

The Christian's Obligation to the Law of Moses

**A Valley Bible Church Position Paper
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When we approach the Word of God, we ought to want to obey it. However, some of the Old Testament laws are challenging to apply. Should we have laws of capital punishment for incorrigible children (Exodus 21:18-21), for adulterers (Leviticus 20:10) and for false teachers (Deuteronomy 13:1-11)? Is it sinful to tattoo your body (Leviticus 19:28)? Can we wear clothes mixed of linen and wool (Deuteronomy 22:11)? Is it wrong for men to trim their beards (Leviticus 19:27)?

Some Old Testament Laws have been specifically discontinued, for example, circumcision (Acts 15; Galatians 5:2-3), the dietary laws (Mark 7:19; Acts 11:8-9; 1 Timothy 4:3) and the Sabbath (Romans 14:1-5; Colossians 2:16). Many have been specifically repeated in the New Testament, such as idolatry, stealing, murder, etc.

Many Christians deal with the Old Testament very inconsistently. In essence, they pick and choose the parts to follow and the parts to discard with no guiding principle.

Some have responded to this problem and have offered the following principle: If the New Testament does not specifically change a command, then the Old Testament commands still stand. Therefore, they are free from offering sacrifices or keeping the dietary laws. Yet this leaves many of the laws that are closely connected to function of the nation of Israel in place.

The most common approach is to attempt to divide Old Testament into moral, civil and ceremonial laws. Unfortunately, this does not eliminate the picking and choosing which Old Testament laws Christians are obligated to follow; it only attempts to categorize them. Of course, before the church age, all of the Old Testament Law was obligatory. Since the "moral laws" are not in red letters, the interpreter is left with the hopeless task of seeking to discern which laws fall into that category. Two Old Testament commands that churches can be particularly motivated to instruct for application are keeping the Sabbath holy and tithing. Should we observe all of the Law, some of the Law, none of the Law or only the parts of the Law that brings people to church more often and causes them to contribute more money?

The unity of the Old Testament Law really leaves us with only two options, to either accept the Law in its entirety, submitting ourselves to it, or to see ourselves as being released from the Law. The goal of this paper is to provide biblical instruction that clarifies exactly what the obligation that Christians today have to the Old Testament Law of Moses.

Interestingly, this problem of the relation of the Old Testament to the church was the topic of the very first all-church business meeting in Acts 15. It was at this meeting in Jerusalem that the apostles and elders clarified how the Old Testament Law applies to the church.

The Council of Jerusalem (Acts 15)

The occasion for this council was the effect the teaching of the Pharisees was having on the church. This aberrant teaching said that a person must be circumcised to be saved. This led to a discussion about the role of the Law of Moses in the Christian life (Acts 15:6).

The preaching of the church from the beginning showed a clear and consistent understanding that salvation was by grace, through faith and apart from works. The events of Acts 10-11 and the testimony of Peter confirmed this, the uncircumcised Gentiles were coming to faith in Christ. The question of whether circumcision was necessary for salvation was never in doubt in the teaching of the early church.

What was at issue was the role of the Law of Moses to the Christian. Once a person believed in Christ, were they obligated to the Mosaic Law, as some believers who were formerly Pharisees suggested (Acts 15:5)? The answer was stated by Peter and confirmed by the letter from James and the elders with Paul to the Gentile churches. Circumcision and the Law of Moses were not required for the Christian.

What is interesting in the response is the direction given to the Gentiles. They were to abstain from fornication, from blood, from things strangled and from things sacrificed to idols. For each of these, there is New Testament teaching that clarifies the specific obligation.

Fornication is clearly identified as forbidden (1 Corinthians 6:18; Galatians 5:19; Ephesians 5:3, etc.). Regarding the other three directives, the New Testament teaches that partaking of these is not inherently sinful. Jesus declared all foods clean (Mark 7:19) and Peter's vision (Acts 10-11) provides additional support. Paul's instruction concerning things sacrificed to idols (1 Corinthians 10:25-29) gives us what is necessary to understand the intention of the letter from the council. Their concern was that the Gentiles not give an offense to the Jews (cf. 1 Corinthians 10:32).

Fornication was sin and was specifically singled out due to the immoral background from which the Gentiles came. Fornication was particularly associated with Gentiles and had the potential to add to the divisiveness between Gentiles and Jews. The remaining practices listed were not inherently sinful but would, in the Jewish context, be a provocation. Better for them to defer their practices for the sake of their Jewish brethren and to "pursue those things which make for peace and the building up of one another" (Romans 14:19).

Therefore we see the New Testament church as stopping short of requiring believers in Christ to follow the Law of Moses but instructing them on certain issues for the sake of unity of the church. The council of Jerusalem did not side with the Jews from the sect of the Pharisees who believed that people must be directed to observe the Law of Moses.

Christians are not under the Mosaic Law because the Law was given to Israel, not to the church

Simply put, when the Bible uses the term “Israel” it means Israel and when the Bible uses the term “church” it means “church.” While this may appear obvious, it is not accepted by all and the blurring of this distinction can have far reaching results. Understanding that God’s ways are different in the age of the church than He used with Israel is foundational to seeing why the Christian is not bound to the Law of Moses.

While the church is distinct from Israel, this does not mean that there are not similarities between the two. However, just like there are similarities between the United States and the United Kingdom, there are different laws of the land. The laws of the United States do not apply to citizens of the United Kingdom who reside there. God’s laws for Israel do not apply to the church, even though there are many requirements that are shared between the people of the church age and the people of Israel.

1. The church is distinct from Israel chronologically

Jesus spoke of the church as future during His earthly ministry (Matthew 16:18). He also spoke of the coming of the Holy Spirit as being future Acts 1:5. Acts 11:15-16 speaks of the promise of Acts 1:5 as being fulfilled. Acts 2 records the baptism of the Holy Spirit coming and Paul later explains that the baptism of Holy Spirit as placing people into the body of Christ (1 Corinthians 12:13), which is the church (Colossians 1:18). From this evidence we can conclude that the church did not exist until the day of Pentecost in Acts 2.

The important point for the purpose of this paper is that the church began after Israel. Ephesians 2:20-23 speaks of the establishment of Christ as the cornerstone of the church with the apostles and New Testament prophets after His resurrection and ascension. This gives more evidence of the distinction between the church and Israel.

Furthermore, it is only the church that is delivered to Christ at the rapture according to 1 Thessalonians 4:16-18. When 1 Thessalonians 4:16 speaks of the raising of the dead, it describes them as “in Christ,” which is a unique phrase synonymous with the church, not Israel. The Old Testament people of God will be raised at the second coming of Christ (Daniel 12:2).

2. The church is distinct from Israel in its citations

Israel is referenced as distinct apart from the Gentiles after the church was established (Acts 3:12; 4:8-10; 5:21-35 and 21:28). Paul refers to Israel as a distinct entity in writing “Give no offense to the Jews or to the Greeks or to the church of God” in 1 Corinthians 10:32 and in praying for their salvation (Romans 10:1).

Those Jews who believe during the church age are joined with the believing non-Jews into one body, the church, where there is no distinction between Jew and Gentile (Ephesians 2:11-23; Colossians 3:11). Those non-believing Jews continue to be described as a distinct people for whom God has a special plan (Romans 11).

This further shows why the Mosaic Law no longer applies in the church age, for the church is not the people to whom the Law was given. The most fundamental reason the Christians are not obligated to obey the Law of Moses is because the Law was given to the nation of Israel, not to the church. The Law of the Old Testament governed the Jewish people; the New Testament was written to the church and governs us.

3. The church is distinct from Israel in its commands

Certain commands are given to the church that were not given to Israel, notably the ordinances of the church: the Lord's Supper and baptism. These were given to the church alone, just such as certain commands such as circumcision were not given to the church. That certain rules were given to each entity is further evidence that the church and Israel are not identical.

While much of the Old Testament Law is repeated in the New Testament, some of it is not. A good example is the Ten Commandments, where nine of the commandments are restated in the New Testament but the commandment to keep the Sabbath holy is not, freedom is given (cf. Romans 14:1-5; Colossians 2:16).

That there are some clear differences in the obligations for the church and for Israel shows they are not identical.

Christians are not under the Mosaic Law because Christ is the end of the Law to everyone who believes (Romans 10:4)

Romans 10:4 gives us a direct statement that "Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes." The context of this is the Law of Moses and the qualifier is all believers. The word "end" can be translated "goal" but with the sense of completion. Therefore, the Law has ended it is application to believers because it reaches its conclusion in Christ.

The Law reaches its completion, or in other words, has ended in Christ because Christ has fulfilled the law perfectly (Matthew 5:17; Hebrews 4:15). As Christians we have Christ's righteousness imputed to us (2 Corinthians 5:21; cf. Romans 4), having Christ's perfect fulfillment of the Law imputed to our account. The law is ended, or in other words, completed in Christ, but only the one who believes participates in this imputed righteous fulfillment of the Law.

God's people are no longer guided in life by the particular code of the Mosaic Law because Christ instituted His law, the law of Christ (Romans 8:2; 1 Corinthians 9:21; Galatians 6:2; James 1:25; 2:8, 12). The law of Christ is the law that Christ gave to love your neighbor as yourself (John 13:35; cf. Matthew 22:39), which is

called the “royal law” in James 2:8. He who loves his neighbor has fulfilled the law because in it all the commands of the Old Testament are summed up and because love does no wrong to a neighbor (Romans 13:8-10). The application of love, the law of Christ, is found in the New Testament.

Christians are not under the Mosaic Law because they have died to the Law (Romans 7:1-6)

Romans 7:1-6 provides a comparison between marriage and the Old Testament Law. The Law has jurisdiction over a person as long as he lives (7:1). No one who lives can say he is no longer obligated to follow the Law. Christians were made to die to the Law through Christ (7:4).

In marriage, the marriage bond holds until one of the partners dies. Upon death, there is no further marital obligation. This illustration is used in Romans 7:2-3 to picture the relationship that we have with the Law. If we have died with Christ (2 Corinthians 5:14-15; Colossians 2:20; 3:3), then our obligation to the Law has ended. Galatians 2:19-20 echoes this truth that our death with Christ has brought our death to the Law as well.

Notice that it is we who have died. This explains how the Law had not been abolished or been annulled (Matthew 5:17-19). In our death with Christ, we have been released from the Law (Romans 7:6). The Law still stands, but for Christians it has been fulfilled by Christ. All believers have died with Christ and have been released from the Law, no longer under obligation to it. Being in Christ, His righteousness has been imputed to us (2 Corinthians 5:21) and so the fulfillment of the Law. We now serve in the newness of the Spirit, not the oldness of the letter, according to the law of Christ, to love our neighbor as ourselves.

Christians are not under the Mosaic Law because of the New Covenant (2 Corinthians 3:1-11)

The New Covenant, represented by the Lord’s Supper (Luke 22:20), has replaced the Old Covenant, represented by the Sabbath (Exodus 31:12-17).

2 Corinthians 3 contrasts the New Covenant from Christ with the Old Covenant from Moses, showing that we are now servants of the New Covenant (3:6). The first contrast is between the letter and the Spirit. The letter refers to the Law of Moses while the Spirit refers to the indwelling Holy Spirit. The contrasts include the location, on our hearts rather than on tablets of stone, and the result, life rather than death (3:3, 6).

The second contrast is between the ministries of the two covenants. The ministry of death (3:7) and condemnation (3:8) is contrasted with the ministry of the Spirit in terms of glory. The ministry of the Old Covenant had some glory that faded away, the ministry of the New Covenant abounds in far surpassing glory that remains (3:9-11).

It is noteworthy that the ministry of death from Moses is specifically said to have been in letters engraved on stones (3:7) and called “tablets of stone” (3:3). This is an obvious reference to the Ten Commandments, the very heart of the Law of Moses. 2 Corinthians 3:7-11 clearly teaches that the Ten Commandments were a “ministry of death” that has “faded away” (3:11). We are no longer servants of the letter but of the Spirit, the new covenant (3:6).

The Law of Moses, including the Ten Commandments, has been replaced. Nine of the Ten Commandments are restated in the New Testament, with the lone exception being the commandment to keep the Sabbath holy. 2 Corinthians 3 allows us to understand the Ten Commandments in light of the New Testament. They, along with the rest of the Mosaic Law, are no longer binding on the church, having been done away in its entirety. What is binding on the church is the law of Christ, which is the law of love as taught in the New Testament. The New Testament forms the code of conduct for believers in the church age, some of which are identical to what was required under the Law.

Christians are not under the Mosaic Law because of the change in the priesthood (Hebrews 7:12)

Hebrews 7:12 tells us that when the priesthood is changed, the law must change also. The change in priesthood is the Levitical priesthood, on which basis the people received the Law, according to Hebrews 7:11. Christ is our high priest (Hebrews 2:17; 3:1; 4:14; 6:20) and as such the law must have been changed since Christ could not qualify as a priest under the Law, being from the tribe of Judah, not Levi. If the Law and the priesthood still remains for the believer, then Christ would not be qualified to act as our priestly mediator (1 Timothy 1:5).

We are able to pray through Christ, our high priest (Hebrews 4:14-16), because of this change in priesthood and Law. In Christ, the first covenant, the Mosaic Law, has been replaced by the New Covenant (Hebrews 8:7-9) and the first has been taken away in order that the second may come into existence (Hebrews 10:9).

Christians are not under the Mosaic Law because Paul taught that he was not under the Law (1 Corinthians 9:19-23)

How can Paul become “all things to all men that I may by all means save some” if he were under the Law of Moses? He specifically says that he became a Jew in order to win the Jews and he became as without the Law in order to win the Gentiles. Paul could not clarify that he was “not being myself under the Law” (1 Corinthians 9:20) if the Mosaic Law applied to him, nor could he set it aside to win those without the Law. He made the same statement to Christians in Galatians 5:18, saying, “but if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the Law.” Galatians 3:23-26 shows that we are not under the Law because its purpose was to guide the Jews to Christ. Once its goal of leading us to Christ by showing our guilt was achieved, we are no longer under the Law as a tutor.

Furthermore, Paul explained why he was not under the Law: He was “not without the Law of God but under the Law of Christ” (9:21). Both the Law of Christ and the Law of Moses include the “Law of God” or God’s moral law, the essence of His character. The Law of God is what is necessarily moral for all people because it is who God is. However, God gave laws to govern His people during different periods of time.

For example, it was not inherently immoral for Adam and Eve to eat from the tree in the garden but it violated God’s direction for them. It is not necessarily righteous to build an ark, but it was God’s command to Noah. The dietary laws are not part of God’s moral law, but it was sinful for them to be violated under the Law of Moses. Neither is baptism part of God’s moral character, else it would have been necessary in all ages. God gave somewhat different laws to guide the church in addition to His moral law. God’s character cannot change and what is against His nature will always be wrong. However, He may add additional requirements for certain people, which may be different at different times.

This then answers the charge that teaching that Christians are not under the Law does away with morality and is antinomianism (“against the law”). God’s moral law remains constant because it is included within both the Old and New Testament. Yet this moral law based on God’s character is not specifically set apart as such in the Word of God because, as with Israel in the Old Testament, the church is responsible for all the instruction of the New Testament. The New Testament provides our moral code for the church age.

The role of the Old Testament in the life of the Christian

All Scripture is inspired by God and is profitable (2 Timothy 3:16), even if it is not directly applicable to us. Much of the Word of God is filled with specific ways that God worked through individuals that will not be repeated today, yet these provide instruction and encouragement to us. To say that we have been released from the Law should not be understood as a discouragement from reading it vigorously.

1 Corinthians 10:1-12 shows the value of the Old Testament as an example to us so that we will not fall into the same temptation to crave evil things. Because of God’s Law and the rebellion of His people, we should be careful to take heed, lest we fall in a similar manner. What was written in the Old Testament instructs us to persevere with hope (Romans 15:4).

We are also able to learn much from the Old Testament wisdom books, such as Psalms and Proverbs. These are filled with teaching of how to live sensibly in this present age. This is why these books have been so popular among Christians.

For the unbeliever, the Law was a tutor leading to Christ (Galatians 3:23-24). For those who were kept in custody under the Law, it served as a guide to Christ. For practicing Jewish people today it can serve this same function of bringing them to the understanding of the substance of Christ, not simply the shadow of what was to

come (cf. Colossians 2:16-17). When faith comes, they are no longer under the Law, which serves as a tutor (Galatians 3:25).

Finally, we can learn much about God's character throughout the Old Testament. We can see much of who God is and what He values in the books of the Law and the rest of the Old Testament. While God is revealed much more clearly in the New Testament in Christ (Colossians 2:17; Hebrews 10:1), the revelation of God in the Old Testament was still accurate and profitable (2 Timothy 3:16-17).

The analogy of parenting

The New Testament sometimes uses the analogy of parents with their children to show how God serves mankind (Matthew 7:9-11; Hebrews 12:5-10). One of the fundamental elements of how a parent instructs their children is that there are different household rules according to their maturity. As children grow, new instructions arise and others are removed. Thus to have a changing code of conduct according to maturity is not contradictory but indeed is expected.

God desires His people to mature. This is not only true individually but corporately. He treats people differently at different times in order to develop them. So God's people, now with the Spirit of Christ, are now under the law of Christ.

Conclusion

How we understand what God desires from us is essential to an obedient love of God. To confuse what God requires of Christians not only affects our application of God's Word to our life, it may well have the negative consequence of leading others into confusion as well. We must take care to impart God's will with accuracy.

While all Scripture is given to us, inspired by God and profitable, not all Scripture is for each person to directly apply. God's commands to Israel must be understood as such and not transferred to the church. Those who seek to do so necessarily do so inconsistently. Christians who mistakenly believe that elements of the Law of Moses are required for believers in Christ today are, in the words of Peter from Acts 15:10, "putting God to the test by placing upon the neck of the disciples a yoke which neither our fathers nor we have been able to bear."