The Three Uses of the Moral Law

Keith Mathison writes, *"If you were to ask the average Reformed Christian to name the three uses of the law, there is a decent chance that the answer might be the moral, the civil, and the ceremonial. In short, some Christians confuse the threefold division of the law with the three uses of the law. The threefold division of the law has to do with the different kinds of laws that we find in the Mosaic covenant."*

When we speak of the three uses of the moral law, we're talking about the *applications* of the moral law or the ten commandments. But before we get to that, let's look at the three kinds of laws that we find in the Mosaic Covenant:

1. The moral law is more concisely written in the Ten Commandment, which concern our duties toward God and man. The moral law was given to Adam as a covenant of works by which he and his posterity were bound to perfect and perpetual obedience. The moral law is a *creation ordinance* by which all of mankind is bound to obey.

   Adam was promised eternal life upon the fulfilling and threatening death upon his disobedience of it. Augustine's famous quote, *posse peccare, posse non peccare* (able to sin, able not to sin). The Greek word for sin is ἁμαρτία (hamartía) which means *missing the mark.* Adam, pre-fall had the ability to sin and not to sin. Adam was created good but he was still *mutable, where he could miss the mark. Christ, however,* was the incarnation and in His divine nature, was *immutable,* using our analogy, Christ could not miss the mark. However, in his humanity, he was "*tempted as we are, yet without sin"* (Heb 4:15).

   After the fall mankind lost the ability to not sin. The apostle Paul writes, Romans 3:23 ESV, *"for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God."* The good news is that Jesus Christ fulfilled the covenant of works for those who are united to Him in faith. Jesus said, Matthew 5:17 ESV, *"Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them."* In his famous book, *Human Nature in Its Fourfold State*, the Scottish Puritan, Thomas Boston (1676–1732) tells us that the four states of human nature are: (a) Primitive Integrity; (b) Entire Depravity; (c) Begun Recovery; and (d) Consummate Happiness or Misery.
   These four states, which are derived from the Scripture, correspond to the four states of man in relation to sin enumerated by Augustine of Hippo:

   - Quoted from Pilgrim Covenant Church

Pre-Fall Man	Post-Fall Man	Reborn Man	Glorified Man
able to sin	able to sin	able to sin	able to not sin
able to not sin	unable to not sin	able to not sin	unable to sin

2. The ceremonial laws were primarily for the priest and sacrifices that prefigured the person and the work of Christ. These ceremonial laws are now abrogated since Christ offered himself on the cross as the *once and for all sacrifice. Hebrews 7:26-27 ESV, "For it was indeed fitting that we should have such*

a high priest [Jesus], holy, innocent, unstained, separated from sinners, and exalted above the heavens. He has no need, like those high priests, to offer sacrifices daily, first for his own sins and then for those of the people, since he did this once for all when he offered up himself."

3. The civil laws were the 613 judicial laws given to the state of Israel for the governing of the nation. We find these laws primarily in the book of Leviticus. The Westminster Confession of Faith states that these judicial laws *"expired together with the State of that people; not obliging any other now, further than the general equity thereof may require"* (WCF 19.4). But what does the exception of the *general equity may require* mean? Robert Shaw writes, *"This law, as far as the Jewish polity was peculiar, has also been entirely abolished; but as far as it contains any statute founded in the law of nature common to all nations, it is still obligatory."*[1]

   We read in Romans 2:14-15 ESV: *"For when Gentiles, who do not have the law, by nature do what the law requires, they are a law to themselves, even though they do not have the law. They show that the work of the law is written on their hearts, while their conscience also bears witness, and their conflicting thoughts accuse or even excuse them."*

   Paul is not writing of the law written in the heart according to promise of the new covenant (Jer 31:32), but that man still has an innate sense of right and wrong according to their conscience. It has been polluted by the fall but not totally destroyed. Even Judas, who betrayed the Lord, "*changed his mind and brough back the thirty pieces of silver to the chief priests and elders saying I have sinned by betraying innocent blood"* (Matt 27:3-4). Repentance is not just a *change of mind* but returning to the Father, as the prodigal son retuned to the Father, asking for mercy. The Hebrew word of repentance is TESHUVAH, which means *to return*. Joel 2:12 ESV, *"Yet even now," declares the Lord, "return to me with all your heart."*

   2 Corinthians 7:10 ESV: *For godly grief produces a repentance that leads to salvation without regret, whereas worldly grief produces death.*

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The apostle Paul writes in 1 Timothy 1:8 ESV, *now we know that the law is good, if one uses it lawfully,*

To use the law correctly, we must first understand what the Bible teaches concerning the *application* of the law. What then are the three uses or applications of the moral law? They are the pedagogical use, political use, and the normative use. The order of the first two can be different but the third use is the normative use.

[1] Robert Shaw. The Reformed Faith_ WCF - Robert Shaw (Kindle Locations 3800-3801). Kindle Edition.

1. Pedagogical use: The apostle Paul uses the word *schoolmaster* in Galatians 3:24 KJV, *"Wherefore the law was our schoolmaster to bring us unto Christ, that we might be justified by faith."* Paul also writes of the law as a *mirror* that reveals our sinfulness before a Holy God. Paul explains:

   Romans 3:19-20 ESV
   Now we know that whatever the law says it speaks to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be stopped, and the whole world may be held accountable to God. For by works of the law no human being will be justified in his sight, since through the law comes knowledge of sin.

   Martin Luther said that the pedagogical use of the law was the primary use of the law to drive us to Jesus Christ for our justification before God.

2. Political Use: This application is found in text such as 1 Timothy 1:9 ESV, *understanding this, that the law is not laid down for the just but for the lawless and disobedient, for the ungodly and sinners, for the unholy and profane, for those who strike their fathers and mothers, for murderers.*

   The magistrate is to use the moral law to restrain evil in society and protect the church. That he is the servant of God and is to rule righteously. We see this is Romans 13, that God has given the state the *power of the sword* to enforce the law.

3. Normative use: This is the law as applied by the believer. Psalm 119:97 ESV, *Oh how I love your law! It is my meditation all the day.* John Calvin said the primary use of the law was the third use, because the chief end of man is the glorify God. The believer is justified in Christ where the ground of their salvation is the works of Christ alone. The Christian's obedience is the fruit of faith, from a loving and gratuitous heart. 1 John 5:3 ESV, *For this is the love of God, that we keep his commandments. And his commandments are not burdensome. Galatians 5:6 ESV, For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything, but only faith working through love.*

   Ephesians 2:8-10 ESV, *For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works,* ***which God prepared beforehand [ordained], that we should walk in them****.*

The Law as a Rule of Life

The Westminster Confession of Faith defines the normative use of the law as a *rule of righteousness.*

> *This law, after his fall, continued to be a* ***perfect rule of righteousness; and, as such, was delivered by God upon Mount Sinai, in ten commandments, and written in two tables****: the first four commandments containing our duty towards God; and the other six, our duty to man (WCF 19.2).*

But what does this *rule of righteousness mean?*

> The Westminster Confession of Faith gives us the definition: *Although true believers be not under the law, as a covenant of works, to be thereby justified, or condemned; yet is it of great use to them, as well as to others; in that, as a **rule of life** informing them of the will of God, and their duty, it directs and binds them to walk accordingly; discovering also the sinful pollutions of their nature, hearts, and lives; so as, examining themselves thereby, they may come to further conviction of, humiliation for, and hatred against sin, together with a clearer sight of the need they have of Christ, and the perfection of his obedience (WCF 19.6)*

Zachary Garris writes, "Following the view that the Mosaic covenant was in substance a covenant of grace, this still leaves the question of exactly how the Mosaic covenant administratively relates to the covenant of works with Adam. The specific question that is often debated today is *whether the Mosaic covenant was "in some sense" a republication of the covenant of works*. The majority of Reformed Theologians have seen some relationship between the Mosaic covenant and the covenant of works, but disagree on the *extent* of that relationship. Essentially, the disagreement can boil down to two predominate views, *substantial republication* and *administrative republication.* The Westminster Confession of Faith summarizes the view of how the covenant of grace is *administered* which is the outward means by which Christ's grace is communicated.

> *This covenant [of grace] was differently administered in the time of the law, and in the time of the gospel . . . There are not therefore two covenants of grace, differing in substance, but one and the same, under various dispensations (WCF 19:5-6)*

Francis Turretin writes, *"Finally others (with whom we agree) say that it was a covenant of grace, but promulgated with the law and lying under it (which was sanctioned in the unusual manner of terror and servitude, in accordance with the state of the Israelite people and the age of the church at the time). The moral law of the covenant of works was reinstated in the Mosaic covenant but not as a covenant of works but as a rule of righteousness.*[2]

We see this in Thomas Boston who wrote the following in his notes on the *Morrow of Modern Divinity: "This was the end of the work, namely, of making the covenant of works with Adam, but not of the repeating of it at Sinai; it was also the end or design of the worker, namely of God, who made that covenant with Adam, to have his due from man, and he got it from the Man Christ Jesus."*

Boston argued that the Covenant of Works, originally made with Adam, was "republished" at Sinai in the sense that the moral law (embodied in the Ten Commandments) was restated as a reflection of God's righteous demands. He saw the moral law given at Sinai as echoing the same requirements of perfect obedience that characterized the Covenant of Works with Adam. This is what is referred to as material republication, meaning the content or substance of the moral law (not the covenant itself as a means of salvation) was reiterated. Boston claimed that Israel was judged not because they're in Moses but because they were in Adam. The law was never meant to save as in the Covenant of Works, but to serve as a "schoolmaster" to drive us to Christ for Justification by faith alone (Gal 3:24).

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[2] Francis Turretin, Institutes of Elenctic Theology, 3 vols., ed. James T. Dennison, Jr., trans. George Musgrave Giger (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1992–1996). 2.262.

He supported this view with biblical texts like Galatians 4:24, where Paul refers to "two covenants," one from Mount Sinai "which gendereth to bondage." Boston interpreted this as indicating that the law at Sinai, in one sense, reflected the Covenant of Works by emphasizing the legal demands of obedience (rule of life), which served to highlight human inability and point to the need for grace.

Despite the material republication of the moral law, Boston maintained that the Mosaic Covenant was fundamentally an administration of the Covenant of Grace. He argued that the covenant made with Israel at Sinai was rooted in the Abrahamic Covenant, which was a covenant of grace, and was not a means of earning salvation through works. The preface to the Ten Commandments ("I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt") underscored God's gracious initiative in redeeming Israel, which framed the law as a rule of life for a redeemed people, not a means to merit salvation.

Finally, our sister church, the Orthodox Presbyterian Church committee on the study of Republication concludes:

> *In this report, we have identified two basic senses of republication: substantial and administrative. Administrative republication is consistent with our standards in that it coherently maintains that the Mosaic covenant is in substance a covenant of grace. Examples of administrative republication include declarative, material, and misinterpretive republications, as well as an indirect, redemptive reenactment of Adam's sin and exile (as described in our report).*
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> *Views of substantial republication which are theologically inconsistent with our standards include: pure and simple republications, subservient republications, mixed republications, and a direct, non-redemptive reenactment of Adam's pre-fall covenantal probation.*

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