

Lesson Sixteen – Law of God – check text

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DOCTRINAL STATEMENT

1] The law of God as revealed in the Bible is a good, right and perfect system of eternal directives and principles which reflects God's character and serves as a means of expressing His love toward man. God's law teaches man how to properly worship God, how to love his fellowman, how to live life abundantly, and, at the same time, how to prepare for an eternal spiritual life in the family of God. The law of God is represented in both the Old and the New Testaments and is expressed by both physical actions and spiritual motivations.

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DOCTRINAL OVERVIEW

2] The Church of God looks to the whole Bible, both Old and New Testaments, as its fundamental source of doctrine and teachings. We accept Christ's statement that "Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of God" (Mt. 4:4). Jesus plainly accepted the authenticity and inspiration of the entire Old Testament with its three major divisions—the Law, the Prophets and the Writings (Lk. 24:44)—as being relevant for the New Testament ministry of the Church of God. In support of this, the apostle Paul wrote: "All scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine" (2 Tim. 3:16). Therefore, the character, personality and specific teachings of Jesus Christ—both as the Rock that went with Israel in the Old Testament (I Cor. 10:4; Deut. 32:15, 18) and as the son of man and the

son of God in the New Testament—are the foundations of our biblical understanding of man's relationship to the law of God.

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3] God's law in its fullest, most complete sense is spiritual and could not be discovered or discerned by man without direct revelation from God. The fullness of God's law involves every facet of personal and collective human existence. Though its expression may change as the circumstances change, the eternal spiritual law of God is unchanging and is always the ultimate object of any biblical law code or instruction expressed in human language. God's laws are all designed to lead to a consummate knowledge and understanding of God and of the ultimate purpose of life, and to supreme godly love and character. [back to the top](#) [back to answers](#)

4] Divine law is the totality of the means whereby God instructs man how to live most abundantly in this present physical life, and how to most effectively prepare for the future spiritual life in the Kingdom of God. [back to the top](#) [back to answers](#)

5] The New Testament writers clearly express a positive attitude towards God's law as magnified and given spiritual impact and import by Jesus Christ. Jesus stated that "all the law and the prophets"—the entire Old Testament—were based on the overall principles of love toward God and love toward one's fellow man (Mt. 22:36-40). Furthermore, Christ made it very clear that He did not come to destroy the law or the prophets (Mt. 5:17). John tells us that sin is the transgression of the law (I John. 3:4); and Paul says that the law is holy and just and good (Rom. 7:12).

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6] The overall approach to God's law in the New Testament is summed up in the statement, "He that saith, I know Him, and keepeth not His commandments, is a liar, and the truth is not in him" (I John. 2:4). However, in fulfilling Isaiah's prophecy of magnifying the law and making it honorable (Is. 42:21), Christ instituted certain changes. Christ Himself specifically abrogated certain statements in the law, in relation to swearing and to marriage, for example, to bring the laws given at Sinai more into conformity with the original intent of the commandments upon which they were based. Moreover, Acts 15 makes clear that the law in regard to circumcision—which had antedated the covenant at Sinai was not binding upon Gentile Christians. Therefore, based upon this example of God's Church using the power entrusted to it by Christ to make binding decisions (Mt. 16:19), the Church of God recognizes the same administrative responsibilities—based upon New Testament principles and examples—to determine the application of Old Testament laws today.

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DOCTRINAL EXPOSITION

7] The term "law" is intrinsic to any systematic study of theology. Yet the English word

"law" carries a narrow, legal connotation which may cause a misunderstanding of the biblical terms. A number of words in both the Old and the New Testaments are commonly translated "law" in the major English versions. These words, however, often admit of broader meaning than the normal English usage and do not necessarily have legalistic overtones of their English counterparts (or are otherwise unequivalent). [back to the top](#) [back to answers](#)

8] A thorough study of the Hebrew and Greek terminology in the Bible would be out of place here because of length and technicality, though some of the major terms are briefly discussed later on in this paper. But it might be helpful to illustrate why "law" may not always be a suitable equivalent of the original. An important term in the Old Testament and later Judaism is the well-known Hebrew word *torah*. It may refer to law as a legal system; it may refer to specific regulations and statutes. Yet *torah* is often used in the broad sense of anything considered traditional, customary and authoritative. Perhaps the best English equivalent is "teachings" though even that may not be broad enough in meaning. [back to the top](#) [back to answers](#)

9] One needs to be careful that he does not assume laws are necessarily categorized by the Hebrew (or English) terms used. There is no consistent terminology for the various types of laws. For example, one might assume a distinction between "statute" and "ordinance" as found in certain translations. However, neither term consistently translates the same Hebrew word. Thus, the Hebrew *hoq* is variously translated as "law..... statute," "ordinance," and "commandment" in the major English versions. The Ten Commandments are never called by the Hebrew term usually translated "commandment" (*miswah*)—they are simply referred to as the ten "words" (*devarim*). As mentioned above, the word *torah* means much more than just the English word "law."
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10] It is also important to note that the term "law of Moses" is itself used interchangeably with the term "law of God." [back to the top](#) [back to answers](#)

11] Thus, in Nehemiah 8, the expression alternates between "law of Moses" in verse 1 and "law of God" in verses 8 and 18. The term "law of Moses" is generally used as a designation for the Pentateuch or "Torah." The term "law of Moses" would thus apply to anything in those five books, whether it be the Ten Commandments or the sacrificial laws or circumcision. Such usage is confirmed in the New Testament as, for example, in Luke 24:44.
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12] Thus, the occurrence of "law" in an English translation may imply—depending on the original Hebrew or Greek and the context—"legal system," "regulation," "sacrificial ritual," "Ten Commandments," "principle," "natural law" " the Pentateuch," "customary tradition," "belief," etc. It is therefore impossible to give a simple definition of "law." The concept of "law" in the Bible is complex and cannot be defined or summarized in any brief way without

danger of oversimplification. The very complexity of the subject requires that the many aspects of the biblical concept of law be discussed. No adequate understanding of the teaching of God's Church on law can be gained without a thorough and careful reading of the entire overview given here. Seldom is an "either/or" position taken. The Church believes in freedom and law, faith and works, love *and* law, forgiveness and justice, reward and selfless service, grace *and* law, to name only a few of the traditional dichotomies found in treatments of the subject.

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13] The Bible itself sets the tone for the use of the term "law. Sometimes law is viewed as the only important thing, sometimes as a good thing; at other times it is considered something obsolete, inadequate or incomplete. Perhaps the epitome of biblical discussion on the subject is found in Paul's writings, yet it is obvious that Paul has been frequently misunderstood.

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Love is the Fulfillment of the Law

14] God is love. That is His nature and essence (I John. 4:8). It is only from God that we can learn what real and perfect love is. A great deal depends on the guidance of His Holy Spirit, but God's love is essentially expressed and taught through His law (Rom. 13:10; I John. 5:3). It is the major vehicle by which His love has been made known to mankind.

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15] If we human beings had the love that God has—perfect, complete and limitless love—we would have no need of any external moral law (though we should still need God to reveal to us His Sabbath, holy days spiritual meanings, ceremonial laws, etc.). If human beings had the full knowledge of love plus the full power to express that love that God has, there should be no need of external guidelines or codified statements or definitions or examples of any kind: we would always express love to its full extent. But we are not God, and we do not have the perfect love which is exemplified in Him. Human beings must *learn* love. Christians must grow toward that absolute embodiment of love of which all fall so short. This is the purpose of God's law.

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16] How can one know love unless he is taught what it is and how it works? Ultimately, it is learned by practice. Yet before one can practice it, there must be some sort of beginning. The various aspects of God's law in the Bible are designed to give a *start* to the individual. These aspects then lead him to greater and greater understanding of this concept until he learns to live by internalized spiritual motivations which, while no longer adequately expressible in human words, impel him to continue to fulfill the objective of God's law which is love at the highest plane.

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17] The concept of love can be epitomized, albeit inadequately, in the following statement:

Love is both wholehearted worship toward God and outgoing concern for one's fellow man equal to the natural concern for self. This is seen in Matthew 22, where Jesus says that the great commandment in the law is to: [back to the top](#) [back to answers](#)

18] "...love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind. This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like unto it, Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself. On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets" (vv. 36-40).

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19] Here, Jesus states that our love must be first toward God with full fervency, and then toward our neighbor in a manner equal to our love for ourselves. In fact, these two great commandments of God are the very foundation of God's law on which *all the law* and all the prophets hang. All the biblical books on the law and the prophets teach one, by example as well as by command, how to show love toward his neighbor. Many of the basic principles of loving one's fellow man are well known; the basic principles of love of neighbor have appeared in almost every culture, age and religion (cf. ROM. 2:14-15). [back to the top](#) [back to answers](#)

20] Yet love of God is a point about which there is considerable difference of opinion. For that reason God gave four basic commands or principles that are the first four of the great Ten Commandments (Ex. 20:3-11). The last six proceed to give basic principles of love of fellow human beings (Ex. 20:12-17). Thus, the two "great commandments" of love of God and love of man are made more specific in the broad precepts of the Ten Commandments (cf. Deut. 5:7-21).

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21] Limited as they are, however, human beings find it difficult to translate broad principles into practical application. [back to the top](#) [back to answers](#)

22] Therefore, when God gave the Ten Commandments to ancient Israel—though it is clear they had already been known for thousands of years—He did not stop there. He went on to give them more detailed instructions, some of them rather broad, others very minute and detailed, applicable only to a specific situation in a specific time or culture. (These will be discussed later at length.)

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23] It is in the detailed physical regulations that man *first* finds himself able to grasp what God's law is all about (cf. Jas. 1:22-25). Almost everyone understands the need today for a speed limit or a no-parking sign. Likewise, in ancient Israel, there was little chance for dispute

about the need for a parapet surrounding one's roof (Deut. 22:8). These are very tangible regulations which anyone can come to grips with. It is these detailed instructions—often time or culturally bound—which begin to lead one toward the higher concepts of God's law and hence "love." This is assuming that one obeys them and reflects on their purpose: to teach one how to love God and how to love his fellow man.

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24] The command to build a guard rail around one's roof has variable application in societies today. It would only serve as a bird perch in some areas of the world. Yet in the society of ancient Israel, as also in certain modern forms of architecture, it was, and is, common to use the roof as living quarters or for other similar purposes. One who did not protect the users of his roof with a guarding parapet was guilty of negligence and, consequently, of not loving his neighbor. One cannot love his neighbor, after all, if he does not correct a potential hazard to life and limb.

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25] As the individual regulates his life by these, more narrow ordinances, he starts to perceive what it means to think of others. He begins to grasp the meaning of living a life which shows concern for others and is not just purely egocentric. Suddenly, the minor regulations have a significance greater than their specific object or immediate concern. The man who would never think of killing a neighbor in cold blood might accomplish the same act—through unthinking carelessness—by not penning up his berserk bull. The one who caused an innocent person to be condemned by his false testimony would be as guilty of his blood as if he had struck him with a meat cleaver.

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26] The detailed regulations, whether statute, ordinance or judgment (the terminology is of little significance, as already discussed, since the Hebrew terms do not correspond exactly with the English ones) lead to more general precepts. As the individual attempts to apply the more minute instructions and in so doing considers their purpose, he comes to see how they relate to one another and how they incorporate broader concepts. These broader concepts themselves cohere to form the basic structure of love embodied in the Ten Commandments. Through these two major facets unfold love of God and love of man—neither of which can be omitted from the total meaning of love.

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27] At this point, the artificial dilemma regarding the spirit of the law and the letter of the law takes on a different perspective. Ultimately, the love of God can be discerned only through His Spirit. It cannot be expressed in human language in other than inadequate form. This is why knowledge of God's love is conveyed through legal, ethical and moral regulations. These instructions are not ends in themselves. They point to the true end and provide a means of reaching it. They were not, in their deepest significance, set up as a code by which a person could be adjudged innocent or guilty. They were designed to show the way to love of God and love of man.

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28] Naturally, in any human society which does not understand God's perfect love, some sort of administrative system of reward and punishment is necessary. In the same way, the concept of sin as the breaking of God's law is a New Testament concept, and sin plays an important part in New Testament theology. Yet it is due to the failings of human nature, not because God is simply interested in the law as a means of judging sin. Ultimately, the law points beyond the level of sin, transgression and living by the letter to the love of God. To fulfill the law to its greatest extent is to have perfect love. Conversely, to have perfect love means to fulfill the law in its most spiritual manifestation.

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Law in the Old Testament

29] The Old Testament is a collection of diverse types of literature. The first five books, which compose the Pentateuch, are often called the "Torah" or "Law." However, the Hebrew term *torah*, as mentioned earlier, means "teachings" rather than just "law" in the legal, codified sense. Further, even though detailed regulations tend to be centered in the Pentateuch, they are not limited to that section of the Old Testament, nor is the Pentateuch simply a law code in the strictest sense.

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30] Some laws in the Old Testament clearly encompass broad principles while others are quite specific, minute regulations. The biblical text does not itself always clearly distinguish between the more important and the less important. That is why one finds many admonitions to meditate on the law (e.g. Ps. 119:97,99). Thus, even though these were all laws originating with God, some are more permanent and spiritual in nature than are others. (For example, the whole sacrificial system of the tabernacle and temple were important—even vital—for a certain period of time, but the New Testament shows that these regulations are not for all men at all times.)

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31] They served a specific function for a certain time and in a particular place while always symbolically pointing to deeper spiritual truths.)

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32] Old Testament laws can be broken down to various categories:

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33] 1) Broad spiritual principles which cover various lesser laws and regulations. The Ten Commandments are the primary example, as is clearly recognized by Old Testament scholars. For example, the seventh commandment—specifically against adultery—is a broad principle

regulating human sexual relations. Detailed instructions concerning the types of sexual practices to be avoided are found in Leviticus 18. These latter fall under the category of "civil regulations" (category no. 2 below) but are summarized by the broad principle of the seventh commandment.

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34] 2) Civil regulations for the Israelite theocracy. These cover a number of different types of regulations. The laws about building a parapet around one's roof, cutting down fruit trees while besieging a city, taking the mother bird with her young, inheritance, cities of refuge, covering an open pit, penning up a dangerous bull, leaving the corners and the forgotten sheaf for the poor, and many other instructions had to do with the proper conduct of a physical society within national state. Since Israel was a theocracy, many of these regulations had religious overtones, even while being primarily civil in function, and often pointed toward the broad principle of the law. To these were added the various decisions made by the judges.

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35] 3) Laws of cleanliness and ritual purity. These are hard to separate since both are often included under the same instructions. For example, one who touched a dead body had to wash himself. This is the cleanliness part of the instructions. Yet he also remained "unclean" (Hebrew *tame*) for a certain length of time (Lev. 11:39-40). Thus, both physical cleanliness and ritual cleanliness are included in the same instructions.

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36] 4) Laws relating to the sacrificial system and other regulations having to do with the religious liturgy or serving a symbolic or disciplinary function. For example, individuals were to sew blue fringes on their garments as a physical ritual to remind them of God's commandments (Num. 15:37-40). Circumcision was also a religious ceremony of great importance. Whole sections of the Pentateuch (e.g. Lev. 1-10) give detailed instructions about the conduct of the sacrificial system. The sacrifices were, of course, religious in purpose since they had to do with worship and expiation of sin (Lev. 4: 26,35; 5:16). [back to the top](#) [back to answers](#)

37] One can use the analogy of a modern free country to better understand the various levels of Old Testament law. All instructions were part of that law. None were to be slighted or ignored. The breaking of any law brought some sort of penalty on the violator, though the penalties varied in severity. The same is true with the laws within, for example, the United States. The Constitution says nothing about speed limits, property taxes, zoning, or sexual conduct. Rather, laws are broadly laid out and worded to serve as an overall guide for all generations. All other laws—whether national, regional or local—must conform to the principles laid down in the Constitution. These laws themselves vary in importance. Some cover only a certain state or region or city. They may need to be changed according to the time and circumstances. In addition, a certain body of common law has grown up through individual court decisions (cf. the "judgments" of the Old Testament).

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38] Category no. 1 might correspond to a national constitution—such as that of the United States—and cover all men at all times. Category no. 2 might be analogous to national laws passed by national legislators. That is, they may incorporate regulations which have permanent value for various human societies. On the other hand, some of the regulations may be culturally bound and require modification or replacement to remain relevant in a changing society. For example, the laws of inheritance were very important for ancient Israel but are less useful today. The seventh-year, land Sabbath could be applied in a nation under God's government but is difficult for all Christians everywhere to apply in today's society. Thus, the specific law sometimes does not fit the changed situation brought about by the vicissitudes of time and circumstance.

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39] Yet, one should not allow the concept of broad principles to devalue minute and detailed regulations. It would be impossible to run a country only on the broad principles of a constitution. Other laws, statutes and ordinances are also required. Speed limits and obedience to traffic lights may not be the most spiritual or "moral" of laws, but they are nonetheless essential for man in a mechanized society. Such ordinances are the result of applying moral and ethical principles (not running into another automobile does, after all, have ethical consequences); chaos would ensue if they were suddenly stricken from the books. To say that a law is of lesser value or more narrow in application than another is not to say that it is of no concern or that it can be ignored. The same applies to the detailed laws of the Old Testament.

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40] No survey, even a lengthy one, can begin to cover all the examples or details of law in the Old Testament. The basic types of law and their function have been outlined above. Following is a brief historical survey, given to illustrate that outline and to show that law was by no means static during Old Testament times, even during the history of Israel.

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41] The Old Testament, especially the book of Genesis, records the existence of extensive legal principles and legal codes long before the foundation of the nation of Israel. The last hundred years of archaeological discoveries have seen the discovery of legal codes and regulations from various parts of the ancient Near East. Thus, the particular codification given under the Sinai covenant was hardly the giving of law where none had previously existed. In fact, many of the regulations found in the books of Exodus, Leviticus and Numbers were only a reaffirmation of accepted regulations which had been known for centuries. [back to the top](#) [back to answers](#)

42] The account of the Garden of Eden is the first reference on instructions to human beings. Adam and Eve were instructed in the proper use and enjoyment of their idyllic physical surroundings; the one thing expressly forbidden was partaking of the tree of the knowledge of

good and evil. This first simple instruction was given for the good of Adam and Eve, yet they disobeyed and reaped the consequences. [back to the top](#) [back to answers](#)

43] Their sons, Cain and Abel, knew of God and worshipped Him by means of a burnt offering. For a reason not fully specified in the Genesis account, Cain's offering was not acceptable. His jealousy of Abel, whose sacrifice was accepted, produced the first murder. This brief episode shows several important points: worship was permitted through certain ritualistic ceremonies; this worship was regulated by some sort of unwritten code which Cain violated; Cain knew he was wrong to slay his brother and tried to cover it up; two sins—violations of law—are pointed out: murder and lying. It is therefore impossible to refer to the period before Sinai as a time of no law.

44] Similarly, the flood of Noah came because "God saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every imagination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually" (Gen. 6:5). Wickedness and evil are capable of existence only when there is a standard against which they can be judged. That standard does not have to be written down or externally codified; it can be a common understanding to which the term "natural law" or perhaps even "common law" could be applied. The point is that law *had* to exist before actions could be pronounced good or evil.

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45] Throughout the patriarchal period, various statements are made which evidence at least an implicit code or system of law with grave results for violation and great blessings for obedience. Perhaps the classic capsule statement of the situation is contained in Genesis 26 in a reference to Abraham: "Sojourn in this land, and I will be with you, and will bless you; . . . and I will fulfill the oath which I swore to Abraham your father. . . because Abraham obeyed my voice and kept my charge, my commandments, my statutes, and my laws" (vv. 3-5).

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46] Abraham, Isaac and their descendants were blessed for obedience to well-known laws and commandments. The fact that these are not specifically enumerated does not mean that they did not exist. On the contrary, many of them can be known by the *specific examples* which presuppose them. The following are examples of implicit laws in Genesis. Adultery being punishable: "What is this you have done to us? One of the people might easily have lain with your wife, and you would have brought guilt upon us" (26:10); homosexuality being drastically punished (chapter 19); circumcision being a requirement for descendants of Abraham as a sign of God's covenant with him (chapter 17); private property being respected (chapter 23); standard weights being used in business dealings (23:16); theft being wrong (31:19,30,32). Many other examples could be cited.

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47] Therefore, when God brought Israel out of Egypt, it was no new thing for Him to lay down regulations for them. The first command concerned the institution of the Passover and Days of Unleavened Bread. Between Rameses and Sinai, a number of different commands were given to the Israelites. On Mount Sinai God spoke the Ten Commandments Himself and wrote them on two tables of stone. These two symbolic acts showed that the Ten Commandments were to be considered more fundamental than the other laws. (The Sinaitic covenant included a number of laws besides the Decalogue, Ex. 20-24). [back to the top](#)
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48] Later, other regulations were added. A significant number of these centered on the sacrificial system at the altar. Sacrifices were not new; they had been offered at least since the time of Cain and Abel. What were new were many of the specific laws about the conduct of the ritual worship. Yet we find that, with the introduction of the temple at Jerusalem centuries later, many of these rules were modified. In fact the rules about building altars in Exodus 20:24-26 were soon changed and no altars except the one associated with the Tabernacle were allowed (Deut. 12). Deuteronomy covers many of the same basic regulations found in Exodus, Leviticus and Numbers but often modifies them or adapts them to new situations. So it is that in the Pentateuch itself we see a development of the legal code. A change in the administration or the environment often changes the interpretation and application of the law without altering the underlying principle. Rules given at one time for one situation were already being modified because of new situations (such as the change from nomadic desert-dwelling, in Exodus, to agricultural living in the land of Canaan, in Deuteronomy). Thus, God's Word establishes from its beginning, the responsibility of God's people to apply His laws to their changing contemporary situations. [back to the top](#) [back to answers](#)

49] Some of the laws arising with Israel were already known in the same or a similar form elsewhere in the ancient Near East, as the book of Genesis and the literature of other ancient peoples show. A code of law was accepted as in any functioning national state today. Even where the word of the monarch was law, a common system of conduct for the average citizen was still very much in evidence. After all, the king could not judge every single case or decide every little matter in the day-to-day life of even a small city-state, much less a huge empire.
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50] It is true that a number of the laws of the Old Testament can seem somewhat less than ideal from our modern viewpoint. They sound strange, indeed "primitive," to our modern ears. For example, slavery is only regulated, polygamy is allowed and women have decidedly inferior position. However, when the instructions dealing with these subjects are viewed against their background in the ancient Near East, many of them are remarkably progressive. That is, they would have been considered extremely liberal, even radical, for that time. These laws appear to have been instituted for the regulation and mollification of previously existing customs. Whether the customs themselves were good or bad was not the point. Rather, since eradication of the bad was impossible, God gave laws to ameliorate the existing situation.
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51] Such accepted institutions as slavery were regulated to help *protect* the indentured servant and the bondsman. Polygamy was normal for the time, yet the laws of the Pentateuch saw to it that at least inheritance should be conducted fairly. A rapist normally had to marry his victim, if unmarried, to protect *her* since she would have had a hard time finding a husband. Of course, if the character of the rapist was clearly depraved—that is, if his crime was not an isolated example of lust getting the better of him but evidence of a basic flaw of character—the father of the victim could still disallow it. From our modern point of view, the law may look peculiar. For the society at the time, it was a means designed to make the best of a bad situation. Similarly, just because God gave specific laws regarding divorce, it did not mean that He approved the practice (cf. Mt. 19:8). God was simply eliminating the possibility of continuous wife swapping (Deut. 24:1-4).

52] These examples are again evidence of a progression in the revelation and the understanding of God's ultimate spiritual law. Even in the New Testament the institution of slavery is nowhere condemned outright. Yet the Church today, from its perspective of two thousand more years of history and guided by God's Spirit, clearly recognizes that slavery is contrary to God's purpose for man. [back to the top](#) [back to answers](#)

53] A look at law in the Old Testament would not be complete without examining certain prophetic Old Testament passages which indicate the reinstatement of a temple and regular sacrificial system during the Messiah's—Christ's—reign in the millennium (Is. 66:20-23; Ezek. 40-48; Zech. 14:20-21; Mal. 3:1-4; etc.). Why should such physical rituals have a place when Christ Himself is ruling? [back to the top](#) [back to answers](#)

54] There seem to be three interdependent reasons for a temple and sacrificial system. First is because, in addition to allowing Jerusalem to serve as a religious center, such a system shall enable a restored Israel to serve as an example to the world. The priesthood, which in times past did not consistently execute its duties with the proper care and willingness, shall now show the world how those duties should be carried out (Ezek. 44:5 ff). Israel as a model physical nation shall also have an important part in setting the social, ethical and religious examples. [back to the top](#) [back to answers](#)

55] The second reason is somewhat similar. Christ shall have established His rule over physical, unconverted nations. They must be led gradually to the place of repenting, being converted and receiving the Holy Spirit. Just as the temple ritual was important to the ancient Israelites without God's Spirit, so the reestablished ritual of sacrifices shall give them a physical means of growing towards a spiritual understanding of God. The necessary education shall take a good deal of time. The temple shall serve as an important part—the center—of religious education.

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56] Thirdly and finally, just as the sacrifices of ancient Israel pointed *forward* to a coming Savior who was to pay the supreme sacrifice for the sins of the world, so in the millennium the sacrifices will point *back* to that sacrifice and give people a greater understanding of Christ our Savior (in much the same way as the Passover service does today), the consequences of sin, and the meaning of salvation.

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Law in the New Testament

57] The importance of law in the Old Testament is easily accepted even though its exact implications may be debated. It is the subject of God's law in the New Testament that has been much misunderstood. The question affects not only the totality of the Christian life but also how the New Testament—and its relationship with the Old Testament—is understood. It would be out of place in this section to attempt to take up the entire New Testament teachings on conversion, salvation, morality, conduct and so on. (Many of these points are discussed in detail under other major headings.) Here we will therefore concentrate on the background situation in New Testament times, the reason why certain new approaches to law are emphasized, and why some contrasts are made with the Old Testament position. [back to the top](#) [back to answers](#)

58] The New Testament is very much rooted in the Judaism of the time. The picture of Judaism in the first century is only now becoming clear as a result of recent scholarship, while many old assumptions (unfortunately widespread in many of the major reference works) are no longer tenable. The reconstruction of early first-century Judaism that emerges from new methods and documents is quite different from that of Judaism after the period 70-135 A.D.

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59] The Judaism of New Testament times was rooted in the Old Testament. The Hebrew Bible was the major traditional literature (even if read only in Greek translation as it was by many in the Diaspora). The religious center was the Temple and its sacrificial system. There were also many different popular preachers and religious sects of diverse persuasions. However, actual membership in the sects was quite small. The vast majority of Jews were not members of any sect and were not overly scrupulous or religious in conduct. That is, despite a general piety which undoubtedly characterized most of them, they were too busy making a living to devote their time to sectarian taboos, religious harangues or denominational disputes.

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60] This does not mean that certain of the sectarian leaders and teachers were not looked upon with a certain respect or that the temple worship was neglected. But the picture of a populace dominated by strictly observed Pharisaic rules of purity and *halakah* is not accurate. This is not to say that the Pharisees did not have considerable prestige or that they were without influence. On the other hand, there were only a few thousand Pharisees, and their rules

and opinions were not dutifully followed by the people and were emphatically not followed by most of the temple priests.

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61] Yet we must also keep in mind the previous centuries of Jewish history. The destruction of Jerusalem and the exile in 587 B.C. were very traumatic experiences. With the return of the exiles, there was a determination not to repeat the original causes of that exile. One of the major causes was considered to be Sabbath-breaking (Neh. 13:16-18; Ezek. 20:24). In the centuries that followed, the Jewish faith had its ups and downs. The one episode which threatened to submerge Judaism entirely came in the middle of the second century B.C. The Seleucid king, Athiochus IV Epiphanes, waged war against Judea, allying with the renegade Jews, defiling the temple and stopping the temple service.

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62] At this time the Jews waged a long war to preserve their religion and autonomy. Although Jerusalem was retaken and the temple services restored after three years, the Maccabean state continued to fight with the Syrians for decades. The priesthood was combined with the political leadership in the Hasmonean (Maccabean) dynasty which ruled Judea for the next century. This autonomy came to an end in 63 B.C. when Rome intervened in civil strife resulting from rival claims to the high priesthood. [back to the top](#) [back to answers](#)

63] Nevertheless, under Roman rule, with the Herodian family as the major figure of political control, the Jewish state still maintained a considerable amount of freedom. Not only was worship not restricted but Herod the Great even began a lengthy process of beautification and restoration of the Temple. Objections to Rome were primarily of a political and not of a religious nature. The Jewish religion was a thriving concern. The main thing to remember is that Judaism was a pluralistic phenomenon of many differing aspects with the Temple as its focus; it was not a Pharisaic or rabbinic monopoly. [back to the top](#) [back to answers](#)

64] It was onto this stage that Jesus stepped—the stage on which He began His teachings. It was on this same stage that the early Church began. The apostle Paul concentrated his efforts in the Diaspora. The Jews in the Diaspora, despite some differences, seemed to cover the same basic religious spectrum as the Jews in Palestine. As a people and as a religion, the Jews and Judaism were very well known in the first century throughout the Roman Empire. This is borne out by many historians of the period. Preaching the gospel in the Gentile world meant building upon a Jewish—and hence Old Testament—foundation. [back to the top](#) [back to answers](#)

65] The New Testament teachings presume the Old Testament and the Judaism of that time. This is clear to anyone who studies the historical and cultural background as well as the New Testament itself. Thus, what sometimes appears to be a radical statement about Judaism or the law or the Old Testament, is really either a spiritual modification or an amplification or both,

rather than a rejection or repudiation of it. In other words, the New Testament writers—including Paul—did not reject the Old Testament or the law or even their Jewish background. They rejected a few things, they modified or changed the emphasis of many things, and they especially taught the newly revealed spiritual meanings involved. *It is critical for a full understanding of God's law in the New Testament to realize that the apostles assumed a great deal as intuitively and publicly obvious, without seeing any need to discuss it specifically.* [back to the top](#) [back to answers](#)

66] To take one example—perhaps the heart of the New Testament—we can look at the "Sermon on the Mount." Much within this vital section is not new; that is, it can be paralleled with sections in the Old Testament. The Old Testament law is presupposed: "Think not that I have come to abolish them but to fulfill them . . . Whoever then relaxes one of the least of these commandments and teaches men so, shall be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but he who does them and teaches them shall be called great" (Mt. 5:17-20). [back to the top](#)
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67] What is revolutionary about the "Sermon on the Mount" is its complete emphasis on matters of the heart rather than just on external practice. Here is the ultimate in the complete rejection of egotism—the highest form of absolute concern for others and for God. Many Old Testament commands are made more strict by becoming matters of the spirit: sexual desire, divorce, repayment for wrongs, swearing, murder and hate, to name some of the major ones. Jesus was making things *harder*, not easier. As the disciples said about the subject of divorce in another context, "If such is the case of a man with his wife, it is not expedient to marry." Jesus' answer was that "Not all men can receive this precept, but only those to whom it is given" (Mt. 19:10-11).
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68] Jesus was not doing away with the law; He was, rather, magnifying and lifting it to a spiritual plane, revealing its full spiritual intent. He was making it a matter of the spirit rather than only of the letter. He was showing the law's intent and purpose as opposed to its bare physical statement. The basic overall result was the introduction of a system of law which could be kept only by means of the Holy Spirit. Old Testament law could be kept in the letter by any ordinary physical individual with character and self-discipline. New Testament law in its spiritual form could in no way be kept without divine help. [back to the top](#) [back to answers](#)

69] In the Old Testament, righteousness was primarily judged by what one did, by external conformity to the laws. This does not mean that there are not many statements about the attitude and intent of the heart and its importance—there are. But the emphasis is nonetheless on adherence to the letter of the law, something that was possible for the ordinary person. The New Testament goes much further, stating that external obedience is not enough. Despite all one's attempts, full service to the spiritual demands of the law is unattainable in the flesh. No one can be completely righteous without perfect obedience. Since this is impossible, no one is,

by himself, righteous.

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70] This view was, of course, quite contrary to the then current view of things. To persons such as the Pharisees who put great emphasis on their scrupulous observance of their own ritual laws of purity, it was rather galling to be told that their faithful practice was so much dung (cf Phil. 3:8). Paul is not castigating obedience; he is not denigrating the Old Testament law. Rather, he is showing that the real source of forgiveness and salvation is Jesus Christ—that His sacrifice for our sins and His resurrection are the really important things as opposed to the less important do's and don'ts of the law. [back to the top](#) [back to answers](#)

71] Paul is often misunderstood in this regard simply because his teachings are not understood against their background. He himself strictly conformed even to what were considered ritual observances (Acts 16:3; 18:18; 21:17-26). On the other hand, some things which are often relegated to the level of ritual were not ritual but essential parts of worship which Paul observed and taught. (For examples, see Sabbath and Annual Holy Days.)
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72] Furthermore, Paul was teaching not just Jews but Gentiles. The Old Testament promises were purely physical, made to a physical Israel that did not understand the spiritual intent of circumcision, even though Old Testament writings speak of an inward circumcision not of the flesh (Jer. 4:4; Deut. 30:6; Joel 2:13). The requirement of physical circumcision for males was a major problem in the early Church, with the decision being made that such circumcision was not for the Gentiles. The message Paul took to the Gentiles was that they no longer needed to become Jews outwardly, in the flesh through circumcision, to gain salvation. Membership in the Israel of God was a matter of the heart.
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73] Paul's epistle to the Romans is replete with vigorous statements in full support of the law. The law is not void by faith, but fully established (Rom. 3:31). Christians are admonished not to continue in sin (Rom. 6:1-2), but to become "servants of righteousness" (Rom. 6:18). The law is good, (Rom. 7:7); it is spiritual (Rom. 7:14) and "holy, and the commandment holy, and just, and good" (Rom. 12:7). The carnal mind that leads to death (Rom. 6:23; 8:6) is defined as being "enmity against God: for it is not subject to the law of God" (Rom. 8:7).
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74] Paul's statements in Romans 2:25-27, while often quoted, have been somewhat neglected as a powerful affirmation of the fact that Gentiles need to be lawkeepers. In this passage Paul is showing that the issue of circumcision is irrelevant for the Christian, in contradistinction to the issue of keeping "the righteousness of the law" which is extremely relevant. If the uncircumcised Gentiles fulfill the law, they are immeasurably superior to

circumcised Jews who transgress the law. So a Gentile in the Church who keeps the law becomes a true Jew inwardly, because he is fulfilling what God wanted all along. The condition is *to keep God's law*. Paul's use of the term "law" cannot mean the entire Sinaitic covenant, since circumcision itself was a part of that covenant and therefore it would be logically impossible for an uncircumcised person to keep the "whole" law. Paul must be referring to the moral law, the Ten Commandments, in Romans 2:25-27.

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75] Paul knew that some would conclude that, because he continually stressed that salvation cannot be earned by law-keeping, the law was annulled or worthless. "Do we then void the law through faith? God forbid: yea, we establish the law" (Rom. 3:31). This is important because, if the law were done away or became invalid, then sin would be dead (Rom. 7:8), no transgression would exist (Rom. 4:15), and God could not impute sin to make the sacrifice of Christ meaningful. "The strength of sin is the law" (I Cor. 15:56): the law is the standard of what sin and what righteousness are. If that standard is removed, there is no need for Christ. So by accepting Jesus, the true Christian is indeed establishing the law, by admitting its full empowerment in condemning him (Rom. 6:23). As a result, the true Christian, with the help of the Holy Spirit, can fulfill the righteousness of the law (Rom. 8:4) and with Paul shall *delight* in the law of God after the inward man" (Rom. 7:22).

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76] The book of Galatians is often used as support in an attempt to do away with God's law. This is not the issue dealt with in the epistle at all. The focal point of Paul's letter to the Galatians does not deal with the abrogation of the law but rather with the question of how one is justified. Justification means forgiveness for past sins—being counted as just and pure through Jesus' blood. That is what Paul is dealing with. In other words, there are two systems. One began with the covenant at Sinai. The other is the system of faith in Christ. The one system, of relying on the fact that you are circumcised, etc. for justification does not lead to eternal life. Paul shows that this only condemns—brings bondage—because no provision exists for real forgiveness and pardon for sin. So the system of the first covenant will not save anyone. Some were denying that to the Galatian Church. They were looking to their physical adherence to the way of life of the Sinaitic covenant, especially to circumcision, to earn them salvation. [back to the top](#) [back to answers](#)

77] But the question was not whether Gentiles could covet, or kill, or steal, or break the Sabbath. Rather, the question was whether a Gentile had to be physically circumcised (Gal. 2:3-4). Paul categorically denied this. Galatians 2:14 portrays the problem further: the Jews were even practicing racial discrimination for religious reasons. They felt superior to their Gentile brethren because they were physically a part of the heritage of Israel. But Paul showed in Romans that this should only have made them see their sins more, since they knew God's law so well. So the question has to do with circumcision and the manner or customs that one follows. Why, then, is Paul so upset over this? Because carried to their logical conclusion these requirements would mean that Jesus' death was not necessary. If being a Jew could save a man, if being physically circumcised could bring favor with God, then Christ died in vain. It would mean that just having the law would be enough. But having the law—having the whole system

of the Sinaitic covenant--was not enough to attain eternal life; in fact, it only pointed out sin more and more. To rely fully on the law, one would have to keep all of it perfectly, which is impossible. So when Paul uses "law" in Galatians he means all that is involved in being a Jew—the whole system of the Sinaitic covenant, especially the ceremonies and rituals which were "added because of transgressions" until Christ should come (Gal. 3:19) —and he specifically singles out circumcision as an issue. [back to the top](#) [back to answers](#)

78] Justification must be by faith (Gal. 3:11) and the law of the Sinaitic covenant was given not to save us, but as a schoolmaster or "pedagogue," to teach us the meaning of obedience, to bring us to Christ. [back to the top](#) [back to answers](#)

79] This, then, is the core of Galatians. Much of Paul's reasoning is the same in Romans as in Galatians. But in Romans, Paul is dealing with moral law—sin and grace—whereas in Galatians, the problem is circumcision and understanding the place of the Sinaitic covenant, the whole system called "law." But the same conclusions are arrived at by complementary arguments.

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80] In Romans, Paul uses as an example the law of God concerning coveting (Rom. 7:7ff). Why cannot that law save us? Because it only emphasizes the sin. If we rely on works of the law—our keeping of this law—we will fail. We are sinners and have all coveted. The only solution is justification by faith. But after justification we must keep the law through God's Spirit. The law is holy, just and good; it is spiritual and eternal.

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81] In Galatians, Paul deals with the law of circumcision. We cannot be saved by being circumcised, because if we go to that *whole system* of which circumcision is a part for salvation we receive no grace or pardon, only condemnation. We cannot, with our natural human strength, keep the law (i.e. the Ten Commandments; we can keep circumcision—it is painful, but easy). So the only solution is again Jesus and justification by faith. What about after justification? Are we then to follow circumcision and the system of the Sinaitic covenant? No, that would be to deny Jesus and our need for Him. [back to the top](#) [back to answers](#)

82] Once again, the reasoning in Romans and Galatians is basically the same, but the issues are different. The first is universal—the question of sin and morality. The second is the question of the historical place of the Sinai covenant in God's plan. Remember that the Ten Commandments did not originate with the Sinaitic covenant but with God at Creation and since. So they are not affected when the covenant is changed. They are universal and tell us what sin is.

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83] Ephesians 6:1-3 is a very significant statement concerning the position of the Ten Commandments in the Gentile churches. Here the fifth one is cited. Notice the comment in verse 2. It *is* "the first commandment with promise." Not just that it was—it still is. And what does Paul mean by "the first"? He is obviously referring to a *set* of commandments—a group of them. And they still apply. This simple statement by Paul gives us an important insight into the attitude of the Gentile churches towards the Ten Commandments. He does not have to introduce them or say that "Honor your father and mother" *was* once a commandment with promise—for it is a commandment at this time. [back to the top](#) [back to answers](#)

84] If Gentile Christians were indeed taught to honor and keep the Ten Commandments, why, then, does Paul make certain mitigating comments about "law"? The answer is rooted in the historical reality that Christianity at this time was viewed as a Jewish sect in the general public opinion. And therefore, *much of what has been taken as a castigation of the Old Testament law in the New Testament is actually an antidote to the idea that Gentiles had to become Jewish Proselytes before they could become Christians.* This idea probably gained credence simply because Gentile Christians were taught and read their Old Testament, and various proselytizing Jewish groups were spreading the message that Gentiles had to follow the whole system of first-century Judaism in order to partake of the salvation offered by the God of Israel. Certainly to Gentiles who had never heretofore been taught the Holy Scriptures, apostolic Christianity and contemporary Judaism must have seemed extremely similar (much as Methodism and Seventh-Day Adventism might seem similar to a Buddhist today). Paul therefore had to take great pains to show how Christianity differed from Judaism. *He had to do this because the two religions clearly had so much in common.*

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85] Nearly everybody knew what Judaism and the Old Testament taught. The Sabbath and annual Holy Days, for example, were commonly known. What Paul had to do was not reemphasize the Old Testament laws already known, but rather teach the new revelations about Jesus Christ and His spiritual magnification of the law that *nobody* knew.

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86] No attempt was made by the New Testament writers to repeat everything of relevance in the Old Testament. To have done so would have made the Old Testament redundant. It would also have been utterly ridiculous, since the Old Testament was commonly presupposed to be inspired Scripture, the Word of God. It was the only Scripture then in existence.

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87] Converts from paganism were, of course, tempted to revert to the religious culture from which they had come. They were influenced by various popular religions, syncretistic cults and astrological clans. But the contrast between Christianity and paganism was fairly clear. What was not so clear was the difference between Judaism and Christianity. Thus, even though Paul has to fight the influences of paganism and the contemporary culture, he seems to have found

many problems from the Jewish side as well. In some cases, this problem may have been instigated by some sort of Jewish syncretistic group. (For example, a Jewish syncretistic astrological group may have been behind the problem in Colossae. In other cases, it was probably the basic Hellenistic Jewish mission to the Gentiles which upset the various churches.)

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88] When this is understood, most of the presumed antinomian, anti-Jewish and anti-Old Testament sentiment in Paul's writings evaporates. Despite some differences because of his specific mission to the Gentiles, Paul suddenly looks a great deal like James and Peter and John in teaching what Jesus taught. Paul was no longer a Pharisee, but he remained a faithful Jew as well as becoming a Christian.

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89] The book of James has been a perennial problem for those who would have the New Testament discard God's law. James calls the law of God "the royal law" in 2:8. He quotes Leviticus 19:18: "Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself," which is the epitome of the last six of the Ten Commandments (Rom. 13:9-10). James goes on to show that if you break one point of the law—any one of the Ten Commandments—you are guilty of all (Jas. 2:10-11). God's law is at the same time the "law of liberty" (2:12), since it frees man from the bondage of sin.

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90] But it is the last half of the second chapter of James, verses 14 to 26, that gives antinomian Christians their biggest problem. James repeatedly emphasizes that "faith without works is dead" (vv. 17, 20, 26), that the best way to show real faith is by works (v. 18), that by works faith is made perfect (v. 22) and "that by works a man is justified, and not by faith only" (v. 24). James 4:11-12 is a proper conclusion to this theme, putting the question directly to any who would do away with God's law: "if thou judge the law, thou art not a doer of the law, but a judge."

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91] In the epistles of John, the subject of keeping the commandments comes up several times. I John 2:4 is direct: "He that saith, I know Him, and keepeth not His commandments is a liar, and the truth is not in him." I John 3:4 is powerful in its blunt assertion that "Whosoever committeth sin transgresseth also the law: for sin is the transgression of the law." Likewise, John 15:10 (cf. I John. 3:22-24), where Jesus tells His disciples before His death to keep His commandments as He had kept His Father's commandments.

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92] Certainly these commandments included all of Christ's commandments, but the expression clearly includes the only *set* of commandments, the Ten Commandments. Compare

Matthew 19:16-19 in this context. Here Jesus tells a rich young man, "if thou wilt enter into life, keep the commandments." The young man asks, "Which?" And Jesus responds by enumerating five of the Ten Commandments. [back to the top](#) [back to answers](#)

93] The necessity to keep God's commandments is reemphasized in the book of Revelation. The Church—"the rest of [the woman's] offspring"—is identified as keeping the commandments of God in 12:17. The saints are defined as those "who keep the commandments of God and the faith of Jesus" in 14:12. And finally, those who shall be in the incomprehensibly awesome new heaven and new earth of chapter 21 shall be only those who "do His commandments."

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94] All the New Testament writers presuppose the Old Testament and often quote or allude to it. It was decades after the founding of the Church before Holy Scripture comprised more than the Old Testament. Furthermore, since Jesus Christ was the very personality who had given His law to humanity in general—and to Israel in particular at Sinai (see Jesus Christ), He would scarcely have discarded—and He did not discard—in the New Testament the very law He had established in the Old. [back to the top](#) [back to answers](#)

95] The Old Testament is an essential part of the biblical canon. It is as much the Word of God as the New Testament. However, to New Testament Christians, the Old Testament has a special status in that it is not to be taken alone: it must be read in the light of the New Testament.

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Law and Grace

96] Much of the misunderstanding regarding whether a Christian must keep the biblical law (i.e. the Ten Commandments) revolves around the term "grace." Those who do not think a Christian "must" obey the law conclude that since we are under grace" (Rom. 6:15), we no longer "must" keep the law. Those who follow this line of reasoning point to various scriptures—especially those in the book of Galatians (some of which have already been mentioned)—to support their case. They maintain that Christ came to free us from "the curse of the law," or that "Christ is the end of the law" (Rom. 7:4). But Jude describes this line of reasoning as "turning the grace of our God into lasciviousness (lawlessness)" (Jude 4). [back to the top](#)
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97] This approach also illustrates a basic lack of understanding of the word "grace." "Grace," in its biblical meaning and intent, means "the favor, forgiveness, beneficence, generosity, mercy, kindness and compassion of God. " Therefore, to be "under grace" means to live within this whole sphere of God's favor and compassion. The two greatest *acts* of grace are: 1) forgiveness of past sins, which God grants upon true repentance, faith and baptism; and, 2) the unmerited freely-given gift of eternal life, which God grants upon the condition of faith.

Hence, to be "under grace" means that one's sins have been forgiven, that he is in a favored position with God, and that he is an heir of salvation.

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98] But the Bible nowhere equates "grace" with freedom to disobey God. On the contrary, the exact opposite is stated: "Do we then make void the law through faith? [i.e. do we negate the necessity of keeping the law because we are under grace as a result of faith?] God forbid: yea, we establish the law" (Rom. 3:31). We, as Christians, "establish the law" because when we accept God's grace through baptism we are acknowledging the existence of law against which we have sinned.

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99] The true relationship between law and grace may be simply stated. Law defines sin because sin is the transgression of the law (I John. 3:4). God's forgiveness of our sins is an act of grace. But this act of grace—this act of unmerited pardon and favor in God's eyes, along with the eventual entrance into God's Kingdom which shall follow if we are faithful—in no way grants us a license or permission to continue to sin. In like manner, a convicted criminal who has been pardoned or has had his sentence commuted by a judge is shown an act of grace, but is not permitted to go out and repeat his crime. Again, far from doing away with the law, grace establishes the law, because one who accepts grace acknowledges that the law has been broken. *Without Law there can be no grace therefore grace can never do away with law.*

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100] The purpose of the law is not to provide a means of earning forgiveness and salvation. Salvation cannot be earned. It comes by God's free gift—salvation is by grace alone (Rom. 3:21-24; 5:15-16). Faith in the sacrifice of Jesus Christ is the only requirement for this gift of grace. Keeping the law even in the most spiritual manner cannot and does not earn salvation. The central message of the New Testament is that salvation is a gift of God through faith in Jesus Christ.

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101] Yet this by no means negates the importance of law in the process of salvation. While salvation is in the final analysis a free gift, God will not give that gift to one who is not willing to submit to Him. Gifts are not given to the unappreciative, and lack of appreciation is indicated in many ways, including a basic contempt for God's laws or a lack of any enthusiasm in trying to see how God's laws reflect His mind (I John. 2:4). Note again the well-known case of the young rich man who approached Jesus about the very subject of salvation in Matthew 19, as quoted above. When Jesus replied, "If thou wilt enter into life, keep the commandments" (v. 17), He was not describing the method of salvation, but rather the prerequisite for His free gift.

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102] The Jews in the time of the New Testament understood the importance of the law and the many promises about blessings *for observing* it. The problem was that many went on to assume that salvation came by observing it. When Paul and other writers showed them that this assumption was incorrect, it became a major stumbling block. Even after the Church had been in existence for almost 20 years, it was still necessary to call a conference over the question of circumcision, since some still believed salvation was impossible without it (Acts 15). Paul had a deep and abiding appreciation for the law (Rom. 6; 7:12; I Cor. 7:19), yet he also understood that salvation was not earned by lawkeeping. [back to the top](#) [back to answers](#)

103] The New Testament makes it clear that sin brings on the death penalty (Rom. 6:23). And "sin is the transgression of the law" (I John. 3:4). Since all have sinned and thus failed to keep the law perfectly (Rom. 3:23), all have brought the death penalty upon themselves. Only the giving up of human life will satisfy this penalty. Thus, the sacrifice of the Creator—of God Himself, in the person of Jesus Christ—is the only means by which that penalty can be paid and thereby removed from all humanity. No one (apart from Jesus) has kept the law perfectly; all have incurred the death penalty. This made the death of sinless Jesus, the Son of God, a necessity. Recognition of Christ's freely given sacrifice not only brings home the sober reality of sin but also enables us to see what true love is at first hand (John. 3:16). [back to the top](#) [back to answers](#)

104] The enormous importance of the law of God and man's living *within* it can be measured by considering this immeasurable price that God has put on the conditions for the forgiveness of sins—repentance and recognition and acceptance of Jesus Christ's death as payment for our transgressions of His laws. This certainly reflects God's love towards mankind, and can begin to motivate man to express his love back to God by *wanting* to live within God's laws. [back to the top](#) [back to answers](#)

105] God expects Christians to *repent* of sin (Acts 2:38). But repentance alone does not remove the death penalty. Once one turns from his sinful way of life in wholehearted repentance, God accepts his repentance and Christ offers His own sacrifice on the cross as payment for the death penalty previously incurred by that repentant sinner. The Holy Spirit is promised to the repentant individual as a free gift which makes possible salvation and eternal life. Even one who is converted will still sin out of weakness. However, he can call on the sacrifice of Christ and gain forgiveness. It is the direction of his life that God is concerned with; God does not keep a tally, as it were, ready to send the individual straight to eternal death if he dies with a single sin he not repented of on his record. Far from being some sort of "Almighty Bookkeeper," God *wants* to see His children receive salvation. He is very happy to forgive His begotten children who continually find themselves in trouble, so long as their hearts and attitudes are right—so long as they are wholeheartedly sincere and making progress despite weaknesses and setbacks. [back to the top](#) [back to answers](#)

106] Thus, the fight against sin is a very important component of the plan of salvation. Sin is horrible and heinous. Yet one can become so preoccupied with sin as to miss the point of the law in the first place. He can be so concerned about making a mistake that he never steps out and does good. Some, people so concentrate on their "sinful wretchedness" that they never climb out of the mire and exercise their positive spiritual talents as they should. Sin is important, but recognition of our sinful natures should not discourage or cow us to the point of not making positive progress through faith. [back to the top](#) [back to answers](#)

New Testament Application of Old Testament Laws

107] Both the Old and New Testaments form the written Word of God. The Old Testament is no less the Word of God than is the New. It would completely miss the point of the relationship between the Old and New Testaments to require everything from the former to be repeated in the latter in order to be considered as relevant for Christians behavior. (Bestiality can be used as an extreme and ludicrous example to make the point.) Conversely, it would be equally illogical to attempt to enforce in the secular states of the twentieth century every exact regulation given to the theocracy of Israel over 3,000 years ago. [back to the top](#) [back to answers](#)

108] Christians read the Old Testament in the light of the New, and the New Testament does make some changes. The teachings of the Old Testament may also be understood in the light of the changed circumstances of the Church in the modern world. The Hebrew Bible was written initially to a congregation or church organized as a special nation in the culture and society of the ancient Near East. By the time of the first century, circumstances had changed to some extent. Furthermore, the full revelation of God's plan with the concept of a spiritual Israel required the modification of certain Old Testament teachings in their implementation within a physical nation. This modification process continues today. [back to the top](#) [back to answers](#)

109] *The Church, as ordained of God and authorized by Jesus Christ, has the power of binding and loosing—of making judgments on the basis of biblical principles* (Mt. 16:18-19). New situations arise not directly addressed in the pages of the Bible. The modern world is not the ancient world. Without the flexibility of making judgments and applying earlier laws to fit newer situations, the Church would become anachronistic and ineffectual. It may be necessary to look at the environment in which the Old Testament laws were given—the society, culture, national situation, contemporary legal attitudes, literary influences and so forth—in order to understand the reason why a law was initially given to Israel. But to understand the intent behind the law, we must examine the lives and teachings of Jesus, the apostles and the prophets. Once the *purpose and intent of each law* is discerned, its application to 21st century life becomes much more clear and obvious. (It is interesting and instructive to realize that though the principles underlying God's laws are immutable and unchangeable, the specific applications of the laws have changed in every period of biblical history.) [back to the top](#) [back to answers](#)

110] The following sections examine certain laws of the Old Testament and show how the Church has applied these today. It has not been possible to cover all the individual laws by any means, but the general principles used should be basically clear. Of course, some of these laws have been clearly modified in the New Testament. In other cases, the New Testament is silent on the subject, and the Church has made decisions based on the Old Testament alone. (Note that Sabbath, Annual Holy Days and Tithing and Giving are covered under those titles.)

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111] *Circumcision:* One of the laws regarding which the Old Testament is very clear is that of circumcision. Circumcision was instituted as a sign of the covenant with Abraham (Gen. 17). It was a sign of the covenant with God and of the Israelites' national identity. It made the newborn boy a part of the community. It was, in a sense, an initiation rite since any male of whatever age was required to undergo it to become a part of Israel. Therefore, it is not surprising that circumcision became an important issue in the early Church (Acts 10-11; 15).

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112] Christians do not consider physical circumcision as a requirement for entry into the spiritual community of Israel, the Church. The reason is that the New Testament makes it clear that the only circumcision that is required is spiritual circumcision of the heart and mind. The question had already been debated and settled in the early Church (Acts 10-11; 15; Gal. 5:2-12). While one could voluntarily undergo circumcision, it was not a requirement for membership in the body of Christ. To reiterate, the only required circumcision is spiritual circumcision—circumcision of the heart and mind.

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113] Nevertheless, this does not mean that the Church rejected all physical rituals. Baptism was taught as a physical ceremony. The symbolism of baptism is that of death followed by resurrection to a new life. It is a voluntary act requiring active, conscious repentance on the part of the mature individual, whereas circumcision is an involuntary act carried out on the unknowing babe in arms.

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114] *The Sacrificial System and Temple Ritual:* The New Testament has a clear teaching about the temple ritual, just as it does about circumcision. As long as the temple was standing, it was certainly not deprecated. On occasion Christians actually offered up sacrifices (Acts 18:18; 21:23-26). However, the death of Christ was the supreme sacrifice, of which animal sacrifices were only a type (Heb. 10:1-18). The Old Testament system was rendered unnecessary by Christ's sacrifice. Christians look to this rather than merely to the "shadow" which represented it. Furthermore, Christians offer up, not only their possessions (livestock and grain stuffs), but their very selves to God by presenting themselves *as living* sacrifices (Rom. 12:1-2).

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115] Many of the laws in the Old Testament were specifically designed for a physical people who did not have the help of God's Holy Spirit and who lived in a national state. The whole sacrificial system was an extremely regulated and detailed physical ritual. It required a great many on a continual basis to keep it going. With many sacrifices, the person offering the animal was actually able to eat most of it along with his family. Only certain parts were burned on the altar and certain pieces went to the priest. But sin offerings were burned whole and neither the offerer nor the priest realized anything from them. It effectively hurt one's pocketbook to sin!

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116] The principle of sacrifice has certainly not been eliminated for New Testament Christians. However, the sin offering we look to is not an animal offered at the temple altar: it is the sacrifice of Jesus Christ. His death rendered the physical sacrificial system unnecessary for converted Christians. This system had pointed to Christ. Christians can now view the sacrificial system with greater understanding than could the ancient Israelites who participated in it (Heb. 9-10).

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117] This does not mean that the temple worship was wrong or even bad. The book of Acts shows that the apostle Paul himself participated in the sacrificial system on at least two occasions. He took certain vows which could be completed only by offering an offering in the temple (Acts 18:18; 21:20-26 and cf. Num. 6:18). It was not wrong for Israelite Christians to continue to participate in the sacrificial system; it was simply unnecessary. Of course, once the temple and Jerusalem were destroyed, it became impossible for them just as for all Jews.

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118] *Clean and Unclean Animals:* Many regulations in Leviticus have to do with being "clean" (Hebrew *tahor*) or "unclean" (Hebrew *tame*). These regulations had two functions: (1) They usually required washing which served as a physical cleansing agent and helped prevent the contraction or spread of disease; (2) they served a ritual purpose in that anyone "unclean" could not participate in the sacrificial service. Ritual purity was a major emphasis in conducting any of the temple activities. Included in this regulation was the prohibition against eating all but certain types of animals (Lev. 11; Deut. 14) and such things as the blood and the bodily fat of these animals.

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119] Nowhere in all these regulations is anything stated specifically about physical health. Yet physical health seems clearly to be one aspect of these regulations. The continual requirement of washing after touching dead bodies or engaging in certain activities has the concept of hygiene behind it. Modern science has also discovered the dangers of consuming animal fats (they are high in cholesterol among other things). Public health doctors are also

acutely aware of the importance of quarantine in avoiding the spread of disease, another requirement for various types of disease in ancient Israel (e.g. Lev. 13). [back to the top](#)
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120] Modern science has also found that certain of the biblically proscribed animals present potential health hazards. For example, the danger of contracting trichinosis from pork is one known by almost every housewife. Such scavengers as crabs are also among the most affected by conditions of pollution since they tend to feed in contaminated areas and thus concentrate the dangerous substances in their bodies. Granted, these are only potential hazards. However, there is always the question of whether there may be other, as yet unknown, dangers to be discovered by science in the future—dangers known and forestalled by the Creator of all. [back to the top](#) [back to answers](#)

121] True Christians, however, obey these Old Testament directions because God *says* to do so. God stated that certain foods should be avoided by man, and He, as Creator of both man and animals, knows best. The laws of clean and unclean meats clearly transcend any ritualistic system given to Moses and Israel, since Noah obviously had known about clean and unclean animals generations before (Gen. 7:2; 9:4). It is recognized that total avoidance of these and other potential hazards in our environment is well nigh impossible. They are physical matters to be kept in balance and perspective. The Church does not have a rigid, ultraorthodox-type ruling which forbids eating out in restaurants or buying packaged foods. One simply exercises a reasonable amount of care, yet does not make a fetish of the regulations. Though the Church continues to abide by the prohibitions against blood, animal fat and certain animal foods, these laws are not considered to be of overriding spiritual importance since food does not constitute the Kingdom of God (Rom. 14:17). (The Church does not see any direct biblical support for the *orthodox Jewish* of not eating meat and milk together and thus does not have any such regulations, even though some of its food practices may otherwise resemble those of orthodox Jews.) [back to the top](#) [back to answers](#)

122] *The year of Release and the Jubilee:* According to Leviticus 25, every seventh year was to be set aside to allow the land to rest (no crops were to be planted and the permanent orchards and vineyards were to be left unattended) and for the releasing of all debts and of all fellow countrymen kept as slaves. Every fiftieth year was also to serve as such a year (thus making two in a row) but additionally as a time when land should revert to its original owner. The seventh year and jubilee were major events in the society of ancient Israel and required the cooperation of the entire community to be effectual. [back to the top](#) [back to answers](#)

123] Today's society is not geared to such an institution. (Even the jubilee was evidently never observed after the return of the Jews from Babylon.) Farmers may not always own their own land. Those who do are often not in a financial position to allow their entire land to rest for a full year; their creditors would not allow them to do that. Debts are considered owed until paid, regardless of the year. (In fact, as discussed in the next section under "Monetary Interest," to release debts incurred voluntarily rather than from necessity was not part of the

original intent of the law.) Fortunately, slavery is no longer practiced either, in most areas of the world, rendering that aspect of the law inapplicable. [back to the top](#) [back to answers](#)

124] It is recognized that allowing one's land to lie fallow every so many years is a good agricultural procedure. Thus, the seventh year land rest teaches a principle from which farmers can indeed learn. Yet the same result can be accomplished by letting a portion of the land lie fallow each year rather than the whole land every seventh year. The Church recognizes the agricultural and other principles in the laws about the year of release and the jubilee. But, because of our differently constituted modern societies, the Church teaches that each person should observe them as best he or she is able according to his or her circumstances and according to the spirit of the law. Farmers are not required to let all their land lie fallow each seventh year, nor should they feel a moral obligation to do so. The important thing is that they respect their heritage—the land and its environment—and do their best to protect it according to the ability and the means God has given them. In this way, the intent of the Old Testament laws (Lev. 25; Deut 15:1-8) is achieved even though the exact means of application may not be the same as in ancient Israel.

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125] *Monetary Interest:* A number of passages forbade charging interest on loans to the poor (Ex. 22:25-27; Deut. 23:19-20). The Church considers that this principle still applies today: one should not lend money at interest to anyone in genuine need. Yet most contractual loans today are not for the purpose of assistance to those in absolute need but instead are a means of obtaining capital for an immediate project (rather than saving up the capital over a period of time). In other words, a person has an amount sufficient to maintain his life and well-being but wants an additional investment or luxury. He could save his money over a long period of time to obtain the particular item. Or he could be enjoying it now while turning the savings payment into repayment for a loan. It is perfectly legitimate to consider interest in such a case as simply payment for services rendered. Likewise, for corporations and institutions to be able to borrow money from banks is essential for economic growth. [back to the top](#)

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126] Our modern society runs on credit. To require members of the Church to avoid all borrowing or lending at interest would be asking them to live outside society. The original intent of the law was simply to avoid adding an additional burden on the poor man who had to borrow because of his financial straits in the first place. Only in such cases of dire emergency does the Church consider it wrong to charge interest. [back to the top](#) [back to answers](#)

127] *Summary:* Many other examples could be given, but the major ones, listed above should be sufficient to illustrate how the Church applies the Old Testament laws. It considers the Hebrew Bible very much a part of God's Word. It is not considered secondary to the New Testament nor in any way inferior to it. Yet it is superseded in the sense that the New Testament has made some specific changes to deal with spiritual Israel, which nation has

replaced the physical nation of ancient Israel. [back to the top](#) [back to answers](#)

128] In a number of cases on which the New Testament throws little direct light, the Church has had to make decisions on the basis of the Old Testament. Time may yet show the need for modification or change of some of these decisions. Nevertheless, the Church of God is exercising the power and authority given to it by God. If such decisions could not be made, each person would drift into doing what seemed right in his or her own eyes and confusion would quickly result. Therefore, the Church assumes its God-ordained prerogatives to step in and make decisions where it deems them necessary and helpful, always remaining aware that each individual has to serve God according to the best of his own knowledge and conscience. The purpose of giving regulations is to achieve unity of thought and practice in major areas without trying to take away from the direct, personal relationship each person should have with God. [back to the top](#) [back to answers](#)

129] By making decisions, the Church is attempting to stay true to, and consistent with, the Bible. In some cases, to attempt to apply the exact Old Testament practice today would actually violate the intent of the law rather than observe it. Changes have to be made as society and culture both change. Sometimes the Bible is not perfectly understood and mistakes are made. But this is inevitable as long as the Church is made up of human beings and as long as God continues to work through human instruments. The important thing is that there always be the proper respect for the Bible, and the desire to understand God's mind and to fulfill His wishes. This requires a continual searching for the mind of God and a continual making of decisions to keep the Church in line with that mind. Since the Old Testament also represents the mind of God, it cannot be neglected in this process. Progressive revelation of God's will cannot be logically inconsistent with previous revelation.

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Conclusion: Law in the Life of a Christian

130] The law is very important in the life of a Christian. Of course, he knows that he cannot earn salvation by it. He knows it is not an end in itself but only the road by which he draws closer and closer to the mind of God and hence to God Himself. The law leads him to godly love. No written law can fully or completely express the depths of love. The "letter of the law" is always an inadequate means of expressing what love is. This is why Christians must keep the law in the spirit. Keeping the letter of the law alone may not be a complete expression of love; it is only when one looks behind the letter to the spirit, the true understanding that he can see how to correctly apply the letter to show godly love. [back to the top](#) [back to answers](#)

131] For example, a Christian recognizes that killing another individual is hardly likely to be showing love for him. But just keeping the literal letter of the law which says, "Thou shalt not kill," is still not sufficient. One must also not hate the other individual, and go yet further and demonstrate a positive outgoing concern for that individual. Yet true concern for another person's welfare does not usually come naturally (cf. Rom. 8:7), it has to be learned. It is a

concept which must be captured and internalized. No amount of explanation can force a person to capture the true spirit of love; no amount of legal wording in a decree can bypass human nature. One can only grasp the concept when guided by the Holy Spirit. [back to the top](#)
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132] The law of God, properly understood in its spiritual intent, enables one to express both love toward God and love toward one's fellow human beings. It defines the relationship with God which shall encourage and stimulate one's spiritual growth. Furthermore, the law of God defines relationships between human beings that foster the development of genuine concern for one's neighbor. In so doing, the law of God also defines the spiritual parameters which, if observed, would maximize the genuine welfare of both individuals within a society and of society as a whole.

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133] The law of God, properly conceived of in its spiritual intent, in no way restricts the flow of godly love. On the contrary, the law instructs man how to love. The law is inherently a law of love.

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134] On the other hand, it is the love of God that enables a Christian to fulfill the law (Rom. 13:10). It is through godly love that the full meaning and intent of the law is expressed.

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135] Hence, God's love and God's law mutually envelop one another in a symbiotic relationship, with the one supporting the other. [back to the top](#) [back to answers](#)

136] The eternal and holy law of God kept in its spiritual intent provides the essential instructional framework that a Christian needs for his godly life. As one grows in understanding and in personal application of God's law, he nurtures within himself the qualities of holiness, justice and goodness (Rom. 7:12).

137] A Christian will make mistakes. If he is wholehearted and desirous of doing all he can to serve God, he may end up making more mistakes—sinning more—than the one who concentrates on his inward state and holds back from positive action for fear of error. God is concerned about the mind and attitude. He does not need us, and in that sense, our service to God is really no service, since He could do it all much better without us. But our service is a means of building character and proving our devotion to God. It is that devotion and that love towards Him that He most wants for *our* ultimate good. Mistakes can be corrected and sins can be forgiven, but character is either present or lacking. [back to the top](#) [back to answers](#)

Therefore, the Christian learns to put his life in perspective.

138] There are sins which weigh one down and continually dog one's steps so that little can be accomplished. These sins must be overcome. But there are also the inevitable sins which occur as a consequence of the frailties of our human nature. These are also important, but one should not allow them to so dominate his thoughts that he turns away from life. There is more to a Christian life than just avoiding trouble. [back to the top](#) [back to answers](#)

139] The one who has been forgiven much is also the one who is grateful for much. He may not be as likely to take God's mercy for granted as the one who thinks that he has never really sinned all that much. The one who has been close to death appreciates life more than the one who has always had health and safety. Self-righteousness is perhaps the worst spiritual malady, and it tends to be bred in an environment of constant attention to outward forms of righteousness.

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140] The true Christian knows that the law is good, not solely because biblical writers say it is, but because he has experienced its blessings in his own life. This does not mean that conforming to this spiritual guide is necessarily easy. On the contrary, it can be very difficult, even with the help of the Holy Spirit. Yet the end result is worth the toil, because God's law produces spiritual character and the natural blessings which result from expressing godly love.

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141] Neither is it always easy to know what to do in any given situation. Comprehension of God's law is something which requires effort, study, time and practice. However, when the law is understood, the reasons for it become obvious and the beneficial results that accrue from following it stand out. Ultimately, the law can be understood, as well as followed, only by the aid of the Holy Spirit. Those who have made the effort to understand and to obey can testify that it makes perfect sense. The Christian grows, develops and builds character as he contemplates the law, meditates on it and sees its purpose and judgment.

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142] A Christian realizes his need to live by faith. Faith is directed toward the future. It aims at a promise which has only been fulfilled in part by the gift of the Holy Spirit. Yet faith is not just a passive state or a vague form of wishful thinking. Faith implies action; faith requires works (Jas. 2:14-26). Works can never earn salvation but works are necessary for the Christian life. A person who is following God will produce good works—fulfillment of the law—as a natural consequence of his conversion and his possession of the Holy Spirit. These works are not an end in themselves. The ultimate goal is the Kingdom and family of God. But even though keeping the law does not produce the Kingdom, one shall never reach God's Kingdom without them. For one who does not have good works also does not have the Holy Spirit, the

sine que non of salvation. Love—fulfilling the law—is the natural product of the Holy Spirit.

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143] Ultimately, the goal of the Christian is to attain the mind of God. When that perfection comes, at the resurrection, there shall be no further need for guidelines. Perfect love shall have become internalized, fully expressible without external law, with the result that the need for law codes shall be no more. But love cannot be comprehended without the law. It requires an understanding of love to truly appreciate the law. But one cannot come to that understanding unless he first starts to obey the law. That is the beginning, and love is its end.

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144] To the Christian, God's law is the way to happiness, peace of mind and, ultimately, salvation. To follow God's law is the way one can become more like God, indeed, he can practice being God, so that God can give him eternal spiritual life in His family.

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145] True freedom comes only under perfect law. Human government recognizes that freedom does not encroach upon the freedom of his fellow citizens. There are limits to freedom in order for freedom to exist; the greatest enslaver is anarchy. Perfect freedom comes from the perfect law of God, which is the law of love. When perfect love is expressed, perfect freedom exists. The law, therefore, is a summary of what constitutes love and how it is best expressed.

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146] James was inspired to call God's law "the perfect law of liberty" and the "royal law" (Jas. 1:25; 2:8). It is indeed a perfect and royal law, because it was given by a perfect and royal King—our Savior, Jesus Christ. [back to the top](#) [back to answers](#)

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