

Introduction

Many Christians have questions about the laws of the Old Testament. Many claim to keep the Ten Commandments, for example, but then ignore one of them — the seventh-day Sabbath. In effect, their “Ten” means only nine — and many can’t explain why. They may say, “Oh, the Sabbath was an Old Testament law” — but so were the other nine! Why one and not the others?

As another example, many churches teach that Christians should tithe — give ten percent of their income to the church. But if the seventh-day Sabbath does not apply to Christians, why should the law of tithing apply? Why one Old Testament law, but not the other?

Anyone who reads the Old Testament is likely to wonder: In this mix of ceremonial, civil, and ethical laws, how are Christians supposed to know which laws apply today? Are there biblical principles we can use to evaluate the laws of the Old Testament?

Yes — and the results challenge some common assumptions. Whether we advocate the Sabbath or abolish it, someone will like it, and others will not. Whether we teach tithing or not, someone will disagree, and others will be happy to agree.

It’s a controversy, so we want to see what Scripture says. What does the New Testament say about Old Testament laws? Which laws are quoted with approval, and which are said to be obsolete? What principles do we use when evaluating Old Testament laws that the New Testament does not specifically mention?

Basic beliefs

We begin with two basic beliefs: that Christians should obey God, and that the Bible is a reliable guide to the way we should obey. People who don’t accept those beliefs probably aren’t interested in this book, anyway — they don’t care which laws apply today, because they don’t consider any of them very authoritative.

Entire books could be written about the authority of the Bible, and I will not discuss that question here. I will simply note that the Bible describes God’s people as people who obey God. Throughout the New Testament, the expectation is given that Christians respond to God’s

grace by obeying him. A few scriptures illustrate this point:

- Jesus told the apostles to “make disciples of all nations, baptizing them...and teaching them to *obey* everything I have commanded you” (Matthew 28:19-20, italics added).
- Timothy was told that the Scriptures he had known from infancy — that is, the Old Testament Scriptures — “are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus.” Even in the Christian era, the Old Testament is useful for “training in righteousness.” It helps us know how to live (2 Timothy 3:15-17).
- Paul said that grace is not permission to sin, and faith does not eliminate the validity of biblical law (Romans 3:31; 6:1-2). Far from it! “The law is holy, and the commandment is holy, righteous and good” (Romans 7:12).
- Jesus said he did not come to do away with the law, but to fulfill it. “Until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished” (Matthew 5:17-18).

But wait a minute, someone might protest. Christians don’t keep *every* law in the Old Testament. We don’t make sacrifices, stone adulterers, or consider ourselves “unclean” after attending a funeral — and neither did Jesus. So what did he mean? The laws have not disappeared, but at least some of them are no longer in force.

Is the law of circumcision good? Yes, says Paul. As part of inspired Scripture, is it useful for teaching Christians about righteousness? Again, yes — but in what sense? Christians do not have to keep it literally, but why not? Why can Christians ignore some of the laws that God gave? That’s what this book is about.

I begin with another belief, too: that this subject is not just for scholars, pastors and professionals. It can be understood by ordinary Christians, and indeed should be. Scholarly studies can help, but they do not help everyone. Some books make the subject so complicated that the average person soon gives up.

In this mix of ceremonial, civil, and ethical laws, how can Christians know which laws apply today?

I have therefore tried to make this subject easy to follow, and rooted in Scripture at every step. I mention a few other books for those who want further reading, but for the most part, this subject can be properly understood from Scripture itself. My main goal is to help average Christian readers understand what the Bible says about the laws of the Old Testament.

About the author

You may also want to know a bit about me. What qualifications do I have to write on this topic? I have, at different times in my life, kept the Sabbath and various Old Testament laws. At other times, I have not. In my Christian ministry, I have written against the validity of the seventh-day Sabbath, and I have written in support of it. I have studied the issues from both sides, both in

theory and in experience. I know the arguments of both sides, and in this book I hope to share with you what I believe to be the best understanding of Scripture.

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keep *every* law in
the Old Testament.
So what did Jesus
mean?

What are my academic qualifications? I have a Master of Divinity degree from Azusa Pacific University, and I am a doctoral candidate at Fuller Theological Seminary. I am a member of the NewLife Fellowship in Pasadena, California, serving in youth ministry and sometimes giving sermons.

My wife Janet is from New Zealand and we have two children: Steven and Melinda. I thank them for their support and patience with me as I worked on the doctrinal studies that eventually became part of this book. I must also thank my church for encouraging me in my studies, giving financial support, and giving me copyright for some of my articles.

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