

# Differentiating Between Ceremonial, Civil, and Moral Laws

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Did God establish three different kinds of laws in the Old Testament? There is no place given in Scripture where the terms Moral, Ceremonial, and Civil Laws are found. From Scripture, it would appear, both in the Old and New Testaments, that the Law was one indivisible unit. In the Old Testament, Joshua speaks of the Law as one unit when he writes in Joshua 1:8: “This book of the Law shall not depart out of thy mouth; but thou shalt meditate therein day and night.” Doesn’t Paul do the same thing in Gal. 5:3: “For I testify again to every man that is circumcised, that he is a debtor to do the whole Law.” and in Gal. 3:17?

We use Col. 2:14-17 as a proof passage that the Ceremonial Law is done away with: “Blotting out the handwriting of ordinances that was against us, which was contrary to us, and took it out of the way, nailing it to His cross; And having spoiled principalities and powers, he made a show of them openly, triumphing over them in it. Let no man, therefor, judge you in meat, or in drink, or in respect of an holyday, or of the new moon, or of the sabbath days: Which are a shadow of things to come; but the body is of Christ.” In verse 14, however, Paul tells us that the handwriting (χειρόγραφον) of ordinances (δόγμασιν) has been canceled. That this verse is a sweeping statement of the whole Law in the Old Testament, not just of one part of it, can be defended from v. 17. Besides the Ceremonial Law, that verse contains the Sabbath Day which we classify as a part of the Moral Law. However, intertwined with the 3<sup>rd</sup> commandment is also the Civil Law. The Civil Law flows out from the Moral Law. Ex. 31:14: “Ye shall keep the Sabbath therefore; for it is holy unto you: every one that defileth it shall surely be put to death: for whosoever doeth any work therein, that soul shall be cut off from among his people.”

Prof. Peters, in his paper “Abrogation of the Mosaic Law,” also includes Heb. 9:10 with Col. 2:14-17 as referring to all the Law. Col. 2:16, for instance, is preceded by the sweeping statement of the Apostle that the handwriting of ordinances that was against us has been blotted out. “Here remember,” to quote Lenski, “that this handwriting contained all the demands of God made upon us. The cancellation wiped out all of them. That means that none are now *left*, such as the Judaizers in Colosse imagined, requiring Christians to avoid this and that (v. 21) and to observe this and that (Col. 2:16). Again, Hebrews 9:10 with its “carnal ordinances” is preceded by the sweeping statement that the old covenant is decaying and waxing old and is ready to vanish away—and with it, certainly all covenant-laws.”

Another theologian, James Denny, also points out that with one exception in a quotation from Jer. 31:33 in Hebrews 8:10 and 10:16, the word “Law” is always singular in the New Testament. This points to the unity of the divine laws.

From where do the terms then come: Moral, Civil and Ceremonial? According to Prof. Peters in his paper “Luther on the Form and Scope of the Mosaic Law,” the terms began with Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274), “certainly not by simply making use of the classification of the Mosaic Law, dividing it, as Thomas Aquinas had originally done, into *Leges, morales, ceremoniales* and *judiciales*, and by finding in the Decalogue nothing but moral laws. This classification he had used in his letter to John Lang in Erfurt, June 26, 1522.” The dogmatical terms of Moral, Ceremonial, and Judicial also were used by our forefathers in our confessional writings. The Apology of the Augsburg Confession, Article IV, sec. 7, reads: “In this discussion, by the Law we designate the Ten Commandments wherever they are read in Scripture. Of the ceremonies and judicial laws of Moses we say nothing at present.”

Why were the dogmatical terms of Moral, Civil and Ceremonial developed if there is no division in the Bible and the Jews never considered the Law as threefold? The division probably was developed because there are 3 natural parts to the Mosaic Law. It also makes for easier teaching when we study the Old Testament Law in a threefold sense. The Law of Moses is massive in scope.

Using the three terms, Moral, Ceremonial, and Judicial, as they have been by our theologians down through the centuries, which of the three are we bound to as New Testament Christians? Very few churches, except such as the 7<sup>th</sup> Day Adventists, have any trouble seeing we are free from the Ceremonial Laws. Someone

once called them the Judaizers of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Certainly Galatians and especially Hebrews 9, Col. 2:14-17 point out to us clearly that we are not under the yoke of the Old Testament Ceremonial Laws (Israel's laws concerning worship). How about the Judicial Laws or Civil Laws (laws peculiar to the governing of a nation)? There are no direct passages in Scripture that tell us the Civil Laws are abrogated for us except Rom. 13 and I Peter 2. These Scripture references tell us we are no longer under a theocracy, such as Israel was. Common sense also would tell us that many of the Civil Laws couldn't apply to us today, laws, for example, concerning leprosy, destroying the Hittites (Deut. 20), cities of refuge, canceling debts for fellow Israelites every 7<sup>th</sup> year. If we remember, too, the Jews thought of the Law as a unified whole, then Paul's words in Col. 2:14 certainly would call for an end to Jewish Civil Law.

However, what about the ten commandments given to Moses on Mt. Sinai that we designate as the Moral Law? Are we still bound to them? Luther said we are free from that, too. He claimed the ten commandments of the Old Testament pertained only to the Jews. Here were two arguments he used: "First of all to the First Commandment: 'The text testifies to that and constrains us in that it says: 'I am the Lord thy God, which have brought thee out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage (Ex. 20:2).' This is quite true and sufficiently clear," he goes on to say, "that we Gentiles were not led by God out of Egypt, but only the Jewish people, Israel. Therefore, Moses is applying the Ten Commandments exclusively to the people, which have been led by God out of Egypt... Consequently it is apparent that the Ten Commandments were given alone to the Jews and not to us, despite all enthusiasts.

"This is also quite obvious, Luther assures us, in view of the prohibition of the First Commandment: Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image or any likeness. 'For this,' Luther states emphatically, 'was spoken alone to the Jews and not to us. Show me one text,' he demands, 'wherewith God has prohibited us to use images.'

"Further on, Luther says once more: 'Thus this text constrains us strongly that the Ten Commandments have been given to the Jews only and not to the Gentiles, as it also follows from the Third Commandment, for the Gentiles have never been brought out of Egypt.'" (*Quartalschrift*, April, 1948)

While we are free from the commandments in the Old Testament, Luther, however, didn't teach us, thereby, that we are free from the commandments or natural law (Rom. 2:14-15). Luther said, "Wherever the Law of Moses and the law of nature are one and the same, there the Law remains and is not outwardly abrogated, except by faith spiritually which is nothing less than the fulfilling of the Law (Rom. 3:28). That is, wherever Moses gives commandments that we do not follow him any farther than where he agrees with the natural law. Let Moses be a master and doctor of the Jews. We have our Master, Christ, Who has submitted to us what we should know, keep, do, and leave undone." (*Quartalschrift*, April, 1948) For Luther, then, where the commandments agree with the natural law, we are to follow them. The correct interpretation of the commandments or the natural law is never to be found for us in the Mosaic Law, but in the New Testament alone, as Jesus and the apostles, inspired by God, interpret the Law for us.

While the commandments in the New Testament are almost all listed identically (wording, not order) to the ten in the Old Testament, some are not. Rom. 13:9-10 and Matt. 19:18-19: "Jesus said, Thou shalt do no murder, Thou shalt not commit adultery, Thou shalt not steal, Thou shalt not bear false witness, Honour thy father and thy mother; and, Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself." That we are still obligated to those not listed, such as commandments 1-3, is found in proof passages in the New Testament. 1<sup>st</sup> Commandment: Eph. 5:5: "For this ye know, that no whoremonger, nor unclean person, nor covetous man; who is an idolater, hath any inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and of God." 2<sup>nd</sup> Commandment: Rom. 12:14: "Bless them which persecute you: bless, and curse not." 3<sup>rd</sup> Commandment: Heb. 10:25: "Not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as the manner of some is." Why we quote the commandments from the Old Testament in our Catechism, is because most are quoted in the New Testament. The order or division in the Old Testament lends itself well to teaching them to others. Luther says, "Nowhere are the laws of nature so well composed and arranged as in Moses." (Reu, p. 109)

Seeing we are free from the Mosaic Law of the Old Testament, what benefit is there in studying the Moral, Ceremonial, and Civil Laws of the Old Testament? Luther answered that in a threefold statement. Here

he was looking at the Law in a broad sense, including everything that Moses wrote. He said, “I want to keep Moses and not sweep him under the rug, because I find three things in Moses:

“In the first place, I dismiss the commandments given to the people of Israel. They neither urge nor compel me. They are dead and gone, except insofar as I gladly and willingly accept something from Moses, as if I said, ‘This is how Moses ruled, and it seems fine to me, so I will follow him in this or that particular.’

“I would even be glad if (today’s) lords ruled according to the example of Moses. If I were emperor, I would take from Moses a model for (my) statutes; not that Moses should be binding on me, but that I should be free to follow him in ruling as he ruled. For example, tithing is a very fine rule, because with the giving of the tenth all other taxes would be eliminated. For the ordinary man it would also be easier to give a tenth than to pay rents and fees. Suppose I had ten cows; I would then give one. If I had only five, I would give nothing. If my fields were yielding only a little, I would give proportionately little; if much, I would give much. All of this would be in God’s providence. But as things are now, I must pay the Gentile tax even if the hail should ruin my entire crop. If I own a hundred gulden in taxes, I must pay it even though there may be nothing growing in the field. This is also the way the pope decrees and governs. But it would be better if things were so arranged that when I raise much, I give much; and when little, I give little.”

“In the second place, I find something in Moses that I do not have from nature: the promises and pledges of God about Christ. In Deut. 18:15-16, Moses says, ‘The Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among you, from your brethren—him you shall heed.’

In the third place, we read Moses for the beautiful examples of faith, of love, and of the cross, as shown in the Fathers, Adam, Abel, Noah, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses and all the rest. From them we should learn to trust in God and love Him.”

While we are free from the Moral Law of the Old Testament, we still are expected to keep the commandments, the natural law, as Jesus and the apostles interpreted them in the New Testament, out of love for our Savior and to the glory of God. Matt. 5:16: “Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father which is in heaven.” We also need the Moral Law as a mirror and rule. “For the explanation and final settlement of this dissent we unanimously believe, teach, and confess that although the truly believing and truly converted to God and justified Christians are liberated and made free from the *curse of the Law*, yet they should daily exercise themselves in the Law of the Lord, as it is written, Ps. 1,2; 119,1: Blessed is the man whose delight is in the Law of the Lord, and in His Law doth he meditate day and night. For the Law is a mirror in which the will of God, and what pleases Him, are exactly portrayed, and which should (therefore) be constantly held up to the believers and be diligently urged upon them without ceasing.

“For although the Law is not made for a righteous man, as the apostle testifies in I Tim. 1:9, but for the unrighteous, yet this is not to be understood in the bare meaning, that the justified are to live without law. For the Law of God has been written in their heart, and also to the first man immediately after his creation a law was given according to which he was to conduct himself. But the meaning of St. Paul is that the Law cannot burden with its curse those who have been reconciled to God through Christ; nor must it vex the regenerate with its coercion, because they have pleasure in God’s Law after the inner man.” (*Catechetical Resources*, Warnke)

What use, however do we make of the Ceremonial and Civil Laws of the Old Testament that we have no obligations to whatsoever?

As Luther said in regard to the Judicial Laws, they give government good advice on how to govern. In regard to this point Prof. Warnke in his “Catechetical Resources” unit on the Moral, Ceremonial, and Civil Laws, writes:

“Those laws protected Israel’s citizens from thieves, murderers, kidnappers, rapists, false witnesses, and the like, as our statutes should also do. There weren’t a great many Civil Laws in comparison with our huge statute books, but they accomplished their purpose.

They also provided for swift, fair, humane, sure justice in keeping with the nature of the crime. One cannot help but contrast the various instances of capital punishment, for example, with our lenient

treatment of vile offenders. No wonder that crime in America is unbelievably huge and dangerous. (A particularly vicious murderer was sentenced to 199 years in prison—he could become eligible for parole, and naturally for continuing his life of crime, after seven years.) It may be interesting to note that the Massachusetts Bay Colony in its early years had few laws. When the judges were in doubt, they consulted the ministers or the Bible. However, by the 1640's a code of laws was gradually adopted based on Israel's Civil Laws. Those laws of the Colony even mentioned chapter and verse in the Bible (the references were places in the margins). They were in effect until about 1700. Those Massachusetts laws were milder and more humane than England's.

Finally, as a church in the New Testament era governed by Christ and not by Moses' Ceremonial Laws, we can still find things beneficial in the Ceremonial Laws for our study. Consider the cleanliness and neatness God demanded of his priests (Deut. 16:4 and Ex. 30). Would God expect less of pastors and teachers today? In regard to pastors' and teachers' salaries, Pastor Warnke makes these remarks:

“The wages of the priests and Levites, decreed by God, are interesting. For one thing, they received no hereditary land like the other tribes, except for 48 cities in which to live with their suburbs for pasturage of their cattle, and they included the six cities of refuge (Numbers 18:20; 35:108). Outside of that they were to depend entirely upon the Lord for their sustenance, as befitted their office. And God provided for them liberally, even magnificently. This meant, using the figures for the second census, Num. 26, that they received probably five times as much income as the average Israelite, if all the people tithed. (There were over 600,000 other adult Israelites as compared with 23,000 Levites from the age of one month and upward. So there were at the most some 12,000 adult Levites receiving tithes from 600,000 people.) In addition the Levites received many perquisites, such as special offerings, parts of various sacrifices, the first-fruits, and the redemption money. See Numbers 18:8-32 for the details. (Let no contemporary pastor start making comparisons, but rather let him pray with Solomon, Proverbs 30:8,9: “Give me neither poverty nor riches; feed me with food convenient for me: Lest I be full, and deny thee, and say, Who is the Lord: or lest I be poor, and steal, and take the name of my God in vain.”)

How grateful we also should be for the freedom we have of being able to choose completely our form of worship and our time of worship. Israel's worship was governed by myriads of laws. The purpose on God's part was love. It was to keep them a holy nation (Ex. 19:6; Lev. 11:44, 19:2, 20:7; Deut. 7:6, 14:2), apart completely from the world so He finally could bring them, in His time, the promised Savior. The severity in which God dealt with Israel's false worship which was punishable by death (Deut. 13 & 17, Ex. 35), was to teach them there was no mercy or hope of salvation under the Law. The many sacrifices without blemish or spot, purification laws for various things, should have told Israel how corrupt they were in sin, unable to save themselves and in need of a Savior. The burdensome, exacting, Ceremonial laws and their severe punishment should have caused the Jews all the more to look forward to their Redeemer who would free them from the yoke of the Law (Gal. 3:13) and place them under the joyous, light yoke of the Gospel. “Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn of me; for I am meek and lowly in heart: and ye shall find rest unto your souls. For My yoke is easy, and My burden is light.” Matt. 11:28-30.