

Asking the Wrong Question

For centuries, when a believer has met a passage which speaks about the law – in Romans or Galatians or wherever – he has generally asked himself a question.

A man living in the late 13th-century might well have asked himself: ‘This Bible passage, when it says “law”, does it mean the moral, ceremonial or civil law?’ Thomas Aquinas had just set out his threefold division of the law, and so, naturally, it would be a question that would spring to many a mind at that time.

A man living in the mid 16th-century might well ask another question on top of the first: ‘This Bible passage, is it speaking about the first, second or third use of the moral law?’ John Calvin had just set out his threefold use of the law, and so, naturally, it would be a question that would spring to many a mind at that time.

A man living a few years later – towards the end of the 16th century – would ask yet another question: ‘This Bible passage, is it speaking about the Mosaic administration or the new-covenant administration of the moral law?’ Kaspar Olevianus and Zacharias Ursinus had just set out their scheme of covenant theology, and so, naturally, it would be a question that would spring to many a mind at that time.

And some it goes on, even until this present day. Put a biblical passage on the law in front of a believer, and more often than not he starts asking these questions and more.

How wrong this is! Wrong? Yes, indeed. These believers are asking the wrong question.

So what is the right question? Nothing could be easier to answer. Think! How did the early believers read (or, rather, hear) the words we are talking about? And what questions would they have asked? Well, they wouldn’t have been asking

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the questions I spelled out! That's for certain! They would never have raised questions which involved the moral law, the threefold use of the law, covenant theology and all the rest. Such wheezes had not been invented in their day! Oh no! Those early believers knew that Israel, and only Israel, had been given the Mosaic covenant including law (Deut. 4:1 – 5:33; 7:8-12; Ps. 147:19-20; Rom. 2:12-14; 9:4; 1 Cor. 9:20-21). They knew that the law was one indivisible law. They knew the Mosaic and new covenants were contrasted covenants ('administrations' would not have entered their heads in this connection). They knew, further, that the Mosaic covenant had been rendered obsolete by Christ's fulfilment of it (Matt. 5:17-18; Heb. 8:13).

And that is how believers today should think. This obvious point is vital. When we, today, read Scripture, we should always ask ourselves: 'How did the first recipients read or hear it?' We ought to do this, whether we are reading the law, the prophets or the New Testament. We must not blunt or warp Scripture by imposing upon the text clever schemes invented by men.

The trouble is, we are all inclined to repeat that very mistake. And when we do repeat it, it costs us dear.