

Chapter 4

The Eternal Validity of God's Laws

Physical circumcision, which was once commanded by God, is no longer required. How can this be? God, the perfect and unchangeable Lawgiver, changed a fundamental aspect of his law — not only circumcision, but also sacrifices and temples and priesthoods. The infallible Scriptures contain commands that are obsolete.

But Jesus said, “Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. I tell you the truth, 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).

Jesus was talking about the entire Old Testament — the Law and the Prophets. So how can his statement be reconciled with the fact that some commands of the Old Testament are not required today? Perhaps the best approach to explain this is to understand that the laws are valid in their intent, but changed in their application. Laws about sacrifice continue to be valid, but we obey them through faith in Jesus Christ, who was sacrificed for us. The law required sacrifice, and Jesus confirmed its validity at the same time as he made it unnecessary for us to perform it.

Obeying in the heart

When God commanded animal sacrifices, he commanded a law that was perfectly appropriate to the times. When David said that God did not want animals (Psalm 51:16), that was also a perfectly appropriate administration of the law of sacrifice, because David was inspired to understand that repentance was the real command (verse 17).

When Christ sacrificed himself, he made all animal sacrifices unnecessary (Hebrews 10:8-10). The administration of the law shifted to faith in the effectiveness of Jesus to atone for our sinfulness. When we have faith in him, we are effectively obeying the laws regarding sacrifice. Likewise, we are obeying the law of circumcision when our attitudes are circumcised. The

real law — allegiance to God — is eternally valid; the physical administration of it has changed. We live in a different age, needing a different administration.

God's law is written on our hearts by the Holy Spirit (Hebrews 10:16). This does not mean the physical details regulating specifics of worship practices are on our hearts, but it means the *intent* behind those regulations, especially faith and love and other fruits of the Spirit.

God's law did not originate with Moses — sin existed before Moses and sin does not exist without law (Romans 5:12-14). God's law existed before Moses did, and the people transgressed it. There is a law *behind* the Law of Moses. The Mosaic administration was a valid expression of God's holy, spiritual, righteous law, and it was appropriate for its situation, but it is not appropriate after the death of Christ and the coming of the Holy Spirit.

In fact, to impose or to attempt to combine the Mosaic administration into Christian faith and practice can cause many problems. New wine makes old wineskins burst (Matthew 9:17). The old covenant, the old way of relating to God, is obsolete. However, many of the Mosaic rules, especially those concerning the way we should treat other people, are still valid applications of the spiritual purpose. Jesus explained them in the Sermon on the Mount, for example (see chapter 8).

But many other laws of Moses, especially those concerning worship, are not valid practices because we have been given the spiritual fulfillment that those rituals only symbolized. Jesus criticized the Pharisees for paying too much attention to details and not enough on human relationships (Matthew 23; Mark 7:11-13).

In summary, laws can remain in Scripture, and remain valid in purpose, and yet we may no longer be required to keep them in the letter. Just quoting Matthew 5:17 does not automatically prove that an Old Testament law must be administered in the way it was under Moses. The law of circumcision illustrates the Christian approach to old covenant laws.

Review 4

- Is the law of circumcision still valid? Explain one sense in which it is, and another in which it's not.
- Are the laws of sacrifice still valid?
- If a law was good at one time in history, is it always good?

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