

# Rethinking Our Use of “Moral Law”

By Michael W. Adams

## Introduction

It is a good thing to periodically examine the terms and phrases we use when explaining a theological position that we embrace because some of our terms might carry with them inherent problems that we don't even recognize. Our terminology and choice of words or phrases may be clear to us, but when someone else hears those same theological phrases, they may have a completely different interpretive grid that they use that drives their interpretation in a completely different direction. We should constantly strive to state our theological positions in a better way and with more clarity and precision. This results in fewer misunderstandings between those involved in discussion or debate. In some instances, we can spend large amounts of time simply defending our theological phrases if those phrases are so overused that they mean something different to everyone in the room. Our use of the phrase “moral law” is one example. If I am in a room with eight other people and I ask them what the moral law is, I will most likely get eight different answers because the phrase has been so overused that each person in the room will probably have a slightly different twist to its meaning. In the interest of continuing dialogue, Covenant Theologians (*CT*), Dispensationalists, and New Covenant Theologians (*NCT*) alike have borrowed this phrase from one another and each has attempted, to varying degrees of success and failure, to put their own unique spin on it in order to show that their own understanding of the term is the correct one. In short, each theological camp explains and defines the phrase “moral law” according to its own unique hermeneutic. This has been done with the best of intentions in hopes of further clarifying the various positions on Biblical law but at the end of the day, the phrase “moral law” is difficult, if not impossible to define from Scripture alone and its continued use causes more confusion than clarity because it doesn't accurately represent the subject of Biblical law as it's presented to us in Scripture. Tom Wells, an adherent of *NCT*, provides an excellent example of this when he says,

One reason for that is clear: the phrase “moral law” is not a Biblical phrase. Nor is the slightly broader phrase, “the moral law.” But as these are used by theologians the intention is to cite them as having Biblical content, and we will treat them with that in mind.”<sup>1</sup>

However, in the interest of theological clarity, our continued use of the phrase “moral law” must be reexamined to determine its value in discussions of Biblical law. It is my intention in this paper to demonstrate that the phrase “moral law” cannot be clearly defined in Scripture and its continued use should be abandoned. It should be abandoned because, as I will attempt to show, it is often used to impose unclear and at times, unbiblical definitions to an otherwise clear Biblical subject. Since the term itself cannot be clearly defined from Scripture, any definition of it is arbitrary.

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<sup>1</sup> Tom Wells, *New Covenant Theology* (New Covenant Media, 2002), 161

Because of its long history in theological debate and discussion, the phrase “moral law” carries with it much implied meaning that is either system-driven by one’s theological system, or just simple opinion, and for that reason, does not clearly convey the concept of Biblical law. More often than not, “moral law” becomes a flexible medium to express what our theological system demands of us concerning Biblical law because we can make “moral law” mean whatever we want it to mean as dictated by what our theological system requires of us. Therefore, any attempt to clearly define “moral law” will always fall short. In saying that, I am not asserting that only Biblical terms should be employed in theological dialogue or debate. There is certainly nothing wrong with using language that is not found in Scripture to convey Biblical truth, *provided the concept conveyed by the use of a term can be Biblically substantiated*. Our use of the word ‘Trinity’ provides us with a good example of using an extra-Biblical expression to convey what is already a clear Biblical concept.<sup>2</sup>

I must also be careful to point out that I am not promoting antinomianism in any form, for antinomianism is to be without law and lawlessness is sin (I John 3:4). The issue dealt with in this essay isn’t whether or not there are imperatives in Scripture, for there certainly are. But our discussion will center on whether or not the phrase “moral law” helps or hinders a clear understanding of how the Bible uses law. With that in mind, the questions asked in this essay will be, “Does our use of ‘moral law’ or ‘eternal moral law’ help or hinder our understanding and application of Biblical law?” Secondly, we must ask, “Can the term ‘moral law’ and the myriads of definitions behind it, be clearly substantiated from the texts of Scripture?”

## **Covenant Theology and the “Moral Law”**

Chapter 19 of the Westminster Confession of Faith (*WCF*) reads,

1. 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.
2. This law, after his fall, continued to be a perfect rule of righteousness; and, as such, was delivered by God upon Mount Sinai, in ten commandments, and written in two tables: the first four commandments containing our duty towards God; and the other six, our duty to man.

From these two paragraphs of the *WCF*, we learn that in the theological scheme of Covenant Theology, the law that Adam received in the garden was given under the guise of a covenant of works. This covenant of works law was perpetually binding on Adam and all of his descendents, the entire human race. In paragraph two, we are told that this same law was eventually delivered to Israel on Mount Sinai in the form of the Ten Commandments. The *WCF* continues,

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<sup>2</sup> For a good discussion on the use of the term “Trinity” in explaining a clear Biblical concept, the reader is encouraged to read *The Forgotten Trinity*, by James White, Bethany House Publishers.

3. Besides this law, *commonly called moral*, God was pleased to give to 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; and partly, holding forth divers instructions of moral duties. All which ceremonial laws are now abrogated, under the new testament. (*Emphasis Mine*)

As the hermeneutic of *CT* unfolds in the Westminster Confession, we see that the Ten Commandments which (according to *CT*) were given to both Adam and Moses, but in two different forms, are also called “moral” law. Not only are they categorized as moral law, but according to paragraph three, they are also *commonly called moral* law. The *WCF* continues its discussion by concluding,

5. The *moral law* doth for ever bind all, as well justified persons as others, to the obedience thereof; and that, not only in regard of the matter contained in it, but also in respect of the authority of God the Creator, who gave it. Neither doth Christ, in the Gospel, any way dissolve, but much strengthen this obligation. (*Emphasis Mine*)

Did you see what just happened? The *WCF* defines “moral law” as the Ten Commandments, first given to Adam in the Garden of Eden, and later revealed to Moses on Mount Sinai. It is this same “moral law” (the Ten Commandments) that “*doth for ever bind all*”, meaning that a believer today, under the New Covenant, is obligated to obey the same “moral law” that Adam, Abel, Seth, Noah, Abraham, Moses, David, and all of the Israelites were obligated to obey. We oftentimes hear this referred to as the “eternal moral law,” the “unchanging moral law,” or some variation of that phrase. The perpetual obligation that *CT* finds to this version of moral law is what Covenant Theologian Robert L. Reymond makes reference to in speaking of the Decalogue, the Ten Commandments:

For Paul the moral law of God, which Christians are to obey, is revealed in the Scriptures – especially (but not exclusively) in the Decalogue.<sup>3</sup>

Earlier, Reymond references the perpetuity of the Ten Commandments as 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.<sup>4</sup>

We can conclude that the *CT* tradition takes moral law to mean an unchanging law for every person in every era, beginning with Adam in the Garden of Eden. The *CT* version of the moral law eventually surfaces as the Ten Commandments given to Israel at Mount Sinai, and subsequently revealed to every generation since then. Mankind’s obligation to the moral law begins with Adam and continues perpetually to all generations. According to

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<sup>3</sup> Robert L. Reymond, *Paul Missionary Theologian* (Christian Focus Publications, 2000), 475

<sup>4</sup> Reymond, *Paul*, 471.

our *CT* friends, this moral law as defined in the *WCF* binds the conscience of everyone in every age.

## A Long-Standing Trichotomy

There is a long-standing tradition within *CT* (and even prior to *CT*) that makes a sharp distinction between ceremonial, moral, and civil (sometimes called judicial) law regarding the Mosaic legislation. This tradition is rooted largely in the *WCF* (although it originated much earlier) and is used by Covenant Theologians to show that Christ has fulfilled the ceremonial law – *All which ceremonial laws are now abrogated, under the new testament* – but the moral law (shorthand for the Ten Commandments) is unchanging and binding on every generation – *The moral law doth for ever bind all*. The *CT* tradition tells us that the ceremonial law is abrogated by Christ, while the moral law is perpetual and timeless. Calvin reasons this very thought a century prior to the *WCF* when he says,

The ceremonial law was the tutelage of the Jews, with which it seemed good to the Lord to train this people, as it were, in their childhood, until the fullness of time should come [Gal. 4:3-4; cf. ch. 3:23-24], in order that he might fully manifest his wisdom to the nations, and show the truth of those things which then were foreshadowed in figures.<sup>5</sup>

For Calvin, the ceremonial law – those portions of the Mosaic Law that pictured or prefigured Christ’s death on the cross – is done away in Christ, while the moral law remains in force for all time and in every age. He continues,

The moral law...is contained under two heads, one of which simply commands us to worship God with pure faith and piety; the other, to embrace men with sincere affection. Accordingly, it is the true and eternal rule of righteousness, prescribed for men of all nations and times, who wish to conform their lives to God’s will.<sup>6</sup>

Calvin makes allusion to Deuteronomy 6:5 (Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul and strength) and Leviticus 19:18 (Love your neighbor as yourself) as the basis for defining the “eternal moral law” – *prescribed for men of all nations and times*. This threefold distinction of the Mosaic Law is reinforced and restated by Willem A. VanGemeran in *Five Views on Law and Gospel*, when he says,

With the coming of Jesus Christ, the ceremonial laws have been abrogated, having been nailed to the cross (Col. 2:14). The judicial laws applied the last six commands to the context of Israel’s existence as a nation. The regulations pertained to the judicial and political life of Israel as a nation. They have also been abrogated.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (The Westminster Press), Vol. 2, 4.20.15, 1503

<sup>6</sup> Calvin, *Institutes*, Vol. 2, 4.20.15, 1503

<sup>7</sup> Willem A. VanGemeran, *Five Views of Law and Gospel* (Zondervan Publishing House, 1993), 53

In dealing with the issue of the Sabbath, Francis Turretin makes reference to Covenant Theology's three-fold distinction of the Mosaic Law by noting,

The fourth precept of the Decalogue concerning the Sabbath, formerly given to the Israelites, is ceremonial, not moral, and moreover has nothing to do with the discipline of Christ.<sup>8</sup>

From this brief discussion of the *WCF*, and a small sampling of Covenant Theologians, we see that classic Covenant Theology separates or divides the Mosaic Law into three distinct categories of law: civil (or judicial), ceremonial, and moral. With the advent of Jesus Christ and the inauguration of the New Covenant, the civil and ceremonial aspects of the law of Moses meet their historic end, while the moral law as revealed in the Ten Commandments remains in force and as such, *doth for ever bind all*. The moral law, according to the *CT* tradition, was first imparted to Adam and subsequently revealed to Moses and the nation of Israel on Mount Sinai on tablets of stone. This same moral law remains in force throughout all time and for all people, making it the “eternal, unchanging moral law.”

### **Dispensationalism and the “Moral Law”**

It should not surprise us to find that Dispensationalism's use of “moral law” differs greatly from that of Covenant Theology in most instances. It should also come as no surprise that there are differences of opinion within Dispensationalism concerning the meaning, extent, and even the existence of “moral law”. This is due in large part to Dispensationalism's continual change and development within its own ranks. A change which we applaud.

What may be termed classic Dispensationalism rejects Covenant Theology's 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. 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.<sup>9</sup>

Henry Thiessen seems to echo this same sentiment.

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<sup>8</sup> Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology* (Presbyterian and Reformed, 1994), Vol. 2, 84.

<sup>9</sup> Wayne G. Strickland, *Five Views of Law and Gospel* (Zondervan Publishing House, 1993), 262

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.<sup>10</sup>

This is somewhat confusing for the reader of Thiessen's *Systematic Theology* because prior to the above statement he says,

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).<sup>11</sup>

On one hand, Thiessen seems to declare there is no Biblical distinction of the Mosaic Law into a moral category as separate from the rest of the Law of Moses, and yet he makes the declaration that both the Decalogue and the Sermon on the Mount are revealed moral law. The reader is left wondering which is correct.

John MacArthur represents another view within Dispensationalism on the validity and use of the term moral law that is relevant to our discussion. He seems to echo the sentiments of Covenant Theology in expounding a threefold distinction of the Mosaic Law into civil, ceremonial, and moral. Commenting on Matthew 5:17 MacArthur writes,

The foundation of the Old Testament is the law given in the Pentateuch, which the prophets, psalmists, and other inspired writers preached, expounded, and applied. That law of God was composed of three parts: the moral, the judicial, and the ceremonial. The moral law was to regulate the behavior of all men; the judicial law was for Israel's operation as a unique nation; and the ceremonial law was prescribed to structure Israel's worship of God. The moral law was based on the Ten Commandments, and the judicial and ceremonial laws were the subsequent legislation given to Moses.<sup>12</sup>

From this statement, it would appear that MacArthur has joined the camp of Covenant Theology in defining the structure of the Mosaic Law. This is not the case, however, for MacArthur goes on to inform his reader that at His coming, Christ fulfilled the whole law – civil, ceremonial, AND moral:

Because Matthew does not qualify his use of *Law*, we are safe to say that it was God's whole law – the commandments, statutes, and judgments; the moral, judicial, and ceremonial – that Jesus came not to abolish, but to fulfill. (*Emphasis Original*)<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Henry C. Thiessen, *Lectures in Systematic Theology* (WM. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1949), 241

<sup>11</sup> Thiessen, *Lectures*, 239

<sup>12</sup> John MacArthur Jr., *The MacArthur New Testament Commentary, Matthew 1-7* (Moody Press, 1985), 255

<sup>13</sup> MacArthur, *Matthew 1-7*, 255

It seems clear that MacArthur divides the Law of Moses into three distinct categories similar to those of Covenant Theology. However, he draws a distinction from Covenant Theology in the way he sees the moral law being fulfilled. As mentioned above, Covenant Theology views the moral law as the binding validity of the Ten Commandments upon every generation, while the civil and ceremonial portions of the law meet their fulfillment in the cross of Jesus Christ. MacArthur's view is a variation of this. He says,

The moral law was God's foundational code. As already mentioned, Jesus fulfilled that law by His perfect righteousness. Every commandment He obeyed, every requirement He met, every standard He lived up to.<sup>14</sup>

The next two pages of his commentary are spent expounding Jesus' fulfillment of all three – the civil (judicial), ceremonial, and moral law. MacArthur then concludes by summarizing what he truly means:

The judicial law and the ceremonial law were fulfilled and set aside. They ended at the cross. But the moral law fulfilled by Christ is still being fulfilled through His disciples.<sup>15</sup>

In other words, MacArthur's view is that both the civil and ceremonial laws were fulfilled *and* abolished by Christ on the cross. At the same time, the moral law was fulfilled by Christ but not abolished. Romans 8:3-4 is cited as a proof text to show that Christ's disciples continue to fulfill the moral law to this present day.

### **New Covenant Theology and the “Moral Law”**

New Covenant Theology's response to the moral law issue has been limited mostly to Covenant Theology's definition of the term. NCT seems to have spent the greater amount of energy and interaction addressing Covenant Theology's meaning of moral law in most instances. This may be due in part to Dispensationalism's continual change within its own ranks as I alluded to earlier. In his response to Willem VanGeneren in the book *Five Views of Law and Gospel*, Douglas Moo states,

First, I commend VanGeneren 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 absolute and unquestioned standard.<sup>16</sup>

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

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<sup>14</sup> MacArthur, *Matthew 1-7*, 256

<sup>15</sup> MacArthur, *Matthew 1-7*, 259

<sup>16</sup> Douglas Moo, *Five Views*, 83

that reflect God's eternal moral will. My point, rather, is that the Mosaic Law is not identical with this eternal moral law.<sup>17</sup>

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.<sup>18</sup>

Tom Wells more aggressively defines the moral law as he sees it in *New Covenant Theology*.

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.<sup>19</sup>

Wells goes on to differentiate between "moral law" and "the moral law" as evidenced in this statement:

Second, 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.<sup>20</sup>

Wells' differentiation between "moral law" and "the moral law" is spoken in the context of progressive revelation. Wells is asserting 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.<sup>21</sup>

Wells' discussion of moral law then proceeds to its dependence upon fuller revelation in order to be recognized *as* moral law. Wells tells us that that the fullness of God's revelation in the New Covenant is required in order for moral law to be *fully recognized as* moral law. This is his clear meaning when he states,

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.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Moo, *Five Views*, 84

<sup>18</sup> Moo, *Five Views*, 89

<sup>19</sup> Wells, *New Covenant Theology*, 162

<sup>20</sup> Wells, *New Covenant Theology*, 163

<sup>21</sup> Wells, *New Covenant Theology*, 163

## The Heart of the Issue

If the concept behind the term “moral law” is a Biblical one, why is it so difficult (if not impossible) to define Biblically? At the end of the day, we’re still left with the question, “what is the moral law?” Is it something that a believer fulfills as he or she lives a life to the glory of God as MacArthur tells us? Is it wrapped up in the Ten Commandments and thus binding on the conscience of men and women everywhere and in every era as Covenant Theology would have us believe? Perhaps it is as Strickland explained, non-existent. If, as Covenant Theology claims, Adam received the moral law in the garden and that moral law was the Ten Commandments in some form, where do we look in Scripture for support of such an idea? Is the moral law eternal and unchanging, unifying every era in redemptive history, or does it meet its historical end in the cross of Christ? Perhaps Calvin is correct and the eternal moral law is summarized in the two great commands to love God and our neighbor. But what if Thiessen is right and the Sermon on the Mount constitutes at least part of the moral law? Or what if Moo is correct in asserting that the eternal moral law consists of any law that is brought from the Old to the New Covenant? Maybe we should embrace Wells’ argument that we cannot see *the* moral law as God intended until the fullness of God’s revelation has occurred. What if Wells is correct in his view that moral law is any law that reveals God’s unchanging moral character?

Again we ask, if the concept behind the term “moral law” is a Biblical one, why is it so difficult to define clearly from Scripture? We don’t have this problem with conveying other concepts such as the Trinity, active and passive obedience, or verbal, plenary inspiration. These extra-Biblical terms convey clear Biblical truth because Scripture speaks to those issues. Why are we unable to do the same with “moral law”? The answer is simple. The myriad of concepts behind “moral law” are not found in Scripture and therefore, cannot be defined Biblically. As I stated earlier in this essay, any definition of “moral law” becomes little more than a vehicle for expounding one’s hermeneutical presuppositions concerning law. “Moral law” becomes a flexible medium to express what our theological system demands of us concerning Biblical law. By employing the phrase “moral law,” our interpretation of Biblical law remains unchecked, because we can make “moral law” mean whatever we want it to mean and whatever our theological system demands that it mean.

### “Moral Law” and the Two Great Commands

Any discussion of “moral law” would be incomplete apart from a treatise on the two great commands of Scripture found in Deuteronomy 6:5 and Leviticus 19:18.

Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength. (*Deuteronomy 6:5*)

Do not seek revenge or bear a grudge against one of your people, but love your neighbor as yourself. I am the LORD. (*Leviticus 19:18*)

When asked which of the commands was the greatest, Jesus cited these verses in His reply,

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<sup>22</sup> Wells, *New Covenant Theology*, 165

Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments. (*Matthew 22:37-40*)

The Apostle James cites Leviticus 19:18 as part of New Covenant law:

If you really keep the royal law found in Scripture, ‘Love your neighbor as yourself,’ you are doing right. (*James 2:8*)

Paul does the same thing in Romans 13:9-10. For this reason, Deuteronomy 6:5 and Leviticus 19:18 are often cited as proof texts for the existence of an “eternal moral law.” Because these two commands are very clearly repeated in the New Testament, it is argued that they give evidence of a “moral law” that spans the ages and is binding on everyone in every era. The problem with this argument is that these commands aren’t revealed to us until Deuteronomy 6 and Leviticus 19. Prior to that, we have no record of their existence. Any argument that insists Deuteronomy 6 and Leviticus 19 are evidence of an “eternal moral law” that existed prior to Moses is an argument from silence. Apart from what little we are told in Scripture concerning law prior to Moses, we cannot ascertain with any amount of certainty what was revealed prior to Sinai. If we impose Deuteronomy 6:5 and Leviticus 19:18 on Adam and his descendants prior to Moses, we are guilty of reading our concept of an “eternal moral law” into the text of Scripture.

### **Mixed Vegetables, Mixed Threads and Mules: A Case in Point**

Earlier in this essay, I cited Tom Wells’ statement,

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.<sup>23</sup>

We are now ready to test this definition of “moral law” to see if it can be substantiated Biblically. To do this, we will look at Leviticus 19:19 which reads,

Keep my decrees. Do not mate different kinds of animals. Do not plant your field with two kinds of seed. Do not wear clothing woven of two kinds of material.

Was an Old Covenant Jew morally obligated to observe these statutes? Yes. Was he or she sinning if they planted mixed vegetables in their garden, wore polyester, or bred a mare with a donkey in order to produce a mule? Again, the answer is yes. Is one morally obligated today to observe these statutes? No. We are not sinning if we plant carrots next our tomatoes, wear something other than 100% cotton, or breed a horse and donkey. Under the Old Covenant, these things were prohibited. Under the New Covenant, they are not.

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<sup>23</sup> Wells, *New Covenant Theology*, 162

Using Wells' definition, the statutes of Leviticus 19:19 were not "moral law" for an Old Covenant Jew because they do not "*bind all men of every era and every land to whom it comes.*" If this is correct, then Leviticus 19:19 does not find its "*source in the unchanging moral character of God with the result that it is intrinsically right*". However, the Old Covenant Israelite was under moral obligation to do everything prescribed by the law. We are forced to the conclusion that everything in the law was "intrinsically right" (Exodus 19:5, et al) for to disobey any part was sinful. In other words, it was "intrinsically right" for an Old Covenant Jew to not mix his or her vegetables because to do otherwise was to break the law of the Old Covenant. The Old Covenant Jew was morally obligated to obey, even though the New Covenant believer has no obligation to this particular statute. Therefore, we can conclude that Leviticus 19:19 is a "moral law"<sup>24</sup> for those living under the Old Covenant and yet it does not "*bind all men of every era and every land to whom it comes.*" Where in Scripture would we turn to support this definition of "moral law"? Nowhere. Scripture doesn't give us a category of moral law, which is why our definitions of moral law are always unclear, arbitrary, and even confusing and complex. There is no Biblical category of an "unchanging moral law" simply because Biblical law changes.

In the historical shift from the Old Covenant to the New Covenant, the law has changed (Hebrews 7:12) and the precepts one was morally obligated to do in one era, may not be a moral obligation in the next, and yet both are moral obligations for the recipients. The argument is often made that the sacrifices of the Old Covenant, along with the statutes similar to Leviticus 19:19 that I used in this illustration, are not based on the moral character of God and therefore, do not constitute "moral law." This seems presumptuous on our part. By definition, all law in any era is moral. How can any law be amoral? We cannot say that the ceremonial laws of the Old Covenant were not moral laws because those under that law were morally obligated to obey them. All law is moral and Biblical laws change from one era to another and do not bind all men in every era.

Finally, the notion of a "moral" division of law is hard to illustrate from Scripture. James 2:10-11 reads,

For whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles at just one point is guilty of breaking all of it. For he who said, 'Do not commit adultery,' also said, 'Do not murder.' If you do not commit adultery but do commit murder, you have become a lawbreaker.

Clearly, James views Biblical law as an indivisible unit that rises and falls together. To violate one command is to violate the entire law code, not just its "moral" parts. James is not alone in his reasoning. Paul told the Galatians,

Again I declare to every man who lets himself be circumcised that he is obligated to obey the whole law. (*Galatians 5:3*)

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<sup>24</sup> I use this term to make a point, not to advocate its use outside of Biblical context.

Scripture views Biblical law as an indivisible unit, and it is the Mosaic Law as a whole that meets its historic fulfillment and end in Jesus Christ (*Galatians 3:23-25*). Douglas Moo agrees:

I will state at this point the position for which I will argue: The entire Mosaic Law comes to fulfillment in Christ, and this fulfillment means that this law is no longer a direct and immediate source of, or judge of, the conduct of God's people. Christian behavior, rather, is now guided directly by the 'law of Christ.'<sup>25</sup>

## Conclusion

At the beginning of this essay, I alluded to the fact that it sometimes becomes necessary to spend an excessive amount of time defining our presuppositions associated with a term or phrase in order to express what we mean in our use of that same term or phrase. In the end, Scripture is silent on the issue of "moral law" and presents no such category of law. An exposition of law prior to Sinai and the Old Covenant is an exposition largely from silence, for in most instances we do not know the specifics of what was revealed. An exposition of law from Sinai to the cross (the Old Covenant) will not yield a "moral law" category that is separate from the Mosaic Law as a whole. Likewise, the New Covenant law of Christ speaks of no separate "moral law" as opposed to the law as a whole. Using Deuteronomy 6:5 and Leviticus 19:18 as proof texts for an "eternal moral law" that everyone from Adam to our present day is obligated to obey is an argument from silence. The most we can say about these texts 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". We see their historic beginning in the Law of Moses and not before.

Contrary to the "moral law" arguments, Scripture provides a model where Biblical laws begin and end historically according to the covenant they serve. The New Covenant law of Christ replaced the law of the Old Covenant (Hebrews 7:12). I have illustrated that what is defined as sin under the Old Covenant, may not be sin under the New Covenant, and yet it is no less moral for those living under the Old Covenant. In other words, what is defined as a moral obligation in one era, may not be a moral obligation in the next, and yet both are moral at the point in redemptive history in which they are given. The reason for this is the historical beginning of one covenant that coincides with the historical ending of the previous covenant. Viewing the issue from this point of view, every law given in every era is "moral" by definition regardless of whether it is binding in every subsequent era.

The phrase "moral law" is confusing because it cannot be clearly defined in Scripture and its continued use should be abandoned. It should be abandoned because it often imposes unclear and at times, unbiblical definitions on an otherwise clear Biblical subject. Since the term itself cannot be clearly defined from Scripture, any definition is arbitrary. We are back to the eight people in the room who define moral law eight different ways.

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<sup>25</sup> Moo, *Five Views*, 343