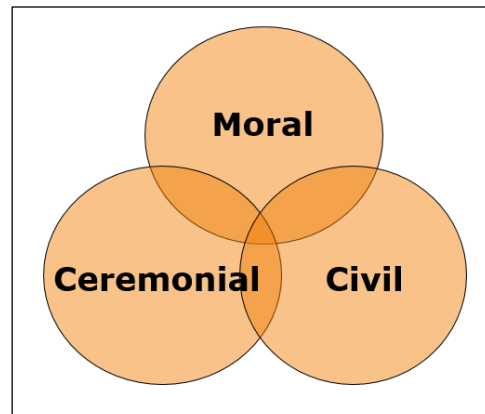


# The Three Aspects of the Law of God

*The law of God is central to the message of the Bible. Only Jesus Christ eclipses the law in importance. ... Because he is the everlasting and holy God, and we are his creatures, this law has incessant relevance.*  
(G.I. Williamson, *The Westminster Confession of Faith for Study Classes*, P&R, 2004, p. 178-79)



The God of the Bible reveals himself to man in many ways. One significant way is in his creation. When we see the beauty - the simple as well as the complex, the utterly magnificent balanced by the seemingly insignificant, the vast immensity in comparison with the absolutely minute, we are looking at the very mind and character of God at work. God is a God of order and creation is the result of his bringing order out of chaos. Creation also reveals its maker to be a God of power, of infinite capacity and creativity. Whether we are looking at erupting volcanoes or the strength of violent storms here on earth or trying to measure the power and energy of the universe, we are reminded that far above all this is the immensity of our Creator.

God also reveals himself in how he speaks. When you read the Scriptures, which are the very words of God "breathed out" through the writings of chosen men (cf. 2 Tim. 3:16-17), you become aware not only of God's voice - his "personality" or "personhood" - but also of God's attributes, his character, his values and his priorities.

## The Moral Law

Supreme among those attributes or characteristics are God's righteousness, holiness and justice. In God there is no corruption but rather absolute purity. There is no shadow of turning with God - he is the same yesterday, today and forever. These attributes become evident when God makes man, who is fashioned in the very image of God. And God's righteous and holy character and his will for man is expressed in terms of God's moral nature. This was impressed upon that first man in the garden and has remained with all men ever since.

*For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. (Rom. 1:20, ESV)*

**God gave to Adam a law, as a covenant of works, by which he bound him, and all his posterity, to personal, entire, exact, and perpetual obedience; promised life upon the fulfilling, and threatened death upon the breach of it; and endued him with power and ability to keep it. (WCF, 18.1)**

What was impressed upon the heart and soul of that first man at creation is revealed again in fullness and in concise summary when God reveals himself to Moses on Mt. Sinai and speaks to him, giving him the Ten Commandments (cf. Ex. 20; Dt. 5).

**This law, after his fall, continued to be a perfect rule of righteousness; and, as such, was delivered by God upon Mt. Sinai in ten commandments, and written in**

**two tables: the first four containing our duty towards God, and the other six our duty to man. (WCF, 18.2)**

The Ten Commandments is the basis of Christian ethics. It is the essence of the wisdom by which God created the heavens and earth, and as such, it is part of the very tapestry of reality. God's Moral Law remains the code of righteousness, holiness and justice. It will not ever grow old or obsolete. There will never be or come a time, age or culture when violating any of these commandments will ever be appropriate, acceptable or of no concern to God, nor a time when they will ever cease to define sin for us or cease to be the basis upon which our sinfulness will be judged by God, condemned and punished outside of his saving grace. The Moral Law will continue to stand until after heaven and earth themselves disappear (cf. Mt. 5:17-18). The moral law of God is with us for all of time.

**Moral Law**

Gen. 1:1

Rev. 20:15

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Due to the fall of man into sin – his initial breaking of this Moral Law – man's relationship to God changed. God's attributes of holiness and justice do not attract man anymore to God. Instead, they now drive man from God in fear and willful rebellion. The moral nature of God's law now judges man and man has grown to resent God for his standard of morality and truth.

But, by God's grace, the gospel of Jesus Christ is extended to sinful men, pointing them to the very way of redemption that he provides. Whereas the Moral Law of God judges men in their sin, the hope of God, extended by the promise of the gospel is offered by God. Through the gospel, Christ fulfills the Moral Law for all those who receive the gift of Christ in faith.

**The Ceremonial Law**

Because the gospel is key to man's redemption, his attention to it and understanding of it are vitally important. This was especially critical before the coming of Christ when the people of God could only anticipate their deliverance but never see it during their own lifetime. This was done through God's instructions to the people of the Old Testament in the form of the worship of God they were to regularly carry out.

When did the worship of God start? Man before the fall was in perfect communion with God – his very life was worship. The Moral Law taught him how to live a life of worship unto God. But after man fell, it took the grace of God to provide sinful man with a way back to God. That came in the form of formal worship, which was given to build a faith and hope in man for his salvation to come in the form of Jesus Christ. So the need for worship of God started after the fall when Adam and his wife were instructed to come before God and present their first blood sacrifices believing in faith that by doing so their sins would be atoned.

And so, in anticipation of that promised one's coming, God gave the first instructions by which sinful people may come before God and worship him, beginning with Cain and Abel. Much more of those instructions were given through Moses at Mt. Sinai when the people of God were becoming a nation. At that time, the practice of ceremonial law required a tabernacle, priests, defined structures for sacrifice and offerings.

God provided mankind ways to worship God – ways in which a sinful man may be drawn toward the one in whom both his judgment and his redemption is to be found. Before Christ's coming, this worship was in the form of various *ceremonial* requirements or laws that were to be offered in faith as exercises of anticipation – teaching the worshipper the basic principles of God's plan of redemption. "Ceremonial" comes from the word "ceremony". "Ceremony" is a formal act or series of acts prescribed by ritual,

protocol, or convention. And the description refers to the laws given of God by which man may enact the *ceremony* of formal service, giving God the worship how due his name. That included the need for substitutionary payment for sin, offering and sacrifice, and the choosing of the best, the first-born, the precious for such offering. The very form of which this worship was to consist was given by God, himself, in order that sinful man might learn of God's righteousness, holiness and justice, that he might also learn of the redemptive hope that he would find in the promise of God in Christ, and be able to claim the assurance of God that his sins were, indeed, forgiven when he was worshipped according to his instructions.

But none of these sacrifices would be satisfactory in and of themselves.

*For it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins.  
(Heb., 10:4, ESV)*

Sacrifices among the people in the Old Testament were not merely to appease God or "pay" God off, so to speak, in some bargaining way. Sacrifices taught man the terribleness of his sin as well as the terrible price that needed to be paid in order for his sin to be satisfied. But those sacrifices, themselves, could not accomplish that. Only when they were offered in faith and in hope in the one yet to come, the one promised by God himself, would they be accepted for the time being.

**... God was pleased to give the people of Israel, as a Church under age, ceremonial laws containing several typical ordinances, partly of worship, prefiguring Christ, his graces, actions, sufferings, and benefits; ... All which ceremonial laws are now abrogated under the New Testament. (WCF, 19.3)**

The Ceremonial Law of God, first given to man after his fall and immediately upon his need to be reconciled to God, was later given in its fullness to Moses also at Mt. Sinai, after which the Tabernacle was constructed and the worship of God commenced in a formal way.

Is the ceremonial law still in effect today? No. We do not make these sacrifices anymore. Why not? Because Christ, who was promised to Adam and his wife, satisfies this law. He is, as John the Baptist so heartily declared, the perfect lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world (rf. Jn. 1:29), once for all given. He has, indeed, come as promised and his sacrifice is sufficient. Our worship today is not according to ceremonial law. Now, it is a step of faith in the lives of Christians not to offer those sacrifices. Our worship today is with a sacrifice of praise and an expression of thanksgiving for the work of Christ and the continual recommitting of lives to the service of Christ in his church.

### **Ceremonial Law**

Gen. 3:15

Jn. 19:30



### **The Civil Law**

God also provided a *Civil Law* which was meant to guide men in his relationship not only with God but with the community of men throughout this present age - for governance, organization and protection.

The civil sphere of the law is about government. Here we meet with a new word - "theocracy" - a government under God. Israel was to be a kingdom ruled and governed uniquely - not by human government, but by God himself. To that end, God also gave out civil laws for things such as social interactions, holy days, judicial matters, legal precedents, all of which would apply to the people once they become a nation unto themselves and moved into the land of Canaan as home.

When did this begin? The civil laws were not evident until God formed Israel into a nation at Mt. Sinai, organizing the Israelites into a theocracy – a nation uniquely governed under God’s direct rule and law. These laws also revealed God’s righteousness, holiness and justice but in the form of everyday governance. And so, there were laws of judicial obedience, of slavery, of reciprocity, of dealing with violations and appeals. All was in place so the people of God might live together in peace under the lordship of their God.

However, in the story of Israel in the Old Testament, we find that the nation’s sin and rebellion corrupted this theocracy and that God eventually judged Israel for it. After several generations, several kings, and several prophets, the people turned their backs to God and were carried off into exile. They were never again given the privilege of being uniquely ruled and governed directly by God as a theocracy. Instead, they would always be ruled by other nations and peoples.

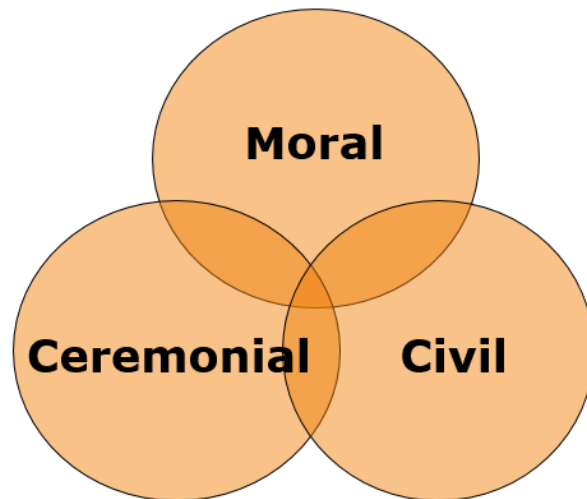
**Civil Law**

Ex. 19:12

2 Chron. 36:21



So, because of this judgment, we say that the civil sphere of God’s law was brought to a close at the time of the exile - after the kingdom of God in Israel and in Judah ceased to exist. To be sure, aspects of God’s civil law are still used by other nations in the wise governance of their own countries. But God’s theocracy cannot be recreated in this present age on man’s own terms. That awaits for the Kingdom of God to come.



**Moral Law**

Gen. 1:1

Rev. 20:15



**Ceremonial Law**

Gen. 3:15

Jn. 19:30



**Civil Law**

Ex. 19:12

2 Chron. 36:21



So, in summary, we can see that God has given three aspects of his law -the moral - which is a part of creation itself; the ceremonial - which was given to sinful men in order that they might stand before a holy God in worship, and which came to its perfect fulfillment in Christ Jesus; and the civil - which was given for the theocracy of Israel but which came to its conclusion at God's judgment upon the nation and which foreshadowed the kingdom of God yet to come.

From *Studies in the Book of Exodus*, by Pastor Dave Barker, November, 2000, revised 2015.

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