

TRACING THE HISTORY OF THE TEACHING OF THE DISTINCTION BETWEEN THE MORAL AND CEREMONIAL LAWS IN THE OLD TESTAMENT SCRIPTURES AMONG PROTESTANT CHRISTIANS: -

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NOTE: - All Bible texts are from the King James Version; and the compiler has supplied all emphasis throughout this article.

INTRODUCTION: -

The belief that the Scriptures teach a clear distinction between the Moral Law of God as found in the Ten Commandments of Exodus 20:3 – 17; and the Ceremonial Law of ceremonies, sacrifices and shadows as found in the writings of Moses¹, is not a teaching that is popularly accepted among many professed Protestant Christians today. Many Evangelical Christians believe that this teaching has originated among Sabbath-keeping Christians since the mid-19th century.²

But when one does a search into the history of this belief, one quickly discovers documentary evidence that the distinction between the Moral and

¹ These quotations are not intended to be authoritative in themselves in proving the truthfulness of this proposition. They are merely to refute the assertion that the teaching concerning the distinction between the Moral and Ceremonial Laws in the Bible originated with Seventh-day Sabbath-keepers in the mid-19th century.

² The reason why this teaching is rejected by many professed Christians today, is because of their strong prejudice against the observance of the Seventh-day Saturday Sabbath, which is enjoined in the Fourth Commandment of the Moral Law in Exodus 20:8 - 11. As some of the Apostle Paul's statements indicate that a certain "law" of the Old Testament writings was abolished by Christ's death, by ignoring the truth of there being two distinct Laws in the "law and the prophets" [the New Testament term for what we today call the Old Testament Scriptures], they misinterpret Paul's statements to be teaching the **supposed** abolition of both the Moral and Ceremonial Laws. And thus, they get rid of [in their own minds] the binding claims of the Seventh-day Sabbath of the Fourth Commandment.

Ceremonial Laws of the Old Testament writings, has been an established belief within Christendom for many centuries before the mid-19th century. In fact, it has been a clearly stated teaching of the Protestant Reformation for approximately the last 500 years.

I shall now produce for the reader, direct quotations from some of the various historical writers which establish the truthfulness of the above statement. In a number of the following historical exhibits, the authors acknowledge that there were actually three types of law in the Old Testament writings: -

- 1.} The Moral Law;
- 2.} The Ceremonial Law; and,
- 3.} The Judicial Law for the ancient nation of Israel.

THE HISTORICAL DOCUMENTARY EVIDENCE: -

- Apology to the Augsburg Confession - 1531: -

Article IV (II): -

“Moreover, in this discussion, **by Law we designate the Ten Commandments, wherever they are read in the Scriptures. Of the ceremonies and judicial laws of Moses we say nothing at present.**”³

- John Calvin – 1536: -

Institutes of the Christian Religion; Volume II; Book 4; Chapter 20; Sections XIV & XV: -

“Now, it is necessary to observe that common distinction, which distributes **all the laws of God promulgated by Moses into moral, ceremonial, and judicial**; and these different kinds of laws are to be distinctly examined, that we may ascertain what belongs to us, and what does not. ... **The moral law**, therefore, with which I shall begin, being comprised in two leading articles, of which one simply commands us to worship God with pure faith and piety, and the other enjoins us to embrace men with sincere love, — this law, I say, is the true and eternal rule of righteousness, prescribed

³ This confession was written by Philip Melancthon. <https://bookofconcord.org/defense/of-justification/> - accessed 1/07/2023.

to men of all ages and nations, who wish to conform their lives to the will of God. For this is his eternal and immutable will, that he himself be worshipped by us all, and that we mutually love one another. **The ceremonial law** was the pupilage of the Jews, with which it pleased the Lord to exercise that people during a state resembling childhood, till that “fulness of the time” should come, when he would fully manifest his wisdom to the world, and would exhibit the reality of those things which were then adumbrated in figures. **The judicial law**, given to them as a political constitution, taught them certain rules of equity and justice, by which they might conduct themselves in a harmless and peaceable manner towards each other.”⁴

- **The Thirty-Nine articles of the Church of England – 1563: -**

Article VII: - Of the Old Testament: -

“The Old Testament is not contrary to the New; for both in the Old and New Testament everlasting life is offered to mankind by Christ, who is the only Mediator between God and man, being both God and man. Wherefore there are not to be heard which feign that the old fathers did look only for transitory promises. **Although the law given from God by Moses, as touching ceremonies and rites, do not bind Christian men, nor the civil precepts thereof ought of necessity to be received in any commonwealth; yet, notwithstanding, no Christian man whatsoever is free from the obedience of the commandments which are called moral.**”⁵

- **The Second Confession of Helvetic faith - 1566: -**

Article XII - Of the Law of God: -

“THE LAW OF NATURE. And this law was at one time written in the hearts of men by the finger of God (Rom. 2:15), and is called the law of nature (*the law of Moses is in two Tables*), and at another it was inscribed by his finger on the two Tables of Moses, and eloquently expounded in the books of Moses (Ex. 20:1 ff.; Deut. 5:6 ff.). **For the sake of clarity we distinguish the moral law which is contained in the Decalogue or two Tables and expounded in the books of Moses, the ceremonial law which**

⁴ The Project Gutenberg eBook of Institutes of the Christian Religion (Vol. 2 of 2), by John Calvin – accessed 24/06/2023.

⁵ “The Thirty-Nine Articles” | Reformed Theology at A Puritan's Mind (apuritansmind.com) – accessed 23/06/2023.

determines the ceremonies and worship of God, and the judicial law which is concerned with political and domestic matters.”⁶

- **William Perkins (1558 - 1602), - “The Works Of William Perkins”, (1:243 – 44): -**

“The law in general, is that part of God’s Word, which commands things just, honest, and godly, and being thus conceived, **it is threefold: ceremonial, judicial, and moral. The ceremonial law**, is that part of God’s Word, which prescribed to the Jews, **ceremonies, rites, and orders, to be performed in the worship of God.** This law is laid down in the books of Moses, especially in Leviticus. **The judicial law, is that part of God’s Word, which prescribed ordinances for the government of the Jews’ commonwealth, and the civil punishment of offenders. The sum of the moral law is propound in the Decalogue or Ten Commandments, which many can repeat, but few do understand.**”⁷

- **The Irish Articles of Religion - 1615: -**

Of the State of the Old and New Testament – Article 84: -

“84. Although **the Law given from God by Moses as touching ceremonies and rites be abolished, and the civil precepts thereof be not of necessity to be received in any commonwealth**, yet, notwithstanding, no Christian man whatsoever is freed from the obedience of **the Commandments which are called Moral.**”⁸

⁶ “THE SECOND HELVETIC CONFESSION” (ccl.org) – accessed 24/06/2023.

⁷ “The Threefold Distinction in the Law Is Basic Reformed Theology” | The Heidelblog – accessed 2/07/2023.

⁸ “The Irish Articles of Religion (1615)” – by James Ussher | Reformed Theology at A Puritan’s Mind (apuritansmind.com) – accessed 1/07/2023.

- **The Westminster Confession of Faith – 1646: -**

Article XIX: - Of the Law of God: -

"2. This law, after his fall, continued to be a perfect rule of righteousness; and, as such, **was delivered by God upon Mount Sinai, in ten commandments, and written in two tables:** (James 1:25, James 2:8, 10–12, Rom. 13:8–9, Deut. 5:32, Deut. 10:4, Exod. 34:1) the first four commandments containing our duty towards God; and the other six, our duty to man. (Matt. 22:37–40)

3. **Besides this law, commonly called moral, God was pleased to give to the people of Israel, as a church under age, ceremonial laws, containing several typical ordinances, partly of worship, prefiguring Christ, His graces, actions, sufferings, and benefits;** (Heb. 9, Heb. 10:1, Gal. 4:1–3, Col. 2:17) and partly, holding forth divers instructions of moral duties. (1 Cor. 5:7, 2 Cor. 6:17, Jude 1:23) **All which ceremonial laws are now abrogated, under the new testament.** (Col. 2:14, 16, 17, Dan. 9:27, Eph. 2:15–16)

4. **To them also, as a body politic, He gave sundry judicial laws, which expired together with the state of that people; not obliging any other now, further than the general equity thereof may require.** (Exod. 21, Exod. 22:1–29, Gen. 49:10, 1 Pet. 2:13–14, Matt. 5:17, 38–39, 1 Cor. 9:8–10)."⁹

- **Francis Roberts – 1675: -**

“The Mystery and Marrow of the Bible: God’s Covenants with Man”; On the Moral and Ceremonial Law: -

“God’s Law given to Moses and Israel on Mt. Sinai is, in respect of the subject matter therein contained, **most usually divided into three sorts, namely: Moral, Ceremonial, and Judicial.** Or, if we rather affect a dichotomy, into two sorts. That is: **1. Perpetual, of obligatory force and power forever, as the Moral Law contained in Ten Commandments.**

⁹ “Westminster Confession of Faith” - WestminsterStandards.org – accessed 23/06/2023.

2. Temporary, of obligatory power and force only for a certain time, and then determinable. And this concerning (1) the worship and service of God, as the Ceremonial Law, and (2) the civil state and polity of the Jews, as the Judicial Law. Both of which were to determine and expire after the death of Christ, Christ being the substance or body of those shadows (the accomplishment of those ceremonies and the commonwealth of the Jews, not long after Christ's death, being utterly dissolved)."¹⁰

- Frances Turretin – 1679 - 1685¹¹: -

Institutes of Elenctic¹² Theology, Volume 2, 11th to 17th Topic, 11, 24, Section 1:-

“The law given by Moses is usually distinguished into three species: moral (treating of morals or of perpetual duties towards God and our neighbor); ceremonial (of the ceremonies or rites about the sacred things to be observed under the Old Testament); and civil, constituting the civil government of the Israelite people. The first is the foundation upon which rests the obligation of the others and these are its appendices and determinations. Ceremonial has respect to the first table determining its circumstances, especially as to external worship. Civil has respect to the second table in judicial things, although it lays down punishments for crimes committed against the first table.”¹³

¹⁰ Book 3, Chapter 4, Aphorism, Question 2, Section 3.

<https://reformedbooksonline.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/07/roberts-francis-on-the-moral-law-and-judicial-law.pdf> - accessed 8/07/2023.

¹¹ I have not been able to find an exact year for the first publishing of Volume 2. The three volumes of Turretin's "Institutes" were published between 1679 and 1685.

¹² **“Elenctics**, in Christianity, is a division of practical theology concerned with persuading people of other faiths (or no faith) of the truth of the Gospel message, with an end to producing in them an awareness of, and sense of guilt for, their sins, a recognition of their need for God's forgiveness, repentance (*i.e.* the disposition to turn away from their sin) and faith in Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord.” - <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Elenctics> - accessed 8/07/2023.

¹³ “Turretin On The Threefold Distinction In The Mosaic Law” | The Heidelbergblog – accessed 24/06/2023.

- **London Baptist Confession of Faith - 1689: -**

Article XIX: - Of the Law of God: -

"2. The same law that was first written in the heart of man continued to be a perfect rule of righteousness after the fall, and **was delivered by God upon Mount Sinai, in ten commandments, and written in two tables, the four first containing our duty towards God, and the other six, our duty to man.** (Romans 2:14, 15; Deuteronomy 10:4)

3. **Besides this law, commonly called moral, God was pleased to give to the people of Israel ceremonial laws, containing several typical ordinances, partly of worship, prefiguring Christ, his graces, actions, sufferings, and benefits; and partly holding forth divers instructions of moral duties, all which ceremonial laws being appointed only to the time of reformation, are, by Jesus Christ the true Messiah and only law-giver, who was furnished with power from the Father for that end abrogated and taken away.** (Hebrews 10:1; Colossians 2:17; 1 Corinthians 5:7; Colossians 2:14, 16, 17; Ephesians 2:14, 16)

4. **To them also he gave sundry judicial laws, which expired together with the state of that people,** not obliging any now by virtue of that institution; their general equity only being of moral use. (1 Corinthians 9:8-10)"¹⁴

- **John Wesley - 1740: -**

The Sermons Of John Wesley - Sermon 25 – “Upon Our Lord's Sermon On The Mount” - Discourse Five: -

"I. 1. And First, "Think not that I am come to destroy the Law, or the Prophets: I am not come to destroy, but to fulfil."

The ritual or ceremonial law, delivered by Moses to the children of Israel, containing all the injunctions and ordinances which related to the old sacrifices and service of the temple, our Lord indeed did come to destroy, to dissolve, and

¹⁴ "1689 Baptist Confession of Faith" - Wikisource, the free online library – accessed 24/06/2023.

utterly abolish. To this bear all the Apostles witness; not only Barnabas and Paul, who vehemently withstood those who taught that Christians ought "to keep the law of Moses;" (Acts 15:5;) not only St. Peter, who termed the insisting on this, on the observance of the ritual law, a "tempting God," and "putting a yoke upon the neck of the disciples, which neither our fathers," saith he, "nor we, were able to bear;" but all the Apostles, elders, and brethren, being assembled with one accord, (Acts 15:22,) declared, that to command them to keep this law, was to "subvert their souls;" and that "it seemed good to the Holy Ghost" and to them, to lay no such burden upon them. (Acts 15:28.) This "hand-writing of ordinances" our Lord did blot out, take away, and nail to His cross.

2. But the moral law, contained in the Ten Commandments, and enforced by the prophets, He did not take away. It was not the design of His coming to revoke any part of this. This is a law which never can be broken, which stands fast as the faithful witness in heaven. The moral stands on an entirely different foundation from the ceremonial or ritual law, which was only designed for a temporary restraint upon a disobedient and stiff-necked people; whereas this was from the beginning of the world, being "written not on tables of stone," but on the hearts of all the children of men, when they came out of the hands of the Creator."¹⁵

- **The Philadelphia Confession of Faith – 1742¹⁶: -**

Chapter `19 – Of the Law of God: -

"2. The same law that was first written in the heart of man continued to be a perfect rule of righteousness after the fall, and was delivered by God upon Mount Sinai, in ten commandments, and written in two tables, the four first containing our duty towards God, and the other six, our duty to man. (Rom. 2:14, 15; Deut. 10:4)

3. Besides this law, commonly called moral, God was pleased to give to the people of Israel ceremonial laws, containing several typical ordinances, partly of worship, prefiguring Christ, his graces, actions, sufferings, and benefits; and

¹⁵ The Wesley Center Online: "Sermon 25 - Upon Our Lord's Sermon On The Mount: Discourse Five" (nnu.edu) – accessed 25/06/2023.

¹⁶ This confession was issued by the Philadelphia Association.

partly holding forth divers instructions of moral duties, all which ceremonial laws being appointed only to the time of reformation, are, by Jesus Christ the true Messiah and only law-giver, who was furnished with power from the Father for that end abrogated and taken away. (Heb. 10:1; Col. 2:17; I Cor. 5:7; Col. 2:14, 16, 17; Eph. 2:14, 16)

4. To them also he gave sundry judicial laws, which expired together with the state of that people, not obliging any now by virtue of that institution; their general equity only being of modern use. (1 Cor. 9:8-10)¹⁷

- Dr. John Gill – Baptist Theologian [1697 – 1771]: -

His Commentary on Matthew 5:17 - His New Testament Commentaries were produced between the years 1746 – 1748: -

“Think not that I am come to destroy the law or the prophets .”

“By “the law” is meant **the moral law**, as appears from the whole discourse following: this he came not to “destroy”, or loose men’s obligations to, as a rule of walk and conversation, but “to fulfil” it; which he did doctrinally, by setting it forth fully, and giving the true sense and meaning of it; and practically, by yielding perfect obedience to all its commands, whereby he became “the end”, the fulfilling end of it. By “the prophets” are meant the writings of the prophets, in which they illustrated and explained the law of Moses; urged the duties of it; encouraged men thereunto by promises; and directed the people to the Messiah, and to an expectation of the blessings of grace by him: all which explanations, promises, and prophecies, were so far from being made void by Christ, that they receive their full accomplishment in him. The Jews pretend that these words of Christ are contrary to the religion and faith of his followers, who assert, that the law of Moses is abolished; which is easily refuted, by observing the exact agreement between Christ and the Apostle Paul, (**Romans 3:31**) (**10:4**) and **whenever he, or any other of the apostles, speaks of the abrogation of the law, it**

¹⁷ “The Philadelphia Confession of Faith” | Alliance of Confessing Evangelicals (alliancenet.org) – accessed 25/06/2023.

is to be understood of the ceremonial law, which in course ceased by being fulfilled; or if of the moral law, not of the matter, but of the ministry of it.”¹⁸

- **Articles of Religion – Methodist Church 1784: -**

Article VI: - Of the Old Testament: -

“Although the law given from God by Moses, as touching ceremonies and rites, doth not bind Christians, nor ought the civil precepts thereof of necessity be received in any commonwealth, yet, notwithstanding, no Christian whatsoever is free from the obedience of the commandments which are called moral.”¹⁹

- **Dr. Adam Clarke – Methodist Bible Commentator - 1832: -**

“Verse 13. ***Ye have been called unto liberty***— A total freedom from all the burthensome **rites and ceremonies of the Mosaic law**. *Only use not that liberty for an occasion to the flesh*. By *flesh*, here, we may understand all the unrenewed desires and propensities of the mind; whatsoever is not under the influence and guidance of the Holy Spirit of God. Your liberty is from that which would *oppress the spirit*; not from that which would lay *restraints* on the *flesh*. The Gospel proclaims liberty from **the ceremonial law**: but binds you still faster under **the moral law**. To be freed from **the ceremonial law** is the *Gospel liberty*; to pretend freedom from **the moral law** is *Antinomianism*.²⁰

¹⁸ Matthew 5:17 - Bible Verse Meaning and Commentary (biblestudytools.com) – accessed 3/07/2023.

¹⁹ Philip Schaff: “Creeds of Christendom,” Volume III. The Creeds of the Evangelical Protestant Churches. - Christian Classics Ethereal Library (ccel.org) – accessed 23/06/2023.

²⁰ Dr. Adam Clarke’s Comments on Galatians 5:13. <https://www.studylight.org/commentaries - moral law> – accessed 29/06/2023.

- Charles Finney [1792 – 1875] - 19th century: -

Sermon – “Religion or Saving Faith”: -

“The gospel has not cancelled or set aside the obligations of the moral law. It has set aside the claims of the ceremonial law or law of Moses. The ceremonial law was nothing but a set of types pointing to the Savior and was set aside when the great ante-type appeared.”²¹

- Dr. Albert Barnes - Presbyterian Theologian - 1868: -

Notes on the New Testament: Explanatory and Practical. Vol. I - Matthew and Mark - His Commentary on Matthew 5:18: -

“The laws of the Jews are commonly divided into moral, ceremonial, and judicial. The moral laws are such as grow out of the nature of things, and which cannot, therefore, be changed - such as the duty of loving God and his creatures. These cannot be abolished, as it can never be made right to hate God, or to hate our fellow-men. Of this kind are the ten commandments, and these our Saviour has neither abolished nor superseded. The ceremonial laws are such as are appointed to meet certain states of society, or to regulate the religious rites and ceremonies of a people. These can be changed when circumstances are changed, and yet the moral law be untouched. A general in an army may command his soldiers to appear sometimes in a red coat and sometimes in blue or in yellow. This would be a ceremonial law, and might be changed as he pleased. The duty of obeying him, and of being faithful to his country, could not be changed.”²²

- Articles of Religion of the Reformed Episcopal Church in America: - 1875: -

ARTICLE VI. Of the Old Testament: -

²¹ I have not been able to find the exact year when Finney preached this sermon. “Religion or Saving Faith” by Charles Finney (gospeltruth.net) – accessed 25/06/2023.

²² “Matthew 5 Barnes’ Notes” (biblehub.com) – accessed 3/07/2023.

“The Old Testament is not contrary to the New: for both in the Old and New Testament everlasting life is offered to mankind by Christ, who is the only Mediator between God and man, being both God and Man. Wherefore they are not to be heard, which feign that the old Fathers did look only for transitory promises; **and although the Law given from God by Moses, as touching Ceremonies and Rites, does not bind Christian men, nor the civil precepts thereof ought of necessity to be received in any commonwealth, yet notwithstanding, as rule of right living,** no Christian man whatsoever is free from the obedience of **the commandments which are called moral.**”²³

 It is historic Protestant teaching that there is a clear distinction between the Moral Law of Ten Commandments and the Ceremonial Law of sacrifices, shadows and rituals as found in the writings of Moses.

The following two New Testament passages are a good place to end this little tract on. One passage teaches from Jesus’ own lips that the smallest part of the Moral Law will not pass away while heaven and earth remains. The other passage teaches that the law of commandments in ordinances was abolished by Jesus.

Matthew 5:17 – 19: - “Think not that I am come to destroy the law, or the prophets: I am not come to destroy, but to fulfil. For verily I say unto you, Till heaven and earth pass, one jot or one tittle shall in no wise pass from the law, till all be fulfilled. Whosoever therefore shall break one of these least commandments, and shall teach men so, he shall be called the least in the kingdom of heaven: but whosoever shall do and teach *them*, the same shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven.”

Ephesians 2:13 – 15: - “But now in Christ Jesus ye who sometimes were far off are made nigh by the blood of Christ. For he is our peace, who hath made both one, and hath broken down the middle wall of partition *between us*; Having abolished in his flesh the enmity, *even* the law of commandments *contained* in ordinances; for to make in himself of twain one new man, so making peace.”

²³ Philip Schaff – “Creeds of Christendom”, Volume 3, p. 816 - 1876.