

- 2) The second matter to consider with respect to the Israel-Church question as it relates to the identity of the “people of God” is the Law of Moses. The reason again is that, along with circumcision, the Mosaic Law (the Sinai Covenant) was the foundational identity marker of Yahweh’s people leading up to the coming of Christ. From the time of Abraham’s calling, membership in God’s household was determined by participation in the Abrahamic Covenant, and this meant bearing the covenant sign of circumcision. But with the nationalizing of the Abrahamic covenant community, personal ownership of the national covenant – the Law of Moses – was added to the Abrahamic sign as identifying those who were God’s people. Thus the quandary addressed by the Jerusalem Council.

There is no disagreement among Christians that the nation of Israel was established and governed by the Sinai Covenant; what is disputed is the nature of Christ’s fulfillment of that covenant (especially as it is regarded as God’s “law”). The answer to this question is of paramount importance, for it determines how a person understands the nature and extent of the Mosaic Law’s continuing relevance for the Church as God’s people.

Again, no orthodox Christian questions that the Law of Moses, like circumcision, had a christological trajectory and point of fulfillment. It’s impossible to read the New Testament and conclude otherwise, and a careful reading of the Old Testament leads to the same conclusion. But though all agree with the *fact* of the Law’s fulfillment in Christ, there is wide divergence in the understanding of what that means and entails.

- Recognizing that the Mosaic Law governed Israel’s relationship with God, dispensationalists have generally held that it has no direct relevance to the Church. The Old Covenant was God’s covenant with Israel, even as its New Covenant fulfillment is said to focus on the Israelite people (ref. Jeremiah 31:31-33). The Law of Moses pertains to the Church only in the sense that it provides instruction in the character of God and His moral, ethical, and spiritual demands upon His human creatures.
- On the other hand, Covenant Theology sees an essential continuity within God’s household; though real distinctions exist between them, Old Covenant Israel and the New Covenant Church are at bottom two manifestations of the one covenant community. This conviction of essential continuity in the covenant people (which facilitated the Reformers’ perpetuation of the Church’s long-standing sacral ecclesiology) is a fundamental premise behind Covenant Theology’s doctrine of baptism, but it equally underlies its conception of Christ’s fulfillment of the Law of Moses and the Law’s continuing relevance for the “people of God” in the New Testament age.

The Reformers were committed to preserving the notion of a composite Church and they looked to the Old Testament for biblical support: The vindication of medieval Christendom was found in the theocratic nation of Israel. The Israelite “church” provided the paradigm for the structure and composition of the covenant people, and this association led to the corollary doctrine of the continuity of the covenant. If Israel and the Church are distinguished primarily by their existence in separate “economies,” it follows that the same is true of their covenants.

The continuity of the “people of God” implies the continuity of their respective covenants. What this means is that the Law of Moses – Israel’s covenant – must somehow continue in its essential nature to define and govern the New Testament covenant community. At the same time, the basic continuity of the Law must accommodate the fact of christological fulfillment that is central to the New Testament message. Calvin and the Reformers after him found the answer in the idea of the *tripartite structure of the Mosaic Law* first proposed by Thomas Aquinas.

By partitioning the Old Covenant into three categories, the Reformers were able to uphold the doctrine of the continuity of the covenant on the one hand while recognizing covenantal fulfillment in Christ on the other. The New Testament demands the latter, but the Reformers’ way of defending their sacral ecclesiology drove them to also embrace the former. Because God’s people have always been determined by covenant, the essential “sameness” of the covenant community – Israel and the Church – points to the “sameness” of the covenant by which that community is defined, established and governed. *Without the essence of the Mosaic Covenant enduring into the age of fulfillment, it was impossible to use theocratic Israel as the paradigm for the New Testament Church.*

The tripartite conception of the Old Covenant was the answer to this dilemma. Recognizing a general pattern in the individual ordinances and commandments of the Mosaic Law, the Reformers adopted the categories of **moral**, **ceremonial** and **civil** laws. This structure was later codified in Reformed doctrinal formulations, notably the Westminster Standards.

- 1) In this conception, the covenant’s *civil* (judicial) laws pertained uniquely to Israel’s historical situation and salvation-historical role. Like Israel itself, these laws were pedagogical; even as Israel has found its fulfillment in Christ, so have the laws that distinguished them from the surrounding nations. It is precisely because Israel’s dietary laws served a preparatory purpose that Jesus could declare all foods clean (Mark 7:17-19; cf. Romans 14:14-20; Colossians 2:20-21; 1 Timothy 4:1-5) without bringing the covenant itself into jeopardy. Israel’s civil laws may set forth enduring principles, but the laws themselves are no longer binding.

- 2) So also Christ has fulfilled the covenant's *ceremonial* laws. These ordinances referenced Israel's status as a theocratic, priestly nation and pertained especially to the particulars of the Levitical cultus and its oversight and administration of the nation's relationship with God. The ceremonial laws included the various sacrificial rituals and designations of holy days and other ceremonies.
- 3) The final component of the Law of Moses is its *moral* law. This is the part of the Old Covenant that Covenant Theology regards as the enduring essence of the one "covenant of grace." The reasoning behind this is that the "moral law" expresses the holy character of God Himself, and is therefore unalterable and independent of time, circumstance, and covenantal administrations. And being the articulation of God's own nature, the "moral law" also expresses His just demand upon His image-bearers.

The so-called "moral law" – associated most closely with the Decalogue – was the heart of the Israelite administration of this one covenant, and so it is with the new covenant administration. The moral law is as binding upon the members of the New Covenant Church as it was the Old Covenant "church." At the same time, the notion of a *composite* covenant community finds the moral law playing a different role with different members:

In both the Old Testament and New Testament "churches," the moral law is said to play a restraining and pedagogical role in the lives of the *unregenerate* members of the covenant community. In simple terms, it acts to convict them of their sin and, in that way, lead them to Christ. In the case of Israel, it led them to Christ *in promise* through the various symbols and ceremonies; in the case of the New Testament Church, it leads them to Christ Himself.

For those who are *regenerate* within the covenant community, the moral law acts as an instructor and motivator toward growth in godliness. This is what Calvin meant by his "third use" of the Law. While in Reformed Theology the law has no value for justification – it has the power to inform and convict but not save, it is fundamental and crucial to the process of sanctification.

The tripartite conception of the Law of Moses allowed the Reformers to grant the Law's fulfillment in Christ while at the same time maintain its continuing authority over the covenant community. Again, finding continuity in the covenant (Law of Moses) was necessitated by the Reformers' determination to use Israel to justify their commitment to the sacral Church. But that doctrine of continuity also needed to be reconciled with the New Testament's proclamation that Christ has fulfilled the Law.

To the Reformers and their theological descendents, the idea of *fulfillment* with respect to the Law of Moses came to be regarded as *establishment*: Jesus “fulfilled” the Law in the sense that, having rescued it from centuries of rabbinical interpretive distortions, He reiterated the moral law to His generation in its original purity and re-certified its binding authority upon all men – most especially the household of faith.

Though useful, appealing, and seemingly biblical, the tripartite solution to the challenging matter of the Church’s relationship to law is problematic.

- First of all, this formulation of the Law of Moses is an *artificial construct*: Neither the Old nor the New Testament suggests such a partitioning of the Mosaic Code. Moreover, a careful reading of the Scripture doesn’t indicate the passing of certain parts of the Law while others are preserved unaltered. The Mosaic Covenant *as such* was binding on Israel (cf. Leviticus 26:13-15; Numbers 15:37-41); so also, it has, *in its totality*, found its fulfillment (and its passing) in Christ (cf. Galatians 3:10-14; Hebrews 8:6-13).
  
- Second, while particular commandments and ordinances of the Law of Moses may have had a civil, ceremonial or ethical framework or emphasis, every component of it was moral. To argue for a distinct “moral” segment of the Law is to argue that the civil and ceremonial portions were *amoral*. And if they were amoral, then they were arbitrary and capricious – merely rules that lacked an essential ethical or moral principle. Beyond that, amoral laws implicate God’s own integrity and righteousness; what sort of God is pleased to impose arbitrary rules upon His people?

But the truth is that every individual component of Israel’s covenant was inherently and thoroughly moral. This is evident simply in the fact that the Law defined and prescribed Israel’s relationship with God as a son to a father: *The relationship between divine Father and image-son is necessarily moral in every component and dimension because of the divine nature itself and its presence in the image-bearer*. The comprehensive morality of the Law of Moses is equally evident in the consideration of its particulars. As, for instance, the Law’s seemingly arbitrary dietary and dress codes spoke of the morality of Israel’s consecration and devotion to God, so the ceremonial laws were preeminently moral. Not only did they administer Israel’s relationship with God, they addressed the ongoing problem of the covenant son’s violation and unfaithfulness. What could be more “moral” than that?

For its part, the Scripture does indeed uphold the enduring relevance of “law,” not by partitioning it, but by understanding its fulfillment in Christ.

Like circumcision, covenant “law” continues to play a role in identifying the people of God in the age of fulfillment. But also like circumcision as the sign of the covenant, the law accomplishes this role in the context of its spiritual transformation in Christ.

- The place to begin is by recognizing that the Law of Moses was simply the *covenant* that formally defined, established and governed Israel’s relationship with God. The Law showed Israel what it means to be “son of God,” and in this way it looked beyond the covenant nation to the entire human race. Man was created in the divine image as the “son of God” (Luke 3:38), but his estrangement had resulted in his loss of self-identity. The Law served to bring to light the truth of human identity and function.
- Because the Law addressed Israel’s relationship with God, it was concerned in its totality as well as its particulars with the human obligation of *love* (Deuteronomy 6:1-9). The Jews of Jesus’ day understood this (Matthew 22:35-40; cf. Mark 12:28-34), *although they were incapable of fulfilling the Law’s demand of love*. In their estranged condition, human beings are unable to love (1 John 4:7), but the isolation of estrangement also insures that they will seek righteousness in themselves. Thus the Jews reduced the Law’s comprehensive demand of love into a list of commandments and ordinances that could be fulfilled by mechanistic observance.

Recognizing what the Law of Moses was and how it functioned in salvation history is foundational to understanding how Christ fulfilled it.

- Jesus didn’t fulfill the Law by flawlessly executing all of its particulars, but by being the person – the “Israel” – that the Law defined and demanded. Though it pertained specifically to the Israelite nation, the covenant between Yahweh and Israel provided a thorough portrait of man when he exists according to his created nature and design as “son of God.” Jesus fulfilled the Law not only by being the promised Abrahamic Seed – true *Israel*, but by being true *Man*. He fulfilled the covenant between Father and son by living a life of unqualified and uncorrupted love.
- If Israel’s righteousness consisted in its perfect conformity to divine “law,” that conformity was to be realized in perfect love, not meticulous observance of commandment and ordinance. This explains how Paul could be *blameless* under the Law and yet a *blasphemer* (Philippians 3:1-6; 1 Timothy 1:12-13). It explains how God could condemn Israel despite its scrupulous observance of the Law’s prescriptions (cf. Isaiah 1:1-17, 29:1-14, 66:1-3; also Psalm 50:7-15, 51:14-17; Amos 6:18-27; Micah 6:6-8; etc.).

- The Law communicated to Israel the truth of what man is and what his nature and design demand of him. Therefore, “righteousness under law” consists in a person’s flawless conformity to his created nature and function; righteousness is *rightness*, and, for man, this is a life defined in every respect by the perfection of love.

This is why Paul insisted that righteousness cannot come by human conformity to law. In their estranged condition, people cannot love; *they can only comply with behavioral demands, and then only as a means of fostering their innate sense of self-righteousness*. Being true God and true Man, only Jesus could fulfill the law and its righteousness. The corollary of this truth is that the answer to human “lawlessness” isn’t greater knowledge or resolve; neither is it for men to draw upon Jesus’ godly example or even spiritual “resource” that can be derived from Him. **The answer to human violation of divine “law” is personal, ontological union with the One who is Himself the fulfillment of that law.** It is to “*become the righteousness of God in Him*” (ref. 2 Corinthians 5:17-21).

Just as spiritual circumcision marks out Abraham’s true covenant offspring, so does their conformity to law as “spiritualized” in Christ. The Law of Moses was concerned with *ontological* and *relational* realities associated with the nature and role of man as image-son. “Lawlessness” is simply the expression of human estrangement, so that true conformity to law begins with reconciliation to God through personal union with Christ. In the context of fulfillment, *the Law’s foundational demand is faith in Jesus Christ* (cf. John 6:27-29 with Acts 17:29-31 and 1 John 3:21-23).

But having believed in Him, the Christian has been indwelt by the Spirit of Christ who is now transforming him into the likeness of the true Man. The Christian has fulfilled the Law simply by being joined to the One who is its fulfillment. The Law demands that men fulfill the “righteousness” of their created identity as image-sons, and they meet this demand through union with the image-Son (Colossians 2:8-10; cf. Romans 8:1-4).

But the very fact that the “people of God” are now defined by ontological union with Christ – who is the Man that the Law defined and prescribed – implies their personal, ongoing relationship with law. If divine law expresses the nature and function of man as *man*, then the Christian’s new existence as “new man” in the true Man is his existence in conformity to law. This is true in principle, but also in practice. To the extent that a person lives in accordance with his new identity in Christ, his practice does represent fulfillment of God’s law. And so, whether in his status or practice, the Christian’s continuing relationship with law – just as his circumcision – is *in Christ*. In the age of fulfillment and the new creation that has come in the Last Adam, the singular definition of God’s people is that they are “in the Beloved” (Ephesians 1:3-12; 1 Peter 2:4-10).