

The Importance of the Law

When Wyclif wrote of his English Bible that “This Bible is for the government of the people, by the people, and for the people,” his statement attracted no attention insofar as his emphasis on the centrality of Biblical law was concerned. That law should be God’s law was held by all; Wyclif’s departure from accepted opinion was that the people themselves should not only read and know that law but also should in some sense govern as well as be governed by it. At this point, Heer is right in saying that “Wyclif and Hus were the first to demonstrate to Europe the possibility of an alliance between the university and the people’s yearning for salvation. It was the freedom of Oxford that sustained Wyclif.”¹ The concern was less with church or state than with government by the law-word of God.

Brin has said, of the Hebrew social order, that it differed from all the others in that it was believed to be grounded on and governed by the law of God, who gave it specifically for man’s government.² No less than Israel of old, Christendom believed itself to be God’s realm because it was governed by the law of God as set forth in Scripture. There were departures from that law, variations of it, and laxity in faithfulness to it, but Christendom saw itself as the new Israel of God and no less subject to His law.

When New England began its existence as a law-order, its adoption of Biblical law was both a return to Scripture and a return to Europe’s past. It was a new beginning in terms of old foundations. It was not an easy begin

and death. God, in order to reestablish the Kingdom of God, called Abraham, and then Israel, to be His people, to subdue the earth, and to exercise dominion under God. The law, as given through Moses, established the laws of godly society, of true development for man under God, and the prophets repeatedly recalled Israel to this purpose.

The purpose of Christ’s coming was in terms of this same creation mandate. Christ as the new Adam (I Cor. 15:45) kept the law perfectly. As the sin-bearer of the elect, Christ died to make atonement for their sins, to restore them to their position of righteousness under God. The redeemed are recalled to the original purpose of man, to exercise dominion under God, to be covenant-keepers, and to fulfil “the righteousness of the law” (Rom. 8:4). The law remains central to God’s purpose. Man has been re-established into God’s original purpose and calling. Man’s *justification* is by the *grace* of God in Jesus Christ; man’s *sanctification* is by means of the *law* of God.

As the new chosen people of God, the Christians commanded to do that which Adam in Eden, and Israel in Canaan, failed to do. One and the same covenant, under differing administrations, still prevails. Man is summoned to create the society God requires. The determination of man and of history is from God, but the reference of God’s law is to this world. “To be spiritually minded is life and peace” (Rom. 8:6) and to be spiritually minded does not mean to be other-worldly but to apply the mandates of the written word under the guidance of the Spirit to this world.

Lawless Christianity is a contradiction in terms: it is anti-Christian. The purpose of grace is not to set aside the law but to fulfil the

and to enable man to keep the law. If the law was so serious in the sight of God that it would require the death of Jesus Christ, the only-begotten Son of God, to make atonement for man’s sin, it seems strange for God then to proceed to abandon the law! The goal of the law is not lawlessness, now the purpose of grace a lawless contempt of the giver of grace.

The increasing breakdown of the law and order must first of all be attributed to the churches and their persistent antinomianism. If the churches are lax with respect to the law, will not let people follow suit? And civil law cannot be separated from Biblical law, for the Biblical doctrine of the law includes all law, civil, ecclesiastical, societal, familial, and all other forms of law. The social order which despises God’s law places itself on the death row; it is marked for judgement.

Notes

- 1 Fredrich Heer, *The Intellectual History of Europe* (Cleveland: World Publishing Co., 1966), p. 184.
- 2 Joseph G. Brin, *The Social Order Under Hebrew Law*, *The Law Society Journal*, vol. VII, no. 3 (August, 1936), pp. 383-387.
- 3 Henry Bamford Parkes, “Morals and Law Enforcement in Colonial England,” *The New England Quarterly*, vol. 5 (July, 1932), pp. 431-452.
- 4 Charles Hoadly, ed., *Records of the Colony and Plantation of New Haven from 1638 to 1649* (Hartford: for the Editor, 1857), p. 69.
- 5 *Ibid.*, p. 130.
- 6 John A. Albro, ed., *The Works of Thomas Shepherd, III, Theses Sabbatical (1649)* (Boston: Doctrinal Tract and Book Society, 1853; New York: AMS Press, 1967), p. 49.

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-ning, in that the many servants who came with the Puritans later were in full scale revolt against any Biblical faith and order.³ Nevertheless, it was a resolute return to the fundamentals of Christendom. Thus, the New Haven Colony records show that the law of God, without any sense of innovation, was made the law of the Colony:

March 2, 1641/2: And according to the fundamentals agreem(en)t, made and published by full and gen(e)r(a)ll consent, when the plantation began and government was settled, that the judiciaall law of God given by Moses and expounded in other parts of scripture, so far as itt is a hedg and a fence to the moral law, and neither ceremoniall nor typical nor had any reference to Canaan, hath an everlasting equity in itt, and should be the rule of their proceedings. ⁴

April 3, 1644: Itt was ordered thatt the judiciaall lawes of God, as they were delivered by Moses... be of rule to all the courts in this jurisdiction in their proceeding against offenders... ⁵

Thomas Shepherd wrote, in 1649, "For all laws, whether ceremonial or judicial, may be referred to the decalogue, as appendices to it, or applications of it, and so to comprehend all other laws as their summary."⁶

It is an illusion to hold that such opinions were simply Puritan aberration rather than a truly Biblical practice and an aspect of the persisting life of Christendom. It is a modern heresy that holds that the law of God has no meaning nor any binding force for man today. It is an aspect of the influence of humanistic and evolutionary thought on the church, and it posits an evolving, developing god. "This dispensational" god expressed himself in law in an earlier age, then later expressed himself by grace

alone, and is now perhaps to express himself in still another way. But this is not the God of the Scripture, whose grace and law remain the same in every age, because He, as the sovereign and absolute lord, changes not, nor does He need to change. The strength of man is the absoluteness of his God.

To attempt to study Scripture, without studying its law is to deny it. To attempt to understand Western civilization apart from the impact of Biblical law within it and upon it is to seek a fictitious history and to reject twenty centuries and their progress.

The Institutes of Biblical Law has as its purpose a reversal of the present trend. It is called "Institutes" in the older meaning of that word, i.e., fundamental principles, here of law, because it is intended as a beginning, as an instituting consideration of that law which must govern society, and which shall govern society under God.

The Validity of Biblical Law

A central characteristic of the churches and of modern preaching and Biblical teaching is antinomianism, an anti-law position. The antinomian believes that faith frees the Christian from the law, so that he is not outside the law but is rather dead to the law. There is no warrant whatsoever in Scripture for antinomianism. The expression, "dead to the law," is indeed in Scripture (Gal. 2:19; Rom. 7:4), but it has reference to the believer in relationship to the atoning work of Christ as the believer's representative and substitute; the believer is dead to the law as an indictment, a legal sentence of death against him, Christ having died -

breaking, to enable man to keep the law for him, but the believer is alive to the law as the righteousness of God. The purpose of Christ's atoning work was to restore man to a position of covenant-keeping instead of covenant by freeing man "from the law of sin and death" (Rom. 8:2), "that the righteousness of the law might be fulfilled in us" (Rom.8:4). Man is restored to a position of law-keeping. The law thus has a position of centrality in man's indictment (as a sentence of death against man the sinner), in man's redemption (in that Christ died, Who although the perfect law-keeper as the new Adam, died as man's substitute), and in man's sanctification (in that man grows in grace as he grows in law-keeping, for the law is the way of sanctification).

Man as covenant-breaker is in "enmity against God" (Rom.8:7) and is subject to "the law of sin and death: (Rom. 8:2), whereas the believer is under "the law of the Spirit of life in Christ" (Rom. 8:2). The law is one law, the law of God. To the man on death row in a prison, that law is death; to the godly man, the same law which places another on death row is life, in that it protects him and his property from criminals. Without law, society would collapse into anarchy and fall into the hands of hoodlums. The faithful and full execution of the law is death to the murderer but life to the godly. Similarly, the law in its judgment upon God's enemies is death; the law in its sustaining care and blessings is for the law-abiding a principle of life.

God, in creating man, ordered him to subdue the earth and to exercise dominion over the earth (Gen. 1:28). Man, in attempting to establish separate dominion and autonomous jurisdiction over the earth (Gen 3:5) fell into sin