

Married to Another Lee Irons

The Law in a nutshell?

(1) In Paul's normal usage, *nomos* means the Mosaic Law as a covenant of works. As such the Mosaic Law includes all of the stipulations given to Israel through Moses, founded on the "Do this and live" principle, accompanied by the threat of the curse for those who transgress the Law. The sanctions of the Law (blessing and curse) cannot be separated from the stipulations of the Law because the two are inextricably intertwined.

(2) Believers have been set free from the Law by means of their union with Christ in his death. The Law has jurisdiction over a person only as long as he is alive (Rom. 7:1; Gal. 2:19). Because we have died with Christ, we are "not under law" (Rom. 6:14-15; 7:4-6; 1 Cor. 9:20; Gal. 3:23-25; 4:4-5, 21; 5:18). This means we are free from its condemnation and from its commanding authority.

(3) This freedom from the Law does not mean that believers have been set free from all ethical standards. For not only have we been crucified with Christ and made dead to the Law, but we have been raised with Christ and are thus under a new commanding authority - the authority of Christ himself. We are not *anomos* but *ennomos Christou*, "under the Law of Christ" (1 Cor. 9:21; Gal. 6:2). Having died to the Law, we have been married to another (Rom. 7:4).

(4) The Law of Christ is not vague or nebulous. It has been revealed in the indicative and the imperative, which is given concrete expression in the ethical teaching of Jesus (e.g., the Sermon on the Mount) and in the apostolic exhortations to live in accordance with our union with Christ (e.g., Eph. 4-6; Col. 3, etc.).

(5) Although the Law of Christ is not identical with the Law of Moses, it does reach back to the Law of Moses in order to bring over those aspects of its teaching that are rooted in God's righteous nature and man's creation in God's image. However, the content of the Law is not taken over directly but transformed as it is taken up in Christ. The law must not be abandoned, nor must we stop studying it or teaching it. But after the cross it no longer stands as the *immediate* standard of conduct for God's people. It must always be studied and applied through the lens of Christ's fulfillment (Matt. 5:17-20).

(6) Since the new covenant church has been delivered from the disciplinarian (*paidagogos*) of the Law (Gal. 3:23-25), we are free. However, we must not use our freedom as a license for sin, but by love we are to serve one another (Gal. 5:13). The new commandment to love even as Christ has loved us (John 13:34; 1 John 2:7; 3:16) stands at the heart of the new covenant ethic. If we sacrificially love the way Christ loved us, the whole Law is fulfilled (Rom. 13:8-10; Gal. 5:14).

(7) The external code of the Law was unable to produce righteousness, and in fact only stirred up sin and brought forth death (Rom. 7:5, 8-10; 2 Cor. 3:6). But the

ascended Lord Jesus Christ has sent forth his Spirit into our hearts. By the powerful, inward work of the Spirit we are impelled to walk in obedience, are progressively conformed into his image, are convicted of sin, and are sealed unto the day of redemption. As a result, the Spirit is accomplishing in us the obedience that the Law was incapable of creating (Rom. 8:2-4).

Is the concept of "the moral law" valid?

In my opinion, the traditional three-fold division of the Mosaic Law, as a method of determining what is still binding and what is not, is fundamentally flawed and needs major revision. The covenantal unity of the Law is such that it is simply impossible to go through the Mosaic Law, commandment by commandment, and then decide which of the three "bins" each commandment belongs in. The Decalogue especially cannot be treated as if it were raw moral law, with no uniquely covenantal and typological elements. The sanctions of the covenant of works are interwoven into the very fabric of the Decalogue. So close is the relationship that the Decalogue is sometimes called "the covenant" (e.g., "So He declared to you His covenant which He commanded you to perform, that is, the Ten Commandments; and He wrote them on two tablets of stone" [Deut. 4:13]).

However, the traditional division does capture a valid insight that can be rescued and reformulated along biblical theological lines. Meredith G. Kline is right to speak of the stipulations of the Mosaic Law as having both moral and typological aspects. This is different from saying that the specific stipulations can be classified into moral or typological categories. It recognizes that the whole Law contains both a moral dimension reflecting a fundamental ethical core founded on God's holy nature and man's creation in the image of God, and a typological dimension that pointed ahead to the kingly ("civil law") and priestly ("ceremonial law") offices of Christ.

Now the typological dimension of the Law need not detain us here. What we are concerned with is the moral dimension. Can we "extract" an abiding core ethic from the Mosaic Law that remains valid for the NT church? I believe we can, but we must be careful to do this always in terms of union with Christ. We have no dealings with the Law in any other way than through Christ who fulfilled it in our place by his active and passive obedience.

Here's how I would develop this. I begin by laying down the premise that the moral dimension of the Law is not a stipulatory subset of the Mosaic covenant with the sanctions removed, but the Law as a covenant of works. I believe that Paul's usage of *nomos* consistently means either "the Sinai Covenant in toto," or "the core ethic of the Sinai Covenant as a republication of the covenant of works at creation." Although Heikki Raisanen does not understand the covenant theology behind this statement, he has shown (chapter one in *Paul and the Law*, Fortress Press, 1986) that Paul often oscillates between a particularistic-Jewish and a universalistic concept of *nomos*. This second usage is commonly found in texts where Paul is speaking of the *nomos* as something that we (both Jews and Gentiles) stood condemned under, and from which we have been delivered by Christ's death.

Nomos in the second usage corresponds to that aspect of the Mosaic Law which overlaps with the basic demands of the Adamic covenant of works grounded in man's

creation in the image of God. That creation law serves as the functional equivalent of the Mosaic Law, and, as such, it is written on the hearts of all men. The remnants of the Adamic covenant, obscured by the noetic effects of sin, but sustained by common grace, are inscribed upon the conscience. Notice that this law is also a covenant of works of sorts, since the conscience speaks with both an accusing and excusing voice (the positive hope of eschatological advancement is obviously not offered, but the curse of the covenant continues and finds subjective reinforcement via the conscience). All of this is involved in Paul's usage of *nomos* in the most important instances.

Thus, one very important dimension of the Mosaic Law, in addition to the typological dimension, is its character as a covenantal enshrinement of the moral will of God. This is what systematic theologians have attempted to convey with the term "moral law." I agree with the intent behind that phrase, but in the current climate it is best to speak of the "moral will of God" instead, since "moral law" has been traditionally equated with the Decalogue without covenantal qualification.

Does the moral will of God bind the Christian?

The Mosaic Law, as a covenant of works, has been fulfilled by Christ. He has fulfilled both its positive demands and its curse sanction. Therefore, we have been released from the Law and are now under the new covenant in Christ.

However, the moral dimension of the Mosaic Law has not been done away. God's eternal moral will finds renewed expression in the Law of Christ in the authoritative teaching of the apostles in the New Testament on the basis of a spiritual internalization grounded in the indicative and the imperative. The believer in Christ therefore sustains a completely new relationship to the moral will of God.

On the other hand, it is not as if the Law of Christ and the Law of Moses are fundamentally incongruous or discontinuous. It is true that the revelation of the moral will of God in the Law of Christ constitutes a redemptive historical advance upon the revelation of the moral will in the Mosaic economy (e.g., the new commandment to love even as Christ has loved us). But it is an increase not a decrease. The ethic of Christ heightens but does not relax the Mosaic ethic. In Christ we are called to love God and our neighbor, just as the Law commanded. But in Christ that call comes to us in a very different form. It is no longer in the old covenant form, "Do this and live," but in the new covenant form of the indicative and the imperative, "You have been made alive in Christ, therefore walk in accordance with that life."

This casts doubt on the notion that the Law, not as a covenant of works but as a rule of life, is binding on the believer. Exegetical study of Paul's teaching on the Law has convinced me that it is impossible to separate the stipulations of the Law from the sanctions. The very fact that the stipulations are telling you to do something or warning you against disobedience implies that they are speaking to you apart from your union with Christ, as if you were not doing what the Law required or as if you might be tempted not to. The Law of Christ speaks to us from a totally different, new covenant ethical framework. It speaks to us in a voice which implies that the Law's demands have already been completely satisfied. The Law's urgent insistence, its

warning and cajoling, have been pacified by Christ's meritorious Law-keeping. Indeed, we have died to the Law; we have already suffered the equivalent of an eternity under its curse. Since the Law's demands have been fully satisfied by us in Christ, the Law has no more to say to us, no more to demand of us. "Or do you not know, brethren, ... that the Law has jurisdiction over a person only as long as he lives?" (Rom. 7:1). "Through the Law I died to the Law, so that I might live to God" (Gal. 2:19).

Because these things are true by virtue of covenantal union with our Law-fulfilling Surety, the believer nevertheless continues to sustain a relationship to the Law in Christ. Otherwise, if the Law itself has been abolished in an ontological sense, we would be saying that the merit of Christ has also been abolished. Thus, as Paul argues so eloquently in 1 Cor. 9:21/Rom. 7:1-6, we have died to the Law, not in order to be *anomos*, as if we were now widows without a husband, but in order to be *ennomos Christou*, married to another. Our moral obligation to the core ethic of the Law has not been severed, but is now mediated through Christ. It comes to us, not directly as a set of bare commands, but indirectly as the indicative of our identity as those united to our Law-fulfilling Head and Husband. In Christ we are not confronted with commands that repel us with their demand that we "keep" them, as if there were a huge gap between ourselves and the righteousness of the Law, but allured into conformity with the moral will of God, where the gap has been closed by Christ (Col. 3:10; Eph. 4:24).

So the three-fold division of the Law is wrongheaded, but its fundamental concern to maintain that large swaths of the Mosaic Law reflect the moral will of God founded on God's righteous nature and man's identity as the image of God is valid. This moral will, however, must not be equated with the Decalogue, nor can it be defanged into a list of bare non-covenantal commands - "the moral law not as covenant of works." The core ethic of the Law is a covenant of works, to which the believer has died in Christ, and which Christ has fulfilled. As a result, the righteous requirement of the Law cannot be fulfilled by our attempts to "keep" it. It can only be "fulfilled" in us by the Spirit of Christ who dwells within us.

This approach means that we must still study the Mosaic Law. We study it not as those who are under it, as if it were directly binding. But having the mind of Christ, and with the guidance of the NT and its inspired commentary on the Law, we are enabled to weigh, discern, test, and approve those aspects of the Law which reflect the moral will of God and to see how those aspects are fleshed out in the ethic of the new creation.

How do we know what the content of the Law of Christ is? How do we avoid subjectivism?

If we can't go directly to the Mosaic Law or the ten commandments as the immediate standard of Christian conduct, it might seem that we cannot avoid a kind of Quaker or Charismatic subjectivism which relies on the inner promptings of the Spirit as a sufficient source of ethical guidance. This could be viewed as a kind of "situation ethics." If in any given situation you do the loving thing, as prompted by the Spirit, you will be doing what God requires, even if it means you have to break the letter of the law.

The primary difficulty of such approaches is that they are arbitrary. Even the most sanctified Christian has a corrupt heart. If the subjective feelings of our heart are the only rule of right and wrong, how do we know that we are really doing *God's* will rather than our own? "The heart," says Jeremiah, "is more deceitful than all else and is desperately sick" (Jer. 17:9). Without any objective standard, our deceitful hearts are prone in one of two directions: either to lower the standard in order to make room for the flesh, or to add to God's revealed will by making man-made rules and regulations in an attempt to be justified by our works.

So where do we go to learn the content of the Law of Christ? It is objectively revealed in the New Testament. It includes all of the ethical teaching of Jesus (e.g., the Sermon on the Mount; the new commandment, etc.) and of the apostles (e.g., the extensive exhortations of Paul in his epistles grounded in the indicative-imperative dynamic of evangelical obedience).

The New Testament also reaches back into the Old Testament to draw out ethical implications from the Mosaic Law, interpreted in light of its fulfillment in Christ. This provides a hermeneutical model for us to follow. We should study the Mosaic Law, not as if it were directly binding on us, but as those who have the mind of Christ we should weigh, test, and approve what is that good and perfect will of God (Rom. 12:2; Eph. 5:10; Phil. 1:9-10). The Mosaic Law does contain ethical principles grounded in creation as seen in the covenant of works with Adam. This creation ethic is not relaxed or negated in the Law of Christ but transformed and fulfilled in the new creation (Eph. 4:24; Col. 3:10). The substance of the righteousness demanded in the Mosaic Law finds expression in new covenant form in the Law of Christ.

The moral will of God continues to be authoritatively binding on the New Covenant church, because it has reached its definitive exposition and fulfillment in Christ, that is, in the Law of Christ. This Christocentric revelation of Law is not only called "the Law of Christ" (Gal. 6:2; 1 Cor. 9:21), but "the perfect law of liberty" (James 1:25), and "the Law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus" (Rom. 8:2).

However, the Law of Christ is not merely a new law-code. Although it places ethical demands upon us it does not do so in the form of regulations that can be observed and fulfilled by mere acts of external conformity to God's revealed will. To be sure, the law of Christ includes specific commands, but those commands are hortatory articulations of the significance of the indicative of our union with Christ. The commands scattered throughout the NT must not be gathered up to create a *deuteronomium* (a second law), for that would be to make Jesus a new Moses and thus to place us again under the bondage of the letter. Instead we must view all of the NT paraenetic material as examples, illustrations, and applications of what union with Christ demands of us. Viewed as such, the NT ethical teaching draws us into the very mind of Christ himself. We are called upon to have our minds transformed by an all-encompassing worldview - the worldview of the gospel, the good news that the old man has died, it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. In this "new way of the Spirit" (Rom. 7:6), we are called *in very specific and concrete ways* to walk worthy of the calling with which we have been called (Eph. 4-6; Col. 3-4).

For example, the righteous demand of the seventh commandment to abstain from sexual immorality remains in the new covenant. But that demand does not come to us in the form, "Thou shalt not commit adultery," with the implied threat of judgment if we fail, but in the form, "Shall I take the members of Christ and join them to a harlot?" (1 Cor. 6:15). The motivation is grounded in the believer's one-Spirit union with Christ (see vv. 16-17). To live this way is much harder than producing outward obedience to a list of do's and don'ts. We must meditate upon the glory of Christ, and the marvel of our being joined to him by the Spirit, so that union with Christ might shape our whole way of thinking and living, leaving no area of our lives untouched. We are to "be transformed by the renewing of our minds" (Rom. 12:2). We are to actively "find out what pleases the Lord" (Eph. 5:10). Christ doesn't just want external conformity to his will; he passionately desires to inscribe the Law upon our hearts by his Holy Spirit, and he is doing so according to the promise of the new covenant (Jer. 31:33; 2 Cor. 3:3).

Doesn't this lead to license, the idea that we can live however we please? If we no longer have a precise, external code to regulate our conduct, aren't we giving people too much freedom? And won't they abuse that freedom? Paul's answer is the constraining power of the Spirit, expressing itself through love (Gal. 5:13-16). The Spirit is the great gift of the risen Christ to his people, given in place of an external code, to keep us on the right path (Rom. 7:1-6; 8:1-4; Gal. 5:18). The Spirit's work in sanctification is not subjective but objective. Paul says that those who are the sons of God are led by the Spirit to obey Christ. When we sin, the Spirit is grieved, and thus we are convicted and led to repentance so that our wills are renewed to live in accordance with our identity in Christ. The powerful operation of the Spirit is a sober, objective work of the risen Christ himself, leading us into a greater appreciation of our identity in Christ, creating faith and repentance in our hearts, producing progressive sanctification within us and conforming us into his image. We are called to walk in the Spirit, that is, to walk in the conscious awareness of and enjoyment of our union with Christ. This in turn causes us to love one another, and in this way the righteous requirement of the law will be fulfilled in us. The Spirit's work as described by Paul has little to do with the Charismatic excesses of emotionalism, individualism, and subjectivism.

In response to the charge of subjectivism, I have appealed in good Calvinistic fashion to both the Word and the Spirit. They must be kept together. Walking in the Spirit is not something that can occur apart from the prayerful study of God's revealed Word and attendance upon the public means of grace, of which preaching is primary.

What is sin?

Even for the believer who has been freed from the Law, sin is still defined as any want of conformity unto or transgression of the Law of God. "Through the Law comes the knowledge of sin" (Rom. 3:20). "Where there is no law, there also is no violation" (Rom. 4:15). "I would not have come to know sin except through the Law" (Rom. 7:7). It is essential to maintain this definition of sin, because it is precisely by being "made under the Law" that Christ bore our sins and satisfied the wrath of God under the terms of the covenant of works. If sin is not defined as *violation* of the Law, then Christ's active and passive obedience cannot be defined as *fulfillment* of the Law.

If sin is so defined, then confession of sin and repentance must also be related to that Law. When the believer confesses his sin, he acknowledges that he has violated God's holy and righteous Law, that apart from Christ he deserves to be eternally condemned under that Law. But confession of sin also involves repentance, and repentance brings us into the sphere of evangelical sanctification by means of union with Christ. At this point, then, the believer must by faith lay hold of his co-crucifixion with Christ as that which has delivered him from the Law with its demands and curse. And by faith he must go on to reckon himself as not only crucified with Christ and dead to the Law, but as raised with Christ and married to another husband.

In repentance, then, there is a subjective re-enactment of the transition from being under the Law to being under grace. This of course is not to say that the believer fell out of grace and back under bondage to the Law when he sinned, and that repentance puts you back into Christ again. Our covenantal union with Christ, from an objective judicial point of view, is an accomplished fact that does not fluctuate with ups and downs of our sins and our sanctification. It is an immutable judicial fact. But in terms of our subjective appropriation of and conscious enjoyment of this truth, confession of sin and repentance is the God-ordained means by which we "reckon" (Rom. 6:11) the judicial fact of our standing in Christ. Now that we have realigned our thinking by renewing repentance and faith, the obligation to new obedience flows from our union with Christ. The claims of the Law (as felt by the pangs of conscience and the fiery arrows of the Accuser) have been satisfied. The Law recedes into the background and is replaced by the norm of union with Christ. We now go forth to obey, not as slaves of the Law, but as servants of Christ.

Why are you concerned about this issue?

I am concerned about our Reformed teaching on the Law, because our systematics must be conditioned by biblical theology, that is, by the covenantal, eschatological, and redemptive historical thrust of Scripture. The New Testament does not divide the Mosaic Law into three categories (moral, ceremonial, and civil) and three uses (*usus politicus*, *usus elencticus*, and *usus normativus*). Not all scholastic distinctions and categories are bad, but in this case they have taken us further and further away from Scripture. There is a major gap between the abstract, systematic approach of the Reformed tradition, and the redemptive-historical, Christocentric approach to the Law of Jesus and the apostles. The New Testament consistently refers to the Law as a unit, and deals with it as a unit in light of the interpretive transformation effected by Christ's own teaching, and (most importantly) by his death and resurrection.

As a result of our systematic categories, are we able to speak in the same idiom as the apostle Paul? Do we preach with authority that the believer is "not under the law"? Or do we hesitate, qualify, and hedge, so that the Spirit's sharp two-edged sword becomes dulled by our theological system? Are we preaching our system or the living and active Word of Christ? These questions have significant practical implications. I believe that the third use of the Law in the Reformed tradition can easily drift toward legalism. The Reformed tradition on the Law is not legalistic in the hard sense of asserting that we are justified by the Law. But I wonder if it sufficiently guards against the idea that we are sanctified by the Law.

This issue is not some remote theological point where the Scriptures seem unclear, but a fundamental topic in the New Testament. Paul in particular spends an enormous amount of energy upon it. The doctrine of the believer's relationship to the Law forms the heart and soul of his epistles to the Romans and to the Galatians. Our freedom from the Law was not an ancillary point for Paul, but a basic bedrock doctrine that he pressed home with kerygmatic zeal and application to his hearers' hearts and minds, knowing that without the assurance of their spiritual liberty in Christ, they would never grow in righteousness, sanctification, and Christ-like love. This whole issue of the Law is far from academic. It has very practical implications for our preaching and teaching ministries, and our spiritual health and growth both as individuals and corporately as a church.

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