

# WCF 19: OF THE LAW OF GOD

## Introduction

It is a sad observation that many modern Christians hate doctrine. But these same professors of faith would often quote Paul's word in Roman 6:14—"for ye are not under the law, but under grace." If we would read Paul's words in context, we will quickly realise that he is not saying what the modern easy-believers take him to say, namely that Christians are not under any obligation to keep any law. "God is love," they say, "and to demand anything of anyone would be contrary to the principle of love." They forget the words of the apostle John: "For this is the love of [i.e. for] God, that we keep his commandments: and his commandments are not grievous" (1Jn 5:3). God's love for us demands a grateful response of love; and that response of love must manifest itself in the keeping of God's commandments or laws.

This Law is presented throughout the Scripture, although it is summarised in the Ten Commandments.

## On the Moral Law as a Perpetual Rule of Life

*19.1 God gave to Adam a law, as a covenant of works, by which He bound him, and all his posterity, to personal, entire, exact, and perpetual obedience; promised life upon the fulfilling, and threatened death upon the breach of it; and endued him with power and ability to keep it.<sup>1</sup>*

<sup>1</sup>Gen 1:26–27; 2:17; Rom 2:14–15; 10:5; 5:12, 19; Gal 3:10, 12; Eccl 7:29; Job 28:28.

- The content of this section has already been dealt with under *WCF 4.2* and *WCF 7.2*. In *WCF 4.2*, we are taught that man, created in the image of God, has "the law of God written in their hearts, and power to fulfil it" (cf. Rom 2:14–15). On the other hand, *WCF 7.2*, teaches that Adam was under a Covenant of Works wherein life was promised upon perfect and personal obedience to that Law (cf. Rom 10:5, 5:12, 19).
- This Law is commonly known as the Moral Law because it was the revelation of the will of God as man's moral Governor, and so it is the standard and rule of man's moral actions. In other words, what is moral or immoral is not defined by the majority view or even consensus of society, but by God through His Law.
- When Adam broke the Covenant of Works, it became no longer possible to obtain life by obedience to the Law because of Original Sin. Thus Paul declares: "Therefore by the deeds of the law there shall no flesh be justified in his sight" (Rom 3:20a).

*19.2 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;<sup>1</sup> the first four commandments containing our duty towards God, and the other six, our duty to man.<sup>2</sup>*

<sup>1</sup>Jas 1:25; 2:8, 10–12; Rom 13:8–9; Deut 5:32; 10:4; Ex 24:1; <sup>2</sup>Mt 22:37–40.

- But the Moral Law was imposed by God not only for Adam but for his posterity, as the perfect rule of righteousness. Its demands were absolute, universal and perpetual. [Indeed, even the promise of life that comes with perfect obedience to the Law as a Covenant of Works was not really disannulled,—only that it is impossible for man descending from Adam by natural generation to fulfil the demands of the Law. But thanks be to God that He gave us a second representative, the second Adam, the Lord Jesus Christ, who fulfilled the demands of the Law or Covenant of Works on our behalf.]
- The Moral Law is able to function as such rule because it was inscribed on the heart or conscience of the first man in his creation, and is therefore also inscribed in the heart of all his posterity. Because of the Fall, the conscience of man is darkened and the fair copy of the Law inscribed in his heart is defaced, but not totally obliterated. This is why men everywhere and of every age and culture continue to have a religious and moral sense. Thus, every people group, no matter how backward or civilised have some form of religion. Man created in the image of God knows in his heart of hearts that God must be worshipped. Likewise, hardly any persons, regardless of race or societal development will disagree that murder and theft are crimes and that that parents must be honoured and obeyed. Indeed, in

some societies, such as amongst the Chinese people, this obligation towards our parents is carried to the extreme of form of filial piety and manifests itself in parental and ancestral worship.

- But because of the corruption of man, the copy of the Law in the heart is seen less and less clearly. Therefore God deemed it fit to have this Law summarised and engraven on two tables of stone, and have it handled with awful solemnity to Israel as His covenant people. In this form, the Moral Law is commonly called the Ten Commandments, or the Decalogue (literally, ‘Ten Words’).
- The Westminster divines, following John Calvin, divided the Ten Commandments into two tables with four commandments on the first table pertaining to our duty of worship towards God, and six commandments on the second table pertaining to our duty of love towards man. Note that this division should be taken as a logical rather than physical division. Many modern scholars believe that the Ten commandments were given in duplicate as was done when covenants were made in the Ancient Near Eastern culture: 10 on one slab as God’s copy and 10 on the other slab as Israel’s copy. But whether this is right or not is not really as important as how the Ten Commandments are logically divided. The Roman Catholic church and the Lutherans divide the Ten Commandments into three on one table and seven on the other table. This is done by combining what we know as the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> Commandments together and breaking up what we know as the 10<sup>th</sup> Commandment. So their 9<sup>th</sup> Commandment is “Thou shalt not covet thy neighbour’s house” and their 10<sup>th</sup> Commandment is “Thou shalt not covet thy neighbour’s wife, ....” This division is not only absurd (as Calvin observes), but has no scriptural basis. More than that, such a division appears to be an artificial attempt to eradicate the regulative principle of worship which is taught in the 2<sup>nd</sup> Commandment. Calvin and all Reformed persons believe that the 2<sup>nd</sup> Commandment is not about worshipping other gods (as Lutherans and Romanists hold), but about how the Living and True God is to be worshipped.
- Briefly, the Ten Commandments may summarised as follows:

*Our duty to God:*

- I Thou shalt have no other gods before me.
  - Object of worship.
  - To worship God alone.
- II Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image....
  - Mode or manner of worship.
  - To worship God in the manner prescribed by Him.
- III Thou shalt not take the name of the LORD thy God in vain...
  - Attitude or spirit of worship.
  - To have unfeigned reverence for God’s Name
- IV Remember the sabbath day, to keep it holy.
  - Day of worship.
  - To keep the Sabbath holy.

*Our duty to our fellow men:*

- V Honour thy father and thy mother.
  - Respect and obey God-given authorities.
  - To love, respect and obey our parents and God-given authorities.
- VI Thou shalt not kill.
  - Respect the sanctity of human lives.
  - To avoid angry passions, to reverence human lives.
- VII Thou shalt not commit adultery.
  - Respect the sanctity of marriage and sex.
  - To be pure in heart, language and conduct.
- VIII Thou shalt not steal.
  - Respect the ownership of personal property.
  - To be honest and industrious.
- IX Thou shalt not bear false witness against thy neighbour.
  - Respect the sanctity of truth.
  - To tell the truth.

- X Thou shalt not covet...
- Respect the lot of ourselves and others as God-appointed.
  - To be content with what the Lord gives us.

## On the Threefold Division of the Law of God

A cursory reading of the Bible will immediately reveal that God did not give only the Moral Commandments. The Law of God, which is revealed in the Word of God, can be classified broadly into 3 categories: Moral, Ceremonial and Judicial.

*19.3 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;<sup>1</sup> and partly, holding forth divers instructions of moral duties.<sup>2</sup> All which ceremonial laws are now abrogated, under the New Testament.<sup>3</sup>*

<sup>1</sup>Heb 9; 10:1; Gal 4:1-3; Col 2:17; <sup>2</sup>1 Cor 5:7; 2 Cor 6:17; Jude 23; <sup>3</sup>Col 2:14, 16-17; Dan 9:27; Eph 2:15-16.

- Ceremonial Laws were given to the people of Israel, as a church under age. These are the laws pertaining to the sacrifices, to the tabernacle, to the priesthood, to the holy days. These laws are all shadows and types pointing to Christ and His redemptive work. They point the Old Testament saints to Christ. Whenever the Jews offer an animal as a sin offering, for example, they were saying that one day Christ would pay for their sins by dying on their behalf. Conversely, we cannot understand the work of Christ unless we know the ceremonial laws. You cannot understand Christ's sacrifice, but that the ceremonial laws had animals sacrificed. You cannot understand why John says that Christ tabernacled in our midst, but that the Ceremonial Law had a Tabernacle. These laws prepared God's people for Christ, and when Christ appeared, there is no more need for them. The Ceremonial Law was a candle showing God's people who Christ is and what He would do on their behalf. Christ, the Son of God, the Sun of Righteousness, has risen with healing in His wings and there is no more need for the candle.
- Thus the Old Testament teaches that the sacrificial system will be laid aside with the coming of Christ: "And he shall confirm the covenant with many for one week: and in the midst of the week he shall cause the sacrifice and the oblation to cease, and for the overspreading of abominations he shall make it desolate, even until the consummation, and that determined shall be poured upon the desolate" (Dan 9:27). Thus the New Testament teaches clearly that all the Ceremonial laws are now abrogated: "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" (Eph 2:15). This is also the theological thesis of the book of Hebrews.
- Note that our Confession also teaches one other use of the Ceremonial Law which is seldom highlighted today, namely that it "partly [holds] forth divers instructions of moral duties." The "proof-texts" (1 Cor 5:7; 2 Cor 6:17; Jude 23) suggest that the divines had in mind the doctrine of separation from sin and sinners, e.g., "Wherefore come out from among them, and be ye separate, saith the Lord, and touch not the unclean thing; and I will receive you" (2 Cor 6:17).

*19.4 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.<sup>1</sup>*

<sup>1</sup>Ex 21; 22:1-29; Gen 49:10; 1 Pet 2:13-14; Mt 5:17, 38-39; 1 Cor 9:8-10.

- Judicial laws are laws pertaining to judgement, and were given to Israel to regulate the nation in the land of Palestine during the era in which it was the instrument of Messianic preparation. These laws no longer apply to us because Israel is no longer functioning as the Old Testament Church or, as our Confession puts it, "the church under age."
- By the time Christ completed His incarnational work of redemption, the Church was no longer confined to one nation, and these laws expired. They, however, continue to serve as guides for judgement and fairness, which is what our Confession is referring to by the term 'general equity thereof'. This being the case, all civil governments ought to pattern their laws after the Old Testament Judicial Law. This is so since the Judicial Laws reveal the mind of God, and if the laws of the nations are patterned after the Judicial Law of God, they would be much more effective. For example, under the Judicial Law of God, if you steal, you return what you stole plus extra. If you stole an ox, you would have to pay back 5 oxen.

If you stole a sheep, you pay back 4 sheep (Ex 22:1). This would certainly be more effective than using prison sentences which sap tax-payers' money.

- That said, since the Old Testament Judicial Law has expired, so long as we are not required to sin against God, believers should submit to the law of the land even if it differ from the Old Testament Judicial Law. This is what the apostle Paul means when he says: "Let every soul be subject unto the higher powers. For there is no power but of God: the powers that be are ordained of God" (Rom 13:1). Thus, if the Judicial Law of our land prescribe imprisonment for parent who spank their children, then we must not be unwilling to suffer imprisonment if we are found guilty of breaking the Law of the land. The legislators of the land would sin against God by introducing such a law, but as long as the law stands, we must willingly submit to its penal sanction. Likewise, if say, the civil law of the Land prescribe a fine and nothing more for murder, then our legislators would be answerable to God for refusing to follow the pattern He laid down, but as private citizens, we may not insist on the death, or take matters into our own hand on any pretext that this is required in the Old Testament Judicial Law.
- We should add by way of clarification that Judicial laws include Civil Law and Criminal Law. Civil law deals with private disputes between individuals occasioned by debts, divorce, inheritance, or other relationships. In contrast, criminal law deals with crimes, that is, actions the state prohibits and takes steps to punish, such as murder, treason, or theft. In civil cases, the guilty party is asked to compensate the victim in an appropriate way. The distinction between civil and criminal law was, however, quite foreign to the Jews. Nearly all offences were matters for private prosecution. If someone was murdered, his relatives were responsible for killing the murderer, or chasing him to the nearest city of refuge, where a trial would be held. Nevertheless, all offences in Israel had a religious dimension: theft or adultery was not merely an offence against one's neighbour but was a sin against God. This meant that in theory every Israelite would be shocked by such behaviour and would want it punished. If such acts continued, God Himself might step in to punish the individual, his family, or even the whole nation. This religious dimension gave an aura of criminality to every offence, even though in most cases prosecution was left in the hands of individuals. Some religious offences, such as sabbath breaking (Num 15:32–36) or idolatry (Deut 13) were regarded as so heinous that the whole nation was responsible for prosecuting and punishing the offenders. They thus correspond more closely to the modern understanding of crime.

*19.5 The moral law doth for ever bind all, as well justified persons as others, to the obedience thereof;<sup>1</sup> and that, not only in regard of the matter contained in it, but also in respect of the authority of God, the Creator, who gave it.<sup>2</sup> Neither doth Christ in the Gospel any way dissolve, but much strengthen this obligation.<sup>3</sup>*

<sup>1</sup>Rom 13:8–10; Eph 6:2; <sup>1</sup>Jn 2:3–4, 7–8; <sup>2</sup>Jas 2:10–11; <sup>3</sup>Mt 5:17–19; Jas 2:8; Rom 3:31.

- This paragraph affirms the authority, perpetuity and universality of the Moral Law of God. It is perpetual in that it is always applicable and binding. It is universal in that not only Christians, but non-Christians are obliged to keep it and will be judged by it.
- Some say that Christians are under grace and so are not obliged to keep the Law. But the Lord Jesus said after preaching the Sermon on the Mount:

“Think not that I am come to destroy the law, or the prophets: I am come not 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” (Mt 5:17–19).

On another occasion, He said:

“Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all they mind. This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like unto it, Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself. On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets” (Mt 22:37–40).

The Lord was summarising the Ten Commandments. Therefore to deny that Christians are obligated to keep the Ten Commandments is to contradict Christ, and to deny that Christians are to love God and their neighbour.

- What does the enigmatic phrase, “not only in regard of the matter contained in it, but also in respect of the authority of God, the Creator, who gave it,” mean? The proof-text gives a clue:

“For whosoever shall keep the whole law, and yet offend in one point, he is guilty of all. For he that said, Do not commit adultery, said also, Do not kill. Now if thou commit no adultery, yet if thou kill, thou art become a transgressor of the law” (Jas 2:10–11).

The Ten Commandments bind Christians not only to obey the letter of the Law according to the wordings of the commandments, but also to all that is implied by the Law. Thus the 1<sup>st</sup> Commandment is not only about not worshipping any other gods, but it is about acknowledging God to be the only true God, and worshipping and glorifying with our whole all our soul, heart, mind and might.

## On the Uses of the Moral Law

*19.6a Although true believers be not under the law as a covenant of works, to be thereby justified or condemned;<sup>1</sup> yet is it of great use to them, as well as to others; in that, as a rule of life, informing them of the will of God and their duty, it directs and binds them to walk accordingly;<sup>2</sup> discovering also the sinful pollutions of their nature, hearts, and lives;<sup>3</sup> so as, examining themselves thereby, they may come to further conviction of, humiliation for, and hatred against sin;<sup>4</sup> together with a clearer sight of the need they have of Christ, and the perfection of His obedience.<sup>5</sup>*

<sup>1</sup>Rom 6:14; Gal 2:16; 3:13; 4:4–5; Acts 13:39; Rom 8:1; <sup>2</sup>Rom 7:12, 22, 25; Ps 119:4–6; 1 Cor 7:19; Gal 5:14, 16, 18–23; <sup>3</sup>Rom 7:7; 3:20; <sup>4</sup>Jas 1:23–25; Rom 7:9, 14, 24; <sup>5</sup>Gal 3:24; Rom 7:24–25; 8:3–4.

- Notice the very careful wordings of the Confession: “True believers be not under the law as a covenant of works, to be thereby justified or condemned.” Since believers are justified in Christ, they will not be condemned or justified by the Law. What about unbelievers? In a sense unbelievers are under the Law as a Covenant of Works. They are unable to be justified by it because all fell in Adam, but they will be condemned by the Law—not only because they are represented by Adam, but because they do actually transgress the Law personally. Notwithstanding, the Law “of great use to them [true believers], as well as to others [unbelievers].” Thus the Confession is here speaking of the general uses of the Law for the regenerate and the unregenerate:

- a. It shows the will of God or the duty that God requires of man: “Thou hast commanded us to keep thy precepts diligently. O that my ways were directed to keep thy statutes!” (Ps 119:4–5).
- b. It reveals the sinful pollutions of man’s nature, hearts and lives: “What shall we say then? Is the law sin? God forbid. Nay, I had not known sin, but by the law: for I had not known lust, except the law had said, Thou shalt not covet” (Rom 7:7); “Therefore by the deeds of the law there shall no flesh be justified in his sight: for by the law is the knowledge of sin” (Rom 3:20).
- c. It drives them to conviction and humiliation and hatred for sin: “For I was alive without the law once: but when the commandment came, sin revived, and I died. ... For we know that the law is spiritual: but I am carnal, sold under sin. ... Now if I do that I would not, it is no more I that do it, but sin that dwelleth in me” (Rom 7:9, 14, 20).
- d. It leads them to Christ by showing them their need for a Saviour: “Wherefore the law was our schoolmaster to bring us unto Christ, that we might be justified by faith” (Gal 3:24). “O wretched man that I am! who shall deliver me from the body of this death? I thank God through Jesus Christ our Lord. So then with the mind I myself serve the law of God; but with the flesh the law of sin” (Rom 7:24–25).

*19.6b It is likewise of use to the regenerate, to restrain their corruptions, in that it forbids sin;<sup>1</sup> and the threatenings of it serve to show what even their sins deserve, and what afflictions in this life they may expect for them, although freed from the curse thereof threatened in the law.<sup>2</sup> The promises of it, in like manner, show them God’s approbation of obedience, and what blessings they may expect upon the performance thereof,<sup>3</sup> although not as due to them by the law as a covenant of works.<sup>4</sup>*

<sup>1</sup>Jas 2:11; Ps 119:101, 104, 128; <sup>2</sup>Ezra 9:13–14; Ps 89:30–34; <sup>3</sup>Lev 26:1–14; 2 Cor 6:16; Eph 6:2–3; Ps 37:11; Mt 5:5; Ps 19:11; <sup>4</sup>Gal 2:16; Lk 17:10.

- The Law also has specific uses for the regenerate only:
  - a. It restrains their corruption. It does so by forbidding sin and showing what chastisement they may expect for their sins, even though they may be freed from the curse of the Law: “If his children

forsake my law, and walk not in my judgments; If they break my statutes, and keep not my commandments; Then will I visit their transgression with the rod, and their iniquity with stripes. Nevertheless my lovingkindness will I not utterly take from him, nor suffer my faithfulness to fail. My covenant will I not break, nor alter the thing that is gone out of my lips” (Ps 89:30–34).

- b. It encourages them to obedience. It does so by showing what blessings may be expected from obedience (though not due them as a Covenant of Works): “Moreover by them is thy servant warned: and in keeping of them there is great reward” (Ps 19:11).
- One of the most useful summary of the Uses of the Law is given by John Calvin in his *Institutes* (*ICR* 2.7.6–12). Calvin lists 3 principle uses:
  - ➔ *Firstly*, the Law shows God’s righteousness or the righteousness alone acceptable to God. And in so doing, it warns, informs, convicts, and lastly condemns, every man of his own unrighteousness (see *ICR* 2.7.6). Calvin calls this the *theological use* of the Law. The Law as such is like:
    - (a) A *portrait*, picturing our Creator and His righteousness (Rom 7:7), and also
    - (b) A *mirror*, displaying our unrighteousness (cf. Rom 3:20; Jas 1:23–25).
  - ➔ *Secondly*, it restrains (particularly) the unregenerate by its dire threats and compels them to Christ (see *ICR* 2.7.10–11). This is known as the *civil or pedagogical use* of the Law. As such the Law is like:
    - (a) A *leash*, restraining sin (cf. Rom 2:14–15) and
    - (b) A *cane* leading the unregenerate to seek Christ (cf. Gal 3:24).
  - ➔ *Thirdly*, the Law shows believers the nature of the Lord’s will, confirms in them the understanding of it, and urges them on in well-doing (*ICR* 2.7.12). We may call this the *moral or didactic use* of the Law. In this regard, it is like
    - (a) A *lamp* unto our feet and a light unto our path (Ps 119:105), as well as
    - (b) A *goad* to prod us on in our Christian walk (cf. Eccl 12:11).

## On the Relation of the Law to Grace

*19.6c So as a man’s doing good, and refraining from evil, because the law encourageth to the one, and detereth from the other, is no evidence of his being under the law, and not under grace.*<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Rom 6:12, 14; 1 Pet 3:8–12; Ps 34:12–16; Heb 12:28–29.

- Because Christians are no longer under the Law as a Covenant of Works, it would appear that anyone who is striving to keep the Law of God is not under grace but under the Law. This conclusion is, however, unwarranted since it is the proper functions of the Law of God to encourage believers to obedience and restraint from evil. Thus there is no basis for declaring a person to be unregenerate or living under Law just because he seeks to conform to the Law. In fact, a person who is freely and cheerfully seeking to be obedient to the Law of God is more likely a regenerate man, being enabled by the Spirit of Christ to new obedience.

*19.7 Neither are the forementioned uses of the law contrary to the grace of the Gospel, but do sweetly comply with it;<sup>1</sup> the Spirit of Christ subduing and enabling the will of man to do that freely, and cheerfully which the will of God revealed in the law requireth to be done.*<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Gal 3:21; <sup>2</sup>Ezk 36:27; Heb 8:10; Jer 31:33.

The Law and the Gospel are often set in opposition to each other by those who wish to de-emphasise the role of the Law in the Christian Church. However, though the Law and the Gospel should be distinguished, they should not be dichotomised.

- *Firstly*, it is the Law that shows the necessity of the Gospel. The gospel of salvation is necessary because of sin, and “by the law is the knowledge of sin” (Rom 3:20). So Paul declares: “But the scripture hath concluded all under sin, that the promise by faith of Jesus Christ might be given to them that believe” (Gal 3:22).
- *Secondly*, by the Gospel a sinner is saved from sin. This includes the condemnation and the bondage of sin. Thus a Christian is one who freely and cheerfully does the will of God by obeying His laws. This is why both Ezekiel and Jeremiah emphasised obedience to the Law when they spoke about the New

Covenant: “And I will put my spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes, and ye shall keep my judgments, and do them” (Ezk 36:27). “But this shall be the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel; After those days, saith the LORD, I will put my law in their inward parts, and write it in their hearts; and will be their God, and they shall be my people” (Jer 31:33).