

**Puritan and New Covenant Baptists:
Co-Defenders of the Decalogue**
by Martin Rizley

I want to speak to you this evening about an issue that has been a matter of ongoing interest and concern to me for a number of years. That issue concerns the Christian's relationship to the Law of God, and in particular, to the Decalogue or Ten Commandments as a revelation of the moral will of God. As you well know, for some time now, there has been a rather heated controversy among Reformed or Calvinistic Baptists concerning the role of the Decalogue in Christian teaching and ethical instruction. That controversy arose in the early 1980's as a number of Calvinistic Baptists who had discovered the riches of Reformed theology began to question certain aspects of that theology as it had developed in the seventeenth century through the English Puritans. Three things in particular were questioned: (1) the idea of one overarching "covenant of grace" governing all of God's covenantal dealings with man from the fall of Adam through the whole of redemptive history; (2) the strict identification of God's unchanging moral law with the Ten Words spoken by God at Mt. Sinai; and (3) the strict "sabbatarian" view of Sunday which was developed by the English Puritans and enshrined confessionally for Baptists in the Second London Confession of 1689. As some Calvinistic Baptists began to question these three tenets of historic Puritan theology, a rift developed between those who held strictly to the Puritan view of the Law and those who dissented from the Puritan view.

What is the precise difference between the Puritan view of the Law (associated with covenant theology) and the view of the Law espoused by New Covenant theology? I agree with John Piper when he writes that *"the essential difference between New Covenant Theology (hereafter NCT) and Covenant Theology (CT). . . concerns the **Mosaic Law**."* He goes on to explain: *"Covenant Theology holds that the Mosaic Law can be divided into three groups of laws-- those regulating the government of Israel (civil laws), ceremonial laws, and moral laws. The ceremonial law and civil law are no longer in force because the former was fulfilled in Christ and the latter only applied to Israel's theocracy, which is now defunct. But the moral law continues.*

New Covenant Theology argues that one cannot divide the law up in that way, as though part of the Mosaic law can be abrogated while the rest remains in force. The Mosaic Law is a unity, they say, and so if a part of it is canceled, all of it must be canceled. On top of this, they say that the New Testament clearly teaches that the Mosaic Law as a whole is superseded in Christ. It is, in other words, no longer our direct and immediate source of guidance. The Mosaic Law is no longer binding on the believer.

Does this mean that believers are not bound by any divine law? No, because the Mosaic Law has been replaced by the Law of Christ. New Covenant Theology makes a distinction between the eternal moral law and the code in which God expresses that law to us. The Mosaic Law is an expression of God's eternal moral law as a particular code which also contains positive regulations pertinent to the code's temporal purpose, and therefore, the cancellation of the Mosaic Law does not mean that the eternal moral law is itself canceled. Rather, upon canceling the Mosaic law, God gave us a different expression of his eternal moral law-- namely, the Law of Christ, consisting in the moral instructions of Christ's teaching and the New Testament. The key issue that NCT seeks to raise is: Where do we look to see the expression of God's eternal moral law today-- do we look to Moses, or to Christ? NCT says we look to Christ. . ."

Piper rightly observes that New Covenant theologians refuse to isolate the Ten Words

spoken at Mt. Sinai from their historical and covenantal context in the Law of Moses in such a way as to apply their literal force *unrestrictedly* to the conscience of New Covenant believers. In other words, they refuse to identify God's immutable moral law in a *strict* sense with the words of the Decalogue. This refusal has led, not surprisingly, to the charge that New Covenant theology is *antinomian*, which is to say, that it encourages loose and immoral living on the part of Christians, by saying that believers are free to ignore the moral law of God. One critic of NCT writes, for example, "*A mantra has gripped the evangelical world that says that we who live in the New Testament age do not have to obey the Old Testament moral law found in the Ten Words. . .*" (George W. Knight, III) Another critic claims that NCT represents an "assault" on the law of God. He says, "*the moral law of God, as epitomized in the Ten Commandments according to Reformed and Puritan Christianity, binds all men everywhere until Christ returns. The rampant antinomian attack on this great doctrine threatens the very foundations of biblical Christianity*" (Samuel Waldron). Strong words indeed, which suggest that some view NCT as a subtle and soul-destroying heresy which has little or nothing of positive good to contribute to the development of Christian theology.

One of the most popular refutations of New Covenant theology that has been published to date is entitled, *In Defense of the Decalogue*. The author of this book, Richard Barcellos, believes that New Covenant theology represents an attack on the Decalogue as a divinely revealed standard of righteousness which God has given to Christians to guide them in their spiritual walk and to which they must be increasingly conformed, if they are truly regenerate. He believes that many are being led astray by this aberrant theology from the path of obedience to God's moral will. He believes that the Decalogue must be defended as an immutable standard of righteousness against its attackers; hence, the title, *In Defense of the Decalogue*.

The question I want to raise this evening is the following: does New Covenant theology really represent an "attack" on the Decalogue in the manner of classical antinomianism? Does acceptance of New Covenant Theology mean that one necessarily opposes the use of the Decalogue as a tool of evangelism and as a tool for Christian ethical instruction? Can one accept the basic tenets of New Covenant theology and still uphold the Decalogue as an important revelation of God's moral will which is of abiding significance to all men in every generation?

This evening, I would like to explain why I believe that it is possible for someone to hold to the basic tenets of NCT and still believe that the Ten Commandments have an important role to play in Christian teaching and preaching. It is not the basic tenets of New Covenant theology themselves, but rather, wrong inferences drawn from those tenets, which have led some proponents of NCT to deny that the Ten Commandments have any legitimate place in Christian teaching and preaching as an abidingly useful revelation of the moral will of God.

What are the basic tenets of NCT?

First, let me explain my understanding of the basic premises of NCT. Those who hold to NCT generally agree on the following affirmations:

1) Christ has established a new covenant by his shed blood that has brought an end to the Old Covenant on Mt. Sinai. The old covenant in all its parts has lost its covenantally binding authority over the people of God, who are now called to look to Christ alone as their covenant Mediator and the only Lawgiver of the Church. Christians are no more under the immediate authority of the "tablets of stone" than they are under any part of that covenantal system which was mediated through Moses on Mt. Sinai.

I believe that New Covenant theology is right in its assertion that Mosaic legal system

formed a *covenantal unity*, so that one cannot be covenantally bound to obey one part of that law without being bound to obey the whole of that law.

Lest anyone regard this view of the Law as novel, it should be pointed out that Martin Luther affirmed the very same view of the Law at the outset of the Reformation period. In his sermon, "How Christians Should Regard Moses," Luther wrote the following:

"Moses was an intermediary solely for the Jewish people. It was to them that he gave the law. . . If I were to accept Moses in one commandment, I would have to accept the entire Moses. Thus the consequence would be that if I accept Moses as master, then I must have myself circumcised, wash my clothes in the Jewish way, eat and drink and dress thus and so, and observe all that stuff. So then, we will neither observe nor accept Moses. Moses is dead. His rule ended when Christ came."

Luther goes on to add that the "expired" character of the Sinaitic covenant extends even to the tables of the Decalogue. Citing the prologue to the Decalogue in Exodus 20:1, he writes, *"This text makes it clear that even the Ten Commandments do not pertain to us. For God never led us out of Egypt, but only the Jews."*

This is the same Luther who includes an exposition of the Decalogue in his Larger and Shorter Catechisms. If one asks how Luther can apply the commandments of the Decalogue to Christians, on the one hand, and deny that the Ten Commandments pertain to us, on the other, the answer is simple: *"We read Moses not because he applies to us, that we must obey him, but because he agrees with the **natural law** and is conceived better than the Gentiles would ever have been able to do. Thus the Ten Commandments are a mirror of our life, in which we can see wherein we are lacking, etc."*

Luther applied the Ten Commandments to Christians, therefore, because he believed that they represented an especially clear revelation of the *natural law*, which is universally binding. The moral duties revealed in the Decalogue bind all men, not because all are bound to keep the law written on the tablets of stone, but because all are bound to keep the duties of the natural law, which correspond generally to what one finds written on the tablets God gave to Israel. Those tablets do not bind Christians by any immediate authority. That is why Luther is able to speak of the fourth commandment as literally binding only on the people to whom those tablets were given. *"The sabbath was given to the Jews alone, for whom it is a stern commandment. . . in the New Testament the sabbath is annihilated as regards the crude external observance, for every day is a holy day, etc."*

So on the one hand, Luther recognized that the legal system of Sinai, including the Decalogue, represented a *covenantal unity* that cannot be divided. Christians are no more bound to keep one part of that law than another. No part of the law, not even the tablets of stone, holds direct, immediate, and unrestricted authority over the life or conscience of any believer, now that Christ has come.

At the same time, Luther recognized that the unified legal system of Sinai has a *moral aspect* which finds ultimate expression in the teaching of the Lord Jesus Christ. By expositing the moral precepts of God's law in all their spiritual depth, Christ thereby incorporated those precepts into the law of the New Covenant. The moral duties revealed to Israel in the Decalogue bind the church, therefore, not only because they belong to the natural law, but also because Christ has established them by His own teaching as a part of His law.

2) The second tenet of new covenant theology grows out of the first: **Because Christ alone possesses authority to govern the church as its sole Lawgiver, believers must look to the**

teaching of Christ and His apostles in the New Testament to determine the pattern that covenantal obedience takes in the New Covenant era. No law or duty that bound the children of Israel under Moses can be regarded as binding on the church except on the supposition that such a law or duty is harmonious with the character of the age in which we live, the "age of fulfillment." As Luther puts it, *"We will regard Moses as a teacher, but we will not regard him as our lawgiver-- unless he agrees with both the New Testament and the natural law."*

This does not mean, as Richard Barcellos alleges, that *"New Covenant Theology reduces the canon for ethics to the New Testament alone."* Rather, it means that, because of the preparatory and partly "shadowy" nature of the revelation of divine law contained in the Old Testament, the Old Testament functions as an ethical canon along with the New *"only when the full light of Christ's fulfillment is shed on it"* (Tom Wells). Christ's redeeming work and teaching helps to clarify the distinction between those "ceremonial" and "civil" aspects of the Law which are no longer directly applicable to the practice of believers today because of their temporally limited function, and those "moral" aspects of the Law which find their fullest and most complete expression in the teaching of Christ and His apostles. Thus, New Covenant theology agrees with Craig Blomberg when he writes, *"the Old Testament remains normative and relevant for Jesus' followers, but none of it can be rightly interpreted until one understands how it has been fulfilled in Christ."*

3) The third tenet of New Covenant Theology concerns the nature of the Decalogue as a revelation of moral law. **According to New Covenant Theology, the Decalogue cannot be identified in a strict or unqualified sense as "the moral law of God," even though its contents are almost wholly moral.** That is because one finds in the Decalogue, among the moral duties listed there, one *ceremonial* duty that was abrogated at the first coming of Christ. The strict keeping of the Sabbath Day, as a "shadow of things to come," was literally binding on the people of God only during the period of the Old Covenant (**Col. 2:17**); for that reason, these two tablets can never be described as "pure moral law," to borrow an expression from Walter Chantry. Nevertheless, the Decalogue does represent a *revelation* of God's moral law, albeit a partly shadowy revelation, pointing forward to and fulfilled in the clearer teaching of our Lord Jesus Christ and His apostles.

Why I believe in preaching on the Decalogue

Having defined the central tenets of New Covenant Theology, as I understand them, I would now like to explain why I believe that it is important for those who affirm these tenets to affirm at the same time the value and importance of preaching and teaching on the Decalogue as a regular part of Christian ethical instruction. Martin Luther did so, even though he recognized the historically conditioned character of the Decalogue, and therefore, did not seek to impose its precepts "unrestrictedly" on the conscience of believers.

The fact that one does not hold to the Puritan view of the Decalogue as "pure moral law" or view the Sabbath commandment as literally binding on all men does not mean that one opposes the authority of the Decalogue itself as a revelation of God's moral will. Neither does acceptance of New Covenant Theology mean that one believes that the interests of Christian holiness are best served by *jettisoning* the Old Testament from our Bibles or *ignoring* the moral instruction God has for us in the Ten Words. Here are several reasons why I believe in the importance of preaching and teaching on the Decalogue:

1) First of all, because I believe that the whole of Scripture was given for the benefit of Christians, and that the Old Testament, as well as the New, is "profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness" (2 Timothy 3:16).

Although the Jews in the Old Testament were given the oracles of God to hold in trust, yet the majority of them, being unregenerate, were not ultimately benefited from the things they heard. Paul explains that in God's eternal design, the things written in the Old Testament Scriptures were written ultimately for the benefit of Christians-- those who would be heirs to the blessings of God's New Covenant (1 Corinthians 10:11). If the Old Testament Scriptures are "for me," then that means that the Ten Words given to Israel in the Old Testament Scriptures must also be "for me." They were not addressed to me, nor am I living under "the ministry of death, in letters engraved on stone," but they are for me, in the sense, that Christ, my only Lord and Lawgiver, has something to teach me out of them.

2) Second, because I believe strongly in the existence of an immutable and perpetually binding moral law of God, and I believe that the Ten Words of Sinai represent an especially clear-- though not a climactic or final-- revelation of this law within the context of the Mosaic legal system.

Some proponents of New Covenant Theology have sought to deny the validity of the terms "moral," "ceremonial," and "civil" to describe various aspects of the Law of Moses. They say that because all the laws God gave to Israel were morally binding on the Jews, it is meaningless to describe some of those laws of the Old Covenant as "moral" in distinction from others. In their view, there is no such thing as a "moral" law. We can safely jettison the concept of "moral law" from our theological vocabulary as unhelpful, unbiblical, and unnecessary.

However, as Richard Barcellos rightly points out, there can be no denying that some laws which God gave to Israel were "moral" in a sense that others were not. *"Reformed theology. . . bases its understanding of moral law on creation imago Dei. When God made Adam, he made him to be like Himself, to reflect His communicable attributes. Creation imago Dei involves having the law of God written on the heart. It is that law which is based on his character. . . Moral law is based on creation imago Dei and on God's unchanging character and is man's possession via general revelation and, due to the entrance of sin, Scripture."*

It is one thing to affirm, as New Covenant Theology does, that the legal system of Sinai is a covenantal unity which cannot be divided into three distinct codes of law-- the moral law, the civil law, and the ceremonial law. If a person places himself under any part of that system, he is bound to keep the whole of it. The Law of Moses cannot be neatly divided into three distinct codes, since we find moral, civil, and ceremonial duties intertwined in every part of the Law, including the Decalogue. However, it is quite another thing to deny the meaningfulness of the terms "moral," "civil," and "ceremonial" to describe different *aspects* of the one Law which God gave to Israel at Sinai. Such a denial is by no means intrinsic to the system of New Covenant Theology.

It should be noted that many of those who have written on the subject of NCT have recognized a clear distinction between the "moral," "civil," and "ceremonial" aspects of Moses' law. While rejecting the strict equation of God's eternal moral law with the letter of the Decalogue, they do not deny the very concept of moral law.

For example, New Covenant writer Gary Long, in his book [Biblical Law and Ethics: Absolute and Covenantal](#), writes concerning the Law of God given at Mt. Sinai: *"Others rightly say that the whole law of God-- moral, ceremonial, and civil-- was fulfilled in Christ and that in*

His fulfillment the moral and spiritual truth eternally abides, but that the ceremonial and civil sanctions of the Old Testament shadows have been fulfilled in their antitype, and thus, have passed away." (Biblical Law and Ethics: Absolute and Covenantal, Backus Books Publishers, Rochester, New York, 1981, pp. 6-7, 52). In this quote, Gary Long does not object to the terms "moral," "ceremonial," and "civil" to describe different aspects of the Mosaic Law; on the contrary, he affirms that the moral aspect of Moses' law, being intrinsically immutable, "eternally abides" through the ministry of Christ, while the ceremonial and civil sanctions are "fulfilled."

I believe this distinction between categories of law is a very important one, and New Covenant theology will do itself a disservice if it fails to recognize this distinction. There is a difference between laws which are ceremonial or judicial in nature, and laws which are "universally binding" and "subjectively inherent in man by nature." While all of God's laws are harmonious with His moral character and reveal something of His holiness (such as the dietary laws), some laws are so deeply rooted in the character of God and the image of God in man, that God Himself could not change those laws without first changing His own character and His own divine image in man. For example, before God could ever annul the law which prohibits lying, He Himself would have to become capable of lying. But the writer to the Hebrews says, "*It is impossible for God to lie,*" so it is likewise impossible for God ever to relieve men of the moral duty of being truthful and sincere in all their relationships and testimony. That is why Jesus, in establishing the law of the New Covenant, affirms the abiding validity of the moral aspect of Moses' law, while at the same time, He abrogates all those temporal provisions in the law which were of a "ceremonial" and "judicial" nature, and which were designed to remain in force only until "the time of reformation."

It is true that New Covenant theology denies that the moral aspect of Moses' Law can be *strictly equated* with the demands of the Decalogue, since a ceremonial shadow is found in the heart and center of that covenantal summary document. Nevertheless, NCT does recognize a very close relationship between God's eternal moral law and the law which was written on the tablets of stone, so close, in fact, that I for one have no difficulty affirming that the Decalogue represents a *revelation* of God's moral law-- albeit a preliminary, preparatory, and partly shadowy revelation of that law that finds perfect fulfillment in the teaching of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Because the Decalogue represents an especially clear revelation of God's moral law within the context of the Mosaic Law, that explains why this part of the Law remains especially useful as an abiding *testimony* and *prophetic witness* to the will of Christ and the moral duty of all men everywhere, even after the old covenant has been abrogated in all its parts. Through the mediatorial authority of Christ, the moral duties previously enshrined on the tablets of stone remain in force, as Christ establishes those same duties by His own teaching and example and writes them on the hearts of His people through the Spirit. Such an understanding of the Decalogue explains why the apostolic epistles allude to these commandments as descriptive of God's will for Christians-- because they are almost wholly moral in content, and because of the substantial continuity between what was written on the tablets of stone for Israel and what God writes on the hearts of His people by the Spirit (Romans 13:8-10, Ephesians 6:1-3, James 2:10-11).

In response to the question, "What is the relationship between the Decalogue and the Law of Christ?" I would distinguish between three possible positions: one of total continuity, total discontinuity, or one of substantial continuity. The three positions can be described in the following way:

1) Total continuity-- This seems to be the view of the Puritans and the Westminster Assembly. The relationship between the Decalogue and Christ's own Law is one of strict identity. What God commanded of Israel on the tablets of stone He commands of us *in toto*; all ten commandments, therefore, are to be applied literally to the church, including the Law concerning the Sabbath day. There is nothing provisional, temporary, or historically conditioned about the duties appointed in the Decalogue, as there is with respect to the other parts of the Mosaic Law. The Decalogue sits "above history" in its supreme legal authority over every man. According to this view, it is very hard to avoid the impression that Christians are living under the supreme legislative authority of Moses and are looking to "the ministry of death, in letters engraved on stone" as their rule of life. During a period of my life when I was attending a strongly sabbatarian church, I always had the feeling that I was being placed under the tablets of stone as a rule of life, because no distinction whatsoever was made between the law written on the tablets of stone and the law of Christ. The relationship between the Decalogue and the Law of Christ was seen as one of total continuity.

2) Total discontinuity-- This position argues that, since the Decalogue was given as a covenant to Israel, and because that covenant came to an end at Calvary (which it did), the Decalogue has no further relevance for Christians as a revelation of God's moral will for their lives. There exists a complete disjunction between the law once given and Christ's law, which exists on a "higher plane" and therefore renders the older law irrelevant or redundant. Those who hold this position believe that to use the Decalogue as a "catechetical tool" for teaching Christian ethics is necessarily retrogressive, unhelpful, and even unlawful, since Christ's law is completely disjoined from the law which was written on tablets of stone. If Christians want to understand the will of God for their lives, they should study the New Testament only. Any teaching of the commandments of the Decalogue inevitably brings Christians in bondage to the ministry of death, and deprives them of their liberty in Christ. The commandments of the Decalogue need not and should not be used as a "framework" for teaching Christians God's moral will for their lives. It seems to me that the position of total discontinuity is hard to maintain, in light of the fact that the apostolic writers allude to the commandments of the Decalogue as revealing in an especially clear manner the moral will of God which is fulfilled in believers' lives as they walk in love through the power of the Holy Spirit (Romans 13:8-10, Ephesians 6:1-2, James 2:8-11). As D. A. Carson says, *"It is one thing for Paul to say he is not under covenant A but under covenant B. It would be quite another thing to say that the commands and prohibitions of the two covenants are completely disjunctive, so that they have nothing in common. They cannot be precisely the same in their commands, or it is difficult to see how one could speak of two covenants. But granted the God of the Bible, it is unthinkable to suppose that the two covenants are completely disjunctive in their respective commands."* In other words, the position of total discontinuity between the two covenants does not do justice to the teaching of Scripture any more than the position of total continuity.

I believe that a third view exists which strikes a "middle ground" between the position of total continuity and total discontinuity, and that is the position of "substantial continuity."

3) Substantial continuity-- According to this view, Christ's law represents a development and fulfillment of the very principles of righteousness which God revealed to Israel in the Law of Sinai, especially in the Decalogue, which can be called "the covenant in miniature." The ten words written on tablets of stone revealed in an especially clear manner to Israel certain fundamental principles of moral duty which are universally and perpetually binding on all men through the order of creation. Because these same principles are established by Christ

as a part of His law, the Decalogue remains a highly relevant and useful tool for "instruction in righteousness," even after the abrogation of the Old Covenant in all its parts and its replacement by a New Covenant. That is not the same thing as saying that the relationship between the Decalogue and Christ's law is one of "total continuity." Because Christ's coming and "fulfilling" work has ushered in a new era with resulting changes in the Law of God and its application to God's people, the Decalogue, like every other part of the Law of Moses, must now be read and applied only in the light of Christ's coming and the final deposit of revelation given in connection with the establishment of the New Covenant. We are under God's Law now only as mediated to us by Christ through the Spirit. He is the sole Lawgiver of the New Covenant, and as such, He has the absolute right to retain what He will and abrogate what He will of the Old Covenant law. That does not render the demands of the Decalogue irrelevant, but it does mean that we must obey those demands only as given to us by the hand of Christ, not as if we were living under the covenantal authority of Moses or bound to keep literally every detail of what was written on the tablets of stone, which tablets have "passed away" forever. In summary, therefore, how should Christians view the Decalogue?

Christians have rightly regarded the Decalogue as a brief summary of fundamental principles on which the rest of the Mosaic law was founded. Those principles are almost wholly moral in nature, and for that very reason, they continue to be of universal and perpetual force through the mediation of Jesus Christ. Christ in His own teaching develops those principles by exhibiting them in a more perfect form-- that is, by "fleshing out" the spiritual and heart implications of each commandment. However, He also makes clear through the ministry of His apostles that the fourth commandment is different from the other nine, because it contains a ceremonial observance that is not literally binding on Christians, since the reality it pointed to has come in Christ.

The Sabbath law is clearly distinguished in Scripture from the other nine commandments of the Decalogue in two ways: 1) it is the only one of the ten commandments which is called a "sign" (Exodus 31:13ff). Covenant signs are generally ceremonial in nature, because their purpose is to distinguish a particular people from all the other peoples of the earth. Thus, circumcision and the Lord's Supper, which are also covenant "signs," are of a ceremonial nature; 2) it is the only one of the ten commandments which represents a "particularization" of moral law, rather than a mere "codification" of moral law. By that I mean that the fourth commandment applied several universally valid principles of righteousness to the life of Israel through the appointment of a particular day (the seventh day of the Jewish calendar week), to be kept in a particular manner (by strict abstention from all servile labor). Early Reformed commentators were in large agreement concerning those principles which "underlay" the fourth commandment. Calvin saw three such principles: the principle of "mortification," or continual resting from our own fleshly will and works so that God by His Spirit can work His own will in us; the principle of "worship," or setting aside special times to the public and private worship of God; and the principle of "compassion," which requires us to provide those under our authority with regular refreshment from their labors. These moral principles were "particularized" or applied to the life of Israel in the fourth commandment through the appointed observance of a *particular* day, which had to be kept in a *particular* manner. It is precisely these "particulars" which can by no means be applied universally to mankind, since they were designed to last only for the duration of the Old Covenant. The fourth commandment cannot, therefore, be applied in the same direct or literal way as can the other nine commandments of the Decalogue, since it appoints a ceremonial observance which was fulfilled at the coming of Christ. That is not to deny that the

righteous principles exhibited in the Sabbath law *will* and *must* be fulfilled in Christians' lives as they walk by the Spirit in love, eagerly seeking to use their Christian liberty from sabbatical decrees as an opportunity for service, rather than self-indulgence.

In light of what has been said, it will be seen that the relationship between the law on tablets of stones and Christ's own law is one of substantial continuity, since Christ develops and fulfills by His own teaching the moral principles which were previously exhibited on the tablets of stone in a rudimentary, sketchy, anticipatory form. It seems to me that New Covenant theology will take a wrong turn if it tries to oppose the Puritan view of "total continuity" with a seemingly Dispensational view of "complete discontinuity," disjoining Christ's law entirely from the law of Moses which went before it. It seems to me that New Covenant theology should seek to correct the Puritan view of "total continuity" with a view of "substantial continuity" as described above. There is substantial continuity between Christ's law and the law written on tablets of stone, because Christ's teaching represents a development and fulfillment of the *very same moral principles* previously revealed in the law of Sinai. The ten commandments cannot, however, be strictly equated with the law of Christ, since that covenantal document also contained something which was uniquely binding on Israel alone-- namely, the ceremonial observance of the seventh day as a day of strict abstention from all servile labor. That observance is not binding on Christians.

I have written this article out of two concerns: 1) My first concern is with the direction that New Covenant theology will take in the future. I believe we are treading on thin ice if we deny the very category of "moral law" as designating an aspect of divine law which is distinct from its "ceremonial" and "judicial" aspect. I also believe it is a mistake to oppose the Puritan view of total continuity with a position of total discontinuity, thus disjoining entirely the law of the old covenant from the law of the new covenant. Substantial continuity between the two covenants, in terms of fundamental moral principles which lie at their heart, seems to me to be the biblical teaching.

This seems to have been the position taken by Benjamin Cox in his appendix to the 1646 edition of the London Baptist Confession. Describing the relationship between the Law of Christ and the Decalogue, he writes the following: *"Though we be not now sent to the law as it was in the hand of Moses, to be commanded thereby, yet Christ in His Gospel teacheth and commandeth us to walk in the same way of righteousness and holiness that God by Moses did command the Israelites to walk in, all the commandments of the Second Table being still delivered unto us by Christ, and all the commandments of the First Table also (as touching the life and spirit of them) in this epitome or brief sum, "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thine heart, etc."*

Cox sums up well the position of substantial continuity between the Law of Moses and the Law of Christ. We are by no means sent to live under Moses or under the tablets of stone on Mt. Sinai, but we find Christ in His Gospel teaching us to walk substantially *"in the same way of righteousness and holiness that God by Moses did command the Israelites to walk in."*

2) My second concern has to do with our relationship to Reformed Baptists who hold to the Puritan view of the Decalogue and the Sabbath. We should not let our Puritan brothers labor under the impression that we who are non-sabbatarian, New Covenant Baptists are "against" preaching and teaching on the Decalogue. Rather, we should assure them that we are co-defenders with them of the Decalogue before an immoral and lawless world that denies the existence of a divine, immutable moral law; only, we believe that the commands of the Decalogue should be taught as ministered by Christ in his New Covenant, not as ministered by

Moses on the tablets of stone. That is why we are non-sabbatarian, because we recognize a substantial, but not a total, continuity between what was written on the tablets of stone and the "law of Christ." We would join with them in defending the Decalogue from those who are truly opposed to the moral substance of that law. Though we may differ from our Puritan brothers on the issue of the Sabbath, and though we may not strictly equate the demands of the Decalogue with the demands of God's moral law in every sense, let us recognize each other as "co-defenders of the Decalogue."

Postscript: Toward a Meeting of the Minds

In recent years, the theological gap between "Puritan" and "New Covenant" Baptists seems to have widened as zealous representatives of each "school," wanting to stress the distinctives of their own theological perspective, have entrenched themselves in polarizing positions that fail to see any truth in the theological emphases of the opposing "camp." In my judgment, both "Puritan" and "New Covenant" Baptists could "tone down" the rhetoric of their polemical writings and enjoy closer fellowship as brethren in the Lord if each group could concede the validity of certain truths being stressed by the other group.

New Covenant Baptists could acknowledge the truth of these propositions:

- 1) That there is a valid theological distinction to be made between the "moral," "civil," and "ceremonial" aspects of the law, and that such distinctions help us to understand better the different ways in which the Lord Jesus brings to fulfillment the Law of Moses.
- 2) That the moral aspect of the Law stands out with greatest clarity in the tables of the Decalogue-- as well as in the two "greatest" commandments of the Law-- so that the Decalogue may rightly be described as a "revelation" of God's moral law, even though it is not identical to God's moral law in every way.
- 3) That Christ, in the New Covenant, establishes the moral aspect of the Law by His own teaching, clarifying the Law's intrinsically spiritual character by emphasizing the internal dimension of obedience to God's commandments. He makes *explicit* what to some degree was *implicit* within the Law of Moses itself.
- 4) That the Sabbath law served secondary functions, in addition to its primary function as a ceremonial "shadow," and that these secondary functions *inform* our understanding of Christ's law in the present day, even after the Sabbath has been abrogated as to its literal observance. We learn from the Sabbath law something about God's timeless concern for the physical and spiritual refreshment of human beings who, apart from some sort of regular intermission from the usual routine of labor, would be sorely oppressed by their labor and hardly have the time required to give adequate attention to the needs of the soul. We will share in these divine concerns if we are truly walking in the love of Christ, and will reflect that concern in the way we order our lives, both individually and as a community.
- 5) That there is a legitimate place for teaching and preaching on the Ten Commandments as a tool of evangelism and Christian ethical instruction, since the Ten Words enshrine timeless principles of the natural law and stand as an abiding witness and testimony to the Law of Christ, who reveals perfectly the substance of the moral law contained within the Decalogue.

Puritan Baptists, for their part, could acknowledge the truth of these propositions:

- 1) That the various parts of the Mosaic Law-- including the two tables-- form an indivisible covenantal unity, so that no part of that Law applies to Christians in an immediate or direct way, but only as ministered to believers by Christ, who is "the only Lawgiver of the New Covenant."
- 2) That disagreement with the Puritan view of the Lord's Day does not necessarily mean that one

is "antinomian" or against the teaching of the Ten Commandments. One may hold to a non-sabbatarian position (as did Calvin and Luther), and still believe in the importance of teaching the moral norms contained in the Decalogue and the principles of regular rest and worship revealed in the fourth commandment.

3) That many non-sabbatarians agree that the Decalogue applies to Christians in moral substance, although they do not believe that it can be applied in all respects to Christians as it applied to the Jews, who were bound to keep literally everything that was written on the tablets of stone. Many non-sabbatarians speak of the Ten Commandments as "abrogated" for the same reason that Luther said that the Decalogue "does not pertain to us"-- because they recognize that a strict identification of the moral law with the Decalogue leads logically to seventh day sabbatarianism and fails to stress adequately the newness of the new covenant.

Issues for Further Discussion

Does NCT remove all Scriptural grounds for Christians keeping a weekly day of worship and refreshment?

Just because one does not believe that there are scriptural grounds for calling Sunday the "Christian Sabbath" or viewing it as a day of obligatory abstention from all servile labor-- as the seventh day was for the Jews-- that does not mean that one opposes the observance of a weekly day of rest on the grounds that such an observance could only stem from superstition or from legalistic bondage to the Old Covenant. On the contrary, many who hold to a non-sabbatarian view of Sunday believe in the *wisdom* of keeping one day a week as a day of "intermission" from the regular routine of labor on grounds other than those set forth by Sunday sabbatarians.

Many of those who believe that the Sabbath has been abrogated with respect to its *literal* observance, since it was a ceremonial law that foreshadowed the eschatological rest into which believers enter through faith, recognize that the observance of the Sabbath in ancient Israel rendered certain physical and spiritual benefits to the Jews of which all men stand in need. Many non-sabbatarians freely acknowledge that the Sabbath served a *humanitarian* purpose and a *religious* purpose, in addition to its primarily *theological* purpose, and that these secondary purposes of the Sabbath shed light on the content of the *natural law* and thereby inform our walk as those called to fulfill the "Law of Christ" through loving God and neighbor.

The primary purpose of the Sabbath was *theological*. It pointed forward to the "age of fulfillment" which would dawn in the first coming of Christ, in which God's people would begin to enjoy the eschatological rest which is the goal of God's redemption. The main concern of the Sabbath institution was not with making life easier for man in the present (although it did that), but with teaching God's people about the age to come, which God had prepared for them. In the age to come, man would be delivered finally from every form of arduous labor that was introduced into the human experience by sin. That deliverance begins with redemption from the unremitting, "servile" labor of sin itself, which unregenerate men perform constantly as "slaves of sin" under the lash of "Pharaoh Satan." Once we are brought out from under the dominion of sin and Satan, we must persevere in our spiritual rest from sin until that rest is brought to consummation in the state of glorification. Until then, our "resting" from sin engages us in constant warfare against the world, the flesh, and the devil, which oppose the work of God's Spirit in us. Only in glory will this constant warfare against our spiritual enemies finally cease.

Then we shall be granted by God perfect rest from all our enemies in the land which He has promised us.

Thus, redemptive rest, begun in this life, is consummated in the next life. Christ is the Giver of Rest, and for that reason Paul calls Israel's sabbaths a "shadow" of things to come, cast by the "substance"-- not heaven itself, but Christ, who grants us spiritual rest in the present and will bring us finally into the consummate rest of heaven. Because Christ is the "substance" of Israel's sabbaths, these are all "fulfilled" in Him at His first advent, since shadows necessarily disperse once the substance comes into view. That is why the obligatory outward sabbaths imposed by the Law-- including the weekly Sabbath-- are not imposed in the NT on Christians who have entered into the new age. Since they are already laying hold of the true rest to which those outward sabbaths pointed, that are not obliged to cling any more to shadows.

At the same time, however, it can be clearly demonstrated from Scripture that the weekly Sabbath observance fulfilled other functions in Israel beyond its obvious theological function as a ceremonial sign. Its observance brought physical and spiritual blessing to the people by providing them with a regularly recurring day of "refreshment" on which their physical strength could be renewed and on which they were free to attend without distraction to the needs of their souls by gathering for public worship and teaching their children the Law of the Lord. They could not do these things as long as they remained in Egypt under the crushing yoke of Pharaoh. The Sabbath day was therefore a merciful provision of God, a day of great blessing because of the physical refreshment it brought to man and beast, and because of the spiritual benefit that came from separating a day to the public and private worship of God.

In light of the above, it is easy to see why someone who does not regard the Sabbath law as literally binding on the church, because of the fulfillment of its theological purpose in Christ, may still believe in the wisdom of taking a day off each week for physical and spiritual refreshment, in light of the practical benefits which the Sabbath conferred on God's people in the Old Testament. It is not a matter of keeping an express decree concerning the sabbatical observance of Sunday (something about which the New Testament is utterly silent). It is, rather, a matter of discerning in the fourth commandment-- in the light of Jesus' own teaching-- certain abiding principles of equity and righteousness that are in harmony with the spirit of the New Testament, and allowing those principles to shape one's own walk before the Lord.

Why would one choose to rest one day out of *seven*, rather than one day out of *ten*, if the Sabbath has been abrogated? Well, if we ourselves have need of the same practical benefits which were conferred on Israel by the Sabbath observance-- namely, regular time for unhindered worship, reflection, and refreshment-- then it would seem a matter of wisdom (rather than legal obligation) to follow a pattern for which there is a biblical precedent, rather than arbitrarily adopting a different pattern of our own invention. If God gave His people in the Old Testament one day in seven for rest, and that day served them well for providing regular refreshment, neither instilling in them a spirit of laziness, nor overtaxing them with too infrequent rest, it makes sense that the same pattern of regular intermission would serve us ideally, as well. At the same time, because of the silence of the New Testament regarding sabbatarian decrees, we must not become judges of one another in this matter of day observance. God does not command strict abstention from all servile labor on any day of the week under the New Covenant, since the reality foreshadowed by such strict abstention from labor has come in Christ.

In conclusion, I fully support, as a non-sabbatarian, the practice of using the Lord's Day for purposes of worship and refreshment because such a practice, though not mandated by express apostolic decree, is certainly in keeping with biblically revealed principles of

righteousness. Such a practice encourages a disciplined and orderly lifestyle, and thus, promotes fulfillment of the apostolic admonition to do all thing "decently and in order."

Additionally, the use of the Lord's Day for public worship is a practice supported by the example of the apostolic churches. The evidence of Scripture suggests that the practice of coming together on the first day of the week for the observance of the Lord's Supper, for listening to preaching and teaching, and for the giving of offerings, was common and widespread (or even universal) among the churches founded by the apostles.

Did Christ Bring in a Higher Law?

Did Christ bring in a higher law? If so, in what sense is His law "higher"? Does the term "higher law" suggest that Christ raised the standard of morality from a merely external standard that concerns outward actions only to an internal standard that touches attitudes as well as actions? What does the evidence of the Law itself indicate-- was God concerned only with the outward actions of His people under the Old Covenant, or also with their heart attitudes? (Clearly, God was concerned with their heart attitudes; He criticized the Jews for failing to recognize that the demands of a spiritual Lawgiver are necessarily spiritual in nature.) Christ did not bring in a "higher law," therefore, in the sense of substituting a spiritual standard of righteousness for a merely external standard. God's standard of righteousness has always been spiritual.

Is there any sense, therefore, in which Christ can be said to have brought in a "higher law"? Has he "raised" the standard of righteousness revealed in the Law from what it was previously under Moses?

A careful study of the New Testament reveals that Christ did two things with the Law of God:

1) First, Christ *clarified* the Law's *spiritual* standard, by making explicit the positive spiritual duties implied by Law's negative prohibitions. For example, Jesus pointed out that a man who does not commit the outward act of adultery is still guilty of violating the seventh commandment *in spirit*, if he looks on a woman to lust after her. The man who refrains from the outward act of murder is still guilty of breaking the sixth commandment *in spirit*, if he harbors unrighteous anger toward his neighbor. Because such internal violations of the Law went unpunished by the civil authorities in ancient Israel-- since the civil penalties only touched outward violations of the Law-- many concluded that God was unconcerned with the attitudes of the heart and mind, and that His Law was given for the sole purpose of governing the "outer man." Christ shows that such an understanding of the Law is sorely mistaken, for the central duty of God's Law has always been to love God with all one's heart, soul, and strength, and to love one's neighbor as oneself. It is impossible to love one's neighbor and harbor evil attitudes toward one's neighbor. The tenth commandment, in particular, reveals God's concern with the attitudes of the heart. The commandments of a spiritual Lawgiver are always spiritual in their intent.

Jesus did not make lust and unrighteous anger sinful for the first time by raising a previously carnal standard to a spiritual level. Rather, He clarified the fact that God's Law judges, not only the outward actions, but the inner attitudes of the heart, as well. Lust and unrighteous anger have always constituted internal violations of the law of God, even if such violations went unpunished by the civil authorities in the Jewish theocracy.

Therefore, I agree with John MacArthur when he writes that Jesus "*came to strip the rabbinic barnacles off the law of God to make it as pure as it was when God gave it by lifting it*

back to where it belonged. God had always been concerned with attitudes-- that wasn't anything new. It was just that the people of Israel had lowered the standard and consequently needed to be reminded of that. They were justifying themselves by what they didn't do, while their hearts were full of murder, lust, lies, hate, and anger. To appear righteous, they were forced to lower the standards to accommodate their sin. This is why Jesus lifted it right back where it belonged, emphasizing that thoughts are just as important as deeds."

2) At the same time, however, Christ definitely raised the Law's *social* standard, by establishing a stricter standard of socially tolerated behavior within the community of God's people. Because the Law of the Old Covenant was given to a largely unregenerate community and was designed to govern their life as an earthly nation, God "tolerated" certain behaviors within that community which are not to be tolerated within the New Covenant community. Through certain "laws of toleration," God regulated certain sinful behaviors, in light of the hardness of peoples' hearts, without indicating His approval of those behaviors. For example, under Moses, a man could divorce his wife for trivial reasons and still remain a member in good standing of the covenant community. He could put away his wife for burning the toast and suffer no civil penalty as an adulterer, even though his action constituted a violation of the seventh commandment *on a spiritual level*. The fact that unrighteous divorce went unpunished by the civil laws of Israel did not mean that God approved of such behavior as "righteous." In a similar manner, the fact that God tolerated the practice of polygamy by regulating that practice (Exodus 21:10, Deut. 21:15-17), did not mean that He approved of polygamy as an inherently righteous way of life.

Because the New Covenant community is a wholly regenerate community, God expects something more of His people now, in terms of the social standards of the community, than He expected of fleshly Israel. Therefore, Christ raises the standard of what will be socially tolerated within the New Covenant community. If a professing Christian divorces his wife for burning the toast, he should be put out of the church as an unbeliever. The standard of socially tolerated behavior has been raised, but the spiritual demands of the law have been clarified. God's positive standard of righteousness is always the same-- nothing less than loving Him with all of one's heart, soul, mind, and strength, and loving one's neighbor as oneself. Such love, in every age and among every people, moves a person to abstain, not merely from ungodly actions, but from ungodly attitudes. In every age, a person moved by love will not only abstain from the outward act of adultery, but from "heart adultery." Job understood that in the Old Testament (Job 31:1); so did David (Psalm 51:6); so the issue of heart purity is nothing new. In the Old Testament, as well as in the New, true love pursues nothing less than righteousness of heart.

In sum, Christ *elevates* the social standard of the Law (by raising the standard of socially tolerated behavior within the covenant community), but He *clarifies* the spiritual standard of the Law. By elevating the social standard, we mean simply that the grounds for church discipline under the New Covenant are much stricter than were the grounds for being punished by the civil authorities under the Old Covenant. Under Moses, people were not punished by the civil authorities for unkind attitudes toward one another-- for gossip or harsh words or unwillingness to reconcile with each other-- however, such offenses are matters for church discipline, and ultimately, for excommunication, under the New Covenant. God tolerated acts of unrighteousness, therefore, under the Mosaic administration, by not imposing a civil penalty for those acts, which are not to be tolerated with the New Covenant community.

How does Calvin's view of the Law shed light on the current controversy between "Puritan" and "New Covenant" Baptist?

Calvin's teaching on the Law in the Institutes sheds light on the current debate between "Puritan" and "New Covenant" Baptists, because one finds the theological concerns of both groups reflected in various statements that Calvin makes about the Decalogue and the Sabbath.

On the one hand, Calvin strongly insists on the perpetuity of the moral law (by which he means the Ten Commandments) as a rule of life for believers that teaches, admonishes, rebukes, and corrects them. For example, in chapter 7 of Book 2, paragraph 15, Calvin writes, "*The (Moral) Law has lost none of its authority, but must always receive from us the same respect and obedience.*" But he goes on in paragraph 16 of the same chapter to insist that the ceremonies of the Law have been abrogated "*not in effect but in use only.*" He explains that "*if the use of them had not ceased, it would, in the present day, be impossible to understand for what purpose they were instituted. Accordingly, Paul, in order to prove that the observance of them was not only superfluous, but pernicious also, says that they 'are a shadow of things to come; but the body is of Christ'*" (Col. 2:17).

Calvin quotes Colossians 2:17 to prove that the use of the Jewish ceremonies has been discontinued by Christ's coming; later in his exposition of the fourth commandment, he clearly indicates that the reference to "sabbaths" in this verse refers to the weekly Sabbath (see Book 2, chapter 8, paragraphs 31 and 33). If the reference to sabbaths in Colossians 2:16 & 17 refers to the weekly Sabbath, then that means that for Calvin, the weekly Sabbath is among the Jewish ceremonies whose use has been discontinued by the first advent of Christ.

This position is crystallized in his exposition of the fourth commandment. Although Calvin exposites the fourth commandment in a chapter entitled "Exposition of the Moral Law," it is clear that, for Calvin, the fourth commandment cannot be described as a *purely* moral law, because it contains what he calls "*the external observance of a day which was abolished with the other types on the advent of Christ.*" To dispel all doubt concerning whether the fourth commandment contained a ceremonial duty that was abrogated upon the first advent of Christ, Calvin makes the following statement: "*There can be no doubt, that, on the advent of our Lord Jesus Christ, the ceremonial part of the commandment was abolished. He is the truth, at whose presence the emblems banish; the body, at the sight of which the shadows disappear. He, I say, is the true completion of the Sabbath*" (paragraph 31). He then goes on to observe certain abiding principles of equity revealed in this law, which remain valid, after the duty to keep the seventh day itself has been abrogated: "*The Sabbath being abrogated, there is still room among us, first, to assemble on stated days for the hearing of the word, the breaking of the mystical bread, and public prayer: and secondly, to give our servants and laborers relaxation from labor. It cannot be doubted that the Lord provided for both in the commandment of the Sabbath.*" These applications of the Sabbath law to Christian living do not stem from any ongoing obligation to keep the seventh day, or any day, as a fixed, obligatory Sabbath. They stem, rather, from a "common sense" recognition that the Sabbath day served a humanitarian and religious purpose, in addition to its primarily ceremonial purpose, which we cannot sensibly ignore. The fact that the Jews met regularly on the Sabbath to worship God corporately, and the fact that they gave refreshment to their laborers on this day clearly flowed out of the fundamental moral duty to love God and neighbor. Who will willingly neglect public, corporate worship if he loves God? Who will willingly oppress servants with unbroken labor if he loves his neighbor as himself? Calvin simply recognizes that the Sabbath law served other functions beside its most prominent

ceremonial function as a promissory sign of eschatological rest. He refuses to impose Sabbath-keeping on Christians, since he recognizes that the promissory sign has been fulfilled in the advent of the One to whom it pointed. But at the same time, he is jealous to guard the moral instruction this law provides us, by highlighting the abiding principles of righteousness exhibited in this commandment. He wants to instruct believers out of the fourth commandment in the duties of righteousness, without imposing a rigid Sabbath observance on them, since there is no evidence in the New Testament that God has transferred the strict sanctions against servile labor associated with the seventh day to another day.

He concludes his teaching with these words: "*As the truth was delivered typically to the Jews, so it is imparted to us without a figure.*" It is clear that Calvin viewed the fourth commandment as containing a "shadowy ceremony" that has been fulfilled along with all the ceremonies of the Law. This tells us something about Calvin's view of the Decalogue, which has not always been recognized by those in the Reformed community. Although Calvin called the Decalogue "the Moral law" and insisted on its perpetuity as a rule of righteousness, at the same time, he believed that the typical, ceremonial ordinance imposed on the Jews by the fourth commandment should not be imposed on Christians. That is because the Decalogue represents a "partly shadowy" revelation of God's moral law, not a "shadowless" revelation. The moral truth conveyed by the fourth commandment is conveyed "without a figure" only to Christians who live under the New Covenant, not to Jews who lived under the Old Covenant.

Calvin's teaching at this point anticipates what many who hold to New Covenant Theology believe about the Sabbath and the Decalogue. The moment one admits that there is an abrogated ceremonial observance in the Decalogue, one must also admit that what was written on the tablets of stone does not represent the *final* or *climactic* revelation of God's moral law, but a *preliminary* and *preparatory* revelation that must be interpreted and applied to Christians only in the light of subsequent revelation that abrogates what is temporary and ceremonial within the earlier revelation. That subsequent revelation comes only through Christ and the teaching of the apostles.