

Discontinuity *Continued...*

A while ago I introduced a subject that may have possibly rattled a few theological cages — *the role of the Decalogue in evangelism*. This response is quite understandable. As Christians we should all have great respect and reverence for the entire Word of God (Ac. 20:27). We believe that the Word is inerrant and infallible and that it is therefore applicable to, and sufficient to all people of all times (Ps. 19). When we hear phrases like the “obsolescence of the Law of Moses” or the “end of the Law,” it does have a somewhat unsettling effect.

However, this need not be the case. What I introduced in that article is no new concept. Rather, it is something that all Christians of different hermeneutical stripes *must* agree on, albeit, to varying degrees. For this reason, covenantalists (who typically believe that the Law of Moses is still intact in some ways today) and dispensationalists (who argue that the Mosaic Law in its entirety has been served in the OT) must all agree to an assumed level of breakage or disconnect with the Old Law. Some obvious examples would be for instance that we don’t cast lots anymore to discern the will of the Lord (Lev. 16:8). Rather we commit all things to God in prayer (Ps. 37:5; Phil. 4:6-7). We also don’t require young, unmarried men to marry their deceased brother’s childless widow (Deut. 25:5-10) to propagate his lineage. Rather, the NT reveals a great level of freedom in who we marry as long as we marry in the Lord (1 Cor. 7:39).

Differences like the ones mentioned above highlight the fact that there is clearly a level of disconnect between OT and NT times. Any study of such differences involves studying the “continuity vs. discontinuity” between the two testaments. Some Christians do not see as much disconnect between the two testaments as others might. As already stated, this is typically true of covenantalists and dispensationalist. However, even among covenantalists there are disagreements as to the level of discontinuity between the two testaments (classic covenantalism vs. new covenantalism), as there are disagreements among dispensationalists (classical dispensationalism vs. progressive dispensationalism).

My goal with this continuation (and attempted settling) of the issue raised in the article about the Decalogue, is to point us to the fact that what I had been arguing for is no less than the dispensational hermeneutic, at least as it helps us to understand the role of the Ten Commandments or the Law of Moses in evangelism and apologetics. My argument for that matter, can be said to have been in favour of the apparent “*discontinuity*” between the OT and the NT.

This view is germane to any study of dispensationalism. Frankly, it is what aids a dispensational understanding of God’s working on planet Earth. For those battling with concepts and terms at this stage, let me just remind you once more. Dispensationalism is what leads to the understanding that, for instance: The church does not replace Israel as the ‘New Israel,’ therefore all the promises that God made to Israel that have not yet been fulfilled, e.g. restoration of, and return to Jerusalem and the like, are yet to be fulfilled in future. This also leads to the emphasis on a “not destined for wrath” (1 Thess. 5:9-10) approach to the Church, who will be raptured (1 Thess. 4:16-18) from this planet before the cleansing of Israel or the Great Tribulation takes place (Jer. 30:7; Matt. 24). Lastly, this necessitates — and keeping in step with the fact that God has not replaced Israel with the Church — a literal and physical millennial reign of Christ on earth where Israel will acknowledge and serve

our King, Jesus (Jer. 29:10-14). All the above are emphasised within dispensational hermeneutics because dispensationalist see a substantial break between the two testaments, or Israel's Law of Moses and the New Testament's New Covenant (Jer. 31:31). Notice, I did not say a clean break. That is simply impossible since the Old Testament, like the NT, finds itself in the completed canon of Scripture.

So how do we make sense of this discontinuity? We certainly have to since it carries implications for our understanding of the Bible in general. It also carries implications for how we understand God's requirements of people in terms of his moral laws. One such moral law hashed out under the Mosaic Law is the *Jewish Sabbath* (Ex. 20:8). For this matter, 10 % of the Decalogue is defined in terms of the special observance of this one law that required capital punishment once transgressed (Num. 15:32-36).

Theologian John S. Feinberg helps us in this regard to understand how to approach this specific law (the Sabbath) in New Testament, or New Covenant times, which is where the Church is currently. Talking about the discontinuity between the Law of Moses and the New Covenant, Feinberg (1988:76) offers not only a feasible, but also a compelling solution to the apparent tension between the two testaments. Responding to the question whether something has to be repeated in the NT for it to still be "in force" he says:

"If the NT explicitly rejects an OT institution, etc., it is canceled. But if God makes a point once (the OT), why must he repeat it in the NT for it still to be true and operative? So long as he neither explicitly or implicitly rejects the OT teaching, why assume it is canceled just because the NT does not repeat it? To argue that it is canceled because it is not repeated is a classic case of arguing from silence. On the other hand, it is not arguing from silence to claim it is still in force despite the NT's silence, *because God has already in the OT broken the silence and given us his thinking.*"

Feinberg's words are indeed helpful to our discussion. The basic hermeneutical rule that he endorses requires from us not to say that a law has been discontinued just because it is not repeated or rehashed in the NT. This is important as it involves the prevention of stripping Israel from OT promises that are yet to be fulfilled in future. Similarly, it is *not our place* to declare that an OT law is *still in working* if it has clearly been canceled or *discontinued*. This prevents us from subjecting the Church to laws that God has clearly done away with.

If, for argument's sake, it can be proven that the NT breaks with the Sabbath Law, then we can assuredly say that it has been canceled. However, as it involves the discontinuation of the Jewish Sabbath, many reading this would already agree. This is not the reason why I am saying this. What I am trying to instill in our understanding however is that if we can be assured that the Sabbath has been done away with, then we *must* also be willing to say that the Decalogue in its entirety has been done away with. Why? Because the Law of Moses was indivisible (Jas. 2:10). If we are going to preach Decalogue living, even as a required observance for fruitful Christian living, we are forced to include the Sabbath.

Thus, it can safely be said that when Jesus hinted at the end of the Sabbath in the Gospels, it can also be stated that He hinted at the end of the Decalogue, and for that matter, the end of the Law of Moses, in totality. As I have pointed out before, what trips us up in this regard is the fact that all those laws that we are so convinced (and rightly so) are sinful are still declared in the NT to be sin. However, their presence in the NT does not render them as the Decalogue. Rather, they have become

part and parcel of “The Law of Christ.” This is an important distinction as we as a church continue to uphold the end of the Sabbath.

This said, how can we know for sure that Jesus ended the Sabbath? If we cannot emphatically answer this question then we have to do the unimaginable, uphold the entire Law of Moses, as the Israelites had to. So, this is important indeed. For this reason we turn to Mark chapter 2:23-28.

Here Jesus walks with his disciples through some grain fields on the Sabbath. The disciples get hungry and start to eat some of the grain. The Pharisees then accuse Christ of allowing His disciples to break the Sabbath. What is important to note is that neither Jesus nor his disciples were breaking Sabbath laws here. The Pharisees interpreted the act of rolling the grain in their hands as “threshing” which was clearly forbidden in Exodus 34:21. However, what Jesus and his disciples were doing was not the act of threshing, for this reason, rendering them innocent of any Sabbath breaking.

There were other occasions where Jesus was also accused of Sabbath breaking, which He was clearly not, according to the Law of Moses. Directly after this in Mark 3, Jesus heals a man’s crippled hand on the Sabbath with the same accusation from the Pharisees following, as that of Mark 2. In Luke 13 we read the same about a woman who was healed by Jesus on the Sabbath. John does similarly by detailing the healing of the lame man, again, on the Sabbath (Jn. 5:1-9). Of all the Sabbath healings, including the feeding of his disciples, Jesus never once transgressed the OT Sabbath. So, there was never any occasion in which Jesus just summarily went against the Law. He did however, do these things on the Sabbath in order to reveal the Pharisees’ legalism. They made the Sabbath into something that it was never intended to be, and this fact, Jesus artfully revealed.

But what is telling above all was Jesus’ employment of the Davidic example in Mark 2 that deserves our attention as we try to discern the Lord’s attitude to the Sabbath. The reason for this is that Jesus uses an example for the OT (1 Sam. 21:1-6) in which David was in clear violation of a law (the loaves were only for the priests), yet Ahimelech consented to it. There are many questions that might arise in this instance. However, we must focus on the significance of Christ’s mentioning this in his own defense. Jesus mentions this to the Pharisees because He sought an example of where it can be illustrated that if Ahimelech and David did this, then how much more may He, who is the Lord of the Sabbath, undo its requirements. Agreed, there is no explicit statement coming from Christ in this instance that the Sabbath has been discontinued. However, the example from David’s life coupled with Jesus’ insurance on his supremacy over the Sabbath hints not only at the lessening of Sabbath laws, but its abrogation.

Our Lord’s attitude toward the Sabbath, which is *implicit* in his response to the Pharisees’ accusations against him, is also *explicitly* reinforced in the apostle Paul when he commands the Colossian church: “Therefore let no one pass judgment on you in questions of food and drink, or with regard to a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath” (Col. 2:16). Simply, Paul warns the Colossians not to allow themselves to be held accountable to an archaic law-system. We don’t have to stretch our imagination to see that he warns against observing that Law that has clearly been abolished. The Law of Moses had many food restrictions (Lev. 11:1-47), there were observances of new moons and significant times of year (Num. 28:11-15) that the Israelites had to keep, lastly, there was the keeping of the seventh-day Sabbath (Ex. 16:22-30; Ex. 35:1-3).

Paul's warning must be understood as a general warning against anyone who preaches the observance of the Law of Moses. To divide the Law of Moses into "moral" and "ceremonial" laws does not alleviate this tension either, because Paul mentions the Sabbath, which technically would fall under the "moral" category. The only solution is to ditch the Law of Moses entirely, including the Decalogue, and acknowledge the upholding of a moral code in this current dispensation in our Lord himself, through the Law of Christ, who, in the NT intensified the moral standard (Matt. 5:22, 27-28).

So, what is the value of the Law of Moses in evangelistic efforts or basic Christian living? The value is in the example that it has left us about God's holiness and His requirement of perfection. Paul again makes this obvious when he instructs Timothy that "...the law is good, if one uses it lawfully..." (1 Tim. 1:8).

How then is it to be used lawfully? In evangelism it is particularly helpful to point people to their sinfulness in the presence of a holy God. It also highlights their intense need for the only one who can save them, the Lord Jesus Christ alone. This is what the Law of Moses should accomplish in evangelism.

But to emphasise once more, this does not mean that we are held to the Law of Moses in order to honour God's commandments. Our fallenness is no longer exclusively defined in terms of our non-observance of the Mosaic Law. Rather, it is newly defined in terms of the New Covenant and the requirements of our Lord Jesus Christ. The Law served its task as the tutor (Gal. 3:24) pointing people to their sin and inability to please God, and it still has that effect when pointing sinners to this law. But the progressive nature of Scripture does not allow us to camp out here. We are saved on the basis of those unconditional covenants in Scripture (Gen. 15:1-18; Jer. 31:31), not on the basis of the conditional Law of Sinai.