

LAW  
&  
COVENANT



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RONALD L. DART

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*Law & Covenant*

By Ronald L. Dart

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# Prologue

*“Let not the wise man boast of his wisdom  
or the strong man boast of his strength  
or the rich man boast of his riches,  
but let him who boasts boast about this:  
that he understands and knows me,  
that I am the LORD, who exercises kindness,  
justice and righteousness on earth,  
for in these I delight,” declares the LORD  
(Jeremiah 9:23-24 NIV).*

This is the third book I have opened with that Scripture.<sup>1</sup> I didn't start out with it in mind, but it seems to have made itself my ongoing theme through all three books. It calls on me to understand that the Creator is not only intelligent and powerful (as a deist might believe), but that he also possesses a character that can be known and understood. Moreover, he has a name. He is to be known as Jehovah, “who exercises lovingkindness, judgment and righteousness here on earth” (Jeremiah 9:24 KJV).

This intensely personal God declares that the pursuit of understanding him, of knowing him, is a glorious pursuit, a rewarding pursuit: “For he that comes to God must believe that he is, and that he rewards them that diligently seek him” (Hebrews 11:6).

I started this book with the simple idea of right and wrong. The Hebrew word for righteousness is *tsedaqah*, and is derived from a verb that means, simply, to be right or to do right. Thus it is a glory

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1. The first book was *The Lonely God*, and the second was *The Thread, God's Appointments with History*.

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for a man to come to understand that God is right and that what he does is right. The inevitable question that arises next is, “What is right?” What makes one action right and another wrong? Elsewhere, a psalmist answers the question: “May my tongue sing of your word, for all your commands are righteous” (Psalm 119:172 NIV). It is thus the Law of God that defines right and wrong for man.

But it seems to me that man has made a fundamental error in understanding that law. We tend to think of laws as regulatory and absolute because that is the way we encounter law in our world. Not so long ago, in a previous energy crisis, speed limits across the the United States were arbitrarily reduced from 70 to 55 miles per hour. The rationale was that gas goes further at 55 MPH than it does at 70. It also goes further at 40 MPH, but no one believed the public would live with that. No one liked 55 very much either, because it increased time on the road. So the law was repealed. Every law that Congress passes is arbitrary and can be repealed.

This is what we are used to, so it is only natural to assume that the Law of God is likewise regulatory and at least somewhat arbitrary. One assumes that the sovereign God said, “Let’s consider what laws we can hand down for man.” Then he proceeded to give a set of laws to Moses. This is what I call “the arbitrary God theory.” And it follows as day follows night if you accept the idea that the Old Testament Law was abolished in Christ. If the law could be abolished, then it might not have been necessary in the first place. Where Congress is concerned, they are human. They make mistakes. They try to regulate things that can’t be regulated and end up having to repeal some of the laws they pass. When Congress repeals a law, it is a tacit admission that the law was a mistake.<sup>1</sup>

But God does not make mistakes. Thus the law cannot be arbitrary. And on the heels of this comes a realization: If the law is not arbitrary, then perhaps it is not entirely regulatory either. This is not to say that the law cannot be used to regulate. It is merely to say that there is an underlying reality of the law that must be grasped before attempting to regulate man’s behavior.

Here is a short, contrasting idea about the law that we can lay out on the examining table: The law is not regulatory, it is

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1. The constitutional amendment prohibiting alcohol comes to mind.

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*revelatory*. It is a revelation of the way things are. The law does not create right and wrong. It reveals what is right and what is wrong. The law says, “You shall not steal.” Stealing did not become wrong when the Ten Commandments were written on stone by the finger of God. Stealing was wrong from the day when there was a man who could take things that were not his to take. The law is what it is because to be otherwise would be wrong. And for God to know that it is wrong and to fail to tell us would be, well, wrong.<sup>1</sup>

Now, what lies beyond understanding and knowing God? There we find a relationship with God, a covenant. The archetype of all covenants in the Bible is the covenant God made with a man named Abraham. Later, God would make a covenant with a nation of people, Israel. Still later, Jesus would make a New Covenant with his disciples.<sup>2</sup>

You will not be reading dogma here. The subject is far too important for that. When you are trying to know and understand God, you can’t afford to be locked into one way of looking at things. God has taken pains to reveal himself in so many ways. Our problem is that we are too often inattentive to what he has had to say.

Years ago, in a moment of personal crisis, something truly profound dawned on me. I realized that I had absolutely nothing to fear from the truth. Truth is glorious. It is exciting. And it can set you free. It would be a shame to let fear keep us from pursuing truth wherever it leads.

In the pages that follow, we will follow these ideas and see where they take us. We may not follow a straight line, because that is not always the way understanding comes. Abraham did not know what Moses came to know. And neither of them knew what Jesus revealed to his disciples.<sup>3</sup> And then there was Paul.

Take your time while you read this book. There will be times when you need to lay it down and stare into space for a while. Some ideas will require that you sleep on them. It is not my purpose to tell you what to believe. Rather, I want to walk alongside you and talk about things I am coming to see.

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1. That there would later come a regulatory law was inevitable. The need for that came as soon as a community was created. More on that later.

2. See Luke 22:20.

3. 1 Peter 1:10-12.

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*I will delight myself in thy statutes:  
I will not forget thy word.  
Deal bountifully with thy servant,  
that I may live, and keep thy word.  
Open my eyes, that I may behold  
wondrous things out of thy law  
(Psalm 119:16-18).*

Some notes: The chapters of this book are derived, in some measure, from sermons, radio programs, and essays. Consequently, there may be some repetition of themes. Also, from long habit, I read the King James Version, but paraphrase it as I go, changing “thee” to “you,” etc. I have frequently followed that practice in this book. Other translations are designated by abbreviations as noted on the copyright page. I encourage you to keep your own Bible handy so you can read the context of citations.

On the matter of the divine name, *YHWH*, in Hebrew is usually rendered in small caps, LORD, in most English versions. Written Hebrew has no vowels, thus it is not certain how the name should be pronounced. The consensus is *Yahweh*, but I lean toward the older *Jehovah*, because of long familiarity. In most cases, “LORD” is clear enough, but there are instances where the passage makes much more sense if we recognize that our LORD has a name. In Hebrew, names have meaning, and the translation of *Jehovah* is “I am.”

My thanks to Mickie Ranaldo and Allie Dart for their indispensable assistance in editing and manuscript preparation.

## *The Jigsaw Principle*

*Open my eyes that I may see wonderful things in your law.  
I am a stranger on earth; do not hide your commands from me.  
My soul is consumed with longing for your laws at all times.<sup>1</sup>*

Few things are more chaotic, more confused, than a 1000 piece jigsaw puzzle coming out of the box. The pieces lie there in a heap with no apparent relationship between them. Some pieces are upside down, others are right side up, their colors and designs vary; and they are all cut out of the picture with shapes that look like they might fit together. No two pieces are exactly the same. If you have a good puzzle and you have the patience, you can put it together with the picture face down.

Most of us adopt a system to approach a puzzle like that. First, we get all the pieces right side up. Then we sort them roughly by colors. While we are doing that, we look for edges and corners. The corners and edges help us get the scope of the puzzle and establish boundaries. After that, we look for patterns and shapes, and we begin to piece the puzzle together.

Why do we do it this way? Well, it's logical. But what does it mean to say that a system is logical? Consider this. Every human child born into the world arrives with a built-in system of logic. We don't have to be taught it, because it is hardwired into us. The brain itself is "wired" according to a logical system, and the mind operates on that system. So we start out in life with a mind that is

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1. Psalm 119:18-20 NIV.

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logical. It is untrained, but the logical system gives it enormous potential for development.

The Apostle Paul didn't use the language of logic, but he came to the same conclusion. Speaking of a man's ability to know right from wrong, he said:

Indeed, when Gentiles, who do not have the law, do by nature things required by the law, they are a law for themselves, even though they do not have the law, since they show that the requirements of the law are written on their hearts, their consciences also bearing witness, and their thoughts now accusing, now even defending them (Romans 2:14-15 NIV).

I think this is Paul's way of saying that the Gentiles were born hardwired to the logic of the law. C. S. Lewis came to a similar conclusion in what he called the Law of Nature. By that, he did not mean laws like gravity or thermodynamics, but rather the Law of *Human* Nature. Unlike physical laws, this is a law we can break, and do. This is from his classic, *Mere Christianity*:

I do not succeed in keeping the Law of Nature very well, and the moment anyone tells me I'm not keeping it, there starts up in my mind a string of excuses as long as your arm. The question at the moment is not whether they are good excuses. The point is that they are one more proof of how deeply, whether we like it or not, we believe in the Law of Nature. If we do not believe in decent behavior, why should we be so anxious to make excuses for not having behaved decently?<sup>1</sup>

I'm not sure whether Lewis drew his idea from Paul or came up with it independently. I think it may have arisen from the logical structure of the argument he was advancing, because he doesn't approach Christianity, per se, until later in the book. His point, though, is clear. The human mind does operate according to a system of internal logic.<sup>2</sup>

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1. C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, (MacMillan, 1952), 20.

2. Here is a question for the philosophers among us to ponder. Was this system a manifestation

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God gave man a system of logic out of which language grows, so he could communicate with man and be understood. It is this underlying principle which makes translation possible, and which has enabled the translations of ancient documents even though they are written in languages no longer in use.

It is remarkable that man, in the absence of revelation, can come to a pretty good estimation of right and wrong. But the mind alone won't get you all the way. Everyone knows there is a difference between right and wrong, but they often fall down sorting out which is which. Everyone knows that a child needs exercise. Fortunately, children are hardwired at birth with a desire to play, and that desire gets them out of doors, up trees, exploring caves and streams. (Someone felt sure that kids all have guardian angels, for if they didn't, none of them would ever reach adulthood.) It is not so certain that everyone understands that a child's mind and spirit need exercise as well as his body. The author of Hebrews drew an analogy to this:

For when for the time you ought to be teachers, you have need that one teach you again the first principles of the oracles of God; and are become such as have need of milk, and not of strong meat. For every one that uses milk is unskillful in the word of righteousness: for he is a babe. But strong meat belongs to them who are of full age, even those who by reason of use *have their senses exercised to discern both good and evil* (Hebrews 5:12-14).

Discerning good and evil is made possible by the logical design of the human mind. But if the senses aren't exercised, the mind, like the body, grows flabby and indolent.

Also wired into the human mind is an insatiable thirst for meaning, so I often find myself looking up the meaning of the Greek and Hebrew words of the Bible. In my search, I often gain insight, and sometimes amusement. The Greek word for senses in the passage above, *aistheterion* (from which we derive the word "aesthetic"), denotes the organs of perception—all of them. But the

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of the Law of God, or was the system created logically and then the law written to reveal the system?

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word for “exercise,” *gumnazo*,<sup>1</sup> means “to practice naked.” The Greeks always exercised and competed in the nude. But the author is talking about mental pushups, spiritual weight lifting, and for all we know, he may have had in mind an oblique reference to being naked before God.

So, I take it that, just as we are born with bones, nerves, muscle and tissue, and just as we have to exercise to build them up to peak performance, so also we are born with a mind that must be exercised for peak performance. So much more is known today about the way a child develops. We’ve known for a long time that there is a connection between the attention a child gets in the earliest years and the overall development of intelligence. What we are only now learning is how it works, and what we are learning is fascinating. I came upon this item recently:

To understand the link between early emotional bonding and brain development, it helps to know what's going on in your baby's brain. You've heard that a baby's brain grows most rapidly during the first three years of life. During the first year, brain cells are busy making millions of connections. The connections peak at about one year and, in a process called “pruning,” they are eliminated if they are not used. The connections that you regularly use are the ones that you keep.<sup>2</sup>

That last should make every parent sit bolt upright. We have heard forever, “Use it or lose it.” It is as true of the brain as it is of the body, and there sits your child with a developing brain, learning stuff at a phenomenal rate. Or not. It really depends on you.

Peter, in his first letter adopted the same analogy as Paul: “As newborn babes, desire the sincere milk of the word, that ye may grow thereby” (1 Peter 2:2). What is of special interest in this passage is that, in speaking of “the word,” Peter uses the Greek, *logikos*, from which the English word “logic” is derived. It is the “pure milk” of divine logic we are after. What I take Peter and Paul

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1. The Greek, *gumnazo*, is the root of the English “gymnasium.” There is no “y” in Greek, but the pronunciation of the Greek letter, upsilon, approximates the letter “y” in English.

2. Caroline Knorr and Deirdre Wilson, “Your Child’s Growing Brain,” *United Parenting Publications*, February 2003.

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to be saying is that we are born with a system of logic that has to be informed, developed, and trained to a higher system—a higher system that is, nevertheless, built on the same base.

So, from a biblical perspective, what do we need to do to develop that higher logic? A psalmist one day sat down to write a treatise on the subject. He organized his work alphabetically in segments to aid memorization, each section beginning with the next letter of the Hebrew alphabet. Some versions of the Bible include these titles, and that makes it easier to note the eight verse stanzas.

In this Psalm, we find all the synonyms for law, seven or eight of them in the first two sections. It is almost as though he is calling our attention to the fact that the various categories and descriptions of the law are all part of a single system. He speaks of the Law of the LORD, the Way, Testimonies, Precepts, Decrees, Statutes, Commandments, Judgments, and the Word, all in the first ten verses. And he tends, as the Psalm progresses, to use each of these words as a synonym for the whole of Divine Law. Having laid out the use of the words in the first section of the Psalm, he proceeds with the gymnastics of the mind and spirit that he uses to make his life work.

How can a young man keep his way pure? By living according to your word. I seek you with all my heart; do not let me stray from your commands. I have hidden your word in my heart that I might not sin against you. Praise be to you, O LORD; teach me your decrees. With my lips I recount all the laws that come from your mouth. I rejoice in following your statutes as one rejoices in great riches. I meditate on your precepts and consider your ways. I delight in your decrees; I will not neglect your word (Psalm 119:9-16 NIV).

His mental pushups included concentration, attentiveness, memorization, and meditation. To hide words in the heart is to internalize. Memorization is accomplished by oral recitation, “With my lips I recount all the laws.” Without internalizing the precepts, the last item becomes very hard; how can a man meditate on what he cannot remember? We have an enormous advantage in that we have the Scriptures in books we can carry with us. In those days, a

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shepherd camped out with his sheep had only his memory for meditation. And meditation is crucial, as we will see.

Years ago, in a series of workshops on management, the instructor challenged us to keep a time log of everything we did for one week in ten minute increments. The following week, he relaxed the requirement to 15 minute intervals, but a new wrinkle was added. He required us to spend a total of one hour in that week doing absolutely nothing but thinking. We couldn't think at the keyboard or while driving a car. At most, we were allowed to tap a pencil on the table.

That week was a turning point for me. I came to realize that, while we do think during every waking hour, we manage to keep ourselves distracted from the really important things. Sitting quietly in a chair, eyes closed, doing nothing at all, was a strange experience. But during that one hour, I mentally worked my way through the most serious problem facing me on my job and found a solution that worked. *In one hour.*

When you apply this principle to the law, some very interesting things happen. In the first place, the temptation to legalism is foreclosed. Legalism is a perspective that sees the law as an absolute requirement from God. The law is there; we have to do it. Thinking is not required or even encouraged. Who are we to second-guess God? The letter of the law controls.

But when you stop to meditate on the law, something else begins to happen. The law begins to shine a new light on your problems, your headaches, your challenges. Decisions become easier, because you now have a logical framework into which they can be placed and by which they can be judged.

If all this logic sounds too pat, too unemotional, you haven't thought about it long enough. Legalism is unemotional, pat, locked in place. Meditation opens the way to understanding. Emotions and feelings are not enough. You have to do something about those feelings, and the logic of the law keeps you from doing stupid, hurtful things. Our psalmist continues.

Do good to your servant, and I will live; I will obey your word. Open my eyes that I may see wonderful things in your law. I am a stranger on earth; do not hide your commands from me. My soul is consumed with longing for

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your laws at all times (vv. 17-20 NIV).

The law is so much higher than most people think. It is not just so much pharisaical legalism. It is not a matter of a heavy burden to be borne. It is a matter of a man in business facing a decision that requires sound judgment and discernment. “Open my eyes that I can see this clearly,” he prays. “I am consumed with longing for your law.” Why? Because it is in that system of logic that the solution to his problem lies.

If the law looks like a yoke of bondage to you, then you need to look again. It makes all the difference how you *think* about it. What the psalmist sees in the law is a Divine Logic that transcends what he can see by himself. He wants to see more.

Remove from me *the way of lying*: and grant me thy law graciously. I have chosen *the way of truth*: thy judgments have I laid before me. I have stuck unto thy testimonies: O LORD, put me not to shame. I will run the way of thy commandments, when thou shalt enlarge my heart (vv. 29-32 KJV).

All this is related to the statement: “Remove from me the way of lying.” Two roads lie before you. This is not a choice to be made once and then laid aside, but a road you choose to walk. One is the way of lying; the other is the way of truth. Nothing can do more damage to your judgment than walking in the way of lying.

Every child is born into the world with a built-in lie detector. It has to be trained, but the circuits are all there. As we grow up, sometimes it seems to work and sometimes it doesn't. Why is that? What makes the difference?

Well, in the first place, if you lie, you degrade your own lie detector. We also degrade our lie detectors by not listening to them. Why would anyone do such a foolish thing? To answer that question, we have to lay the Psalm aside for a moment and read something from Paul's letter to the Thessalonians. Warning about the nature of “the lawless one,” he wrote this:

The coming of the lawless one will be in accordance with the work of Satan displayed in all kinds of counterfeit

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miracles, signs and wonders, and in every sort of evil that deceives those who are perishing. They perish because they refused to love the truth and so be saved. For this reason God sends them a powerful delusion so that they will believe the lie and so that all will be condemned who have not believed the truth but have delighted in wickedness (2 Thessalonians 2:9-12 NIV).

They perish because they refuse to love the truth. This seems a strange idea at first, but when we think about it, we know it is true. People do believe lies and even seem to prefer them. Why? For one thing, they may *want* the lie to be true. We know from experience that if we tell people what they want to hear, they are more likely to believe us—no matter the truth or error of the statement.

When Dan Rather and crew at CBS ran a story about George Bush that turned out to be based on forged documents, the whole news industry was scandalized. How on earth could the CBS fact checkers not have noticed the problem? The most common explanation at the time was that the news team wanted the story to be true and so they ran it without thoroughly checking it out. Their built-in lie detector had been compromised. But there was probably more to it than that. It fit with an established worldview,<sup>1</sup> a way of looking at people and events. Seeing President Bush as a shirker, a college frat boy, fit with their view of the world, so they went with it. It was a huge mistake and put a distinguished career on the rocks.

There are so many things that conspire to blind us to the truth. Our psalmist suggests that covetousness is a factor: “Incline my heart to thy testimonies, and not to covetousness” (Psalm 119:36). Greed, for money or for power, can blind a man to the truth. That is a sad commentary. But the truth takes the blinders off, and leads to real wealth in the end.

The psalmist went on to plead, “Turn my eyes away from worthless things; preserve my life according to your word” (v. 37 NIV). These two requests tie the Law of God to the ability to know what is valuable and what is not, to know what is truth and what is not. What would it be worth to always know when a man is lying?

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1. From the German: *weltanschauung*, “a comprehensive conception or apprehension of the world especially from a specific standpoint,” *Miriam-Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary*.

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You can come pretty close if you just tune up your love of the truth, and the rewards for doing so are enormous.

Do not snatch the word of truth from my mouth,  
for I have put my hope in your laws.  
I will always obey your law, for ever and ever.  
*I will walk about in freedom,*  
for I have sought out your precepts (vv. 43-45 NIV).

There is a truth of staggering proportions here. It is the connection between the “word of truth” and walking about in freedom. One of the strangest of Christian theologies is the one that considers the Law of God a “yoke of bondage.” The idea derives from an idiosyncratic interpretation of an argument advanced by Paul in his letter to the Galatians. He wrote: “Stand fast therefore in the liberty wherewith Christ hath made us free, and be not entangled again with the yoke of bondage” (Galatians 5:1). Ironically, Paul spoke of not becoming entangled with something that takes away liberty and freedom. The psalmist considered the Law of God as the *guarantor* of freedom. So did Paul. Then there was James:

For if anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man who looks at his natural face in a mirror; for once he has looked at himself and gone away, he has immediately forgotten what kind of person he was. But one who looks intently at the perfect law, *the law of liberty*, and abides by it, not having become a forgetful hearer but an effectual doer, this man shall be blessed in what he does (James 1:23-25 NASB).

Some interpreters think they find an argument between Paul and James, but they are being careless. The Psalm gives us the key. Understanding of the purpose of the law is what opens the door. The Law of God is the ground and source of all freedom, of liberty. Those people will be in bondage who cannot bring themselves to live by the Law of God. Returning to the psalmist:

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I am a friend to all who fear you, to all who follow your precepts. The earth is filled with your love, O LORD; teach me your decrees. Do good to your servant according to your word, O LORD. Teach me knowledge and good judgment, for I believe in your commands (Psalms 119:63-66 NIV).

Many times we have heard, “A man is known by the company he keeps.” If you hang out where the truth is valued and lies are condemned, you will be where you belong. It’s important to note the last phrase here: “I believe your commandments.” The Commandments of God are his *Testimony*.

Before I was afflicted I went astray, but now I obey your word. You are good, and what you do is good; teach me your decrees. Though the arrogant have smeared me with lies, I keep your precepts with all my heart. Their hearts are callous and unfeeling, but I delight in your law. It was good for me to be afflicted so that I might learn your decrees (vv. 67-71).

The worst thing that can happen to us is to have life too easy. It doesn’t matter very much what the affliction is. It can be physical pain. It can be failure in business. It is a rare man who engages in self-examination when everything he is doing is working just fine. Someone who had reason to know once said that the best thing that can happen to a man is to get fired somewhere in his 30s or 40s. It forces self-examination and a readjustment of a man’s career and life goals. We can just get a little too comfortable, a little too risk-averse, and spend our entire lives like a cog in a machine.

Twice in my long career, I have had occasion to resign from good, well paying positions to start over. I can honestly say that both these moves were good for me, as uncomfortable as they were at the time. In my case, these occasions forced me to look long and hard at my calling, my relationship with God, and my spiritual growth (or lack thereof). It was good for me that I was afflicted. Affliction set my feet on a better path.

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Oh, how I love your law! I meditate on it all day long.  
Your commands make me wiser than my enemies,  
for they are ever with me.  
I have more insight than all my teachers,  
for I meditate on your statutes.  
I have more understanding than the elders,  
for I obey your precepts.  
I have kept my feet from every evil path  
so that I might obey your word.  
I have not departed from your laws,  
for you yourself have taught me.  
How sweet are your words to my taste,  
sweeter than honey to my mouth!  
I gain understanding from your precepts;  
therefore I hate every wrong path (vv. 97-104 NIV).

These verses are the heart and core of this Psalm. The psalmist loves the law because it gives him an edge in life. What is it worth to be wiser than your enemies, to have more understanding than your teachers, to know things even the gray heads don't know? Why would I not love something like this, and why would I not hate anything that threatened to take it away?

Having come this far, we should begin to understand what happens to our lie detector as life proceeds. We are given the core logic at birth, and then the world goes to work eroding it, often with our consent and cooperation. The ability to recognize truth when we hear it, to spot a liar before he finishes his spiel, is worth a lot in life.

What makes the difference? The next verse answers the question: "Your word is a lamp to my feet And a light to my path" (v. 105). This is the chosen analogy. The law is not a burden we have to carry. It is not shackles around our feet and legs. It is a lamp to light our way so we don't fall down and hurt ourselves. When I hear Christians who should know better refer to this law as a "yoke of bondage," I can only shake my head in wonderment.

Your statutes are my heritage forever; they are the joy of my heart. My heart is set on keeping your decrees to the very end.

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I hate double-minded men, but I love your law (vv. 111-113 NIV).

It is ironic that the two richest men in the world, Warren Buffet and Bill Gates are giving away most of their wealth. Neither of them wants their heirs to get too much money or too much power. They may not be going far enough, but that is their call. What the psalmist is saying is that he has taken the testimony of God as his heritage. It is worth far more than the billions these two men might leave behind.

The last sentence in this section is interesting: “I hate double-minded men.” That doesn’t sound right to me. I think what he is saying is that he hates double-mindedness, in himself or in others. Why put up with ambiguity when you can come down on the side of the right?

It is time for you to act, O LORD; your law is being broken. Because I love your commands more than gold, more than pure gold, and because I consider all your precepts right, I hate every wrong path. Your statutes are wonderful; therefore I obey them. The unfolding of your words gives light; it gives understanding to the simple. I open my mouth and pant, longing for your commands (vv. 126-131 NIV).

This is a man who will never be morally confused. He knows right from wrong with clarity. Why? Because he believes God is right. *It really is that simple.* It is striking to read his words and realize that then, as now, there were those with an anti-law philosophy. In the days of the psalmist, they could not argue that the law was nailed to the cross, but they still found a way to regard the law as void. This fellow panted for the laws of God. Some foolish ones are panting to cast them off.

Yet you are near, O LORD, and all your commands are true.  
Long ago I learned from your statutes  
that you established them *to last forever* (vv. 151-152).

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I said earlier that every child born into the world comes with a built in baloney-detector. Baloney is slang for bologna, a large smoked sausage. In slang it means “pretentious nonsense.” Why do we get sucked in by baloney? Because it appeals to our vanity, our idea that we are somehow special, that we have knowledge denied to other people. And, of course, we fall for it because we like to be stroked. It is a part of the permanent condition of man, and it led Paul to write this to Timothy:

But mark this: There will be terrible times in the last days. People will be lovers of themselves, lovers of money, boastful, proud, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy, without love, unforgiving, slanderous, without self-control, brutal, not lovers of the good, treacherous, rash, conceited, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God—having a form of godliness but denying its power. Have nothing to do with them. They are the kind who worm their way into homes and gain control over weak-willed women, who are loaded down with sins and are swayed by all kinds of evil desires, always learning but never able to acknowledge the truth (2 Timothy 3:1-7 NIV).

This is a truly sad commentary. Here are people who are no longer able to discern between truth and a lie. How do people get that way? Paul, on another occasion, answers:

The weapons we fight with are not the weapons of the world. On the contrary, they have divine power to demolish strongholds. We demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God, and we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ (2 Corinthians 10:4-5 NIV).

We are born with a built-in baloney detector. If it is fine tuned, it can demolish arguments and pretentious nonsense. It can save us more heartache than I can enumerate. The Law of God is the highest expression of the logic of God and man. It is the primary source of renewing and repairing the old baloney detector.

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We would do well to use the jigsaw principle in studying biblical law. First get all the pieces right side up. Sort them according to the most obvious principles. Locate the boundaries, the corners, the edges, so you can get a proportion of what you are looking for. And then be patient. Don't try to make pieces fit where they don't belong. Don't throw pieces out because they don't look right. The Bible, like the puzzle, will yield to persistence and patience.

Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—*think about such things* (Philippians 4:6-8 NIV).

## *The Purpose of Law*

*The first of all the commandments is, Hear, O Israel; The LORD our God is one LORD: And thou shalt love the LORD thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind, and with all thy strength: this is the first commandment. And the second is like, namely this, Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself. There is none other commandment greater than these (Mark 12:29-31).*

You may take for granted the typesetting on the page you are reading, but in days past, it was a very long and tedious labor to set a book to type. Even after the invention of movable type it was still a hard process and prone to error. Each and every letter and space had to be set in place, batted firmly together and then locked to print pages from the set type. All that is gone now, as there is no longer a typesetting process in producing a book. With the onset of computers, the author's own manuscript provides the basis for the final product.

But imagine what a laborious job it would have been to set an entire Bible to type, and how hard it would be to get it right the first time. Naturally, those early typesetters didn't always get it right, and one example turned up in a 1631 edition of the Bible, ordered by King Charles. The Bible was pretty much correct except for the omission of one little three letter word: not. And that might not have been such a big deal if it hadn't been for where that word was supposed to be. It was in Exodus 20, in the seventh of the Ten Commandments which, in this particular edition, read: "Thou shalt

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commit adultery.”

Some wag dubbed it “The Wicked Bible,” and King Charles ordered all 1000 of them recalled and destroyed. There are still 11 copies in existence, and the mind boggles to think what they might be worth at auction.

It would be a Bible for our age, though—the age of recreational sex. And since we are talking about God and the law, it might be worth asking: Why did God outlaw recreational sex? Sex surely is fun and exciting, so why not do it? Was it, as teenagers are apt to ask their parents, because God doesn't want us to have any fun? Or are there consequences, for individuals and for society, if sex isn't kept within boundaries?

One of my first clues to this came, of all places, in a Navy VD<sup>1</sup> film. Watching the film, I learned that many babies went blind soon after birth because of the presence of the gonococcus bacteria in the birth canal. The mother may not have shown any symptoms, even though she had been infected. By the time I saw the film, they were putting silver nitrate on babies' eyes at birth to prevent blindness, but the film was warning about other problems.

At the time I saw the film, there were maybe six or seven significant venereal diseases. Now there are more than 50, and they are much more dangerous than what sailors called, “a dose of the clap.” How dangerous? Well, you have surely heard of AIDS. Consider Africa. Over 13 million children have been orphaned in Africa from AIDS. Many of those kids now have AIDS themselves and will die of it. In Africa alone, 24.5 million have died of AIDS. Nearly four million of them were children under fifteen.

You can't solve this problem with a little silver nitrate in the eyes or a shot of penicillin in the rump. They say that the spread of AIDS in Africa is primarily from heterosexual, promiscuous sex. The same thing is going on in your country; the only difference is in the numbers. We may begin to see why God would say, “Thou shalt *not* commit adultery.”

But this raises a core question. Did God create sexually transmitted disease (STD) as a trap for man, as a punishment for having too much fun? Hardly. It is more likely that STDs are an example of what can happen when viral and bacteriological strains are given indefinite life to mutate and change. Your body is

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1. VD, Venereal Disease, what is today called STD, Sexually Transmitted Disease.

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teeming with bacteria right now. (Try not to panic. Most of them are harmless and some are even good for you.) When a person has sex with another person, he or she inevitably trades some bacteria with the partner. Bacteria and viruses mutate, and in the lifetimes of a man and a woman they may change a bit. However, the strains of germs exchanged between one man and one woman won't survive the lifetime of that couple. But if we add additional people to the mix and give those strains of bacteria indefinite life, all bets are off.

I don't know if that is how STDs originated, but just take it as an analogy to what *might* have happened. What I do know for certain is this: If we could manage complete monogamy for everyone for a generation or two, we could wipe out all STDs including AIDS. So why blame God for it? It is our problem. We created it. God told us how to avoid it.

So, why did God say, "Thou shalt not commit adultery"? Perhaps, at the highest level, it's for the children. Society has a responsibility to protect children from the stupidity of adults. At another level, it's for our personal health. At still another level, it is for the health of society. No one knows yet what the final impact of AIDS will be on society on the African continent—only that it will be devastating.

So, yes, society has an interest in putting a damper on extra-marital, "recreational" sex. But society has completely lost control. We have lost control because we have lost sight of God and the law.

We begin to get the idea right from the start, when God created the basic unit of society: the family.<sup>1</sup> From the beginning, provision was made for the spin-off of a new family from the old. Why a family? Well it's for the children, of course. And why should we care about the children? Because a society that doesn't care for children will not survive. Moslems living in Europe today are producing ten children for every one produced by Europeans. How long do you think European culture can survive that ratio?

A culture that corrupts their children doesn't deserve to survive, and there are too many ways to corrupt children. They can be corrupted sexually. They can also be corrupted by hatred, as Palestinians are teaching their children to hate the Israelis more

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1. See chapter 16, "The Oldest Covenant."

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than they love life. Then there are the effects of divorce.

Divorce is becoming so common in our country that some 50 percent of all kids are being raised in single parent homes. These children have more difficulty in school, more behavioral problems, more negative self-concepts, more problems with peers, and more trouble getting along with their parents.

And there is no reason we should be surprised at this. Children are frightened and confused by the breakup of the family and by the separation and alienation of the two most important people in their world. They tell us that children commonly think they are the cause of the problem when a family breaks up. Sometimes, children even assume the responsibility for reconciling the problem and healing the breach, often sacrificing themselves in the process.

What is it in children that will cause a normally selfish kid to turn around and sacrifice himself to keep his parents together? What does the child know that the parents don't? Divorce can affect the mental, emotional, and physical health of a child. We've come to a terrible pass in our society when those who were to be protected by marriage are the very ones who sacrifice themselves to save it.

The examples I have cited so far speak strongly to the question of biblical law. They speak not only in terms of individual conduct, but to the concerns of society in at least minimal regulation of individual conduct—as in laws to discourage divorce, and promiscuous sex. Many states had laws against adultery that seem antiquated now, but they were rooted in sound morality and a willingness to take strong measures *to protect children*.

What is important about this chapter is that we have shown the justification for society having a concern for private morality. The Supreme Court of the United States jumped the tracks when it found a “right to privacy” in the Constitution—a right not explicitly stated, and not found by any previous court. Some argue that you can't legislate morality. But in society, sometimes you must, or your social order will unravel. There are limits to any perceived right to privacy.

There are two issues here. One has to do solely with personal morals. The other has to do with the preservation of social order for the sake of maintaining the society and for the sake of the children. The state has an interest in protecting the social order. It was this

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that accounted for two very different aspects of biblical law. One is personal, the other is social. This is parallel to the classic distinction made between moral law and civil law.

Thomas Aquinas distinguished three kinds of law in the Bible: moral, ceremonial, and judicial. Jesus himself confirmed a twofold division:

The first of all the commandments is, Hear, O Israel; The LORD our God is one LORD: And you shall love the LORD thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind, and with all thy strength: this is the first commandment. And the second is like, namely this, You shall love thy neighbour as thyself. There is no other commandment greater than these (Mark 12:29-31).

In Jesus' construct, both moral and civil law<sup>1</sup> fall under the heading of the love of neighbor. Ceremonial law would fall under the heading of the love of God. A temptation arises to use these distinctions to explain why some laws are abolished while others are kept, but who can argue for the abolition of the command to love one's neighbor or to love God? Even the distinction between these commandments is blurred. As John put it: "If a man say, I love God, and hates his brother, he is a liar: for he that loves not his brother whom he has seen, how can he love God whom he has not seen?" (1 John 4:20).

And all these laws are gathered together in the broader definition of "the written law," as opposed to "the oral law." It is the written law that Jesus specified when he said:

Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. I tell you the truth, until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished (Matthew 5:17-18 NIV).

With this information in hand, we are prepared to address a singular issue in Old Testament legal studies: The civil law. It is

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1. Or, following Aquinas, the judicial law.

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not uncommon to encounter the argument that the civil law is not binding upon Christians, but that is not, strictly speaking, true. All the civil laws of the Old Testament are part and parcel with the written law, and Jesus said plainly he had not come to abolish them.

What, then, are we to make of, say, the laws regulating slavery? Can a Christian own a slave? The very idea is repugnant, but upon closer examination the answer appears to be, that he can. The laws regulating slavery are part of the written law, and therefore would have to be included in Jesus' affirmation of the law. Some light is shed on the subject by a short letter Paul wrote to a Christian who was in fact, a slave owner. His name was Philemon, and he had a runaway slave named Onesimus.

Philemon was a close friend to Paul, having been converted by Paul on his stay in Ephesus. He was also a strong man of faith, and effective in ministering to the church. So imagine Paul's surprise to find that one of the servants who ministered to him, and whom he had converted there in Rome, was a runaway slave belonging to his old friend Philemon.

I would have thought that the Christian faith would have freed all slaves, but apparently not. Paul determined that he had to send Onesimus back to his master. When you think about it, that is a significant statement about the Christian and the law. Paul opened his letter with his usual salutation, and we learn that Philemon is a significant player in the Christian drama. He is leader of the church in his house and beyond. Thus, in his most diplomatic style, Paul writes to him:

I appeal to you for my child, whom I have begotten in my imprisonment, Onesimus, who formerly was useless to you, but now is useful both to you and to me. And I have sent him back to you in person, that is, sending my very heart, whom I wished to keep with me, that in your behalf he might minister to me in my imprisonment for the gospel; but without your consent I did not want to do anything, that your goodness should not be as it were by compulsion, but of your own free will (Philemon 1:10-14 NASB).

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In that brief statement, “I am sending him back,” Paul acknowledges the rights of Philemon under the law to own a slave. Not only did Roman law allow it, so did biblical law. But the nature of the common Christianity of both men added a new element:

For perhaps he was for this reason parted from you for a while, that you should have him back forever, no longer as a slave, but more than a slave, a beloved brother, especially to me, but how much more to you, both in the flesh and in the LORD. If then you regard me a partner, accept him as you would me (vv. 15-17).

Reading between the lines, it is clear that Paul was forestalling any anger or retaliation for wrongs Onesimus might have done. Paul called in a debt:

But if he has wronged you in any way, or owes you anything, charge that to my account; I, Paul, am writing this with my own hand, I will repay it (lest I should mention to you that you owe to me even your own self as well). Yes, brother, let me benefit from you in the LORD; refresh my heart in Christ. Having confidence in your obedience, I write to you, since I know that you will do even more than what I say (vv. 18-21).

So Christians could own slaves in societies that permitted it. But they were bound by the written Law of God to go beyond anything required by their society. But there is something interesting to consider here. The civic *enforcement* of law was not the function of any individual, nor of the church. That function had transferred to the state under which the Christian lived. We will discuss this again in the chapter on “The Social Contract.”

## *Law and Meaning*

*But avoid foolish questions, and genealogies,  
and contentions, and strivings about the law;  
for they are unprofitable and vain (Titus 3:9).*

In religion, the very existence of a law is an invitation to legalism. When Paul wrote warning Titus to avoid foolish striving about the law, he was addressing the then common Jewish custom of endless debate over fine points of law. It was this kind of debate that later found expression in the Mishnah<sup>1</sup> and finally the Talmud.

I have to believe that there were some contentions about the law from the earliest days of the Christian faith. That should not be surprising, because the earliest church was comprised entirely of Jews, soon joined by “God Fearers”—non-Jews who nevertheless believed in the God of the Bible, and loosely practiced Judaism. We know there were Pharisees who became believers,<sup>2</sup> and we are fully justified in assuming that there were Sadducees as well. In fact, there is reason to believe that the new Christian faith cut across every facet of Judaism. That being the case, it is reasonable to assume that controversies involving the law followed in due course. It could hardly have been otherwise.

Consider, then, the dilemma of any Christian who takes the view that the law has not been abolished. He has firm grounds for

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1. Mishnah (Hebrew for “repetition”) is the first written record of the Jewish Oral Law as it was held by the Pharisees. It is the first work of Rabbinic Judaism. It was redacted around 200 A.D. by Rabbi Judah ha Nasi.

2. Acts 15:5.

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that conclusion, since Jesus affirms it in the Sermon on the Mount:

Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. I tell you the truth, until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished (Matthew 5:17-18 NIV).

Some awkward problems present themselves when you try to live by this. For example, the law forbids the mingling of fabrics together in the making of a garment.<sup>1</sup> One fellow, sincerely wanting to do the right thing, became concerned about whether the elastic around the band of the top of the socks would constitute the mixing of fabrics together. The story had it that he removed all the elastic from his socks. I don't know what he used to keep them up.

I have long been an advocate for reading the Old Testament, but once people start reading it seriously, all manner of questions start arising about the law. There is a strong temptation to attempt answers to all those questions and thus create a new Talmud. Resisting that temptation, we still need to find a way to heed what Jesus said, to read the law with understanding and learn what it reveals to us about God, his character, and what he expects of us in living a life.

A friend once asked me, "Why it is that we play hopscotch through the Old Testament, picking up this law and dropping the one right next to it?" I thought the question was reasonable. In essence what he was asking was this: "What are the criteria we use to decide which Old Testament laws we will keep and which we will ignore?" It is an important question because, truth to tell, every serious Christian does precisely that.

Ever since the beginning of the Christian faith, theologians and teachers have attempted to address the question. Various and sundry dissections of the law have been suggested in an effort to rationalize what we do. For example, no one is going to argue that the law, "Thou shalt not steal," is of no import to Christians. But when it comes to a law that requires a blue tassel on the fringes of our clothes, we will probably find dissenters.

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1. Leviticus 19:19.

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Some people try to solve the problem by making a distinction between the Ten Commandments and the rest of the Law. In other words, the Ten Commandments are valid, but the rest of the Law is not. Others attempt to distinguish between the Law of God on the one hand and the Law of Moses on the other, feeling that if a statement can be identified as the Law of God, you should keep it; but if it is part of the Law of Moses, then it's abolished. Still others distinguish between what they call "the moral law" and "the ceremonial law." They try to make the distinction based upon whether or not it is a ceremony, a ritual, or a sacrifice. These, they argue, are done away whereas the other aspects of the law are not.

Still another denomination contends that all of the law was nailed to the cross, including the Ten Commandments. They then go on to explain that nine of the commandments were "reinstated" in the New Testament. It is the Sabbath commandment that didn't make the cut.

With typical wrongheadedness, we often make big issues out of things that aren't very important while we give too little attention to more serious matters. It is tempting to ask, "Do I have to do this?" rather than ask, "What does this mean? What lies behind it? What is the underlying principle? How might it apply in real life?"

Too few people ever get around to asking the immortal, "Why?" To me, that is the truly interesting question when it comes to the law. When I read the Old Testament and encounter an obscure law, I stop and ask, "Why did God say that?" I can't see any way to apply the law in the here and now, but the natural question that follows is, "Why was this a law in the first place?" I have come up with some intriguing questions, though not quite so many answers.

I spotted a bumper sticker once that proclaimed proudly, "God said it, I believe it, and that settles it for me." That makes life much simpler, but the fellow driving the car might well be wearing wool and Dacron slacks. He probably has no idea that God handed down a law of mixed fabrics. Yes, God said it. Yes, he believes it. But so far, he hasn't done it. He has likely overlooked the importance of understanding those things that God has said. Solomon wrote: "Wisdom is supreme; therefore get wisdom. Though it cost all you have, get understanding" (Proverbs 4:7 NIV).

Blind obedience may be better than no obedience at all.

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Sometimes you don't know the reason behind a law until the consequences come home to roost. But still, obedience with understanding is better. Without it, you may cause actual harm in your attempts at righteousness.

A guiding light for me is that passage in Jeremiah cited on the very first page of this book: “. . . Let not the wise man boast of his wisdom or the strong man boast of his strength or the rich man boast of his riches, but let him who boasts boast about this: that he understands and knows me . . .” (Jeremiah 9:23-24 NIV).

It seems to me that it is in the study of the Law of God that we have a great opportunity for coming to understand the character of God, what he stands for, and why he did some of the things he did.

### **The Basic Assumption: No Bad Laws**

I have approached the study of the law with a basic assumption. One should always be alert to an author's assumptions, so I'm giving you one of mine right up front. I am assuming that God would not and did not ever give man a law that was bad for man.

Readers of the King James Version may object, citing Ezekiel: “Wherefore I gave them also statutes that were not good, and judgments whereby they should not live” (Ezekiel 20:25 KJV). But this flies in the face of the character of God and what we see and know of God. As it happens, the King James guys got it wrong. Read it in context in another version:

Because they had not obeyed my laws but had rejected my decrees and desecrated my Sabbaths, and their eyes lusted after their fathers' idols. I also gave them *over to* statutes that were not good and laws they could not live by (Ezekiel 20:24-25 NIV).<sup>1</sup>

God did not hand down a set of bad laws when they disobeyed the original. He gave them up to other laws, including the laws they made for themselves. So I can retain my premise. All of God's law, as originally written, was good for man. Then, I can ask an

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1. “That God would give Israel ‘statutes that were not good’ means that Israel would choose to live according to the world's ordinances that brought misery and death.” *Expositor's Bible Commentary*, on Ezekiel 20:24.

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important question about any given law: “Why is this law good?” Proceeding along these lines, I find some interesting questions and some important answers.

Here is another premise I bring to the study of the law: The Law of God is not arbitrary. I get the impression that some people think God sat back one day and said to himself, “Now let’s see. These people need some laws. And I must determine what is going to be right and what is going to be wrong.”

Some seem to approach the law like teenagers fighting a parent’s rules. They think God said, “This act is fun so I will make it wrong.” God, they think, doesn’t want us to have any fun. If God were arbitrary, he could have taken the things that were fun and made them right and taken the things that were not fun and made them wrong. That would have made life a lot simpler for all of us, not to mention a lot more fun.

I think we can all agree that God, who made man, knows man. And as an old mentor of mine used to put it, “the Bible is God’s instruction book to man.” He compared the Bible to the instruction book that comes along with a new car. It tells you what kind of oil to put in it, what pressure should be maintained in the tires, what grade of fuel you must use, what periodic maintenance is needed, and how to operate all the features. If you accept the premise that the Bible is God’s instruction book, then it follows that God, having created man, then began to communicate to man a way of life, a way of living, and things to do that were good for man, things that would save him from hurt, from trouble, and from the heartache that might come his way. And so, we proceed from this premise to the conclusion that when God speaks to man, he tells him something that is good for man.

But, there is a fly in the ointment. As you begin to read through the law, you’re going to occasionally find laws that are a little bit, well, annoying. You will find others that are deeply and profoundly troubling. I don’t recall the occasion when I first read the Old Testament laws concerning slavery, but I recall vividly how I felt. I came across this law:

And if a man strikes his male or female slave with a rod and he dies at his hand, he shall be punished. If, however, he survives a day or two, no vengeance shall be taken; for

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he is his property (Exodus 21:20-21 NASB).

Here was my question: “How could God take such a callous view of human beings and see them treated as chattel, as property? Why would He do that?” I won’t answer that question right here, but the laws regarding slavery still fall within the assumption that God never gave to man a law that was bad for him. And, since they are a part of the written law, they haven’t gone away.

Our problem is not so much that we are getting the wrong answers as it is that we keep asking the wrong questions. Take this common question, for example: “Is the Law of Moses binding upon Christians?” There are two problems with semantics in the question. What, exactly, does the questioner mean by “the Law of Moses,” and how does the word “binding” apply? Here is another misleading question: “Is keeping the Fourth Commandment [the Sabbath] required for salvation?” The question implies that there are some laws that *are* required for salvation, an assumption that is theologically unsound. Just change the commandment by one notch and think about the implications: “Is honoring your father and mother required for salvation?”

The error in this line of questioning is that it does not recognize that the purpose of the law is not, and never has been, the achievement of salvation. It was not a salvation issue for Jews, and it is not for Christians. Proceeding from this basic fact, we can ask what a person means when he asks if a given law is “binding” upon Christians. What does the word “binding” mean? Does it mean God requires it of us? If we don’t do it, what happens to us? The question is just another way of asking, “Is this or that law required for salvation?” And that assumes a role for the law that God never intended the law to play.

The best way to get at this question is to illustrate it with one of those Old Testament laws. Try this one: “Do not muzzle an ox while it is treading out the grain.”<sup>1</sup> Is a Christian “bound” by this law? It is hard to get at the question by trying to decide what category of law it is. Is it the moral law? Is it ceremonial? There is no ritual involved in the law, and how can it be a question of morality if you feed an ox while he’s actually working instead of feeding him before?

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1. Deuteronomy 25:4 NIV.

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There are more questions. Is this the Law of Moses or is it the Law of God? How would that affect our answer as to whether it is binding? Being where it is in Deuteronomy, it would be part of the Law of Moses. But what if I don't have an ox? Do I need to go out and buy one? The question is absurd, but nevertheless, it's the one that has to follow if we are asking if this law is binding upon us. As it happens, Paul reached back in one of his letters, grabbed this law, and revealed in the process an entirely different way of thinking about the law. He said this:

For it is written *in the Law of Moses*: "Do not muzzle an ox while it is treading out the grain." Is it about oxen that God is concerned? Surely he says this for us, doesn't he? Yes, this was written for us, because when the plowman plows and the thresher threshes, they ought to do so in the hope of sharing in the harvest. If we have sown spiritual seed among you, is it too much if we reap a material harvest from you? (1 Corinthians 9:9-11 NIV).

One question is answered. This law falls in the category of the Law of Moses. Make a note, though, Paul said it is *written* there, and that turns out to be more important than you might think. Paul did not see it as an animal rights law. It is not, he said, because God is concerned about the animal. It is for our sakes that it is written (he mentions it twice), and it is written so we can understand that it is right and fitting *to compensate our minister*.

You can't argue that this law was nailed to the cross (the common reason for dismissing a law we don't like). Paul wrote this 25 or more years after everything was nailed to the cross that would ever have been nailed there. Nor can we argue that it is solely Jewish. The law was being applied to a *Gentile* church. Plainly, it was not nailed to the cross, and it was not "abolished."

It may be worth looking a little further into Paul's usage. He took this law out of its Old Testament context, and applied it here as an *authority* for what he is telling this church of Gentiles. In the broader context, Paul was talking about his own example of avoiding offenses:

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Am I not free? Am I not an apostle? Have I not seen Jesus our LORD? Are you not the result of my work in the LORD? Even though I may not be an apostle to others, surely I am to you! For you are the seal of my apostleship in the LORD. This is my defense to those who sit in judgment on me. Don't we have the right to food and drink? (1 Corinthians 9:1-4 NIV).

It is an odd statement on its face, but when taken in context, it is clear enough. The word rendered “right” is *exousia*, which means “authority” or “privilege.” And as the theme is developed through the chapter, it becomes clear that he meant he had the right to eat and drink at their expense. He appealed to the practice of the other apostles who traveled with a wife and did not work at an ordinary job. “Who ever goes to war at his own expense?” he asked. Then he said something very strange when viewed in the light of modern Christian belief. He appealed to the Law of Moses as an authority. But then the Old Testament was the only Scripture they could appeal to. This is the *meaning* of the law of the Ox:

Do I say this merely from a human point of view? Doesn't the Law say the same thing? For it is written in the Law of Moses: “Do not muzzle an ox while it is treading out the grain.” Is it about oxen that God is concerned? Surely he says this for us, doesn't he? Yes, this was written for us, because when the plowman plows and the thresher threshes, they ought to do so in the hope of sharing in the harvest. If we have sown spiritual seed among you, is it too much if we reap a material harvest from you? (vv. 8-11 NIV).

It is worth emphasizing that Paul did not appeal to the teachings of Jesus. He didn't appeal to the Sermon on the Mount. He didn't appeal to Peter, or the Jerusalem elders. He appealed to the law, and specifically to the Law of Moses. Does this make the Law of Moses somehow binding upon Christians? This was said to people just like us. There were people in Corinth who were not even in agriculture. They may have been craftsmen, merchants, or mine workers. They may have owned vineyards, where they didn't

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use animals for their work. Yet Paul wrote that the law was written for their sakes—and ours.

Mind you, a Gentile church was told that a segment of the Law of Moses was “written for our sakes.” It was written, not for oxen, but for the underlying principle:

If others have this right of support from you, shouldn't we have it all the more? But we did not use this right. On the contrary, we put up with anything rather than hinder the gospel of Christ. Don't you know that those who work in the temple get their food from the temple, and those who serve at the altar share in what is offered on the altar? In the same way, the LORD has commanded that those who preach the gospel should receive their living from the gospel (vv. 12-14 NIV).

I wouldn't have thought that the church or the Gospel was what God had in mind when he handed down that law of the ox. But in a simple, two line statement God laid down a principle that can stand through all the ages, and across all national or cultural boundaries. It is applicable in any circumstance of human endeavor, that a man should be paid fairly and promptly for what he does.

Now a legalist<sup>1</sup> might have been very careful to ensure that his oxen were not muzzled, while at the same time he failed to pay the man who followed the oxen and tended to them.<sup>2</sup> This kind of thinking comes about because men don't understand the underlying principle of the law. It is not enough to obey the letter. One must understand the *meaning* of the law.

This is important because a man might be careful to buy clothes that are 100 percent wool, thereby establishing his righteousness, while he is sleeping with another man's wife. If the law is your salvation, you had better keep it all. You can't just cherry-pick the laws that appeal to you, or that are easier for you. Then there is the fellow who dismisses all Old Testament law and ends up in the same place as the legalist.

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1. A person who is a strict, literal, or excessive practitioner of conformity to the law or to a religious or moral code

2. James 5:4.

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Now listen, you rich people, weep and wail because of the misery that is coming upon you. Your wealth has rotted, and moths have eaten your clothes. Your gold and silver are corroded. Their corrosion will testify against you and eat your flesh like fire. You have hoarded wealth in the last days. Look! The wages you failed to pay the workmen who mowed your fields are crying out against you. The cries of the harvesters have reached the ears of the LORD Almighty (James 5:1-4 NIV).

Try another example of Old Testament law: “When you build a new house, make a parapet around your roof so that you may not bring the guilt of bloodshed on your house if someone falls from the roof” (Deuteronomy 22:8 NIV).

Why on earth, in an age of pitched roofs, would we need to put a parapet around our roof? No one is going up there except repairmen, and they have their own skills and insurance. Maybe this is a law we can safely ignore. Well, not if you have a flat roof and easy access to that roof. If children climb up onto that roof and fall off, you are liable. The principle underlying this law is *personal liability*. You may not have a flat roof, but you might easily have an elevated deck behind your home. My home is built on a slope, and the back edge of the deck is eight feet above the ground. If anyone fell from that deck, they might well be hurt. I have an obligation to protect my family and guests from falling off the edge of that deck, and that obligation is implicit in the law of parapets. Why would it be abolished? It is implicit in the law that it would apply in any comparable situation in any age.

This law would probably be categorized as civil law by those who divide the law into compartments. But there is nothing wrong with civil law. In fact, one should be held accountable for creating a hazard and for negligence.

So here is a biblical law, thousands of years old, that still has application in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The reason some might think it doesn't apply is because, in our society, flat roofs are a rarity. But if a person is free to build one, the law requires the parapet. It isn't a matter of legalism, but responsibility for any hazard you create.

It is easy to forget that, in many parts of the world to this day, there are people who not only have flat roofs, they have stairways

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that go up to them. They go up and sun. The air is fresher up there. They go up and sit in the evening. In fact, I stayed once in a home in Jerusalem that was just so. I think some visitors actually slept on the roof of that house at night because it was so cool once the sun had gone down and the evening breeze began to blow. And it did have a balustrade all around the edges so there was no danger of falling off.

There are, to be sure, parts of the law that would have no application for a man. For example, a single man need not concern himself with the laws that might apply to a married man. And laws that pertained to a particular priesthood would have no application if that priesthood were no longer in existence. In the same way, if there's no Temple, then many of the laws pertaining to the Temple might not have an application. Then, some laws are not applicable because they deal with administrative penalties. Take this one:

If men who are fighting hit a pregnant woman and she gives birth prematurely but there is no serious injury, the offender must be fined whatever the woman's husband demands and the court allows. But if there is serious injury, you are to take life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot, burn for burn, wound for wound, bruise for bruise (Exodus 21:22-25 NIV).

The idea of cutting off a man's hand because he caused the loss of a hand is troubling. So troubling that some interpreters have said that the meaning of the law was that the man had to pay the value of the hand. In any case, it should be clear that only a governmental authority could administer such a penalty, either literal or monetary. A church, existing in a land where there is a civil government, has no right to impose civil or criminal penalties. The law is not abolished. But it cannot, it must not, be privately enforced. That has always been true of laws of enforcement.

Nevertheless, the principle is still there. If you cause bodily harm to another through an act of carelessness, anger or neglect, you are responsible. And in the New Covenant, you are held responsible, not merely to the letter of the law, but to the spirit of the law, whether there are civil penalties or not. We'll talk more

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later about administrative law and how it affects the relationship between man and God, but for now, I want to look further into the way we *understand* the law.