

ASSESS SOME USES OF THE MORAL LAW IN CONTEMPORARY EVANGELICAL PREACHING.

Darren Middleton, Teaching Elder, Caringbah Presbyterian Church.

SYNOPSIS

What is the moral law of God? What do we mean by moral law? Moreover where can we find moral law in the Bible? And even if we can answer those questions, we would still need to know how we should use the moral law (if at all) in our preaching? These are all pressing questions every evangelical preacher has to settle before he can preach. Most evangelicals believe that we are not under God's law (for justification) but then apart from Adam who was, certainly not Israel. So what does it mean not to be under the law and what part should law play in the believers life?

INTRODUCTION

To discuss law is to invite disagreement. According to John Murray, *"law frequently sounds to our uninstructed ears as something very primitive, crude temporary, arbitrary. Antinomian tendencies inherent in our sinful hearts, and given widespread currency in much of what professes to be evangelical teaching, are responsible for this."* That is, we have preached evangelical grace with such regularity and fervor that to preach law in many of our modern evangelical pulpits is to be considered repressive, harsh and unchristian.

This is born out of the evangelical teaching that no Christian is under the law but under grace, since Christ is the end of the law having nailed it to the cross.¹ In evangelical preaching such beliefs are universal; as they have been since the early Church Fathers. As early as 105 BC Ignatius taught that *"If we still live according to the Jewish law, we acknowledge that we have not received grace."*² And again he makes the same point, *"If anyone preaches the Jewish law to you do not listen to him. For it is better to listen to Christian doctrine from a man who has been circumcised than to listen to Judaism from one who is uncircumcised."*³

In the same manner Cyprian articulates the early Church understanding of the temporary nature of Old Testament law when he wrote *"the former law that had been given by Moses was about to cease. And a new law was to be given. Another dispensation and a new covenant were to be given. The old baptism was to cease and a new one was to begin."*⁴ So there is absolute agreement that Christ is the end of the law, and as a consequence,

¹ Rom 10:4; Eph 2:15; Col 2:13-14.

² Ignatius (105, E) (ANF1.62)

³ Ignatius (105, E) (ANF 1.68)

⁴ Cyprian (250, W) (ANF 5.508)

Christians are not under law, but under grace.⁵ Having said this, we are not free from law, but only free from the condemnation that comes from breaking the law, since Christ is our law keeper and righteousness.⁶

However, today in evangelical pulpits all over the land there are marked differences in our approach to law, and in particular the moral law. The diversity is predicated upon our understanding of what constitutes the moral law and its appropriate uses in Christian preaching. It also characterises how we understand our salvation and how what we think is the appropriate response to it.

WHAT IS (THE) MORAL LAW?

For the sake of theological clarity in this essay I will first articulate what is meant by the phrase moral law and what constitutes it according to Covenant, New Covenant and Dispensational theology before assessing some uses of it in evangelical preaching.⁷ The phrase '*moral law*' needs to be defined because there are many evangelicals questioning its usefulness as a theological (it's obviously not biblical) term. Covenant theologian John Murray argues that in the last analysis moral law is but a reflection or expression of the very nature of God. Since God is holy, just and good so too is his law which reflects his moral nature. Moral law then is God's moral perfection expressed in commands to govern and regulate our life and conduct.⁸ Moreover, this understanding has a long tradition that flows all the way back to the Reformation.

Tom Wells a New covenant Theologian defines the "moral law" in a similar way saying, "*Moral law is the law that has its source in the unchanging moral character of God with the result that it is intrinsically right and therefore binds all men of every era and every land to whom it comes.*"⁹ Moreover, Wayne Strickland a dispensational who argues for discontinuity in matters of law none the less acknowledges that the law (Mosaic) had two functions, namely revelatory and regulatory.¹⁰ In so far as its regulatory effect is concerned it is no longer binding since it is eschatologically attached to the nation Israel and its future restoration. However, Strickland agrees that there is a revelatory function to law and so far as the law reveals God's (moral) nature it stands to reason that the immutability of God demands that the revelatory nature of that law remains valid.¹¹

⁵ Rom 6:14.

⁶ Moreover, no evangelicals would ever promote antinomianism in any form, for lawlessness is sin (I John 3:4). Also evangelicals believe we are in law to Christ (1Cor 9:21; Gal 6:2)

⁷ New covenant theology has been characterised by some as a half way house between covenant and dispensational theology. Personally I understand that its proponents are more interested at asking the question, what is new about the new covenant? Tom Wells, Douglas Moo and Donald Carson are all representative of this thinking.

⁸ J Murray, *Collected Writings of John Murray* (Banner of Truth Trust, Edinburgh, 1989) pg 196.

⁹ T Wells, *New Covenant Theology* (Frederick, MD: New Covenant Media, 2002) pg 162.

¹⁰ W.G Strickland (Ed), *The Law The Gospel, And The Modern Christian* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1993) pg 278.

¹¹ W.G Strickland (Ed), *The Law The Gospel, And The Modern Christian* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1993) pg 278-79.

WHERE CAN IT BE FOUND?

As a theological category then, there is agreement that moral law is law that reflects the unchanging nature of God that has ethical implications for all people. However, the disagreement amongst evangelicals pertains to the issue of where such moral law is found in Scripture. Murray makes the argument for Covenant theology that moral law is to be identified with the Decalogue which is the republication of that which was originally written upon the hearts of mankind as image bearers of their Creator.¹² Historically in Reformed circles this has been the consistent understanding and is reflected in the confessions and catechisms of the Church.¹³

Reisinger is even clearer when he says “*God has opened to us His mind and instructed us in his will. He has made his laws a matter of record. First he wrote them on the hearts of our original parents. Then he proclaimed them by word of mouth through the prophets and preachers, from Adam to Sinai. Later, at Sinai, God inscribed them on tablets of stone. The orthodox Christian Church has always referred to the ten commandments as the moral law.*”¹⁴

Robert Reymond agrees, he argues for the correlation of the Ten Commandments with the “moral law” when he says: *That is to say, it is the Decalogue, being obeyed in love for God, which is the ethical norm for the Christian’s covenant way of life.*¹⁵ Again he affirms this traditional understanding when he says, “*For Paul the moral law of God, which Christians are to obey, is revealed in the Scriptures – especially (but not exclusively) in the Decalogue.*”¹⁶

William VanGemen also agrees when he states, “*The moral law is summarized in the Ten Commandments and was supplemented by the ceremonial and judicial laws.*”¹⁷ He goes on to argue that the ceremonial laws applied the first four commandments to the life of Israel and the judicial laws applied the last six commandments to the nation. Consequently, the ceremonial laws have been abrogated with the coming of Christ, and the judicial laws no longer apply since they were peculiar to the nation of Israel. But consistent with other Covenant theologians he argues that the Decalogue provides the content of the moral law.

In his response to Willem VanGemen, Douglas Moo represents the New Covenant Theology view saying, “*First, I commend VanGemen for insisting on the clear and unchanging standards of God’s moral law. In an era of ‘alternative lifestyles’ it is more important than ever that Christians cling tenaciously to the moral law of God as our*

¹² J Murray, *Collected Writings of John Murray* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1989) pg 198-204.

¹³ London Confession.19:2; Thirty Nine Articles.7; Savoy Declaration.19:5; WCF.19:2; WCF catechism (short) 39-41 (long) 91-97.

¹⁴ E.C Reisinger, *The Law And The Gospel* (New Jersey: P&R Publishing, 1997) pg 25.

¹⁵ R.L Reymond, *Paul Missionary Theologian* (Ross Shire: Christian Focus Publications, 2000) pg 471.

¹⁶ R.L Reymond, *Paul Missionary Theologian* (Ross Shire: Christian Focus Publications, 2000) pg 475.

¹⁷ D. Moo response to W VanGemen in W.G Strickland (Ed), *The Law, The Gospel, And The Modern Christian* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1993) pg 53.

absolute and unquestioned standard ¹⁸ Moo goes on to assert that the “moral law” is not exhausted by either the Ten Commandments or the Mosaic Law; “*First, I want to make clear that I am not denying that the Mosaic Law, especially the Ten Commandments, contain principles and requirements that reflect God’s eternal moral will. My point, rather, is that the Mosaic Law is not identical with this eternal moral law.*” ¹⁹

According to Moo’s interpretation, the “*eternal moral law*” consists of any laws that are brought over from the Old Covenant into the new. Here Moo makes an important distinction predicated upon the hermeneutic that “*They are binding on us not because they are in the Ten Commandments but because the New Testament makes clear that they are expressions of God’s eternal moral law.*” ²⁰ Thus according to Moo “*the NT clearly takes up all the Decalogue, except the Sabbath, as part of ‘Christ’s law’...*”²¹

This important distinction that New Covenant theologians make is a result of their belief that the progressive nature of revelation teaches us that the fullest revelation of God and his will is found in the New Testament not the Old. This has led some New Covenant theologians to differentiate between “moral law” and “the moral law” saying, “*we understand immediately that we cannot pick a point in time at which we now know enough about God to think we have ‘the’ moral law.*” ²²

Consequently Wells argues that at no point in redemptive history can it be said that we have all of “*the moral law*” in its entirety, but it can be said that we have some form of “*moral law*” revealed at various points in redemptive history. Based on this, he concludes, “*For that reason, the category ‘the’ moral law is not a useful one.*” ²³ However, like all the others he does recognise the category of moral law minus the definite article, and like Moo argues that for any law to be recognised as “moral law” it must first be repeated in the New Covenant since this is the climax of redemptive history and as a consequence the high point of progressive revelation. Wells concludes, “*The point of this long discussion is this: it required the advance from promise to fulfillment, from Old Covenant to New Covenant, from shadow to reality, to make the category of moral law stand forth.*” ²⁴

What may be termed classic Dispensationalism rejects the threefold division of the Mosaic Law into civil, ceremonial, and moral, insisting instead that the Law of Moses is indivisible and always viewed in scripture as a unified code.

¹⁸ D. Moo in W.G Strickland (Ed), *The Law, The Gospel, And The Modern Christian* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1993) pg 83.

¹⁹ D. Moo in W.G Strickland (Ed), *The Law, The Gospel, And The Modern Christian* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1993) pg 84.

²⁰ D. Moo in W.G Strickland (Ed), *The Law The Gospel, And The Modern Christian* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1993) pg 89.

²¹ D.Moo in J.S Feinberg (Ed), *Continuity and Discontinuity* (Illinois: Crossways Books, 1988) pg 218.

²² T Wells, *New Covenant Theology* (Frederick, MD: New Covenant Media, 2002) pg 163.

²³ T Wells, *New Covenant Theology* (Frederick, MD: New Covenant Media, 2002) pg 163.

²⁴ T Wells, *New Covenant Theology* (Frederick, MD: New Covenant Media, 2002) pg 165

Wayne G. Strickland represents this view when he observes, “Furthermore, the New Testament treats the entire Mosaic Law in an epochal or dispensational sense as a unit. Paul does so in Galatians 5:3, arguing that the believer is to walk by the Spirit, not try to live by the law, since that would require one to ‘obey the whole law.’ He never furnishes guidelines to provide a framework for distinguishing between the law’s temporal and permanent aspects. James likewise warns against breaking any part of the law (James 2:8-10); if one tries to live by the law, one must live by the entire law.”²⁵ Thiessen also concurs when he says, “From all of this it is clear that Paul does not distinguish between the ceremonial and the moral law. He knows of only one law, and it is the law of God.”²⁶

However, both Strickland and Thiessen seem to recognise the category of moral law and identify it with the Decalogue (which seems confused with their other positions). This seems evident in Thiessen’s Systematic Theology where he states, “The positive enactment is the expression of God’s will in published ordinances. These consist of His definitely moral precepts, as the Decalogue (Ex. 20:1-17) and the Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 5-7).”²⁷ Likewise, Strickland is quick to reject any idea of antinomianism when he says the rule of life (moral law) for Christians is to be found in the love commands and various principles of the New Testament which now form the law of Christ and the appropriate reflection of God’s moral law.²⁸

In concluding this section we may say that all three groups of evangelicals believe in “moral law” although in some cases the usefulness of that category is only granted with some hesitation. Concerning the content of the moral law there is no accord since CT evangelicals teach the moral law is the equivalent of the Decalogue. NCT evangelicals teach that it is to be found in the law of Christ which consists of nine out of the ten commands and the love commands. Dispensational evangelicals teach that the Decalogue is only for Israel and that the category of moral law is not a biblical term. None the less like the NCT evangelicals they believe Christians should obey the law of Christ and that is found scattered throughout the New Testament.

²⁵ W.G Strickland, *Five Views of Law and Gospel* (Zondervan Publishing House, 1993) pg 262.

²⁶ H.C Thiessen, *Lectures in Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 1949) pg 241.

²⁷ H.C Thiessen, *Lectures in Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 1949) pg 239.

²⁸ W.G Strickland, *The Law, The Gospel, And The Modern Christian* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1993) pg 276-8.

ASSESSING SOME USES OF THE MORAL LAW IN EVANGELICAL PREACHING

Covenant Theology

In CT circles the moral law is considered to be forever binding on the conscience of men; This is predicated on the belief that the law that Adam received in the garden was in essence the same Ten Commandments received by Moses on Mount Sinai.²⁹ As Reisinger has stated *“God has opened to us His mind and instructed us in his will. He has made his laws a matter of record. First he wrote them on the hearts of our original parents. Then he proclaimed them by word of mouth through the prophets and preachers, from Adam to Sinai. Later, at Sinai, God inscribed them on tablets of stone. The orthodox Christian Church has always referred to the ten commandments as the moral law.”*³⁰

In CT thinking, Adam had them written upon his heart, he was obligated to keep them as a creature, and they formed the basis of the covenant of works by which Adam through his obedience could have secured eternal life through his representative obedience. Adam failed and as a consequence brought spiritual and physical death into the world.³¹

As a consequence of the federalist convictions of CT all of unredeemed humanity is judged as covenant breakers. Therefore in CT preaching the moral law serves the following functions.

The preaching of law serves to illuminate the sinfulness of sin which is articulated so clearly in Romans 7:7 where Paul says *“I would not have known what sin was except through the law.”*³² Or as Reisinger notes *“Although sin is in us, it is not perceived until it is held before the holy, spiritual law of God.”*³³ Consequently, the law of God invites men to measure their lives against God’s holy law and in doing so reveals their depravity and their great need for a law keeper on their behalf. The genius of CT teaching is that believers are saved by works, just not their own. Christ is the second Adam, who is also a representative of all that are in him. Consequently he does what the first Adam could not do, that is, to perfectly obey the moral law of God on behalf of all those he represents.

CT preaching sees no tension between law and gospel. The Law leads to the gospel; after all, the gospel is all about God sending the second Adam to fulfill all righteousness by the keeping of the law (and covenant) on behalf of sinners. Therefore every man woman and child is either a covenant breaker or a covenant keeper depending on if they are in the first or second Adam. This then is the second use of the moral law; the preaching of the demands and

²⁹ That Calvin and Melancthon both taught this division see D.K McKim, *William Perkins and the Christian Life: The Place of the Moral Law and Sanctification in Perkins Theology* (Evangelical Quarterly, 59:2, 1987) Pg 1265-6.

³⁰ E.C Reisinger, *The Law And The Gospel* (New Jersey: P&R Publishing, 1997) pg 25.

³¹ Romans 5:11ff

³² This is considered the first use of the law to restrain sin.

³³ E.C Reisinger, *The Law And The Gospel* (New Jersey: P&R Publishing, 1997) pg 26.

obligations of sinners to obey God serves as preparation of the covenant breaker for justification by faith in the life and death of Jesus Christ who becomes their righteousness apart from the law. Calvin clearly taught the need for the second use of the law, *“For man blinded and drunk with self love, must be compelled to know and confess his own feebleness and impurity.”*³⁴ Such preaching has a long tradition stretching back to the Reformation and flowing richly through the Puritans and has always been considered an appropriate use of the law. Ernest Kevan quoting the Puritan preacher Edward Elton underscores this second use of the law with the following quote, *“Men must come to a knowledge of sin in themselves, by the law’ and this is no ‘easie matter’ but it is the preaching of the law of God ...that will... discover to them their hidden and secret sins; never was any brought to a sight of his sinnes,..... but only by the preaching of the law of God.”*³⁵

The final use is what is known as Calvin’s third use of the law for the sanctification of believers. Calvin argues that in the law *“God lays down what he demands from us, and in short, everything necessary to be known. He goes on to say that God’s moral law as expressed in the Decalogue contains ‘a perfect pattern of righteousness’ for it is the one everlasting and unchanging rule to live by.”*³⁶ That’s why Paul could affirm that the law is good, righteous and useful.³⁷ Though it is true that the law has no power to save, it does have power to guide and to help us know the mind of God.

The strengths of CT’s preaching of the moral law are to emphasise that law keeping is the appropriate expression of love and obedience between creature and creator. In CT thinking there is nothing inferior or lacking in living obedient and righteous lives as the proper response to God. Indeed, even those who trust in Jesus Christ as their Law keeper and righteousness are still bound to obey God’s law as a response of gratitude as well as duty although never ever as a means of righteousness.

The utility of the law in CT is that it shows that in our fallen state we can not keep God’s law, nor can we love him as he requires and as a consequence we can not please him. Though CT teaches the duty of all people to keep God’s law perfectly it also teaches no fallen person can do this. Therefore no one can, or will be justified before God through the law, for the law serves to convict and condemn us as covenant breakers. Such a view of law keeping has the desirable effect of intensifying the importance of Christ’s active and passive obedience, since his law keeping is the basis of the imputation of his righteousness.³⁸ Moreover, the active obedience of Christ on the sinner’s behalf is

³⁴ J.T McNeill, *Calvin: Institutes of the Christian Religion* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press) Book 11, Chapter 7:6, Pg 354.

³⁵ E.F Kevan, *The Grace of law: A Study in Puritan theology* (Morgan, PA: Soli Deo Gloria publications, 1999) pg 85.

³⁶ D.K McKim, *William Perkins and the Christian Life: The Place of the Moral Law and Sanctification in Perkins Theology* (Evangelical Quarterly, 59:2, 1987) Pg 126.

³⁷ Romans 7:12,16; 1 Timothy 1:8.

³⁸ Romans 5:17.

central to Christ being our righteousness.³⁹ In addition, we also note that proper assurance of salvation can only come from the knowledge that Christ has justified us through his own obedience to the law (cradle to grave). Hence forth we understand that the forensic nature of justification is built upon such an understanding of the Christ's law keeping as the basis of his righteousness been imputed to us.

Concerning passive obedience the preaching of the law and God's wrath against those who break it provides the only intelligible understanding of the cross work of Christ. It enables us to see how the curse of the law was upon him instead of us and turns our hearts towards him as our propitiation and peace offering. As Reisinger so beautifully affirms, "*He explained the law's meaning, He expressed its character, He embodied its duties, and He endured its penalty.*"⁴⁰ Consequently, the moral law is central to the Gospel and is central to the appropriate response of every believer to God's grace in Christ. Such obedience is never as a means of personal righteousness, but as the appropriate duty and response of the believer as a means of personal obedience and sanctification.⁴¹

An ever present danger in having the law central in preaching is the danger of congregations either misunderstanding the basis of salvation (works) or the more realistic danger of believers putting such an emphasis upon their own obedience that they minimize their reliance upon the righteousness and grace found in Jesus. That there has always been a tendency in some reformed circles to lean towards legalism is a danger that seems to be prevalent if not peculiar to this particular theological emphasis.

Another danger is that CT preaching can often fail to reflect appropriate consideration of the progressive nature of redemptive history and sometimes seek to apply ethical teaching from the Old Testament without considering its proper relationship to the believer through Jesus Christ. So at its best CT preaching is sensitive to biblical theology, at its worst it crassly applies the teaching of the Old Testament to New testament believers with little or no eschatological sensitivity. Moreover, some would argue that such an emphasis on law provides such continuity with the Old Testament that it does not do justice to the Pauline contrast between the covenant of law and the covenant of grace. This leads those who are sympathetic to NCT to ask so what is so new then about the new covenant?

³⁹ Romans 5:10,19; Heb 10:7.

⁴⁰ E.C Reisinger, *The Law And The Gospel* (New Jersey: P&R Publishing, 1997) pg 36.

⁴¹ D.K McKim, *William Perkins and the Christian Life: The Place of the Moral Law and Sanctification in Perkins Theology* (Evangelical Quarterly, 59:2, 1987) Pg 131. Perkins affirms "*believers thus obey God and obey God's law as a response of gratitude to God for their salvation. keeping the moral law not as a means of salvation but as a fruit of salvation.*"

New Covenant Theology

In making some assessment of NCT preaching it is helpful to remember that on the whole NCT disagrees with the hermeneutic of continuity for a hermeneutic of discontinuity. Moo asserts this when he argues the “moral law” is not exhausted by Decalogue or the Mosaic Law; *“First, I want to make clear that I am not denying that the Mosaic Law, especially the Ten Commandments, contains principles and requirements that reflect God’s eternal moral will. My point, rather, is that the Mosaic Law is not identical with this eternal moral law.”*⁴²

According to Moo’s interpretation, the “*eternal moral law*” consists of any laws that are brought over from the Old Covenant into the new. Since nine of the ten commands seem to be repeated in the new, Moo concludes this to be the essence of the “*eternal moral law*”: *“They (nine of the ten commands) are binding on us not because they are in the Ten Commandments but because the New Testament makes clear that they are expressions of God’s eternal moral law.”*⁴³ Thus in NCT there would still be an acceptance of the three uses of law, but the primary use seems to be the first and second use of the law in that it is a ministry of condemnation and death.

Moo affirms this view of the law when he says, *“Those purposes of the law that are given most attention in the New Testament - guardianship of Israel, revelation of sins – are limited to the time before the coming of Christ.”*⁴⁴ Concerning the third use of the law, Moo says, *“the entire Mosaic Law comes to fulfillment in Christ and this fulfillment means that the law is no longer a direct and immediate source of, or judge of, the conduct of God’s people.”*⁴⁵ Consequently, NCT argues that the believers conduct is not regulated by the moral law, but by the law of Christ.⁴⁶ Moo goes on to make the distinction saying, *“this law does not consist of legal prescriptions and ordinances, but of the teaching and example of Jesus and the Apostles, the central demand of love, and the guiding influence of the indwelling Holy spirit.”*⁴⁷ This is shaped by the view that the New Covenant emphasis seems to fall on love being the appropriate response of faith as opposed to obedience.⁴⁸ Furthermore, Moo suggests that understood correctly Paul’s teaching that we are no longer under law but under grace (Rom 6:14-15; 1 Cor 9:20; Gal 3:23; 4:4-5,21; 5:18) refers to the role of the law as supervision (ie conviction).⁴⁹

Consequently, NCT teaches that Christians are now free from the law, though they are not lawless, since they are bound to Christ and in law to him. Consequently, Moo argues that they are *“bound by certain moral*

⁴² D. Moo in W.G Strickland, *The Law, The Gospel, And The Modern Christian* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1993) pg 84.

⁴³ D. Moo in W.G Strickland, *The Law, The Gospel, And The Modern Christian* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1993) pg 89.

⁴⁴ D. Moo in W.G Strickland, *The Law, The Gospel, And The Modern Christian* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1993) pg 343.

⁴⁵ D. Moo in W.G Strickland, *The Law, The Gospel, And The Modern Christian* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1993) pg 343.

⁴⁶ D. Moo in J.S Feinberg (Ed), *Continuity and Discontinuity* (Illinois: Crossways Books, 1988) pg 217.

⁴⁷ D. Moo in W.G Strickland, *The Law, The Gospel, And The Modern Christian* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1993) pg 343.

⁴⁸ John 13:34; Romans 13:8; Galatians 5:14.

⁴⁹ D. Moo in W.G Strickland, *The Law, The Gospel, And The Modern Christian* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1993) pg 363.

*imperatives: to love one another (5:13-15) and to manifest the fruit of the Spirit (6:2).*⁵⁰ However, it is debatable if Paul sees the fruit of the spirit as a moral imperative, since it is not as much about doing as it is about being.

According to Richard Barcellos NCT leaves itself open to the charge of antinomianism because *“it seeks to redefine the moral law, drives a wedge between Old and New Testament sanctification, and destroys the foundation of much of the Reformed view of the law. Thus, NCT fits within the theologically antinomian camp.”*⁵¹ Though I think this is a harsh assessment of NCT none the less it is obvious that such interpretations are possible.

Barcellos continues, *“The righteousness demanded of Adam is essentially the same demanded of us. The righteousness procured by Christ’s life (His active obedience) and imputed to believers is the same for all the elect. NCT unwittingly tampers with what constitutes essential righteousness in man. This is so because NCT sees the moral law as a dynamic concept in Scripture and therefore in process, both changing and advancing as revelation unfolds. This impinges upon the active obedience of Christ, the imputation of righteousness, and the ground of justification. The Bible teaches one Justification based on one righteousness, not various levels of righteousness depending on what moral law one is under. The Decalogue is the heart of the moral law. It summarizes all moral law. Its utility transcends covenantal bounds.”* Barcellos’ charge is a serious one since it highlights the corroding effects of NCT upon the work of Christ as our law keeper. Moreover, it clouds the exact nature of his representation of the elect and his correlation to Adam’s representative role according to Romans 5:11-21.

However one of the positives in its approach is that it advocates clear demarcation lines between the Old and New Covenant. It is unambiguous in its teaching that the Law of Moses was binding on Old Covenant believers up until the coming of Jesus Christ. Consequently according to Mike Adams *“The most we can say about these texts (moral law) is that they are repeated in the New Covenant law of Christ and as such, are binding law on the New Covenant believer, just as they were binding law in the Old Covenant. This makes them binding law in two different historical covenants, but does not provide an example of “eternal moral law”.*⁵² NCT provides clarity through discontinuity with a hermeneutic that can be simplified to say that if it’s in the New Testament then it’s binding, if it’s not, then it’s not binding.

⁵⁰ D. Moo in W.G Strickland, *The Law, The Gospel, And The Modern Christian* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1993) pg 364.

⁵¹ R Barcellos, *The Death of the Decalogue* (Tabletalk, September 2002) cited at www.solochristo.com 12/10/2003.

⁵² M Adams, *Concerning Old Testament laws: Rethinking Our Use of ‘Moral Law’* cited at www.solochristo.com 12/10/2003.

Dispensational

Dispensational preaching prides itself on rightly dividing the word of God. This means that there is complete discontinuity between the Old and New Covenants. In some ways their preaching is similar to NCT's which denies the Old Covenant moral law has any binding force in the New Covenant believers' life. Dispensational preaching argues that Old Testament Law is for the dispensation of Israel who was under law; however, this is in contrast to New Testament believers who are under grace.

As a consequence, Strickland argues that *"the Mosaic law naturally ended when God suspended his program with Israel and inaugurated a program with the Church."* So that we may say *"now that faith has come, we are no longer under the supervision of the law."*⁵³ According to dispensational teaching (like NCT) only the Law of Christ is binding on Christians and that is *"no mere rephrasing of the Mosaic law, for it consists not of concrete corpus of demands, but rather of basic principles, for each believer is promised permanent indwelling by the Holy Spirit."*⁵⁴ Consequently *"there is no need for any lengthy, detailed, codified, external means of restraint as in the Mosaic Law."*⁵⁵ Love then is the fulfillment of the law.

Like NCT dispensational theology argues that the standard for people is moral law, but warns us that this is not to be equated with the Mosaic covenant. Nor should it be compared with the Decalogue since this was at best a temporary and incomplete revelation of moral law. And like the weakness in NCT Dispensational preaching makes little if any use of the first and second Adam theology that CT uses via the contrast of the Covenant of works and the Covenant of grace. Consequently, Dispensationalists make very little of the active obedience of Christ as our law keeper and as a consequence major on the passive obedience on the cross which undermines the doctrine of justification and the imputation of righteousness from Christ's covenant keeping on our behalf.

Moreover, like NCT there remains the suspicion of antinomianism since the idea of an objective and external moral law is considered fleshly and inappropriate for New Covenant believers who are led by the Spirit. This to my mind draws a false antithesis between obedience or duty, and that of faith. Moreover, the only moral law preached would be the third use of the law (to sanctify believers) and would apparently have very little to say to unbelievers regarding their duties before

In conclusion then, we can see that the major differences in the use of the moral law in preaching relate to the identification of the contents of moral law and its relationship to believers and unbelievers. Generalising it would

⁵³ W.G Strickland, *The Law, The Gospel, And The Modern Christian* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1993) pg 276.

⁵⁴ W.G Strickland, *The Law, The Gospel, And The Modern Christian* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1993) pg 277.

⁵⁵ W.G Strickland, *The Law, The Gospel, And The Modern Christian* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1993) pg 277.

be fair to say that NCT and dispensational teachings are closer together in their theological constructions than either of them to the CT position. This is evident in that both reject the idea of the eternal moral law which has a fixed content that has been communicated in varying ways throughout the ages. Reisinger makes this point really clearly when he says *“God has opened to us His mind and instructed us in his will. He has made his laws a matter of record. First he wrote them on the hearts of our original parents. Then he proclaimed them by word of mouth through the prophets and preachers, from Adam to Sinai. Later, at Sinai, God inscribed them on tablets of stone. The orthodox Christian Church has always referred to the ten commandments as the moral law.”*⁵⁶

Both Dispensationalists and NCT stand as one is arguing that although God has revealed moral law in every dispensation it is only binding within the economy or dispensation it is given. Hence both would identify the law of Christ with the love commands of the New Testament as a guide or principle as opposed to talking about objective and binding duties that oblige men and women in every generation. Moreover, they would both emphasise discontinuity both in the content of law and the method of fulfilling it, since it is no longer about doing as it is about love in the Spirit (though one wonders what the Spirit in love would have us do!).⁵⁷

Having said this Moo argues *“that in actual practice, very little is lost. For the NT clearly takes up all the Decalogue, except the Sabbath as part of Christ’ law..”*⁵⁸ This assessment by Moo doesn’t seem to address the challenges to federalism (two Adams) and the importance of Christ’s active obedience that forms the basis of his righteousness and our justification by faith. As a consequence I believe CT is best positioned to make use of the three uses of the law through its federalist system of theology that’s predicated upon a fixed standard of moral law that all people everywhere are obliged to keep. Yet no one can since the fall of Adam, and our message is simple, we are saved by works... just not our own. Jesus Christ is our righteousness, our law keeper and our response to him is love working its way out in obedience to the moral law of God.

⁵⁶ E.C Reisinger, *The Law And The Gospel* (New Jersey: P&R Publishing, 1997) pg 25.

⁵⁷ D. Moo in J.S Feinberg (Ed), *Continuity and Discontinuity* (Illinois: Crossways Books, 1988) pg 210.

⁵⁸ D. Moo in J.S Feinberg (Ed), *Continuity and Discontinuity* (Illinois: Crossways Books, 1988) pg 218.

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