

Flogging a Dead Horse

That's what it feels like – trying to get the Reformed to engage with Scripture on the law without reading it through a Reformed Confession. But... let's try again.

The so-called threefold division of the law is of paramount importance to the advocates of John Calvin's threefold use of the law. It conveniently enables them not only to enforce their chosen part of the law on believers, but to dispose of – skirt round, explain away – any scriptural passage that contradicts their theology. They dare not let it go. If they do, the whole Reformed edifice of covenant theology on the law will crumble about their ears. And they know it. Sadly, it was also stop them coming to a proper understanding of the law, and the liberty the believer has in Christ under his law in the new covenant.

A friend has recently come across another Reformed attempt to justify the unjustifiable by claiming that because Scripture speaks of God's 'statutes... judgments... commandments' (Lev. 26:15 Deut. 6:1-2; 11:1, for example) this means that Reformed theologians are right to divide the law into three parts – moral, ceremonial and judicial. I would like to raise a few things for these teachers to think about.

First, it is true that Scripture does use a variety of terms when speaking about the law – but far more than three: 'precepts, commandments, laws, words, covenant, judgments, commands, statutes, testimonies, rulings, rules, instructions, ordinances, decrees', and the like. So why do they add three more? Why not stick to the many scriptural words, and show us, precisely and scripturally, which of the 613 or so commandments are statutes, precepts, commands, judgments, words, or whatever?

Secondly, and more importantly, I might say that Scripture is promiscuous in the way it uses its terms when speaking about the old covenant and its laws, commandments, judgments, statutes and so on, using the terms interchangeably, seemingly

indiscriminately. Whatever nuances Scripture attaches to these various words it does not warrant us classifying the law into three separate compartments. Such a notion is ridiculous.

At this point, I had intended to quote several passages of Scripture to prove my assertions, but the scriptural usage of these terms, the sheer multiplicity of the terms themselves, the almost indiscriminate way in which they are used, even within one version, coupled with the variety of excellent versions in use... made the task so complicated that I threw in the towel. I can only ask that readers check these – and scores more – passages in their favoured version (and then repeat the task in another version): the result will be a foregone conclusion.

Take Exodus 12 and on, especially, perhaps, Exodus 15:25-26; 24:3-8; 34:10-11; and then, for instance, Leviticus 20:22; 26:15; Deuteronomy 12:28,32; 24:8; 1 Kings 2:3; 6:12; 8:58,61; 9:4; 11:11,33-38; 2 Kings 17:13-16,19,34-38; 18:6,12; 22:8-13; 23:2-3,21,24-25 2 Chronicles 7:17; 19:8-11; 34:30-32; Nehemiah 1:5; Psalms 105:45; Ezekiel 37:24; Hebrews 9:19-22, and so on!

Not only does Scripture mix up the terms it uses to describe the various laws, it also mixes up the various laws which the Reformed like to keep separate. At the end of Leviticus, after God had reminded Israel of a whole host of laws on all sorts of matters, including idolatry, adultery, disrespect for parents, the weekly sabbath, harvest, resting the land every seven years, the year of jubilee with all its regulations for redemption, and so on, Moses recorded: ‘These are the statutes and judgements and laws which the LORD made between himself and the children of Israel on Mount Sinai by the hand of Moses... These are the commandments which the LORD commanded Moses for the children of Israel on Mount Sinai’ (Lev. 26:46; 27:34). It did not matter whether or not any particular law was found in the ten commandments or the regulations for the tabernacle or the statutes for the ordering of Jewish society. No Jew ever asked which part of the law any commandment came from. It simply would not have crossed his mind. It was all the law of God; the statutes, judgments, commandments were all part and parcel of

the one entire, indivisible law of God which he gave to Israel through Moses on Mount Sinai.

Take Numbers 15. The stoning of the man for transgressing the law of the sabbath (Num. 15:32-36) is sandwiched between – on the one hand, the laws of sacrifice and offering for sin (Num. 15:1-31) – and on the other, the sewing of tassels on the corners of garments (Num. 15:37-40), this last to remind the Israelites to ‘remember all the commandments of the LORD and do them’ (Num. 15:39-40). And the chapter concludes with words remarkably similar to the preface to the ten commandments (Num. 15:41; Ex. 20:2; Deut. 5:6). My point is that *it is impossible to detect any biblical difference in the designation of any of these laws*. Sacrifices, offerings, sabbath and tassels all – *all* – come under the one umbrella: ‘Ordinance... law... custom... all these commandments... all that the LORD has commanded you by the hand of Moses... the LORD gave commandment... law... the word of the LORD... his commandment... So, as the LORD commanded Moses, all the congregation [obeyed]... Remember all the commandments of the LORD and do them... remember and do all my commandments’ (Num. 15:15-16,22-23,29,31,36,39-40).

Scripture, I repeat, mixes the laws, statutes, commands, judgments, testimonies, precepts, taking them from all over the entire Mosaic covenant, and calling them the law, the covenant. ***But it never heaps them into three neat piles!***

Conclusion

The attempted justification of the threefold division of the law based on the various terms Scripture uses to fill out the law is artificial. Worse, it smacks of desperation.

Not only that, the scheme is puerile, totally unworthy of any serious reader of Scripture. The merest glance at Scripture shows up the nonsense for what it is (not) worth.¹

When are the Reformed going to admit that their system is built, not on Scripture, but on a pre-supposed theology? And give it up? And let Scripture be Scripture? Alas, I fear those questions take me back to where we came in, and my title – ‘Flogging a Dead Horse’.

¹ It reminds me that when I was getting good marks at school, if I disappointed my father with my incompetence, he would tell me that if I was one of the best then he didn't want to see the worst!