

Commonly Asked Questions About New Covenant Theology

By Steve Lehrer and Michael Adams

Question: I have heard NCT proponents argue that the Law of Moses kills. While I agree with this, it seems that Scripture gives a positive role to the Law of Moses as well. Would you explain this?

This question is about the function of biblical law, particularly the function of the Mosaic Law in that era. This has been a matter of heated debate for a long time. It often sounds something like this: “The Mosaic Law kills and condemns!” “The Mosaic Law is gracious!” “Live by the Spirit not by written law!” “Moses leads us to Christ and Christ leads us back to Moses!” “Antinomian!” “Legalist!” “Anabaptist!” “Papist!” The Scriptures need to be heard over the cacophony of these sloganeers and emotional outbursts. The theology of law in Scripture is too subtle and balanced for a slogan to be able to express the whole truth. Over the years I have heard many unbalanced statements about the role of law in the life of the believer from every theological camp, including those who hold to New Covenant Theology. In fact, I have made many of these unbalanced statements myself. I still cringe when I remember some of the things that I have said in the heat of theological debate. The issue of God’s law is a particularly difficult issue because it requires a delicate touch so as not to overstate matters. It is a theological balancing act.

1. Defining Law

Before I can answer this question I need to define biblical law. As I looked through my various theological dictionaries, it was my old American Heritage Dictionary from high school that has the simplest definition of biblical law: “The body of principles or precepts held to express the divine will...” Law expresses God’s moral will or the way in which God wants man to live. Behind the expression of God’s will stands God’s authority. When men do not live as God wishes, God inflicts the necessary punishment for breaking His law and shirking His authority.

The law of God is a concept that always remains the same, but the content of the law in Scripture does change. This is a simple fact about which Scripture is unambiguous about. Scripture says in crystal clear terms that God’s law changes: “If perfection could have been attained through the Levitical priesthood (for on the basis of it the law was given to the people), why was there still need for another priest to come—one in the order of Melchizedek, not in the order of Aaron? For when there is a change of the priesthood, there must also be a change of the law” (Hebrews 7:11-12). Although the extent of that change may be in question, the fact that the content of God’s law does change to some degree is not a matter of debate. I will address the extent of the change in answer to the next question. For now it is enough to say that the concept or definition of biblical law is “The body of principles or precepts (in Scripture) held to express the divine will...”

2. The Function of Law

Law functions the same way in every era. It condemns unbeliever and it functions as a guide for believers in how to show their love for God. Each era has a different emphasis and therefore at times it seems as if law has a different function in each era. But if this is your conclusion, you're mistaken. Each era emphasizes a different function of law. The Old Covenant era emphasized the condemning effects of law on the unbeliever, while the New Covenant era emphasizes the guiding function of law for believers. That is why it might seem as if the Mosaic Law *only* kills and condemns when we read what the New Covenant Scriptures say about the Mosaic Law. But, even though certain functions were highlighted in each era, the basic functions of law do not change. Law condemns unbelievers and guides believers. Let's examine condemning and guiding functions in each era.

A. The Law of the Old Covenant Served to Condemn Unbelievers in That Era

2 Corinthians 3:7-9 is a text that tells us about the condemning effects of the law of the Old Covenant. In these verses, Paul is contrasting the ministry of the Old Covenant with the ministry of the New Covenant:

Now if the ministry that brought death, which was engraved in letters on stone, came with glory, so that the Israelites could not look steadily at the face of Moses because of its glory, fading though it was, will not the ministry of the Spirit be even more glorious? If the ministry that condemns men is glorious, how much more glorious is the ministry that brings righteousness!

The phrase "letters engraved on stone" refers to the Mosaic Law. Deuteronomy 4:13 makes this fact clear: "He declared to you his covenant, the Ten Commandments, which he commanded you to follow and then wrote them on two stone tablets." The Ten Commandments are the essence of the Old Covenant and therefore they are representative of the whole, even though there were many more laws included in the Old Covenant.¹ In 2 Corinthians 3, the Old Covenant is seen as condemning men and producing death. Paul is highlighting that condemning role of the Old Covenant law and contrasting it with the work of the Spirit in the New Covenant. The law of the Old Covenant confronted the unbelieving Israelite with the authority of the God that he hated (although he claimed to love God). This law not only confronted the unbelieving Jew with his sinfulness by pointing out transgressions, but it stirred up his self-centered rebellion: "For when we were controlled by the sinful nature, the sinful passions aroused by the law were at work in our bodies, so that we bore fruit for death" (Romans 7:5). The law of the Old Covenant does its perfect work of pointing out sin, arousing more rebellion, and of course stating God's just condemnation on such behavior.

B. The Law of the Old Covenant Served as a Guide for the Believer in That Era

2 Corinthians 3, which explains the condemning effects of the Mosaic Law, is not the only way one can or should view the law of the Old Covenant. We must examine Psalm 119 where we find the guiding function of The Mosaic Law:

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. I will speak of your statutes before kings and will not be put to shame, for I delight in your commands because I love them. I lift up my hands to your commands, which I love, and I meditate on your decrees (Psalm 119:43-48).

David loved God and loved His holy law. David was a rare person in Israel. Not only was he the king of Israel, but he was a believer.² His love for God was obvious, despite the terrible sins he committed.³ The law did not condemn David because his sins were covered. He trusted in God and God passed over his sins. In the fullness of time God poured out His wrath on Christ for David's sins.⁴ David was a redeemed believer before the redeemer bled and died:

However, to the man who does not work but trusts God who justifies the wicked, his faith is credited as righteousness. David says the same thing when he speaks of the blessedness of the man to whom God credits righteousness apart from works: Blessed are they whose transgressions are forgiven, whose sins are covered. Blessed is the man whose sin the Lord will never count against him" (Romans 4:5-8).

David was a redeemed sinner whose heart had been changed from hating God to loving God. His sins had been covered and therefore the version of God's law⁵ as found in the Old Covenant did not condemn him. Instead, David approached the stipulations of the Old Covenant as the detailed instructions of how he could glorify the God he loved. Whether it was the laws concerning agriculture, animal husbandry, sacrifice, or loving your neighbor, David obeyed these laws happily out of love for his God. For David, the words of the Apostle John regarding the relationship of God's law to the believer applied: "This is how we know that we love the children of God: by loving God and carrying out his commands. This is love for God: to obey his commands. And his commands are not burdensome, for everyone born of God overcomes the world. This is the victory that has overcome the world, even our faith" (1 John 5:2-4).

C. The Law of the New Covenant Serves to Condemn Unbelievers in This Era

Whatever the content of the law of Christ is, there is a specific law that applies to people in the New Covenant era. We know this because we see in Scripture that sin is still a relevant concept. It is defined as lawlessness.⁶ Paul tells us that breaking God's law in the New Covenant era brings death or condemnation from God: "For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord."⁷ If I break God's law regarding the way I must speak in the New Covenant era⁸ I have earned eternal punishment from God unless Christ takes the punishment I deserve on Himself. If I break God's law regarding the way I must relate to those who are evil to me,⁹ once again I find myself under God's just condemnation. These laws of the New Covenant era function exactly the same way 2 Corinthians 3 tells us that the law of the Old Covenant functioned. When the unbeliever is confronted with the holy law of Christ in the New Covenant era, it should cause him to see his sinfulness and the fact that He deserves only

eternal punishment from God. This law will ultimately be the standard by which God condemns him unless he repents and believes.

The law of the Old Covenant was given to a people who were mostly unbelieving. They did not have the work of the Spirit causing them to love God—motivating them to obey. Instead, they were spiritually dead people being confronted by God’s authority which was revealed in the form of the Mosaic Law. This confrontation with God’s authority only served to stir up their sin and rebellion. *The Old Covenant era and the version of the law of God in that era is the historical example used to teach us that law, by itself, cannot transform people.* That is why you have what seems like an absolute contrast between written law and the Spirit of God in Romans 7:6 “But now, by dying to what once bound us, we have been released from the law so that we serve in the new way of the Spirit, and not in the old way of the written code.” It is not that once you have the Spirit you don’t need any written commands from God. The main question at issue is, “What will free us from our slavery to sin and our condemnation because of our sin against God?” Law, any law, simply points out sin and further enslaves when it comes in contact with an unbelieving heart. The Spirit, given to those who repent and believe, frees the person from slavery to sin by giving him an unquenchable love for God. It is not the law of God that allows us to live for Him: “For the grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to all men. It teaches us to say ‘No’ to ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in this present age” (Titus 2:11-13). The believer shows his grace-given love for God by obeying His law. The particular era in which era he lives will determine which law he uses as his guide to show his love for God.

D. The Law of the New Covenant Serves as a Guide for Believers in This Era

I have heard NCT proponents say, “In the Old Covenant era, the Israelites were bound by an external law. Now we are given greater freedom and we are simply to obey the Spirit’s promptings.” I have heard CT proponents say, “If you do not believe that the Decalogue is the rule of life for the believer today you are an antinomian.”¹⁰ Both statements are equally incorrect. The New Covenant Scriptures are filled with commands from Christ and from His representatives, the Apostles, that specifically guide believers in how to show their love for God. In his first epistle John writes: “This is love for God: to obey his commands” (1 John 5:3). Notice, John does not say that love for God is to obey the “impressions” or “inner promptings” that the Spirit gives you. God’s commands are clear and unambiguous in the pages of Scripture. We are commanded to be joyful, to pray, and to give thanks.¹¹ We are commanded to obey governmental authorities,¹² to flee from sexual immorality,¹³ and to gather together as believers and encourage one another.¹⁴ The list could go on and on. The fact that there is objective law—different than the Ten Commandments but clear written commands of God for the New Covenant era—is beyond question. These commands serve as the law that the believer loves and, as the Spirit works in him, he is able to obey with increasing consistency.

Steve Lehrer

Question: NCT says we have a new law, but how do you respond to the fact that part of the core of the law found in the New Testament is Leviticus 19:18?

“Do not seek revenge or bear a grudge against one of your people, but love your neighbor as yourself. I am the LORD.”

The believer in the New Covenant era can say with King David, “Oh how I love Your law.”¹⁵ Both will be referring to their love for God’s revealed will and they will be speaking out of the same Spirit motivated love for God. But they will be referring to two different versions of God’s law. The Old Covenant version of law differs from the New Covenant version of law in some rather drastic ways. Sometimes we will find the very same law given in the Old Covenant that is in the New Covenant. But the meaning and application will often be drastically changed.

1. The Old Law is New Law in the New Covenant Era

‘Love your neighbor as yourself’ is a cornerstone of law in the New Covenant era. But this is a command from the Old Covenant. It is from Leviticus 19:18. But when this law is given in the New Covenant era, the old commandment becomes new. It is given a *new meaning* and a *new application*.

A. New Meaning

The Apostle John commands believers to love their brothers, and he writes that it is a new command “in Christ”:

Whoever claims to live in him must walk as Jesus did. Dear friends, I am not writing you a new command but an old one, which you have had since the beginning. This old command is the message you have heard. Yet I am writing you a new command; its truth is seen in him and you, because the darkness is passing and the true light is already shining (1 John 2:6-8).

This command to love your neighbor in the New Covenant Scriptures is different from the command in its Old Covenant context because of all that Jesus has done for His people. He gives us a new example that we never had before: “A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another” (John 13:34-35). The context of these verses is the washing of the disciples’ feet and the last supper. It is at this time when Jesus makes known, in veiled fashion, His intent to give His life for the disciples. It seems that our new understanding of the command to love our neighbors is intimately tied to the work of Christ on the cross:

Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love. This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him. This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins. Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another (1 John 4:7-11).

It is clear from these verses that the command to love one another is imbued with new meaning because of the self-sacrificial love of Christ. Christ loved us while we were His enemies. Christ laid down His life for His people, even across ethnic and cultural barriers. The meaning of this commandment is given new depth, but it cannot be fully seen outside of its application. Without seeing this new meaning lived out in a new application one might conclude that, although there is a “newness” to the command because of the new example, it does not make the commandment itself new. So, let’s examine the application of this commandment, first in the Old Covenant era, and then in the New Covenant era.

B. New Mission

Because of the coming of Jesus and his work on the cross, we have a new mission that changes the face of the old commandment to love our neighbors as ourselves forever. In the Old Covenant era, the neighbors the Israelites were obligated to love consisted only of their fellow Israelites. The people of Israel were the (unbelieving) people of God *gathered*.¹⁶ Their enemies were God’s enemies. They were not obligated to love their enemies.¹⁷ In fact, they were obligated by the command of God Himself to hate their enemies. Look at God’s holy command to the Israelites to destroy their neighbors:

However, in the cities of the nations the LORD your God is giving you as an inheritance, do not leave alive anything that breathes. Completely destroy them—the Hittites, Amorites, Canaanites, Perizzites, Hivites and Jebusites—as the LORD your God has commanded you. Otherwise, they will teach you to follow all the detestable things they do in worshiping their gods, and you will sin against the LORD your God (Deuteronomy 20:16-18).

One of the ways the Israelites were told to stay away from sin was by hacking their neighbors to death! In 2 Chronicles, God rebukes King Jehoshaphat through Jehu the seer because the king has been too kind and loving to the wicked:

When Jehoshaphat king of Judah returned safely to his palace in Jerusalem, Jehu the seer, the son of Hanani, went out to meet him and said to the king, “Should you help the wicked and love those who hate the LORD ? Because of this, the wrath of the LORD is upon you. There is, however, some good in you, for you have rid the land of the Asherah poles and have set your heart on seeking God (19:1-3).

The wrath of God is on Jehoshaphat because he did not have the holy hatred for some of his neighbors that God’s law commanded him to demonstrate.¹⁸

In the New Covenant era, this law to love our neighbors is very different. Our neighbor is whoever we bump up against. We (believers in the New Covenant era) are the (believing) people of God *gathering*.¹⁹ Our mission is to gather the true people of God from the world by loving everyone as Christ loved us. Armed with our new understanding of Leviticus 19:18, it is easy to see that our new mission makes this a radically different command once it is translated into the New Covenant era. Now we are to love not just our closest neighbor, but also our furthest enemy (who is also our neighbor).²⁰ It is now an incredibly sinful act to live like an obedient Israelite. If I were

to go and hack down my pagan neighbors because of their wicked false religion, I would be rebelling against God and breaking his law. But, it was a God glorifying act for an Israelite to do that same thing in the Old Covenant era. Killing my neighbor would be breaking the New Covenant law to love my neighbor. But my Old Covenant Israelite counterpart would not be violating Leviticus 19:18 in any way. When wicked idolaters persecute me and even threaten me with bodily harm, I am commanded by God to seek to bless them and do good to them,²¹ while an Old Covenant Israelite would have been in deep rebellion against God if he acted the way I am commanded by God to act today. The command to love your neighbor in the New Covenant era is so radically different from the command in the Old Covenant era that it ought to be (and is) called a new law.

Steve Lehrer

Question: Is the “law written on the heart” the Ten Commandments?

Many covenant theologians believe that the law written on the heart²² (referred to in Jeremiah 31) is the engraving of the Ten Commandments, in some fashion, on the hearts of all people. It is reasoned that the recipients of this law include both believers and unbelievers, with little distinction between the two. In discussing the Ten Commandments, Calvin clearly sets forth this view: “Now that inward law, which we have above described as written, even engraved, upon the hearts of all, in a sense asserts the very same things that are to be learned from the two Tablets.”²³

A proper interpretation of law written on the heart in Jeremiah 31:31-34 must be arrived at by considering all of Scripture. The most casual glance at the context of Jeremiah 31 reveals that Jeremiah makes little or no attempt to explain the details of what is promised. Instead, he states the promise of this future New Covenant, while excluding particulars such as when it will occur or how it will be implemented. Because Jeremiah gives us such limited information, we must not interpret the promise in Jeremiah 31 with reference to the many other Scriptures that inform us of its meaning. Reference to the New Covenant is made elsewhere in the Old Testament,²⁴ but our interpretation of Jeremiah 31 is largely dependent on the New Covenant Scriptures.²⁵

The writer of the book of Hebrews sheds the most light on this enigmatic phrase from the book of Jeremiah. In chapter 10, the author actually interprets the law written on the heart:

Day after day every priest stands and performs his religious duties; again and again he offers the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins. But when this priest had offered for all time one sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God. Since that time he waits for his enemies to be made his footstool, because by one sacrifice he has made perfect forever those who are being made holy. The Holy Spirit also testifies to us about this. First he says: “This is the covenant I will make with them after that time, says the Lord. I will put my laws in their hearts, and I will write them on their minds.” Then he adds: “Their sins and lawless acts I will remember no more.” And where these have been forgiven, there is no longer any sacrifice for sin (Hebrews 10:11-18).

The author cites Jeremiah 31 as his proof text for illustrating the result of the work of Christ on the cross on behalf of all who believe.²⁶ He tells us that Christ's *one sacrifice* on the cross (vs. 14) effectually purchased two things for all who believe: (1) every believer gets a changed life and (2) every believer experiences the complete forgiveness of sin. The reference to the changed life is found in the phrase, *those who are being made holy*. The reference to the forgiveness of sins is found in the phrase, *he has made perfect forever*.²⁷ In verses 15-18, the writer supports what he wrote in the previous verses by making reference to Jeremiah 31. The law written on the heart promised in Jeremiah 31 is the result of Christ's one sacrifice. Since forgiveness of sins is listed separately from the law written on the heart in the quotation of the Jeremiah passage, it is reasonable to equate *those who are being made holy* with the law written on the heart.

When Jeremiah 31 is interpreted through the lens of Hebrews 10, its meaning becomes clear. According to Hebrews 10, the law written on the heart has nothing to do with the specific laws believers are to obey or the specific laws about which people have knowledge. Any argument about the content of the law written on the heart, be it an argument for the Decalogue, the Law of Christ, or the Code of Hammurabi, misses the point. The law written on the heart is referring to the gracious work of God on a sinner, transforming a God-hater²⁸ into an incurable God-lover²⁹ because of Jesus Christ's *one sacrifice*. The believer will desire to obey God and he will have the ability to obey God. Every believer will be *made holy*. This is the promise of the law written on the heart, the New Covenant.

Michael Adams

Question: Most everyone agrees that the content of God's law has changed with the change from Old Covenant to New Covenant. But isn't that which has changed really only the ceremonial and civil law? Doesn't God's moral law remain the same?

While making a distinction between the kinds of laws found in the Old or New Covenants can be helpful, there is nothing in Scripture itself that gives us a guideline to make such a distinction. How do we determine which laws are moral and which are civil or ceremonial? Where does it say that only certain parts of the Mosaic Law passed away, while others remain in force? It is a mistake to use such distinctions about law and then use that as a tool in shaping one's theology of biblical law.³⁰ Below I want to look at 3 different laws that change significantly from the Old Covenant era to the New Covenant era that all can fit neatly into the category that many theologians call "moral law."³¹

New Content

There are a number of new and important laws given in the New Covenant era. These laws are very different in their content than their Old Covenant counterparts. Here we will only be able to examine three laws that are illustrative of the general newness of content in the version of God's law that is revealed for the New Covenant era: Giving, Sabbath, and Divorce. This is by no means meant to be an exhaustive study of these three issues. I only want to point out the clear contrast between the laws given by God in each era.

A. Giving

We'll begin by examining the law of God concerning giving in the Old Covenant era. Under the Mosaic Law several tithes were required:

- The general tithe (10%) was given to the Levites who then had to tithe. *Leviticus 27:30-33; Numbers 18:21-24; Numbers 18:18-26*
- The festival tithe used for an annual festival and remainder given to the Levites. *Deuteronomy 14:22-27*
- Every third year an additional tithe was given for the Levites and the poor. *Deuteronomy 14:28-29*
- Additional giving: (1) Corners, gleanings, forgotten sheaves *Leviticus 19:9; Deuteronomy 24:19*; (2) Firstfruits *Deuteronomy 26:1-10*; (3) The Lord's tithe *Leviticus 27:30*; (4) Freewill offerings *Deuteronomy 16:10; Leviticus 22:18-23*

Notice the detailed commands for giving that God gave the Israelites. These tithes were not optional. It was God's holy law that you gave exactly according to these specifications. If you did not give as stipulated above, you were sinning against God by breaking His holy law.

There is much material in the New Covenant Scriptures about how we are to handle our money. The warnings about the danger of being consumed by our desires for material wealth are numerous. But when it comes to commands about what amount we are to give toward Kingdom work, it directly conflicts with the Mosaic Law. In 2 Corinthians 9:7 Paul writes: "Each man should give what he has decided in his heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver." There is no legislated amount of giving in the New Covenant era. Israelites living under the Mosaic Law were under compulsion to give. There was no freedom as to the amount of money and possessions one was to give to God. It was legislated. The Law of Christ is completely different when it comes to giving. Each believer is to examine his situation and his heart and give as much as he desires. There are great and important theological reasons for this difference in the two versions of law which I hope to examine in a future article, but for our purposes it is sufficient to note the radical difference in these two versions of God's law.

B. Divorce

Next let's examine God's holy law concerning divorce. In the Old Covenant Scriptures, God's law on divorce³² is given in Deuteronomy 24:

If a man marries a woman who becomes displeasing to him because he finds something indecent about her, and he writes her a certificate of divorce, gives it to her and sends her from his house, and if after she leaves his house she becomes the wife of another man, and her second husband dislikes her and writes her a certificate of divorce, gives it to her and sends her from his house, or if he dies, then her first husband, who divorced her, is not allowed to marry her again after she has been defiled. That would be detestable in the eyes of the Lord. Do not bring sin upon the land the Lord your God is giving you as an inheritance (Deuteronomy 24:1-4).

This text tells us that if a man found something wrong with his wife he could divorce her as long as he gave her a certificate of divorce. There is controversy over what the phrase “something indecent” means. We know that it cannot mean something equivalent to adultery, because unlawful sexual relations were punished by death. Not only would divorce have been unnecessary in the case of unlawful sexual relations, but remarriage for the offender also would have been impossible since she would have been dead (Leviticus 18, 20:10).

Now we need to look at the New Testament and God’s law on divorce to see if there are any important differences. In Matthew 19 Jesus tells us that the Mosaic Law gave greater license for divorce than before that time (Adam to Moses) or after that time (Pentecost to the second coming of Christ). The reason he gives is that the Israelites were hard-hearted:³³

Some Pharisees came to him to test him. They asked, “Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any and every reason?”

“Haven’t you read,” he replied, “that at the beginning the Creator ‘made them male and female,’ and said, ‘For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh’? So they are no longer two, but one. Therefore what God has joined together, let man not separate.”

“Why then,” they asked, “did Moses command that a man give his wife a certificate of divorce and send her away?”

Jesus replied, “Moses permitted you to divorce your wives because your hearts were hard. But it was not this way from the beginning. I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for marital unfaithfulness, and marries another woman commits adultery.”

The disciples said to him, “If this is the situation between a husband and wife, it is better not to marry.”

Jesus replied, “Not everyone can accept this word, but only those to whom it has been given. (Matthew 19:3-11).

Jesus is very clear—the regulation in Deuteronomy 24 is not as strict as what He laid down in Matthew 19. The only allowance for divorce that Jesus gives is for adultery. Deuteronomy 24 must be allowing divorce for something other than adultery. If a man decided to divorce his wife, he then had to give her a certificate of divorce. After doing that, the husband was free to marry another. But there was one prohibition that then applied to him. If the recently divorced wife got married to another and then divorced from that man, the first husband could not remarry her.

Below is a chart comparing and contrasting the law of Christ found in Matthew 19 to that version of God’s law that God gave through Moses in Deuteronomy 24:

Mosaic Law	Law of Christ
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It was given to hard-hearted (unbelieving) people.	It is only given to believing people.
Divorce was permitted for some "indecency" less than adultery.	Divorce only is permitted in the case of unrepentant adultery.
Remarriage is permitted in all circumstances except to one's former spouse after she has been remarried and divorced again.	Remarriage is forbidden in all circumstances except those divorces that are caused by adultery. Any marriage that is with someone who has had an unbiblical divorce is in an unlawful or adulterous relationship.

It is clear that the God of heaven and earth has decided in His perfect wisdom to change His holy law. We now have a new law concerning divorce in the law of Christ that tells us that divorce that was once tolerable in God's sight is now sinful.

C. Sabbath

Finally we will examine God's different but equally holy laws concerning Sabbath keeping. The keeping of a weekly Sabbath is one of the Ten Commandments. The way one kept the Sabbath holy was by ceasing from all labor. God was very specific about just how one was to do this:

Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the LORD your God. On it you shall not do any work, neither you, nor your son or daughter, nor your manservant or maidservant, nor your animals, nor the alien within your gates. For in six days the LORD made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but he rested on the seventh day. Therefore the LORD blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy (Exodus 20:8-11).

Do not light a fire in any of your dwellings on the Sabbath day (Exodus 35:3).

If one broke God's clear and holy law on Sabbath the punishment was severe:

Observe the Sabbath, because it is holy to you. Anyone who desecrates it must be put to death; whoever does any work on that day must be cut off from his people (Exodus 31:14).

While the Israelites were in the desert, a man was found gathering wood on the Sabbath day. Those who found him gathering wood brought him to Moses and Aaron and the whole assembly, and they kept him in custody, because it was not clear what should be done to him. Then the LORD said to Moses, "The man must die. The whole assembly must stone him outside the camp." So the

assembly took him outside the camp and stoned him to death, as the LORD commanded Moses (Numbers 15:32-36).

God's Law concerning the Sabbath was crystal clear in the Old Covenant era. Exactly how one was to obey the Sabbath was to do absolutely no work. It was a serious sin to break the Sabbath and it was punishable by death. These facts concerning God's holy Sabbath law laid out in Scripture are unambiguous.

The teaching on Sabbath in the New Covenant era has been a matter of longstanding debate. In the limited space available to me I am not going to attempt an exhaustive positive teaching on Sabbath in the New Covenant era. Instead, I simply want to point out clear and undeniable differences between the two versions of God's holy Sabbath law. In Romans 14:5-6 Paul speaks of the observance of special or sacred days as a matter of freedom in the same category with drinking wine and eating meat. We are not to judge one another according to our partaking in or abstention from these things: "One man considers one day more sacred than another; another man considers every day alike. Each one should be fully convinced in his own mind. He who regards one day as special, does so to the Lord. He who eats meat, eats to the Lord, for he gives thanks to God; and he who abstains, does so to the Lord and gives thanks to God." When Paul writes the Colossians, he treats the Sabbath similarly. But this time he relegates the keeping of the Sabbath to a shadow of what believers now have in Christ:

having canceled the written code, with its regulations, that was against us and that stood opposed to us; he took it away, nailing it to the cross. And having disarmed the powers and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross. Therefore do not let anyone judge you by what you eat or drink, or with regard to a religious festival, a New Moon celebration or a Sabbath day. These are a shadow of the things that were to come; the reality, however, is found in Christ (2:14-17).

These texts tell us that God's law concerning Sabbath-keeping in the Old Covenant is no longer applicable today as a command of God. This is widely recognized even by those churches who believe that the Sabbath is part of God's moral law for all people. I say this because these faithful believers heed these New Covenant Scriptures and they do not accuse those who do not keep a weekly day of rest as sinning. They do not excommunicate the habitual "Sabbath breaker." In the Old Covenant era, you were killed for picking up sticks to make a fire to keep your family warm on the Sabbath. In the New Covenant era, we are commanded not to judge our brother in the least if he decides to build a house on the Sabbath. In the Old Covenant era, one would break God's holy law by refusing to be in concert with the rest of Israel in stoning a person for breaking the Sabbath. In the New Covenant era, it is sinful to rebuke a person for working from dawn to dusk on the Sabbath day as long as he does so for the Lord. Once again we see that the law of God in the New Covenant era is actually different and new in content.

Closing Thoughts

It is obvious that God's laws relating to the theocracy of Israel and their sacrificial system have changed with the change from the Old Covenant to the New Covenant. But

it is wrong to assume that there is some category of law (like “moral law”) that is unchangeable. Instead we should see that our holy God changed His holy law in many ways when He made the New Covenant. Some of these changes seem minor, like changes regarding laws about what we are allowed to eat or the kinds of plants we can plant together in our gardens. But some of these changes are enormous as we have just seen regarding what and how we give to God; His law regarding divorce; and how God wants us to view “holy days.”

Steve Lehrer

Authors

Steve Lehrer directs the biblical counseling ministry and teaches theology for In-Depth Studies in Mesa, Arizona. He is also one of the pastors at New Covenant Bible Fellowship in Tempe, Arizona. He holds an M.A. in Theology from Westminster Theological Seminary in California.

Michael Adams is one of the pastors at New Covenant Bible Fellowship in Tempe, Arizona.

Endnotes:

¹ That is to say that one can refer to the Old Covenant by simply restating the Ten Commandments. The Ten Commandments are NOT equivalent to the entire Old Covenant. But they seem to be used by God as the part of the Old Covenant to represent the whole.

² For more on the spiritual makeup of the nation of Israel see the article in this issue of the journal entitled “Israel: A Nation of Unbelievers.”

³ Psalm 51

⁴ Romans 3:25

⁵ I realize that in writing this phrase this may sound scandalous to those who hold to Covenant Theology. But, as I stated above, Scripture itself states that God

’s law does change (Hebrews 7:12). So even if it is only an obscure law regarding priesthood that has changed in the law for the New Covenant era, there would still be two different “versions” of God

’s law, one that has the law governing priesthood and lineage, and one that does not.

⁶ 1 John 3:4

⁷ Romans 6:23

⁸ “Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen” (Ephesians 4:29).

⁹ “Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse” (Romans 12:14).

¹⁰ An antinomian is one who is against law. He believes that Christians are not bound by any law at all.

¹¹ 1 Thessalonians 5:16-18

¹² Romans 13:1-5

¹³ I Corinthians 6:18

¹⁴ Hebrews 10:24-25

¹⁵ Psalm 119

¹⁶ During the Old Testament and the Old Covenant era you do not find any clear teaching on evangelism or the taking of the gospel to the world. There were no missionaries in Israel and there was no great commission.

¹⁷ An objection may be raised that they were to “show love to the alien in their midst as they were once aliens in Egypt” (Exodus 22:21; Deuteronomy 10:19, etc). This is true, but it seems that a differentiation should be made between “alien in their midst” to whom they were to show love, and their enemy whom they were to destroy.

¹⁸ Here are more examples of hating your neighbor/enemy in the Old Testament: Joshua 10:11, 30, 11:6-9, Psalm 139:19-22.

¹⁹ It was a big difficulty for the disciples to grasp this concept. The very idea that the Gospel was to be given to non-Jews was revolutionary (Acts 15:6-11). For Paul and John, this idea of the universality of the people of God was of paramount importance. See Ephesians 2:12-18 and Revelation 5:9-10.

²⁰ Luke 10:25-37, Matthew 5:43-48

²¹ Romans 12:14-21

²² Although the wording of Jeremiah 31 and Hebrews 8 and 10 is “I will **put** my laws in their **hearts**, and I will **write** them on their **minds**“ no one has paid close attention to the wording of the verse in debating this question. Most authors seem to conflate this passage with 2 Corinthians 3 and Romans 2 which speak of writing on the heart. Since it is obviously figurative language I don’t think it really matters whether it is the law written on the heart or on the mind so I will refer to “the law written on the heart” as do most authors.

²³ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Volume I (The Westminster Press, Philadelphia, 1960), 367-36.

²⁴ One example is Ezekiel 36:22-27.

²⁵ Our understanding of the law written on the heart is utterly dependent on the later revelation of the New Covenant Scriptures. The New Covenant writings complete what was only pictured in the Old (Romans 16:25-27; Ephesians 3:2-6; Colossians 1:25-27).

²⁶ Christ’s atoning sacrifice on the cross is limited to the elect and all of the elect receive everything that was purchased for them on the cross (Acts 13:48, Romans 9:6-20).

²⁷ Notice that both *those who are being made holy* (vs. 14), and those whom He has *made perfect forever* (vs. 14) are the same group of people He purchased by His *one sacrifice* on the cross (vs. 14). They are the elect.

²⁸ Romans 1:30

²⁹ Titus 2:11

³⁰ For more on the issue of “moral law” see Mike Adam’s paper “Rethinking our use of Moral Law.” The paper can be found on the In-Depth studies website at <http://www.ids.org>.

³¹ Of course some might not consider the laws I have chosen to examine as “moral law.” The whole problem with categorizing law into these groupings is that it is a very subjective practice.

³² Much of this short section on divorce is taken from the previous issue (1:1) of the *JNCT*.

³³ Hard-hearted is another way of saying unbelieving.