

*NMOPPC Bible study background notes for "Holiness is Still Required" teaching.*

## **Introduction:**

From the very earliest days of the church Christians have struggled to understand how to interpret the Old Testament Law. The first church council was convened at Jerusalem in an attempt to settle just that issue. The decision made there was that Gentile Christians were not required to obey the Law, but were to avoid activities that would offend the conscience of their Jewish brothers and sisters (Acts 15:24-29). Even so, Paul still struggled with those who wished to force Gentiles to be circumcised and obey the Law (see Paul's argument in Galatians). Over the next few centuries increasing antipathy between Jews and Christians resulted in many Christians rejecting the Old Testament completely, or resorting to allegory to interpret it, so avoiding its literal meaning.

## **The Covenant Stipulations for Israel**

The biblical data concerning the Law begins within several patriarchal narratives in the book of Genesis, then following that are three defining narratives for Israel as a people in the book of Exodus. First, their miraculous deliverance from slavery in Egypt, the most powerful empire in the ancient world at that time (Exod. 1-18); second, the return of the presence of God as distinguishing his people from all other peoples on the earth (Exod. 33; 40); and third, God's reconstituting them as a people for his name at the foot of Mount Sinai (Exod. 19-Num 10:10).

Israel were people who for hundreds of years had known only slavery and Egyptian culture. Now God was about to reconstitute them into a totally new people on the face of the earth. Israel needed direction as to how they were to be God's people, both in their relationships with each other and in their relationship with God, so that they would shed the ways and the culture of Egypt and not adopt the ways and the culture of the Canaanites whose land they were to possess.

This is the role of the law in Israel's history. It was God's gift to his people to establish the ways they were to live in community with one another and to provide for their relationship with and worship of Yahweh, their God. At the same time the law set boundaries with regard to their relationships with the cultures around them.

## **What is the Law?**

The whole of the Old Testament is sometimes referred to as the Law (e.g. Rom. 3:19), but more usually it meant the five books of Moses; Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy (Rom. 3:12b; Gal. 4:21). However, through careful study one will observe that the word "law" has more than one connotation or is used in more than one sense throughout scripture:

1. In plural referring to the 600 plus "laws" or specific commands Israel was to abide by (e.g., Ex 18:20).
2. In singular to refer to all these laws collectively (e.g., Matt 5:18).

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3. In singular to refer to the entire Pentateuch (Genesis to Deuteronomy); (Luke 24:44; 1 Corinthians 14:34 with Genesis 3:16; 1 Chronicles 16:40), as the “Book of the Law” (e.g., Josh 1:8).
4. In singular by some New Testament writers to refer theologically to the entire Old Testament religious system (e.g., 1 Cor 9:20).
5. In the singular by some New Testament personages to refer to the Old Testament law (in sense 2 above) as it is interpreted by the rabbis (e. g., Peter in Acts 10:28).

Next, to comment more on sense 3 mentioned in the previous paragraph, it is observed that the New Testament writers frequently referred to the whole Pentateuch as “the Law” (e.g., “the Law and the Prophets” in Matt 5:17; Luke 16:16). Two points; (1) The commandments themselves are found almost exclusively in only four of the five books called “the Law”: Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. (2) These books also contain varied material besides the list of laws; this material is largely narrative. The reason for this is that the covenantal law between Yahweh and Israel, beginning in Exodus 20, cannot be understood apart from the narrative in which it is embedded. This especially includes Genesis. Genesis includes only a handful of basic commandments; for example, “. . . Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth, and subdue it . . .” (Gen 1:28); “Whoso sheddeth man's blood, by man shall his blood be shed . . .” (Gen 9:6); and “And God said unto Abraham, Thou shalt keep my covenant therefore, thou, and thy seed after thee in their generations.” (Gen 17:9). These laws are not specifically limited to Israel and its special covenant with Yahweh. This reveals that there is not an exact correlation between what we would call “laws” and what are called “books of the Law” in the Old Testament. Therefore, the use of the word “law” in scripture must be understood by examining the context in which it is written.

## **The Law is a Covenant**

### Christians and the Old Testament Law:

Contemporary believers are not expected to express their loyalty to God by keeping or observing Old Testament rituals. New Testament believers are not judged in this way (Col 2:16-17). We are related to God under a new covenant. There is no temple or central sanctuary any longer on whose altar you could offer the meat of animals (Lev. 1-5). However, I would like to express some guidelines for understanding the relationship of the New Testament believer to the Old Testament law.

### The Old Testament law as a Covenant

A Covenant is a formal agreement between two parties, specifying what each party should receive from the other and defining penalties for failure to live up to the terms of the agreement. There are several covenants in the Old Testament (Gen. 9:1-17; 15:1-21; 17:1-14; 2 Sam. 7:12-16). In Old Testament times covenants were often given by an all-powerful suzerain (overlord) to a weaker dependent vassal (servant). The suzerain guaranteed the vassal benefits and protection. But in turn, the vassal was

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obligated to be loyal solely to the suzerain, with the warning that any disloyalty would bring punishments as specified in the covenant. How was the vassal to show loyalty? By keeping the stipulations (rules of behavior) cited in the agreement.

A covenant put in place a relationship - in Israel's case, a relationship with the one true God, who alone could save and sustain them. The rules were extremely important. No rules? No relationship! If and/or when the stipulations were violated, the suzerain was required by the covenant to act and punish the vassal. In an extreme case, the relationship could even be altered or suspended by the suzerain (Deut 4:25-27; 28:20).

Points for understanding:

1. God uses this well-known ancient eastern covenant form when he constituted the binding contract between Himself (Yahweh = "the LORD") and His vassal Israel. In return for benefits and protection, Israel was expected to keep the many stipulations (i.e., commandments) contained in the covenantal law (Exodus 20- Deuteronomy 33).
2. The understanding of the covenant nature of the law makes it very important in one's understanding of the Old Testament as a whole. It is an essential part of Israel's story.
3. Apart from the covenantal nature of the law, you will not perceive the role of the prophets in Israel as covenant enforcers.

We are not expected to keep "the law", however it is essential for us to read and know, in order to appreciate the biblical story-God's story- and the church's place (Christians) in that story.

### Common Structure of Ancient "Suzerain-Vassal" Covenants

Component	Description	Example
Preamble	Identifies the parties to the Covenant: "I am the Lord your God"	Exod. 20:2; 34:6-7; Deut. 1:1-5
Prologue	Contains a brief history of the relationship of both parties: "...who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery."	Exod. 20:2; Deut. 1:6-4:49
Stipulations	Requirements of the covenant, the laws themselves.	Exod. 20:3-7; 34:11-26; Deut. 5:1-26:49
Witnesses	The gods are the witnesses to extra-biblical covenants, but in the Bible God Himself is the witness. There is biblical example of heaven and earth (all of God's	Heb. 6:13-14; Deut. 4:28; 30:19

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	creation) serving as witness.	
Sanctions	A statement of blessings and cursings	Exod. 20:5-6, 7, 12; Deut. 11:26-32; 27:1 - 30:20
Document Clause	Provisions for reviewing the terms of the covenant. In extra-biblical covenants this clause required the covenant to be deposited in a temple and be read publicly	Exod. 25:16; Deut. 6:6-9; 17:18-20; 31:19-21, 24-27

### **The Old Testament is not our Testament**

Testament is another word for covenant. The Mosaic Covenant therefore represents God's dealing with the nation of Israel. It was made on Mount Sinai, which is one we are no longer obligated to keep (cf. Rom. 6:14-15). As such it is not directly applicable to us today. We should assume, in fact, that none of its stipulations (laws) are binding on us unless they are renewed in the New Covenant. That is unless an Old Testament law is somehow restated or reinforced in the new testament. There have been changes from the old covenant to the new covenant. The rules have changed because in Christ, the relationship has changed. God expects of His people, us (the church), somewhat different evidences of obedience and loyalty. The loyalty itself is still expected. It is how one shows this loyalty that has been changed in certain ways.

### **Types of Old Covenant Stipulations that have not been Renewed**

The two categories of the Pentateuch that does not apply to us are Israelite civil laws and Israelite ritual laws. In comparison, just as laws in Canada do not apply to people who live in the United States.

The civil laws are those that specify a penalty for various crimes (major and minor) for which one might be arrested and tried in Israel. These laws shaped the daily life of Israel as God's people in their relationships with one another and toward their culture. They revealed areas of God's own character. However, no one living today is a citizen of ancient Israel.

The ritual laws told the people of Israel how to carry out practices of old covenant worship, detailing the design of the implements of worship, to the priest responsibilities, to what sorts of animals should be sacrificed and how. The sacrificing (ceremonial killing, cooking, and eating) of animals was central to the Old Testament way of worshipping God. Without the shedding of blood, no remission of sins was possible (see Heb. 9:22). When Jesus' once-for-all sacrifice was completed, this old covenant method was immediately made obsolete.

Now some will ask, "Didn't Jesus say that we are still under the Law, since not a jot or tittle, not the least stroke of a pen, would ever drop out of the Law?" The answer is no, he did not say that. What he said (see Luke 16:16-17) was that the Law cannot be changed.

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Jesus came to establish a new covenant (see Luke 22:20; cf. Heb 8-10), and in so doing “fulfilled” the purpose of the old, thus bringing its time to an end. The fulfilment itself Jesus called a “new command”; the law of love (John 13:34-35).

Let’s view a modern analogy to unveil this sort of transition or change of stipulations from covenant to covenant. In the case of labor agreements, for example, a new contract may specify changes in working conditions, different staffing levels, different pay scales, etc. Yet it may also retain certain features of the old contract- seniority, work breaks, provisions against arbitrary firing, etc. Although a labor contract is not on the level of a covenant between God and Israel, it is a type of covenant and therefore helps to illustrate in a familiar way the fact that a new covenant can be quite different from an old covenant, *yet not necessarily totally different*. This is also the case with biblical covenants.

### **The Law is Applicable Only When Renewed in the New Testament**

#### Part of the Old Covenant is Renewed in the New Covenant

Some aspects of the Old Testament ethical law are restated in the New Testament as applicable to Christians. Such laws derive their continued applicability from the fact that they serve to support the two basic laws of the new covenant, on which depend all the Law and the Prophets (Matt 22:40): “...love the LORD thy God with all thine heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy might” (see Duet 6:5) and “...thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself...”(see Lev 19:18). He concluded that these too summed up the whole of the Old Testament (Matt. 22:40; cf. Rom. 13:9-10). Jesus thus extracts some Old Testament laws, giving them new applicability (read Matt 5:21- 48), redefining them in terms of love for neighbor rather than simply as prohibitions to be “kept” and in so doing broadens the perspective considerably. Thus, we say that aspects rather than simply the laws themselves are renewed from old covenant to the new.

All of the Old Testament law is still the word of God for us even though it is not still the command of God to us. The bible contains all types of commands that God wants us to know about, which are not directed toward us personally. If we are not concerned about building parapets around the roof of our houses (Duet 22:8), we should nonetheless delight in a God who cared that houseguests not fall off a (usually flat) roof with which they were unfamiliar; and therefore God’s people were taught to build their houses with that sort of love for neighbor in mind. This fits into our understanding of the law as part of Israel’s story, since we cannot know the significance of our story, the story of the new covenant, without knowing well how the law functioned in Israel’s story, the story of the former covenant.

Only that which is explicitly renewed from the Old Testament law can be considered part of the New Testament “law of Christ” (Gal 6:2). Included in such a category would be the Ten Commandments, since they are cited in various ways in the New Testament as still binding on Christians (see Matt 5:21-37; John 7:23), and the two great commandments carried over into the New Testament; “...love the LORD thy God with all thine heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy might” (see Duet 6:5) and “...thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself...”(see Lev 19:18). And in this case these two “laws” perfectly display God’s character, which is to be reproduced in God’s children.

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### The Renewal of Commandments in the New Testament

OT Reference	Commandment	New Testament Reference
Exod. 20:3	You shall have no other gods before me	Matt. 4:10
Exod. 20:4	You shall not make any idols	Eph. 5:5; 1 John 5:21
Exod. 20:7	You shall not misuse the name of the Lord	James 5:12
Exod. 20:8-11	Remember the Sabbath	Col. 2:16-17 <b>(not renewed in NT)</b>
Exod. 20:12	Honor your father and mother	Matt. 19:17-19; Eph. 6:1-3
Exod. 20:13	You shall not murder	Matt. 5:21-22; 19:17-19; Rom. 13:9-10
Exod. 20:14	You shall not commit adultery	Matt. 5:27-28; 19:17-19
Exod. 20:15	You shall not steal	Matt. 15:16; 19:17-19; Rom. 13:9-10
Exod. 20:16	You shall not give false testimony	Matt. 15:16; 19:17-19
Exod. 20:17	You shall not covet	Luke 12:15; Rom. 13:9-10; Gal. 5:21

The above table traces the continuation of nine of the Ten Commandments. The Ten Commandments require careful contextualization in order to make their details relevant to our culture and situation, e.g. how many of us are likely to covet their neighbours' donkey today? The point is that we should look below the surface at what the underlying meaning of the commandments is.

Writing to Timothy, the apostle Paul is adamant that all of Scripture is inspired and is useful (2 Tim 3:16), including the Law.

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