

# **THE ROLE OF THE DECALOGUE IN EVANGELISM AND APOLOGETICS**

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## 1. Introduction

In all evangelistic and apologetic endeavours it is vitally important to point the one being evangelised to the problem of sin early on in the process. This is indeed the source of the unregenerate's problem before God (Rom. 3:23), and up to this point, most conservative scholarship would agree. However, not all would agree about the actual content of God's laws which the unregenerate has broken.

Assuming the total inability of people to save themselves, and the totality of their depravity or fallenness inherited by being born in Adam, the following study seeks to provide an answer to the *actual laws that God holds people accountable to* (Rom. 5:12; Eph. 2:1-2; Tit. 3:5-6). In effort to answer this question, many have assumed that the Decalogue is the standard of law that God still requires, even until New Testament times, thus making it the basis for showing the unbeliever, first, their transgression of God's law, but second, their inability to keep God's law.

Although the latter employment of the Decalogue could very well be substantiated from the New Testament (Rom. 3:20), it is the insistence of this study that the former *cannot*.

## 2. The Decalogue

It is to be lamented that many evangelistic courses and efforts fail at such a basic point as to show the unbeliever their depravity and their resultant need for forgiveness. To be sure, there can be no "Good News" (Greek: euangelion) of Christ's atonement until there is a thorough understanding of one's own guilt. To this end, the Decalogue has become the "go-to" strategy by many a conservative evangelist or apologist to prove to people that they have broken God's law.

In principle, there is nothing inherently wrong about this method<sup>1</sup>, since it accomplishes the desired result, which is not only to show people the extent of their fallenness, but also their need for forgiveness. The main concern with this method is rather that it often disregards the original context in which the Decalogue was originally given. For this reason, it is important to pay attention to the proper definition, purpose, and extent of the Decalogue.

### a. Definition

The Decalogue must be defined in terms of its original appearing in Scripture. One need not read long into the book of Exodus to notice its first appearing, this as a governing feature of the Old Covenant, or the Law of Moses (Ex. 20:1-21). However, to the average Israelite it would have been indistinguishable from the

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<sup>1</sup> In this regard, Ray Comfort of Living Waters Ministries has been an example to most who do not even make evangelism a primary focus in their lives. Their efforts through initiatives like "The Way of the Master" is to be commended.

other laws because it reached them as an indivisible unit within the Law of Moses. To then argue that there is something special about the Decalogue, is to prefer one part of the Law of Moses over another — something which would have been impossible for the Israelite.<sup>2</sup>

Some might at this juncture reach the wrong conclusion that the Law of Moses must be discarded altogether in teaching or evangelism, since we are clearly not liable to other laws contained in it.<sup>3</sup> This however need not be the case. Christ explicitly underscored the value of the Law as He became its own fulfilment. For this reason, the Law of Moses must continue to be taught, not as “the” code of living for the Church, or the Church-to-be even, but rather as finding its true interpretation, application, and fulfilment in Christ.<sup>4</sup>

### **b. Purpose**

So, what then was the real purpose of the Law of Moses? One of the most insightful passages that speaks to this is found in Galatians 3:19. Here Paul explains that the Law’s main purpose was to reveal the sinfulness of men. In this sense, the Law became a kind of school master who governed Israel and who pointed them to their inability to keep the Law without error (Gal. 3:24). Of course one could say that Paul intends the same for the church when he calls to mind the Law as a tutor. However, the aim was mainly to explain what the actual purpose of the Law was to average law-abiding Jews. Sure, one could argue from Paul’s description that both Jew and Gentile would have been able to see their level of depravity when being faced with the Law. However, within its historical context, the Law was intended for Israel.

For this reason, the Law of Moses could actually be seen as a gracious law. It was never intended to be a means of salvation, rather, it was the “God-intended way for Israel to show its love and commitment to God” (MacArthur & Mayhue, 2017:874). In addition, this Law was conditional and it could be cancelled. This meant that any lapse on Israel’s side would render the covenant broken. The Law of Moses therefore stood in stark contrast with the Abrahamic Covenant, which is

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<sup>2</sup> Chamblin (1988:183) points out that “Reformed theology has traditionally distinguished three kinds of law within the Mosaic Law — namely, the moral, the ceremonial, and the civil. Such a distinction can be misleading, because both OT and NT normally use the term ‘law’ to speak of the *whole* Mosaic Law rather than a particular aspect of it; and moral, ceremonial, and civil laws are inextricably bound together in the OT, each kind being intelligible and operable only in relation to the other two.”

<sup>3</sup> Acts 10:9-33 is a good example already appearing in the time of the apostles that the Law had come to an end.

<sup>4</sup> As Moo (1988:206) puts it, “The OT law is not to be abandoned. Indeed, it must continue to be taught (Matt. 5:19) — but interpreted and applied in light of its fulfillment by Christ. In other words, it stands no longer as the ultimate standard of conduct for God’s people, but must always be viewed through the lenses of Jesus’ ministry and teaching.”

eternal and “unilateral.” However, disregard of these laws would lead to the forfeiting of blessing as contained in the Abrahamic Covenant.<sup>5</sup>

### c. Extent

So, here’s begging the most important question as it involves the Old Law – How far is its extent? This is undoubtedly the most important consideration, since it would not only affect one’s evangelistic and apologetic efforts, but also one’s understanding of what God holds his children accountable to in New Testament times. The implications would be far reaching. For instance, if the Law of Moses is still completely intact, and remains unaltered, then one can certainly be held to, for instance, a Sabbath’s rest (Ex. 20:8-11). In addition, as was already referred to under the definition of the Law of Moses, one would also be held accountable to each stipulation of the Law. As James pointed out, failure in one part of the Law of Moses automatically meant failure in all of its parts, anyway (Jas. 2:10).

Yet, if it can be proven that the Law of Moses was limited to its purpose as stipulated in the previous point, then one can safely say its extent was limited to the pre- New Covenant era. As Douglas Moo (1988:206) explains, “...it stands no longer as the *ultimate* standard of conduct for God’s people, but must always be viewed through the lenses of Jesus’ ministry and teaching.”

If Moo is understood correctly, then Jesus’ ministry indeed becomes the very key to understanding the extent of the Law of Moses. In others words, one must look to the ministry of Christ if one is going to understand the Mosaic Law in its correct context. In its most usable and applicable New Testament context, the Law must be viewed as secondary to the teaching of Christ, yet more accurately, inferior to the Law of Christ.

How can one know that Christ had his own demands or Law? One need look no further than the limited amount of references that Christ made to the Old Law. This in and of itself illustrates that Jesus intended this to substantiate his fulfilment thereof, and authority over it.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> MacArthur & Mayhue (2017:874) explain: “Adherence to the Mosaic covenant was the means through which Israel could stay connected to the blessings of the Abrahamic Covenant. Keeping the Mosaic out of love to God would lead to spiritual and material prosperity, but disobedience would result in judgment, including removal from the land and dispersion throughout the nations (Deuteronomy 28-29).”

<sup>6</sup> Moo (1988:206) motivates that Jesus became the ultimate standard of morality by saying: “That this conclusion is in keeping with Jesus’ general approach to the OT law is clear from the relatively few number of times he cites the OT as substantiation of his demands (and most of these occur in polemical contexts), from the clear implications of statements such as ‘the Son of Man is Lord even of the Sabbath’ (Mark 2:28), and from the fact that it is Jesus’ teaching that his disciples are to convey in their missionary enterprise (Matt. 28:16-20).”

### 3. The Law of Christ

Apparent discontinuity between the Law of Moses and New Covenant times does not necessarily mean that one is without Law (antinomian), this side of the cross. Rather, the opposite is true, but first it would be necessary to show that a transition has indeed occurred.

Again, Paul's explanation of the purpose of the Law is insightful. For Paul, the coming of faith meant the ending of the Old Law era altogether (Gal. 3:25). In this sense the "guardian" was no longer needed because it has been replaced by faith. This "New Era" was inaugurated by the advent of Christ. As Meyer (2009:172) explains: "Now that Christ has come, the era of the law as the *paidagogos*<sup>7</sup> has come to an end so that believers are no longer under the law."

For this reason Paul can address Peter's mistake in holding the Greeks to circumcision laws, by referring to the obsolete nature of the Old Law. He addresses this in one final attempt by exhorting the church to "fulfil the law of Christ" (Gal. 6:2).

This law, though characterised by love, is in many ways more extreme and sacrificial than the summary of the Law of Moses, the Decalogue. There are various instances found in the Gospels where Jesus emphatically intensified Old Testament laws, seemingly forming his own. In addition, there are examples where He rendered certain laws as reaching its expiration date.

For instance, in the Sermon on the Mount Jesus addressed the sixth commandment which prohibits murder, saying that it is the same root sin to have murderous anger in the heart (Matt. 5:21-22).<sup>8</sup> In effect Jesus is likening the sin of hatred-spurred-anger with the actual crime of murder.

The same occurs when He addressed the sin of sexual lust. Even a mere look spurred by lustful thoughts could very well be linked to the same root sin of adultery (Matt. 5:28). As in his dealing with the sin of anger, the Lord deals with lustful thoughts in a similarly intensifying fashion. In both handlings of these aspects of the Decalogue, Jesus addresses the heart and not so much the results.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> When Paul compares the Law of Moses to a 'paidagogos' or 'guardian' he refers to a person who "is given authority over a child for a specific duration of time (usually until adulthood)" (Meyer, 2009:172). In a modern sense parenthood becomes a good example of what this guardian accomplished in Israel. Meyer (2009:172) explains: "Our modern notion of living under the rules of a parent until the 'legal' age of eighteen is another example. The phrase 'as long as you live under my roof, you will live under my rules' is a modern illustration.

<sup>8</sup> Beale & Carson (2007:21) explain this in the following way: "Here Jesus radically internalizes the command by stressing that the person who is inappropriately angry with another, or who speaks spitefully or slanderously of another, is likewise guilty of sin (5:22)."

<sup>9</sup> Again Beale & Carson (2007:23) offers insight by noting that "Jesus speaks of internal thoughts and not just outward actions..." The only solution to this all-pervasive problem is extreme spiritual surgery. Thus, "people should metaphorically mutilate themselves (i.e. take drastic action) to avoid these sins lest God judge them eternally (5:29-30)."

Lastly, it is quite evident that Jesus rendered certain laws obsolete, for instance the Sabbath Day, or the fourth commandment.<sup>10</sup> He alone could do so with the Old Law since He alone had the authority to decide over its applicability. Calling to mind what happened when Jesus' disciples were picking heads of grain on the Sabbath because they were hungry, Millard Erickson observes:

“Only God could abrogate or modify [the Sabbath].<sup>11</sup> Yet consider what happened when Jesus' disciples picked heads of grain on the Sabbath and the Pharisees objected that the Sabbath regulations (at least their version of them) were being violated. Jesus responded by pointing out that David had violated one of the laws by eating of the bread reserved for the priests. Then, turning directly to the situation at hand, Jesus asserted: ‘The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath. So the Son of Man is Lord even of the Sabbath’ (Mark 2:27-28). *He was clearly claiming the right to redefine the status of the Sabbath, a right that belongs only to someone virtually equal to God.*”<sup>12</sup>

In other words, Jesus was the only one who had the authority to render an OT Law so deeply engrained in Israelite culture such as observance of the Sabbath — *as done with*. David who was a type of Christ, prefigured Jesus' own attitude toward the Sabbath in an indirect way, when allowed by Ahimelech, urged his hungry men to eat of the show bread in the temple — something that was strictly reserved for the priests (1 Sam. 21:1-7).

Like David, who addressed a basic need like hunger, Jesus perhaps did so to prove a point about his authority over the Sabbath, having mentioned David's clear violation of the Law. The implication should be clear from Mark's Gospel. If David, who referred to the Christ as Lord (Ps. 110:1) could violate certain laws and get away with it, then how much more could Jesus, in the absence of any clear Sabbath violation, do as He pleased with the Sabbath. After all, “the Son of Man is lord even of the Sabbath” (Mk. 2:28).

In fact, Jesus' recalling of this event in the life of David tells us everything about God's original intent for the Sabbath and should remind us who alone has authority over it. Beale and Carson (2007:141) explains, referring to Jesus' true identity as the long-awaited Son of Man in Mark 2:28: “If the Sabbath was created for humanity...then how much more...is Daniel's messianic Son of Man its Lord. The real issue at hand “is again Jesus' uniquely divine authority and his right to give the final word on the meaning of this ‘his’ Sabbath.”<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Interestingly, Paul, who coined the term “Law of Christ,” never once emphasised the keeping of the Old Covenant Sabbath. Rather, in his letters, one finds strong reprimands for holding the gentiles to the old code, despite large scale overlap between the laws contained in the Old and New Covenants.

<sup>11</sup> Insert in square brackets is not part of the original text.

<sup>12</sup> Italics added.

<sup>13</sup> The Old Testament establishes Yahweh as the owner of the Sabbath. Beale & Carson (2007:141) recalls Ex. 16:25; 20:10; 31:13 and Ez. 20:12-13 as examples.

By implication, and for all practical purposes then, the entirety of the Law of Moses has been served, at least as it was a guardian, showing the Israelites their inability. However, as for the rest of the world, God did not allow us to be without law. Rather, as has been proven, the moral standard has been raised under New Covenant conditions to include the “thoughts and intentions of the heart” (Heb. 4:12), having far-reaching implications for evangelism.

#### 4. Implications for Evangelism

At this juncture it should now be obvious that the clean break between the Law of Moses and the Law of Christ has implications for evangelism, albeit not as the result of a lowered standard which can never be substantiated from the NT. Rather, the break between the “old” and the “new” necessitates an approach to evangelism that can clearly distinguish between what is commanded and what is not. There may be great overlap between the “old” and the “new” but if one is going to be accurate in pointing people to their fallen condition before a holy God, one must know to which moral code God holds mankind.

Again, any model of evangelism that has a commitment to the fallenness and guilt of people should be commended, however, the aim here is to prove what actually should be the content of such a commitment. For this reason we will now turn to our Lord’s insistence in evangelism, the apostle Paul’s approach to evangelism, and, lastly, Peter’s example in evangelism. What Christ has commanded forms the common denominator among all.

##### a. The Lord Jesus’ Insistence in Evangelism

To keep with the notion that the Mosaic Law has passed, it is interesting to pay attention to the manner in which the Lord Jesus commanded or commissioned his disciples to go and evangelise the lost.

Interestingly, it was the Lord’s prescription that it was his teachings that the disciples had to convey to the world as they went out making disciples of him. Matthew 28:18-20 or the Great Commission serves as example:

“All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, *teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you*. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”<sup>14</sup>

On a fundamental level then, as it involves the all-important command to evangelise the lost (repeated in Mark 16:15), it was interestingly Jesus’ teaching or his laws that had to be presented to the world as the absolute standard of morality. As Moo (1988:206) explains with regards to his exegesis on Matthew

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<sup>14</sup> Italics inserted.

5:17-19, “the *code of conduct* applicable to life in the kingdom — and so, I would take it, to the church — is to be *found essentially in Jesus’ own teaching*.” This does not mean that the OT law should not be taught, rather, it merely means that the Law of Christ has superseded it and has become the ultimate standard.<sup>15</sup>

### **b. Paul’s Approach to Evangelism**

The other motivation for a methodology in evangelism can be found in the apostle Paul. In 1 Corinthians 9:20-21 we find him saying the following:

“To the Jews I became as a Jew, in order to win Jews. To those under the law I became as one under the law (though not being myself under the law) that I might win those under the law. To those outside the law I became as one outside the law (not being outside the law of God but under the law of Christ) that I might win those outside the law.”

What does Paul mean by these words? Well, what should be said from the get-go is that Paul does not at all mean to convey that the Law is a means of salvation. Rather, as Moo (1988:215) again aptly explains, “What Paul has in mind is his lifestyle, and he makes plain that he is not under obligation to pursue a lifestyle dictated by the precepts of the law. When evangelizing Jews he *can* do so; but when evangelizing Gentiles, he exercises the liberty not to do so.”

This is insightful and instructive as it involves any modern-day attempt at evangelising the lost. As Moo pointed out, Paul was at liberty to place himself under the Law of Moses for the sake of reaching out to them, but there was nothing that bound him to the keeping of it since he was “outside the Law.” Some might read this and say, “but Paul was merely drawing a distinction between the moral law, and the ceremonial and civil law.” However, this is not possible, since Moo (1988:215) likewise points out that “there is nothing in this context or in Paul’s use of [law]<sup>16</sup> that would justify a restriction here to the cultic law or to any part of the law.” Again, the Law of Moses came to Israel as an indivisible unit, making it all the more striking that Paul could say that he was not “bound” to it.

### **c. Peter’s Example in Evangelism**

It is in the book of Acts that we find ample example of a Christ-focused methodology in evangelism, starting with the apostle Peter. What becomes clear from his sermon in Acts 2:14-41 was his commitment to inform his Jewish audience (who were there for the feast of Pentecost) that they were all guilty of the death of Christ. Granted, he included OT references<sup>17</sup> to be mindful of the Jewish

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<sup>15</sup> Italics inserted.

<sup>16</sup> Insert in square brackets is not part of the original text.

<sup>17</sup> See: Joel 2:28; Ps. 16:8-11 & 110:1



background of his hearers, however, the crescendo of his sermon involves the Jews' blood guilt for the slaying of the God-man.

Peter recounts this crime twice in his sermon, first, after acknowledging their Jewishness in verse 22, he insists in verse 23 (although it was part of God's sovereign plan to deliver Jesus to be crucified) that they were the ones who were at fault for it. A few verses later Peter does the same when he says in verse 36, "Let all the house of Israel therefore know for certain that God has made him both Lord and Christ, this Jesus whom you crucified." It is this knowledge that led these Jewish men to acknowledge their sin, and Peter exhorting them to "Repent.." (Ac. 2:38). To be true to the historical context, Peter was right that they were directly responsible for the death of Christ. However, the wider application is that all human beings are likewise at fault and face judgment for rejection of God's greatest revelation of himself, the Lord Jesus.

For this reason, rejection of his Son, and as we will now see in Peter's next speech, rejection of his Son's laws, is what is worthy of eternal damnation. After healing the paralytic in chapter 3, verse 6, Peter again ceased the opportunity to be bold for Christ and inform the witnesses of the healing with regards to the way of salvation.

Again, referring to the terrible crime of delivering Christ to be crucified, Peter now transitions to the mutual human accountability of keeping Christ's laws. Referring to the Mosaic foreseeing of the coming Messiah (Ac. 3:22), Peter exclaims in verse 23 "that every soul who does not *listen*<sup>18</sup> to that prophet [referring to Jesus]<sup>19</sup> shall be destroyed from the people." In effect, what Peter establishes through this statement is the universal accountability to the laws of Christ, firstly, of his original hearers, secondly, of Luke's original readers of his detailing of the acts of the apostles, but also thirdly, of all human beings who would still be born. In other words, Peter's evangelistic drive is governed by his understanding of the Christ revelation and the resultant moral obligation people have to respond rightly to it. This is why Peter does not stop short of an appeal to repentance, exhorting them to turn from their sin (Ac. 3:19).<sup>20</sup>

## 5. Conclusion

It is imperative for the evangelist to keep in mind that although there is similarity to be found between the two laws, the unbeliever finds him-or-herself at odds with the final revelation of God's law — the Law of Christ. If this law is the standard to

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<sup>18</sup> Italics inserted

<sup>19</sup> Insert in square brackets is not part of the original text.

<sup>20</sup> James Montgomery Boice (1997:68) comments on the same passage, explaining: "...not only does Peter's sermon point to Jesus and highlight the listener's sin — making it clear that the people of Jerusalem had something to repent of — but it also contains an appeal. This is because in the final analysis, Peter was not interested in merely condemning his hearers. On the contrary, he wanted them to repent of their sin and believe on Jesus."

which God holds Christians accountable in New Covenant times, then it is also the standard to which God holds the unbeliever accountable to in an unregenerate state.<sup>21</sup> For this reason, evangelistic and apologetic efforts must seek to state its demands. This does not make it wrong to refer to the Ten Commandments when pointing people to their sin<sup>22</sup> However, the unity (indivisibility) of the Law of Moses, which includes the Decalogue, prevents us from presenting it to the lost as God's final standard of morality. Instead, it is the moral standards which God has set forth for the church under the New Covenant that must be presented as binding on those who are not yet part of the body of Christ.

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<sup>21</sup> Moo (1988:215) reminds: "The Law of Christ is Paul's way of stating the demand of God that is binding on Christians since the coming of Christ."

<sup>22</sup> Jesus did so when he met the Rich Young Ruler at a time in Christian history when transition from the Old Law had already begun (Lk. 18:18-30).

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