

Why then the law? (Galatians 3:19) Christ as the fulfilment of the Old Testament.

Many Christians today take broadly the same attitude to the Old Testament Law as we find in the Thirty-Nine Articles of the Church of England:

Although the Law given from God by Moses, as touching Ceremonies and Rites, do not bind Christian men, nor the Civil precepts thereof ought of necessity to be received in any commonwealth; yet notwithstanding, no Christian man whatsoever is free from the obedience of the Commandments which are called Moral. (Article VII, Of the Old Testament)

In other words, we don't have to do what the Bible says when it forbids eating pork or tells us to keep Saturday special, but we do have to do what it says when it forbids murder or theft.

'Common Sense' At first glance, this seems common sense – after all, we are Christians, not Jews! Unfortunately, it can sometimes look as if we are just selecting the bits of the Old Testament we happen to like. And nowhere is this more contentious today than in the case of homosexual behaviour; for although the Bible indeed says, “You shall not lie with a male as with a woman” (Lev 18:22), it also says, “Everything in the waters that has not fins and scales is detestable to you” (Lev 11:12). Hence the Dean of St Albans, who himself rejects the Church's traditional teaching on homosexual acts, can write, ‘The next time you see a clean-shaven fundamentalist wearing a poly-cotton shirt and eating a shrimp, remember to shout ‘Abomination’ ...!’ (From *Permanent, Faithful, Stable* Darton, Longman & Todd).

A biblical Bible So can we legitimately eat shrimps, work on Saturdays and yet still say homosexual acts are wrong “because the Bible says so”? Or do Evangelicals really take a ‘pick and mix’ approach to Scripture, as their opponents accuse them of doing?

The answers depend on whether we read and apply the Bible biblically. But to do this we have to recognize the radical break with the Law which is brought about by the gospel – something which the Bible itself shows Christians have not always done.

The Law as a whole

In Galatians 3:10, Paul writes, “All who rely on works of the law are under a curse; for it is written, ‘Cursed be everyone who does not abide by all things written in the Book of the Law, and do them.’” Again in 5:2 he writes, “I testify again to every man who accepts circumcision that he is obligated to keep the whole law.” For Paul, the Law is not a mixture from which we can take our pick but an undivided whole.

However, the Law was also not God’s last word, but a stop-gap between the promise to Abraham (Gen 12:1-3; Gal 3:8, 17) and the coming of Christ (Gal 3:14, 19). “The law,” says Paul, “was our guardian until Christ came” (3:24). But since Christ has come we are “not under law but under grace” (Rom 6:14).

For Paul, therefore, it is not ceremonial or ritual laws from which Christians are freed but the whole Law. Christ died under the Law and was raised from the dead so that the Christian, being in Christ, no longer lives by the Law: “For through the law I died to the law, so that I might live to God” (Gal 2:19; see also Rom 7:1-6).

This is why arguments about the Law take up so much space in the New Testament. The gospel is spiritual dynamite – and in the wrong hands just as dangerous! So when Paul asks in Romans 3:31, “Do we then overthrow the law by this faith?” he immediately answers, “By no means! On the contrary, we uphold the law.”

Fulfilment

Yet how can Christians who have died to the Law nevertheless uphold it? The answer is that the Law is fulfilled in Christ: “For Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes” (Rom 10:4). But just as the Law addressed various different aspects of life, so its fulfilment in Christ has various different consequences for us.

The Law’s demand for sacrifices of atonement is fulfilled perfectly by Christ’s death on the cross, so that there is simply no further need for the priesthood and Temple in Jerusalem (see Heb 10:1-14). The Law’s demands for sacrifices of thanksgiving, however, become an obligation on all of us to live lives pleasing to God: “I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy

and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship.” (Rom 12:1, see also Heb 12:28-13:19).

Those aspects of the Law which created a sharp distinction between Jew and Gentile are sometimes called ‘cultural laws’. But these were still divine commands which defined Israel’s culture, not cultural practices which became Israel’s law, so it would be more accurate to call them ‘laws of culture’. Nevertheless, now that both Jew and Gentile are brought to God in Christ, Paul can say he “has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility by abolishing the law of commandments and ordinances” (Eph 2:14-15). Previously, God’s people observed regulations about food, drink and Sabbath days. Now, “These are a shadow of the things to come, but the substance belongs to Christ” (Col 2:17).

Morality

Of course, God’s people are still called to be different. But the required difference is entirely in the quality of our lives, and no longer in the diet we eat or the days we honour:

“Keep your conduct among the Gentiles honourable, so that when they speak against you as evildoers, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day of visitation.” (1 Pet 2:12, see Gal 4:10-11; Rom 14:1-6; 1 Tim 4:1-4, etc)

‘Gentiles’ are no longer those outside the Law but those outside Christ. Yet those in Christ will seek to obey their Father’s will which was once expressed through the Law, just as it is now fulfilled in Christ:

“But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law, although the Law and the Prophets bear witness to it.” (Rom 3:21)
Hence our moral behaviour is indeed guided by what the Law had to say on morality, even though as we read the Law we must constantly ask, “What does the coming of Christ mean for this?”

Fortunately, the New Testament addresses this same issue. The Sermon on the Mount shows clearly what Christ means for the laws addressed to our moral behaviour. The Law banned murder (Matt 5:21; Ex 20:13), but Christ disallows even anger (Matt 5:22). The Law forbade adultery (Matt 5:27; Ex 20:14), but Christ condemns lust (Matt 5:28). The Law allowed for divorce, oaths and retaliation, but Christ denies all of them for his people (Matt 5:32, 34-37, 39).

Conclusion

In this light, it is surely hard to argue that Christ would allow what the Law forbade regarding other aspects of sexuality! And indeed the New Testament supports that doubt (see Rom 1:24-27; 1 Cor 6:9-11). We may indeed eat shrimp with a clean conscience, but we must honour God with our bodies (1 Cor 6:20).

Further Reading

Freedom by Martin Luther (a reprint of "The Freedom of a Christian"), Matthias Media, 1997 available from the Good Book Company, £1
What God has Made Clean: If we can eat prawns, why is gay sex wrong? John Richardson, MPA Books/Good Book Company, £2.50

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