

Has it Really Come to This?

Comments on a Banner Article

Part 1

For convenience, I divide my article into two.

Here is an extract from the current issue of *The Banner of Truth*, taken from an article which, in itself, is an extract from J.Gresham Machen's *The Christian View of Man*, which the Banner published in 1965:

Consider for a moment, my friends, the majesty of the law of God as the Bible sets it forth. One law over all – valid for Christians, valid for non-Christians, valid now and valid to all eternity. How grandly that law is promulgated amid the thunderings of Sinai!... The whole universe is beneath his holy law... God's law embracing all!... Liberty under the law of God...⁴

Machen, let us be clear, is talking about the law of Moses.

What's your reaction to what he said? 'It's just what we need today, with its flippancy, superficiality, lack of the sense of sin! This is the material to give them! Especially with the rise of this new-covenant theology and its antinomianism. Well done Banner! Well done!' Is that your response?

Well, it's not mine! Here is my reaction: 'Really, Banner, this takes the biscuit! Such a towering Bible teacher as Gresham Machen, too! How the gold has dimmed (Lam. 4:1)! How did you come to re-publish this in 1965? How did you decide to re-publish it again in the current magazine? Really, your readers deserve better than this! And if it does represent an effort at stemming the tide of new-covenant theology, it is, I must say, a signal failure'.

⁴ J.Gresham Machen: 'The Majesty of the Law of God', *The Banner of Truth*, Nov. 2017, pp1-6.

Why am I so categorical? I can answer that very easily. I find Machen's words grievously at variance with Scripture. Indeed, I cannot recall ever having read something so obviously unbiblical in so prestigious a magazine. In saying this, I am not breathing a word against the perfect law of God. Not a word! But Machen's sentiments fall far wide of the scriptural mark.

The law of Moses is valid for Christians. Really?

The law of Moses is valid for non-Christians? Really?

The law of Moses will be valid in eternity? Really?

Where does one start!

Let me begin with this fact – this scriptural fact; the old covenant, the law, was given to Israel, and only to Israel (Deut. 4:1 – 5:33; 7:8-12; Ps. 147:19-20; Rom. 2:12-14; 9:4; 1 Cor. 9:20-21). It was not given to Adam. It was not given to all men. It was not given to Abraham. It was given to Israel – and only Israel – through Moses on Mount Sinai.⁵ Nothing illustrates this better than the sabbath. The sabbath was the main distinguishing marker of the law, separating Israel from all other people (Ex. 31:13-17; Ezek. 20:12-24). Clearly, the sabbath as a weekly observance, being an integral part of the law of Moses, was entirely Jewish.⁶ The Jews, and only the Jews, were under the law. It was given to them as an integral and inseparable part⁷ of a temporary covenant, introduced, added by God, alongside the Abrahamic covenant, and was planned by God to last only until the coming of the Seed, Christ, who would abolish it by fulfilling it and rendering it obsolete (Matt. 5:17-22; Rom. 10:4; Heb. 7:12,18-22; 8:13). These scriptural facts must not be

⁵ The law was given to Israel at Sinai, and repeated almost at once after Moses broke the tables of stone. The law was repeated to Israel about forty years later near Beth Peor, just before Israel entered the promised land.

⁶ The sabbath was not given to Adam; it was not given to all men. Gen. 2:1-3 and Mark 2:27-28 do not prove the contrary. See my *Sabbath Questions; Sabbath Notes; Essential*.

⁷ See my 'What God Has Joined... Covenant and Law Inseparable'.

dismissed, glossed or blurred. Being cavalier with Scripture inevitably and rightly carries a high price tag. The *Banner* article is cavalier in the extreme. All men (whether believers or unbelievers) are not under the law of Moses.⁸

And what about the law of Moses ruling in eternity? The mind boggles. Will the inhabitants of the new heaven and the new earth be worried about whether or not they should seethe a goat in its mother's milk? Will they be concerned about the wearing of garments of different materials? What need will they have for commandments against adultery, when there is no marriage or giving in marriage in eternity (Matt. 22:30)? Does the *Banner* – and did Machen – really believe that there will be need for commandments against murder, theft and lying in eternity?⁹ Really? What a strange view of eternal bliss! After all, are we not explicitly told of the sort of people for whom God introduced the law of Moses? Paul could not have put it more clearly:

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 sexually immoral, men who practice homosexuality, enslavers, liars, perjurers, and whatever else is contrary to sound doctrine, in accordance with the gospel of the glory of the blessed God with which I have been entrusted (1 Tim. 1:9-11).

Is this a description of those who will live for ever in the new heaven and the new earth, and is this a description of the way they will be carrying on in that age? Really?

And so it goes on. Machen tells us the law of Moses was given 'grandly' on Sinai. Yet Exodus 19 and Hebrews 12 tell us that it was given with terror, and frightened everybody – including Moses – out of their wits. And quite right, too.

⁸ See my *Believers; Christ Is All*.

⁹ Incidentally – see below – these commandments are part of the so-called moral law, not the ceremonial or civil, allowing for the moment this non-scriptural division of the law.

Machen speaks of liberty under the law. Really? 2 Corinthians 3 tells us that the old covenant (and, that included the law),¹⁰ was a condemning covenant and law,¹¹ and this is confirmed by many scriptures (see, for instance, Deut. 27:26; Gal. 3:10; Jas. 2:10-11). Some liberty!¹² One offence brought condemnation. Does the Banner really want to talk about ‘grandly’ and ‘liberty’ and ‘eternity’ in light of this? Really?

We have heard from Machen, and you have heard from me. It is high time we heard from Scripture. To my mind, the following passages destroy Machen’s case.

Sin will have no dominion over you, since you are not under law but under grace (Rom. 6:14).

My brothers, you also have died to the law through the body of Christ, so that you may belong to another, to him who has been raised from the dead, in order that we may bear fruit for God. For while we were living in the flesh, our sinful passions, aroused by the law, were at work in our members to bear fruit for death. But now we are released from the law, having died to that which held us captive, so that we serve in the new way of the Spirit and not in the old way of the written code... For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do. By sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin, he condemned sin in the flesh, in order that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit (Rom. 6:14-18; 7:4-6; 8:3-4).

You are a letter from Christ delivered by us, written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts. Such is the confidence that we have through Christ toward God. Not that we are sufficient in ourselves to claim anything as coming from us, but our sufficiency is from God, who has made us sufficient to be ministers of a new covenant, not of the letter but of the Spirit.

¹⁰ See my ‘What God Has Joined... Covenant and Law Inseparable’.

¹¹ Paul was referring explicitly to the ten commandments, the so-called moral law. See below.

¹² Jas. 2:12 speaks of the law of Christ, not the law of Moses. See my *Believers; Christ Is All*.

For the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life. Now if the ministry of death, carved in letters on stone, came with such glory that the Israelites could not gaze at Moses' face because of its glory, which was being brought to an end, will not the ministry of the Spirit have even more glory? For if there was glory in the ministry of condemnation, the ministry of righteousness must far exceed it in glory. Indeed, in this case, what once had glory has come to have no glory at all, because of the glory that surpasses it. For if what was being brought to an end came with glory, much more will what is permanent have glory (2 Cor. 3:3-11).

Through the law I died to the law, so that I might live to God. I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me (Gal. 2:19-20).

If a law had been given that could give life, then righteousness would indeed be by the law. But the Scripture imprisoned everything under sin, so that the promise by faith in Jesus Christ might be given to those who believe. Now before [the] faith [that is, the gospel] came, we [that is, the Jews] were held captive under the law, imprisoned until the coming faith [that is, the gospel] would be revealed. So then, the law was our guardian [better, child-custodian] until Christ came, in order that we might be justified by faith. But now that [the] faith [that is, the gospel] has come, we are no longer under a guardian (Gal. 3:22-25).¹³

Tell me, you who desire to be under the law, do you not listen to the law? For it is written that Abraham had two sons, one by a slave woman and one by a free woman. But the son of the slave was born according to the flesh, while the son of the free woman was born through promise. Now this may be interpreted allegorically: these women are two covenants. One is from Mount Sinai, bearing children for slavery; she is Hagar. Now Hagar is Mount Sinai in Arabia; she corresponds to the present Jerusalem, for she is in slavery with her children. But the Jerusalem above is free, and she is our mother... Now you, brothers, like Isaac, are children of promise. But just as at that time he who was born according to the flesh persecuted him

¹³ For the justification of my interpolations, see my *Three*.

who was born according to the Spirit, so also it is now. But what does the Scripture say? ‘Cast out the slave woman and her son, for the son of the slave woman shall not inherit with the son of the free woman’. So, brothers, we are not children of the slave but of the free woman. For freedom Christ has set us free; stand firm therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery... For you were called to freedom, brothers. Only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another. For the whole law is fulfilled in one word: ‘You shall love your neighbour as yourself’... But I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh... If we live by the Spirit, let us also keep in step with the Spirit (Gal. 4:21 – 5:1,13-16,25).

[Christ]... having abolished in his flesh the enmity; that is, the law of commandments contained in ordinances... putting to death the enmity (Eph. 2:14-16).

[Christ] having wiped out the handwriting of requirements that was against us, which was contrary to us. And he has taken it out of the way, having nailed it to the cross (Col. 2:14).

Christ has obtained a ministry that is as much more excellent than the old as the covenant he mediates is better, since it is enacted on better promises. For if that first covenant had been faultless, there would have been no occasion to look for a second. For he finds fault with them when he says: ‘Behold, the days are coming, declares the Lord, when I will establish a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah, not like the covenant that I made with their fathers on the day when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt. For they did not continue in my covenant, and so I showed no concern for them, declares the Lord. For this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, declares the Lord: I will put my laws into their minds,¹⁴ and write them on their hearts, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. And they shall not teach, each one his neighbour and each one his brother, saying: “Know the Lord”, for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest. For I will be merciful toward their iniquities, and I will remember their sins no more’. In speaking of a new

¹⁴ The ‘law’ in question is the law of Christ, not the law of Moses. See earlier note.

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covenant, he makes the first one obsolete. And what is becoming obsolete and growing old is ready to vanish away (Heb. 8:6-13).

You have not come to what may be touched, a blazing fire and darkness and gloom and a tempest and the sound of a trumpet and a voice whose words made the hearers beg that no further messages be spoken to them. For they could not endure the order that was given: 'If even a beast touches the mountain, it shall be stoned'. Indeed, so terrifying was the sight that Moses said: 'I tremble with fear'. But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering, and to the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God, the judge of all, and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect, and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel (Heb. 12:18-24).

I submit that the Banner has laid down one stick, and I have laid down another; namely, Scripture. I say further that the two are clearly at variance with each other. They are poles apart! Banner has got 'the law' wrong. It is not only Banner, of course. Machen has gone astray. Above all, covenant theology cannot survive.

I can imagine only one response. If there is another solution, I should like to hear it. But I can imagine only one. And it is one I have heard on countless occasions.¹⁵ Here it is: 'Ah! But you've made a dreadful mistake, an elementary mistake! You've forgotten one of the most basic points in this debate. You've forgotten that the law is divided into three parts. As long as you remember and apply this basic hermeneutic, all the above falls into place, and Banner, Machen, covenant theology and Scripture neatly dovetail. The law is to be divided into three parts – moral, ceremonial and civil. Christ has fulfilled, abolished and rendered obsolete the second and third parts of the law, leaving the moral law as "the law". And that is how Machen and Scripture can be reconciled'.

¹⁵ I have read it in the *Banner*. See my 'Misleading, Sad, Revealing: "Relevant Today" by Jeremy Brooks.

Well, if that *is* the response, I have just two things to say.

First, as I have noted in passing, even if the tripartite division of the law is called upon, it does not get round such things as laws against murder, adultery, theft and lying in eternity. Moreover the law's curse applies to all the law, including the so-called moral law.

But, *secondly*, the tripartite division of the law is not a scriptural hermeneutic. It is nothing but a conjuring trick. It is unscriptural! The Bible never makes such a division. Never! Certainly the Jews never did. So where did it come from? It is a traditional assumption taken over from an invention of the medieval Church. In particular, it came from that 'prince of schoolmen', Thomas Aquinas, the orthodox theologian *par excellence* of the Roman Catholic Church, whose influence even today in Protestantism, let alone Romanism, is greater than ever. Forming his views by drawing upon Aristotle, Augustine, Paul, classical antiquity, Arabs and medieval Jews – what a combination! – Aquinas devised a system which, though sophisticated, was vague and obscure. It is his labelling of the ten commandments as 'the moral law' which has come to play such an important role in Reformed theology.¹⁶ Sensitive to Papist accusations over antinomianism, the Reformers countered by using Aquinas' tripartite division of the law, claiming that believers are under the moral law for progressive sanctification.

And so to conclude the first part of my response to Banner's extract from Machen. I make a suggestion; indeed, I issue a friendly challenge to the Banner. Produce an article establishing the tripartite division of the law, and do it by Scripture alone, without mentioning any theologian, book, theology, Confession or catechism. Just Scripture. It is, after all, one of the key issues between covenant theology and new covenant theology. Now, what an invaluable service you would provide, if you could show the world that the tripartite division of the law really is scriptural! It would kill two birds with one article. It would stop new-covenant theology in its tracks, and establish one of the

¹⁶ See my 'Reading the Bible'.

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leading fundamentals of covenant theology. Without the tripartite division of the law, covenant theology collapses. So I put it to my friends at the Banner: ‘How about it? Will you do it?’ As I say, it would do a world of good.¹⁷

¹⁷ If you have already done so, please let me know, and if you really have established the biblical proof of the tripartite division, I will publicly apologise and admit my error.