

The Pilgrim's Pathway

**The Bible, the Church, and the World:
A Third Way (3)**

**The First Way:
Theonomy/Christian Reconstruction (ii)**

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The central issue with theonomy/Christian reconstruction involves the modern use of OT law. As we shall see, the modern validity assigned to the Mosaic law belongs to an interpreter's understanding of the nature of the Mosaic covenant.

Confessional spectacles for Bible interpretation

The NT church—and to this the NT Scriptures bear witness—has had to reflect on the question of precisely what, from the OT legislation, retains its validity, its normative force, and what does not. *How does the OT legislation retain its normative character for the NT church?* Consider Christ's use of the OT, in the Sermon on the Mount and in His conflicts with the Pharisees concerning the Sabbath. Think also of Peter's vision and subsequent visit to Cornelius (Acts 10); of the Jerusalem council (Acts 15), occasioned by the great influx of Gentile believers into the church; of the apostle Paul's application, in 1 Corinthians 9:9ff., of Deuteronomy 25:4 (about muzzling an ox treading out the grain). Recall as well that all the sins mentioned in Revelation 21:27 and 22:15 as barring people from the New Jerusalem are related in some way to the commands found in the Decalogue.

How should we derive our "ought" from the text of Scripture? The answer lies embedded in our Reformed Confessions and tradition. Here is the answer stated briefly: *the relationship between Scripture and ethics involves a normative aspect which is discerned best by observing*

how Scripture employs Scripture. As those who confess the divine inspiration and the unity of Scripture, we need to ask: How does *God* move from revelation, from the “text,” to the situation?

A moment ago we referred to how the NT employs the normative aspect of the OT revelation. This normative aspect is identified by some Reformed confessional statements that deal with the law of God. Listen first to *The Westminster Confession of Faith*, Chapter 19:

III. Beside 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; and partly, holding forth divers instructions of moral duties. All of which ceremonial laws are now abrogated, under the new testament.

IV. 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.

For now, notice the phrase “the general equity” of the law, something we’ll hear again later, from John Calvin.

In 1561, eighty-five years before *The Westminster Confession* would be adopted, Guido de Bres and the Reformed churches echoed Scripture this way in the *Belgic Confession*, Article 25:

We believe that the ceremonies and symbols of the law ceased at the coming of Christ, and that all the shadows are accomplished; so that the use of them must be abolished among Christians; *yet the truth and substance of them remain with us in Jesus Christ*, in whom they have their completion. In the meantime we still use the testimonies taken out of the law and the prophets to confirm us in the doctrine of the gospel, *and to regulate our life in all honorableness to the glory of God, according to His will* (italics added).

Notice here the distinction between, on the one hand, “ceremonies and symbols” and “shadows,” and on the other hand, “the truth and substance” of these ceremonies, symbols, and shadows. The former *pass away*, having been accomplished or fulfilled in Christ; but the latter—the truth and substance—*remain* to confirm us in the gospel and to regulate our life to God’s glory. (In this connection, I believe it is inaccurate to say that the ceremonial {36} laws have been abolished or have become irrelevant for guiding our faith and conduct. To say that the *keeping* of them has been abolished [true] is different from saying that the *laws themselves* have been abolished [dubious, since their “substance” remains in Christ to confirm the gospel and guide our living; cf. Belgic Confession, Article 25]. I understand the sentence in the WCF, “All of which ceremonial laws are now abrogated, under the new testament” to mean essentially that keeping the OT ceremonial laws has been abolished in the NT.)

You will recognize immediately what principle of Bible interpretation is being formulated here. It is the distinction between the so-called moral, ceremonial and civil laws of God. We must remember, however, that no OT Israelite would have invented or employed this distinction; for the OT believer, church and state, temple and courthouse, were regulated by the one, unified law of the LORD, the Torah. But this characterization of divine laws as moral, ceremonial and civil became necessary and useful *with the progress of redemption*. It was when the temple no longer served as the New Israel’s cultic center, when circumcision was replaced with baptism and Passover with the Lord’s Supper, when Israel’s theocracy was fulfilled by Jesus Christ, that this differentiation became relevant. Even so, perhaps it would be better to speak about moral, ceremonial and civil *aspects* of the *one* law of God, rather than about three *kinds* of laws.

The Reformed Confessions help us answer the question as to *how* the interpreter moves from the Bible text to contemporary application. Our Confessions help us by pointing to three aspects of OT legislation, and by identifying how these aspects continue to function in the NT. That our Reformed Confessions are able to do this reflects a hermeneutic that was self-conscious on their part, resulting from a careful “listening” to God’s Word. This confessional hermeneutic is normative for us today. In other words, we subscribe to both the confessional *content* distilled from Scripture and *the way our creeds “hear” and interpret Scripture*; both are normative for a

church and for theologians desiring to be confessional. In my judgment, our Form of Subscription compels us to endorse not merely the *content* of the Confessions, but their *method* as well. This is part of the Holy Spirit's testimony, that we confess all things contained therein *because they agree*—not insofar as they agree—with Scripture, in content and hermeneutic. The hermeneutic employed by the Confessions is the same as that which God Himself uses!

A covenantal-historical hermeneutic

Without taking the time here to spell out in detail the lessons to be learned or principles to be derived from the NT's use of the OT, I would submit that *the manner in which the NT employs the OT arises from, is determined by, and corresponds to the progress of revelation and of salvation history.*

As Reformed ethicist W. H. Velema has argued (in *Wet en evangelie [Law and Gospel]* [Kampen: J.H. Kok, 1987]), the progress of salvation history compels us to distinguish among various aspects of God's law, for baptism has come in the place of circumcision, and Sabbath has become Sunday. God's law contains elements that are *permanent* and elements that are *passing*. Some theologians speak of the norm and the form of God's law. Distinguishing among aspects of the law (moral, ceremonial and civil) compels another choice, namely, that of arranging them in terms of rank or priority. The Reformed Confessions, and under their tutelage, Reformed ethics, is not embarrassed to recognize the priority and centrality of the *moral* aspect of God's law, or as some might put it, God's moral law, also called the Decalogue. It is this aspect that Jesus Christ focuses upon in His teaching in the Sermon on the Mount and in His Sabbath conflicts with the Jewish leaders. It is this aspect that the early church was led to acknowledge, both in apostolic practice and gospel application. *The NT use of the OT proceeds from viewing God's moral law as constitutional, central, and governing, and the ceremonial and civil legislation as the outworking or concretization thereof.*

The relationship between moral constitution and ceremonial/civil concretization arises from considering the Decalogue in its *covenantal-historical context*, which requires us to pay

attention to Exodus 19 as conveying the introduction to God's covenant-making with Israel. The story of Sinai begins at Exodus 19:1, and unfolds with covenant conversation between the LORD and Israel, through God's appointed mediator, Moses. Covenantal consecration prepares Israel for God's thundering and Sinai's smoke. Then comes the Decalogue. In the Decalogue we are confronted with a unique moral concentrate (this word can be used as a *verb*, meaning "to bring to or toward a common center"; here we use it as a *noun*, meaning "that which is brought to a common center"). Everything {37} else that the LORD commands flows forth from the Decalogue, is an outworking thereof, or is determined by it. In the very concisely formulated Decalogue, everything concerning our relationship toward God and our neighbor is addressed. Its prologue reminds us that the law's context is one of divine deliverance and mercy, one of grace and power. That it contains two tables testifies to the religious character of ethics and of neighbor-love. That the precepts governing our relation to God precede those directing relations with fellow-men teaches that morality, and laws governing human relationships, are to be anchored in the LORD.

From the Decalogue there is an outward, centrifugal movement in revelation in terms of redemption. The two forms of the Decalogue (Ex. 20 and Deut. 5) bear the marks of that growth or movement. The Decalogue is re-published as Israel prepares to enter a new mode of existence in the land of Canaan as God's chosen people.

This covenantal-historical context involves both constitution *and* concretization, moral center *and* ceremonial/civil outworking. This is what some have referred to as norm and form. As the word indicates, the "norm" points to that normative or regulative aspect of the temporal form required during a particular time. The *norm* of the eternally valid Decalogue is addressed in a *form* that is historically *expressed*, not historically *determined* or *time-bound*. Moreover, this norm (e.g., "you shall not murder") is expressed in a form appropriate to Israel's particular situation (e.g., "when you build a house, you shall build a parapet on your roof"). Notice these three ingredients: *norm*, *form*, and *situation*.

We prefer to speak of the Decalogue's *covenantal*-historical context, rather than simply of its historical context, in order to show that *both* the norms concentrated in the Decalogue *and*

the manner whereby they are historically concretized in further OT legislation are regulative for our interpretation. The manner of their concretization has canonical authority. I say this in order to identify what I consider the mistaken underestimation and virtual elimination of these historically concretized commandments by characterizing them as being “just cultural.” Rather, in these commandments, Israel’s Sovereign Redeemer is revealing Himself to Israel *and to us* as her/our Legislative Lord by working out the constitutional principles of the covenantal relationship into precepts and ordinances designed to aid, sustain, protect, and nurture that covenantal relationship in the land of Canaan, for the sake of the coming Christ.

This legislative dynamic is part of what I would call the dispensational dynamic of the covenant of grace. My use of the term “dispensational” seeks to maintain the delicate biblical balance between continuity and discontinuity. One might put it very simply this way: *there is one covenant, but two dispensations*. That is much more than merely a historical observation, or a biblical-theological maxim. Embedded within this simple statement is our hermeneutic, our way of interpreting and applying the Bible. One covenant—that is: one eternal, abiding norm, constitution, foundation, whose moral concentrate is the Decalogue. Two dispensations—that is: two kinds of administrations, the one a legislative administration, the other a Spirit-empowered administration.

Bible passages must be positioned within the framework of world history, but also within the framework of God’s history of revelation. For example, as Reformed biblical scholar J. van Bruggen has observed, when the OT prescribes capital punishment for adultery, it is useful to inquire about how adultery was punished among the nations surrounding Israel. That helps us to assess how severe or mild God’s prescribed punishment was for Israel. But it is more important to understand this punishment in the light of what God had said earlier, in Paradise, about marriage. “A man shall cleave unto his wife,” God said. That divine word is directly relevant to the punishment prescribed in Israel for adultery. But we must also take into account the fact that along with the exodus from Egypt, God forged His people into a theocracy with their own form of government. But then when later in the new covenant we observe that adulterers in the church are not stoned, that difference is not due to any alleged time-boundness of biblical law, but due to the fact that God has moved in His revelation from a nationally gathered church to an

internationally gathered church, gathered from every nation. In the NT *the church no longer exercises judicial/civil authority*. Since in Israel the church had exercised civil authority in the name of God, the permanent significance of the civil sanction remains firm: the adulterer stands guilty before the God of Paradise! And so we read later, in Revelation, that harlots, murderers and idolaters remain outside the New Jerusalem (Rev. 22:15).