

—A Study of the Westminster Confession of Faith—

The Law of God & Christian Liberty WCF 19-20.1

Introduction

- ° Having dealt with the covenant of God and its outworkings in the application of redemption, the divines now come inevitably to the question of the Law of God, its significance, and especially the role it has in the life of the church and the believer.

The Law of God

- I. The law of God was given to Adam in the form of a covenant of works § 1
 - A. This was a federal transaction, binding Adam and all his posterity, Rom 5.12ff
 - B. The demand of the covenant was for personal, perfect, and perpetual obedience, expressed in a positive precept, Gen 2.17; Ps 15.1-2
 - C. The promise of the covenant was life, Rom 10.5; Gal 3.12
 - D. The threat or penal sanction of the covenant was death, Gen 2.17; Gal 3.10
 - E. The provision of the covenant was the strength and ability to keep it, Gen 1.27; Ecc 7.29
 - F. When Adam violated this covenant, he plunged all his posterity under it as a broken covenant. Though ordained for life, it has become weak through the flesh and can neither deal with our sin nor give us life. The natural condition of all men is therefore most miserable, Gal 3.10; Eph 2.3; Ps 51.5.
- II. The law of God was given again at Mount Sinai through Moses § 2
 - A. In sum, the law of God itself was unsullied by the fall and remains a perfect rule of righteousness (Js 1.25; 2.8). It was therefore given by God at Sinai in ten commandments (Dt 10.4), the first four summarizing our duty to God and the latter six summarizing our duty to man (Mt 22.37-40).
 - B. Upon the fall, the law considered as a covenant of works was annulled and set aside; but considered as the moral law, it continued to be a perfect rule of righteousness written on the heart of every man (Rom 2.14-15).
 - 1. **Ferguson**, “The fact that Adam has fallen makes no difference in the way in which God has called him to live. Ability or loss of ability does not minimize responsibility. Fallen though he is, man is responsible to live as God made him.”
 - C. But since the original edition of the law on the heart was defaced by sin, God was pleased to give a new and complete copy of it at Sinai in awful solemnity.
 - 1. The law of God was displayed from Sinai in the form of a covenant of works, but not in order to renew it with Israel, or to put them to seeking life by their own obedience. Rather, it was published as a covenant of works to show them that without a perfect righteousness, answering all the demands of the law, they could not be justified before God; and that, finding themselves wholly destitute of that righteousness, they might be stirred up to take hold of the covenant of grace, in which a perfect righteousness for their justification is graciously provided by God Himself.
 - 2. Thus the Sinai transaction was a mixed dispensation. In it the covenant of grace was published, as appears from the words of the Preface to the Law and from the promulgation of the ceremonial law at the same time. But the moral law was also displayed as a covenant of works to teach them of their sinfulness and misery and of the necessity of an atonement, and to lead them to embrace by faith the blessed Mediator, the Seed promised to Abraham.
 - 3. The law was therefore published at Sinai as a covenant of works in subservience to the covenant of grace. In fact, the law is still published (when it is preached) for the same purpose, in subservience to the gospel, as a schoolmaster to bring sinners to Christ, that they may be justified by faith (Gal 3.24).

- III. Besides the *moral* law, God gave the people of Israel *ceremonial* laws as well § 3
- A. The ceremonial laws respected the Jews in their ecclesiastical capacity as a church “under age.” These laws were chiefly designed to prefigure and foreshadow Christ and lead them to the knowledge of the way of salvation through Him, as promised in the covenant of grace (Heb 10.1).
 - B. Yet, none of the ceremonies of the OT were efficacious in and of themselves, for they were but shadows and types and not the reality. “For it is *impossible* for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins,” (Heb 10.4). The efficacy of the ceremonial laws lay in their serving as directives and helps to the believer’s faith, directing them to the promises of the covenant of grace and helping them visually to trust in God’s promises. These visual helps were suitable to a dispensation prior to the coming of the Messiah, but are completely out of place in our dispensation following the coming of the Messiah—not only because He fulfilled them, but because the reality is now in view.
 - C. These ceremonial laws are all *abrogated* under the New Testament dispensation:
 1. They served as a dividing wall to separate the Jews from the Gentile nations. Now that the gospel is preached to all nations this wall is taken down and the elect are gathered from all nations, Eph 2.14-15.
 2. They were only figures and types imposed on the Jews until the coming of Christ, in whom they were realized and substantiated, Heb 9.9-12
 3. They were given to typify and represent Christ and His death. Therefore by His death they must be abolished, Col 2.17
 4. They were restricted to the temple of Jerusalem and have ceased along with the destruction of the temple, Mk 15.38
 5. The apostles taught the abrogation of the ceremonial laws, Acts 15.24; Heb 7.12
- IV. In addition to the *moral* and *ceremonial* laws, God gave Israel *judicial* laws § 4
- A. The judicial laws respected Israel in their political capacity as a nation and consisted of those institutions which God prescribed to them for their civil government.
 - B. These laws have *expired* with the Jewish nation and have no binding on any, further than what the general equity behind them may require (Mt 5.38-39; 1Cor 9.8-10)
 - C. Thus, to the question of theonomy, the Westminster divines would simply say, “the OT judicial laws expired with the nation of Israel and are no more.” We may learn lessons of general equity from them, but they are no more binding upon any people. Along with the ceremonial laws, they were temporary and have served their purpose. Christ fulfilled the one and moved us beyond the other.
- V. *The moral law, however, is perpetual and universally binding* § 5
- A. The moral law has no respect to time and places, or to one nation more than another. It is the reflection of God’s holy character and an indelible part of the human constitution as made in the image of God, Gen 1.27, outlining the duty man owes to God and therefore retains its authority under all dispensations.
 - B. In opposition to the Antinomians, the Confession affirm that believers are still under the moral law. Being delivered from it as a covenant of works, they are yet still under it as rule of life, in the hand of the Mediator, 1Cor 9.21. Instead of weakening the law, the gospel of grace confirms and strengthens its authority and enforces obedience to its precepts by the strongest motives, Rom 3.31; Rom 8.4.
 - C. Thus, although the moral law is divested of its covenant form for believers, it remains immutably the same in both its matter and its authority. Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law but not from the matter or authority of it. It retains its full force as the rule of our moral conduct.
 1. In fact, it carries a greater force upon believers than it ever did on Adam, because we have both Christ’s example in Scripture and Christ’s strength in the Spirit. We have the actual illustration in Jesus Christ of how the Law of God is to be kept and we have the Holy Spirit of Christ coming to write this Law of God into our hearts and lead us in the willing and doing of it, Phil 2.13.

VI. The uses of the law of God §§ 6-7

- A. Christ endure the curse of the law in all its bitterness and in its utmost extent, in His sufferings and death, and thus set believers completely free from its *condemning* power (Gal 3.13; Rom 8.1). But had He only endured the curse of the law and left His people under the law's *commanding* power as a covenant, it would have restored us to the same uncertain probation as Adam had. Therefore Christ not only sustained the full penalty of the law, but He also yielded perfect obedience to its precepts and thus obtained for His people deliverance from its *commanding*, as well as its *condemning* power, Rom 7.4; 10.4; 6.14
- B. This doctrine of the believer's freedom from the law as a covenant does not tend to licentiousness since they are thereby bound in Christ under the obligation of the same law as a rule of life.
- C. The law therefore serves numerous and important purposes both to the believer and to the unbeliever
 1. To unbelievers the moral law is of use:
 - a) To restrain them from sin, 1Tim 1.9
 - b) To convince them of their sinfulness and misery, Rom 3.20; 7.9
 - c) To discover to them their absolute need of Christ, and drive them to Him as their all-sufficient Saviour, Gal 3.24
 - d) To render them inexcusable, if they continue in their sins, and finally reject the only Saviour of lost sinners, Rom 1.20; 2.15; Jn 3.18, 36
 2. To believers the moral law is of use:
 - a) To render Christ more precious to them, and excite their gratitude to Him, who so loved them as to obey its precepts and suffer its penalty, that He might deliver them from it as a covenant of works, Gal 3.13; 4.4-5
 - b) To show them the will of God, and regulate their conduct, Mic 6.8
 - c) To serve as a standard of self-examination, in order to discover the pollution of their hearts and lives, to keep them humbled, to lead them to a constant dependence upon Christ, and to excite them to a progressive advancement in holiness, Phil 3.10-14
 - d) To serve as a test of their sincerity, that they may assure their hearts that they are of the truth, and that they delight in the law of God after the inward man, notwithstanding their many defects in duty, 1Jn 3.19; Rom 7.22, 25; 2Cor 1.12
 - e) To show them God's approval of obedience and what blessings they may expect from God when they obey (Ps 19.11; 2Cor 7.1; Eph 6.2-3)—not due to them for their obedience (Gal 2.16; Lk 17.10), but upon the faithfulness of God to His own promises.
 - (1) Therefore a man's close and precise pursuit of holiness and sober refrain from evil, because the law of God commands the one and forbids the other, is no evidence of his being under the law and not under grace (Rom 6.12, 14; 1Pet 3.8-12; Ps 34.12-16; Heb 12.28-29).
 - (2) Rather, the Christian gospel complies with the law of God, since the Spirit of Christ subdues and enables the believer to freely and cheerfully do that which the law of God requires (Ezk 36.27; Heb 8.10; Jer 31.33; 32.40). If we love Christ, we will keep His commandments, Jn 14.15.
- D. What a difference this Reformed view on the law of God is to the modern evangelical view!
 1. The Shorter and Larger Catechisms spend much time on the moral law. In the Larger Catechism Questions 91-150 (30%) are taken up with exposition of the life lived in the context of the Ten Commandments. Question 99 is particularly significant. It gives us eight rules to properly interpreting the Ten Commandments.
 2. The modern evangelical world would call this legalism. The Reformed call it the pursuit of holiness in the fear of God.

Introduction

- ° Having shown that believers are delivered in Christ from the covenant of works—which bespeaks bondage and slavery (Gal 4.24, 30), and are brought into the covenant of grace—which bespeaks liberty and freedom (Gal 4.26, 31), the divines now give attention to this liberty as it pertains to the Christian life and conscience.

Christian Liberty

I. Covenantal Liberty § 1

- A. This liberty involves the change of a person’s nature effected in regeneration and perfected in sanctification as well as the change in a person’s relationship to both God and Satan involved in justification.
 - 1. This liberty is a main element in the grace of adoption and a privilege of all the children of God, Rom 8.14-15. It was purchased for us by Christ and is therefore attributed to Him, Gal 5.1; and it is applied and effectually wrought in us by the Holy Spirit, and is therefore attributed to Him, 2Cor 3.17.
- B. Christian liberty may be considered as what is common to all believers and as what is a special to New Testament believers. Since there are two diverse administrations of the covenant of grace (WCF 7.6), there are correspondingly two different styles of experience of the covenant of grace: that of NT believers being greater, richer, and fuller than that of OT believers. Yet, there is much in common:
 - 1. The liberty common to all believers in both Testaments:
 - a) We are delivered from the guilt and dominion of sin.
 - (1) We are no longer obligated to suffer eternal punishment on account of our sins, Eph 1.7. The guilt of our sins has been extinguished and the demands of the law have been satisfied by God crediting to our account the perfect righteousness of Christ.
 - (2) We are no longer under the tyranny of sin and its power is gradually weakened in our progressive sanctification, Rom 6.14, 22.
 - (3) **Hodge**, “A law [of sin] still remains in their members warring against the law of their mind, and bringing them into captivity to the law of sin (Rom 7.23); nevertheless, the indwelling Holy Spirit works with them to will and to do of His good pleasure, and thus secures them, upon the whole, the victory.”
 - b) We are delivered from the condemning wrath of God, Rom 8.1. God may hide His face from us in chastisement, but His judicial wrath is forever turned away, Isa 54.9-10; Rom 5.10
 - c) We are delivered from the law as a broken covenant (Gal 3.10). Christ endured the curse as our Surety and bore its curse away, Gal 3.13. Though we are under the law as a rule of obedience, we are freed from it as a covenant of works, freed from both its condemning and commanding power, and therefore cannot be subject to its curse on account of our sins, Rom 6.14; 7.6; 8.33-34
 - d) We are delivered from this present evil world, Gal 1.4; 6.14
 - e) We are delivered from bondage to Satan, Heb 2.14; Isa 61.1; Col 1.13. Satan is our powerful adversary (1Pet 5.8), but he will never again regain his dominion over us, and in due time we will be completely freely from his temptations and placed forever beyond the reach of his influence, Rom 16.20
 - f) We are delivered from the evil of afflictions, Rom 8.28; Heb 12.6-11; 2Cor 4.17.
 - (1) **Shaw**, “The cup of their affliction may be large and deep, but there is not one drop of judicial wrath mingled with it. Their afflictions are designed for their profit; and, through the divine blessing, they are rendered, in various respects, highly beneficial to them, Ps 119.71.”
 - g) We are delivered from the sting of death, Jn 11.25-26; 1Cor 15.56. Death is powerless to do us any real harm. Instead of doing us any real injury, death has a commission to confer upon

us unspeakable good. It is the termination of all our sorrows, our release from warfare, and our departure to be with Christ, Phil 1.21, 23.

- (1) The sting of death is sin and the strength of sin is the law, but Christ has delivered us from the curse of the law, having been made a curse for us. In justification our relation to the law is permanently changed. It is no longer the basis of our salvation. And death, and all the sorrows of this life, which are the consequences of sin, are elements of God's chastening grace, designed for our improvement.
 - h) We are delivered from the victory of the grave, Job 19.26-27; 1Cor 15.20, 54; Hos 13.14.
 - i) We are delivered from everlasting damnation, Jn 5.24; 1Th 1.10; cp. Ps 9.17; Mt 25.41.
 - (1) **Ferguson**, "There's a freedom of status, a freedom of progress, and a freedom of consummation. Christian Freedom isn't a static phenomena but a new status within which the experience of freedom actually develops to the point of consummation. Only in this sense in the resurrection is the believer able to say "fully and finally free at last.""
 - j) We are delivered from fear and have peace with and access to God, Eph 3.12
 - k) We are delivered from the slavish of wrath and serve God from a principle of love, Jn 14.15.
 - (1) **Ferguson**, "The believer's new access to God is marked by a new fellowship, with free access to God and a new status in relationship to God: we yield obedience to him in the light of that free access, not out of slavish fear but with a childlike love and a willing heart."
2. The liberty special to New Testament believers by virtue of the coming of Christ:
- a) New Testament believers are delivered from the yoke of the ceremonial law, Acts 15.10. The ancient ceremonies were all abrogated, as an obligation, by the death of Christ, Gal 5.1.
 - (1) This law as inestimable blessing to the OT believer because it was the revelation of the gospel of the Son of God; but it was comparatively obscured by types and shadows and enforced such a measure of obedience that the NT writers called it a yoke of bondage (Acts 15.10; Gal 5.1), elementary principles of the world (Gal 4.3), and regulations for the body imposed until the time of reformation (Heb 9.10).
 - (a) Note: the ceremonial law which was typological of Christ was also restrictive of and frustrating to the believer. There was a built in incompleteness, frustration, and therefore restriction about living under the yoke of the ceremonial law, which is why the NT writers spoke of it as a yoke of bondage.
 - (2) **Hodge**, "We enjoy the clear light shed from the person and work of our adorable Redeemer in person. We have the direct instead of the reflected ray—immediate access to the Father instead of a constrained approach through the medium of priests and an outward sanctuary."
 - (a) The OT ceremonial law not only pointed forward typologically to the work of Christ, but it also functioned within the context of the relative immaturity of the OT stage of God's redemptive revelation and therefore the relative immaturity of those who trusted in God at that stage.
 - (b) Such ceremonies would therefore be unnecessary in the NT not only in keeping with Christ's coming, but also in keeping with the consequent maturity of the believers in the NT because of the more mature revelation of God in this stage. Thus there's a principle of progressive and cumulative revelation built into the Bible.
 - (c) The NT freedom from the ceremonial law reflects the liberty which little children enjoy when they become full age and enter into the full liberty of their inheritance.
 - (d) So, comparatively speaking, there's an enormous breakthrough from the Old Covenant to the New Covenant in the liberation of Christian experience from the yoke under the ceremonial law to which the Jewish church was subjected.

- b) New Testament have greater boldness of access to the throne of grace, Heb 4.16; 10.19; 1Jn 3.21; 4.17; 5.14. This greater boldness of access results from the clearer and fuller revelation now enjoyed of the method and completeness of redemption and the greater fulness in the communications of the Holy Spirit to NT believers.
 - c) New Testament believers enjoy fuller communications of the Spirit of God than were ordinarily granted to believers under the law. Christ promised the gift of the Holy Spirit in this pre-eminent and climactic measure after His ascension, Jn 15.26.
 - (1) It was said previously that the Holy Spirit had not yet been given because Jesus had not yet been glorified (Jn 7.39); but after His ascension, this promise of Christ—which echoed the promises of the OT, was fulfilled, Acts 2.16-17, 33.
 - (2) Notice, then, the Trinitarian undergirding of this final statement:
 - (a) With respect to Christ, there is freedom from the yoke of the ceremonial law.
 - (b) With respect to the Father, there is greater boldness of access to the throne of grace.
 - (c) With respect to the Spirit, there are fuller communications of the Spirit than believers under the law enjoyed.
 - (3) If we ask what are these “fuller communications” are then the divines point us to specific elements of the ministry of the Spirit described in the NT, that are simply absent from the Spirit’s ministry in the OT, which are largely in terms of the relating of the Spirit to fellowship with Christ and God and the outpouring of the Spirit on the Church distinctively as the Spirit of the Lord Jesus Christ.
3. In conclusion:
- a) There’s genuine liberty in the OT. But there’s a difference between *genuine* liberty and the *fuller* liberty of the NT, just as there’s a difference between this *fuller* liberty and the *final* liberty which we will enjoy in the day of the consummation and the resurrection when the creation enters into the freedom of the glory of the children of God.
 - b) Likewise, there’s a freedom under Moses. But in comparison with the freedom under Christ the freedom under Moses can look like bondage. Similarly, in comparison with the final freedom, it will be possible to look back at the present freedom as circumscribed by the restrictions inevitable to the experience of a sinful believer.

Bibliography:

An Exposition of the Westminster Confession of Faith, Robert Shaw
 The Confession of Faith, A. A. Hodge
 Westminster Standards class at WTS 2001, Sinclair Ferguson

Assignments:

*Read Chapters 19-20 in Hodge
 *Read Chapters 19-20 in the WCF
 *Memory work: The Law of God: Gen 2.16-17; Rom 5.19; Col 2.17; 1Cor 9.8-14; Rom 13.10; Rom 6.14; 7.4-6; Gal 2.16; Rom 6.12-13; Ezk 36.27; Christian Liberty: 1Th 1.10; Gal 3.13; Rom 5.2; Heb 4.16

—Next class: 8AM on **14 May** for a study of **WCF 20.2f and 21**, Liberty of Conscience *and* Religious Worship and the Sabbath Day