential to a full understanding of the Law and its ongoing usefulness. Briefly stated the three theses are: the Law is good, the Law is weak, and the Law is a unified whole. The second half of the book will focus on these three main theses. The main point is this: we absolutely must hold tenaciously to the truth and significance of all three theses all the time and all at the same time, because all three correspond to significant statements about the Law in both the Old Testament and the New.

Moreover, all three are still true in the application of the Law today in the church and the Christian life. We must never, in any part of the conversation, lose hold of any of the three. The first two echo expressions found in Romans 7-8, but their truth permeates both Old and New

Testament scripture. The last one derives from a combination of the straightforward reading of Old Testament Law and the fact that the New Testament uses all the different categories and dimensions of the Law to inform and direct the Christian life and community. Even if one divides the laws, for example, into moral, civil, and ceremonial categories, specific laws and principles from all three categories are cited and applied to the Christian life in the New Testament.

Ultimately, thoroughgoing adherence to all three principles as the Bible articulates and relates each to the other will provide the matrix out of which we can take the whole council of God seriously on the matter of the OT Law and the Christian. We need not, indeed, must not, deny any part of the Law full significance and authority in the church and the Christian life. As Jesus put it, “. . . until heaven and earth pass away, . . . Anyone who breaks one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever practices and teaches these commands will be called great in the kingdom of heaven” (Matt 5:18-19). He then goes on to explain what he means by that in the remainder of the Sermon on the Mount. Our goal here is to faithfully follow his lead, since we are citizens of that “kingdom of heaven.” This passage, of course, will be treated in depth when the time comes.

So first, on the one hand, the Law is good. It was good in the OT, it was treated as good in the NT, and it will always be good. We need to be clear about the fact that “the law *is holy*, and the commandment *is holy, righteous and good*. . . . the law *is spiritual* . . .” (Rom 7:12, 14a), present tense. Furthermore, the Old Testament Law was then and still today is not only “good,” but also *useful* for the Christian (2 Tim 3:15-17). It applies to the life of the Christian today in a New Covenant “written on the heart” sense, and it is the Holy Spirit who writes it there (see esp. Jer 31:31-34 and Ezek 36:25-27, and the combination of both in 2 Cor 3:3-8).

Very few informed Christians would say that the Law is actually bad, since the NT says it is good, but many will say that it is no longer good as a guide for the Christian life. They attempt to escape from the “Old Law” to the “New Law” via the “law of Christ” (see 1 Cor 9:21 and Gal 6:2; cf. also James 1:25; 2:8, 12; 2 Pet 3:2). But the fact of the matter is that Christ’s commands to us are all based in the Old Testament in the first place. The “law of Christ” is the way the OT Law is mediated to us in Christ. In fact, some of his clearest statements of basic principles of life in the kingdom of heaven are direct quotes from the Old Testament. For example, according to Jesus, the two greatest commandments – love God with your whole person and all you have, and love your neighbor as yourself (Matt 22:34-40) – constitute the framework on which the whole Law and the prophets hang (cf. also Matt 7:12). Unfortunately, many do not read the Law that way, which means that they read it badly. Jesus says so!

Second, on the other hand, the Law is weak, it always was weak, and it continues to be weak, as compared to the power of the Spirit (Rom 8:3; Heb 7:18; etc.). It is true that “the law *is holy*, and the commandment *is holy, righteous and good*. . . . the law *is spiritual* . . .” (Rom 7:12, 14a), but we also need to reckon fully with the fact that “what the law was powerless to do in that it was *weakened* by the sinful nature, God did by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful man to be a sin offering, ⁴ in order that the righteous requirements of the law might be fully met in us, who do not live according to the sinful nature but according to the *Spirit*” (Rom. 8:3). In other words, although it is true the Law was and still is “good” and applies to the Christian, it is also true that the Law was and still is also “weak” in that it has never had the power in itself to change a human heart and motivate godly living. The strength, the power of the Christian life, comes not from the OT Law but from the continuing practice of *faith* through the power of the work of the *Holy Spirit* in the *human spirit* (Gal 3:1-7; Rom 8:4-16; 1 Cor 2:10-

13). There are certain things no law can do, not even God's Law. The Law was never endowed with the power to change a human heart. Only the Holy Spirit can do that.

The same Holy Spirit who indwells and sanctifies us is also the One who inspired the writing of scripture (2 Pet 1:21, see above), so it is simply natural that the Spirit would continue to use the Law as part of the scripture that he himself made useful in very direct and directive ways for the Christian life (2 Tim 3:16-17, see above). It is not fair to say that anyone who thinks the Law is still authoritative for the Christian life is a "legalist." Jesus and the NT writers, in point of fact, cited it as authoritative for us, so we have no right to discount it. Nevertheless, there is a major problem with the Law that was already recognized under the Law in the OT. It needed to be "written on the heart" (Jer 31:33), and only the Holy Spirit can do that (Ezek 36:26-27; cf. 2 Cor 3:3, 6). To have the Law "written on the heart" is to live it from a heart that has been purified and vivified by the Spirit of God doing his work in the human spirit. It is possible to misuse the Law (1 Tim. 1:7-8), and one way of misusing it is to try to use it to do things that only the Holy Spirit has the power to do through his work in the human spirit.

Third, and finally, the Law is a unified whole. It is neither biblically correct nor is it useful in interpretation of the Bible to separate out one type of law from the others as a means of understanding the Law or applying it today in the church and the Christian life. We should not be dividing it up into "kinds of law" – for example, moral, civil, and ceremonial – and deciding what applies or does not apply to us based on that. The Bible does this nowhere. There is a better, more holistic and biblically sound, way of handling the Law and its application today.

Basically, it is this. If it is true that the whole Law and prophets hangs on the two greatest commandments, then every element of the Law supports and/or works out the implications of those two commandments in some way. Therefore, we need to understand and work out the details and implications of the fact that it is the whole *unified* Mosaic Law that is to be "written on the heart" of the New Covenant believer, not just one aspect of it or another, or some combination thereof. The *whole* Law applies to the Christian. As the Lord says it: "I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts" (Jer. 31:33). This does not mean we should bring every specific law in the Old Testament over directly into the church and the Christian life. However, every law does contribute to some dimension of the Law that, in turn, does indeed apply to the Christian life as part of the "law of Christ." We shall spend considerable time unpacking this point later in the book.

Other biblical and theological issues will be confronted along the way, of course, but focusing the discussion on these three main points will keep the topic as a whole in focus. The Law and the Christian is the kind of issue that can very easily get out of hand, as has been the case in many instances in the history of the church. In fact, even within the first century New Testament period itself – during the Apostolic age no less – it got so out of hand that the leaders of the church had to have a church council about it (Acts 15). And two of the great Apostles themselves were sometimes at odds with each other over this same matter, Peter and Paul (Galatians 2:11-21).

Another ever present danger is that a discussion like this could turn into a debate between theological systems rather than a sincere investigation of exegetical and theological issues on their own merit. We need to avoid this as much as possible. Focusing on these three aspects of the topic brings us directly to the very center of the debate about the OT Law in the larger world of biblical and theological studies. And as noted above, we need to anchor the discussion in the OT Law in its OT context as the background for reading NT passages regarding the OT Law. What is proposed here is that *the whole Law was and still is good and profitable for the*

Christian and applies to the life of the Christian today in a New Covenant “written on the heart” sense. We need to think in terms of the “level” or the “kind” of application of the OT Mosaic Law, not the “limit” or “extent” of application.

One of the most troublesome problems in the ongoing debate regarding the OT Law and its application to the church and the Christian life is the tendency of theologians to take away with the left hand what they have offered with the right. On the one hand, some theologians seem to say that the OT Law is good but then tend to essentially deny the same by either implicitly or explicitly placing unbiblical limits on its goodness in one way or another. They undermine the clear intent of Paul’s remarks in Rom 7:12, 14: “¹² So then, the law is holy, and the commandment is holy, righteous and good. . . . ¹⁴ We know that the law is spiritual; but I am unspiritual, sold as a slave to sin.” Although this approach avoids Marcionism (except possibly in its more latent form), it nevertheless underlies various forms of “antinomianism” (teachings “opposed to the Law”), whether subtle or not so subtle.²

On the other hand, there are those who seem to admit that the Law is weak but then tend to promote it as if it were not – as if it had the power to motivate godly living. They tend to promote salvation by faith but sanctification by the works of the Law. This is contrary to Galatians 3:1-14 and others passages, where it is clear that the power of sanctification, like salvation, is by the Spirit, not the works of the Law. In this case, the end result is often a latent if not blatant form of partially gentitized “legalism.”

The fact is that both statements are absolutely true: *the Law was and is both good and weak at the same time and at all times, including today.* It is essential to recognize and take fully into account the full implications of both the enduring goodness as well as the essential weakness of the Law. We need to hang on tightly to both of these truths with both hands if we are to articulate a thoroughly biblical approach to the Law in its original OT context, in the NT, and in its application to the church and the Christian life.

With regard to the third main thesis, all those who divide the Law into moral versus civil versus ceremonial divisions commonly agree that the so-called “moral” law applies to the church and the Christian at least on some level, in some way. The applicability of the “civil” law has been seriously debated and continues to be a contentious subject among them. But everyone seems to agree that the “ceremonial” law does not apply to the Christian life because Christ fulfilled the ceremonial aspects of the Law for us when he died on the cross. But there is a problem with this rationale. Did not Jesus fulfill the *whole* Law for us, including also the “moral” and “civil” law, so that our righteousness before God might be found in him rather than in ourselves?

Although there are various units of law in the “Torah” (= the Pentateuch), and we deal with this fact in the first part of the book below, the categories of “moral” versus “civil” versus “ceremonial” law never appear in the Bible. They are artificial and misleading. The OT does not present the Law this way and the NT does not handle it this way. In point of fact, the so-called “ceremonial” regulations (i.e., the laws of the priesthood, the sacrificial system, the system of physical purity, etc.) are referred to extensively in the NT, sometimes in relation to the work of

²Marcion of Sinope was a second-century heretic who was hostile to Judaism, and rejected the entire Old Testament. His Bible included only a truncated form of the Gospel of Luke and ten Pauline epistles. See the short explanation and sources cited in David Noel Freedman, ed., *Eerdman’s Dictionary of the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 855-56.

Jesus Christ as the New Covenant sacrifice for us, but sometimes also applied to living the Christian life (see, e.g., Romans 12:1; Hebrews 13:15-16; 1 Peter 2:4-10; and many other such passages). From this point of view, the “ceremonial” law is as applicable to the Christian life as the “moral” law.

Summary and Conclusion

As noted above, the approach taken in this volume will be to lay a solid foundation in understanding the OT Law itself and how it was actually intended to work in its OT context first, before attempting to work out the problem of how that Law applies to the life of the church and the Christian according to the NT. We need a whole-Bible approach to the treatment of this subject. The divine author, the Holy Spirit, was working on both ends of the process. He was involved in the inspiration of both the Old and the New Testament. Moreover, the same Holy Spirit dwells within us to bring the word that he himself inspired to bear on us in our own personal lives, our redemptive community, and our mission in the world. This includes the OT Law. The Mosaic Law is still God’s word to us.

The Hebrew scriptures are not old in the sense that they are “old” and “worn out.” But there are numerous seriously problematic misconceptions about the nature and function of the OT Mosaic Law circulating in the church today. These constitute major obstacles to a correct and meaningful understanding of how the OT Law applies to us in the church. There are three main theses that will carry and organize the argument as we move into and through the New Testament: the Law is good, the Law is weak, and the Law is a unified whole. These three theses will be argued for in detail, and will provide the framework for considering the issues that arise as we deal with the various texts and their interpretation. But before this, we turn to understanding the Law itself.