

New Covenant Theology and the Mosaic Law

A Theological and Exegetical Analysis of Matthew 5:17-20

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I. Introduction

A. Area of Study

The topic for study this evening is "New Covenant Theology and the Mosaic Law." If you're wondering why you haven't read of "New Covenant Theology" before now, don't worry -- no one else has either. But it is a term many of us have begun to use as a way of identifying the way we understand the schema of the Bible and of redemptive history. Simply put, we understand this age as having a distinctively "new" character to it. This newness shows itself in many ways, and it stems from the fact that we live under the provisions of the new covenant inaugurated by Christ.

B. Specific Focus

In keeping with one of the emphases of the John Bunyan Conference, we are going to look at this subject as it relates to the law. Really, this is the specific area of concern handed to anyone studying the larger picture of the Divine schema -- it just works out that way in that it is such a pivotal matter from the point of view both of Scripture and of the competing systems of theology today. Your view of the law winds up shaping your entire hermeneutical grid.

So, what is the status of Mosaic law since the coming of Jesus Christ? In what way(s) did He affect it, if at all? Still more specifically, how did the revelation which Jesus brought relate to that of Moses? Does Moses' law remain the final court of appeal in questions of ethics? What bearing does it have on ethical and behavioral issues which face the new covenant believer?

Within this discussion Matthew 5:17-20 looms large. Indeed, out of this pivotal statement of Jesus the whole New Testament theology of law grows. In this passage Jesus specifically disclaims any conflict between Himself and Moses and enthusiastically affirms His harmonious relationship with the older revelation. But the *exact* nature of this relationship is what we must determine.

Covenant Theology is designed to show the unity in God's purpose in human redemption. It is called "covenant" theology not because of an emphasis on the Biblical/historical covenants as such but on certain "theological" covenants -- the covenant of redemption, the covenant of works, and the covenant of grace. The covenant of grace is essentially the promise made in Gen.3:15 of the coming deliverer, and all of history is a progressive unfolding of this covenant. With this emphasis on the unity of God's purpose there is a strong tendency in Covenant Theology to carry over the old order into the new: the church is the new Israel, the law of the old covenant is still binding in the new, and so on.

Dispensational Theology is designed to show the various *differences* in God's dealings with men. A "dispensation" has to do with the various administrations of Divine truth. With new revelation come new responsibilities and/or privileges. This change results in a new "economy" or dispensation. With this emphasis on the various *changes* in God's program, Dispensationalism labors to show the differences between the old and new economies or dispensations. For the Dispensationalist, law is a thing of the past and not relevant to the new covenant believer.

Between these two systems is what we call New Covenant Theology, and I think the distinctiveness of what we are attempting to show is made most clear in Mat.5:17-20. The passage bristles with difficulties and various theological intricacies, but if we can get a "handle" on it the larger picture takes clearer shape. We'll try to hit the more salient points, but the *crux interpretum* is v.17 -- "I came to fulfill" the law.

II. Contextual Observations

A. Matthean Christology

1. *Jesus and Moses*

One prominent feature of Matthew's gospel is his close -- although often subtle -- association of Jesus with Moses and the Torah. Matthean allusions to Moses abound -- both in terms of narrative and teaching.

The infancy narrative with the narrow escape of the child (Mat.2) is strikingly reminiscent of that of Moses (Exo.2). The noted details of Jesus' ascent from Egypt along with King Herod's fear and the slaughter of the children are significant. Later in his Gospel Matthew is careful to present Jesus as the New -- and greater -- Moses (cf. giving the law from a mountain, ten miracles, giving bread in a desert place, etc.), and it seems this is one subtle introduction to the theme. In fact, the wording of 2:20 ("for they are dead which sought the young child's life") is strikingly reminiscent of Exo.4:19. This is the one "like Moses" whom Moses said would come.

And on the evidence goes. Jesus' responses to Satan in the wilderness temptation are all from "Israel in the wilderness passages" (Mat.4:4, 7, 10; cf. Deu.8:3; 6:16; 10:20). The wilderness event itself follows the baptism in water and lasts *forty* days and precedes the giving of the law. The whole narrative in both cases (Exodus and Matthew) proceeds in the same direction: childhood, exodus through the Red Sea/baptism in the Jordan, wilderness temptation, mountain, law. The temptations also are common to both: hunger and idolatry. Both Moses and Jesus fasted forty days on the mountain (4:2; cf. Exo.24:18 and Deu.9:9). And as an ethical teacher Jesus resembles Moses more in Matthew than in any of the other Gospels.

The Moses/Sinai motif is extensive and quite beyond coincidence. Matthew labors to present Jesus Christ in close association with Moses.

2. *Jesus' Superiority*

Moses is by no means the only historical point of reference for Matthew. There is also Abraham (1:1), David (1:1; 12:3-4), Joshua (1:21), the priests and the temple (12:5-6), Jonah (12:39-41), Solomon (12:42), and Elijah (17:1-9).

What is striking in all of these is not just the typological reference but the nature of the type's realization. In each case there is no mere parallel being drawn: there is an eschatological transcendence. That is, Jesus, for example, is not merely another great Solomon: he is "greater than Solomon" (*pleion*, 12:42). Likewise, He is "greater than the temple" (*meizon*, 12:6), and "greater than Jonah" (*pleion*, 12:41). In the midst of all this, the clear implication is that He is also David's greater Son (12:3-4); in fact, this is precisely Jesus' point in 22:45. Further, He is "Lord even of the Sabbath" (12:8). Similarly, Jesus is not merely a son of Abraham -- privileged as that is. He is the Son of Abraham par excellence, the One in Whom the Patriarchal promises reach their goal (1:1). He is not simply a representative of Israel -- He is the true Israel (2:15, 16-18). His name is "Joshua," but He is *greater* than his forebear and brings a greater deliverance: "for He shall save His people *from their sins*" (1:21). Moreover, it would have been very wrong to erect booths for each of Moses, Elijah and Jesus: these men, great as they were, deserve no equal place with the Christ. "Hear *Him*" was the word from Heaven (17:5). He is greater than Elijah and greater than Moses -- that is to say, greater than the prophets and even the law itself.

3. *Jesus' Authority*

Closely associated with this is Matthew's emphasis on Jesus' personal authority. This is involved in the references to David, Solomon, Moses, Joshua, etc., mentioned above. Whatever authority these men had, Jesus' is greater.

But there is more. With the clear Sinai motif throughout, the reader may see in Jesus, God Himself speaking from the mountain. Indeed, Jesus' opening statement ("I came to fulfill") and His emphatic and much repeated "But I say unto you" is an unmistakable claim of authority. This is precisely the effect it had on the original hearers (7:28-29). At the conclusion of the Sermon it is "these sayings of mine" which constitute the standard by which men are judged (7:24-27), and it is disobedience to His word which constitutes "lawlessness" (*anomia*, 7:23). It would seem evident that Jesus is stressing His personal right to articulate what is the law of God and how it must be kept.

His great authority is precisely the point in 12:8: "The Son of man is lord even of the Sabbath." That is, He has authority over the law itself, with inherent right to do with it as He sees fit. In fact, the entire Sabbath controversy in chapter 12 Jesus (and so Matthew) turns into a Christological manifesto intended to stress this very issue: His authority surpasses even that of the law.

This same point is emphasized again on the Mount of Transfiguration (17:1-10). The allusions to Moses again are evident -- the six days (cf. Exo.24:16), the mountain, the Divine presence and voice, the cloud, the shining face, the divine revelation, etc. But the climactic event is the voice from Heaven demanding that this Jesus, by virtue of His very Person, must be heard and obeyed (*akouo*): "This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased; hear Him." The incident appears designed to stress again the fact of Jesus' authority.

Finally, in His missionary manifesto of Matthew 28:18-20 Jesus lays claim to universal authority (v.18). And in this global discipling enterprise it is all of His commandments which are to be taught and kept (v.20).

All this ("But I say to you," "hear and do these sayings of mine," "Hear Him") is unmistakably reminiscent of Deuteronomy 18. There Moses Himself prophesied of One like him but greater Who would come and, like him, give the law of God. It was this One Whose law would be brought to bear in judgment. His authority is supreme, and His law is obligatory.

4. Conclusion

Matthew presents Jesus as the new Moses and as a new Law-giver. But He is much greater than Moses -- and even Moses' law. He bears a supreme authority that is His by inherent right. And it is within this Christological context that Jesus is presented as the "fulfiller" of the law.

B. The "Antitheses" (Mat.5:21-48)

1. Introduction

One of the most important factors in making a determination of the meaning of Jesus' claim in 5:17-20 is the very passage that follows, vv. 21-48. It is obvious and agreed by all sides that Jesus here is commenting on the law of Moses in *some sense*. But just what is that sense? What is Jesus' approach to Moses?

Generally, commentators from both sides of the fence understand Jesus here as correcting abuses and misunderstandings of the law that had arisen in the teachings of the rabbis. And there is theological motivation: Reformed interpreters want to carefully guard against any notion of change or advance in the law. So, "you have heard it said" refers to the rabbinic perversions of the law and not the law itself. The older Dispensational interpreters viewed the Sermon on the Mount as purely Mosaic law to be reinstated during the millennium. They likewise, then, saw Jesus as criticizing the law's modern (mis)interpreters. For these, when Jesus says "But I say unto you," He is not offering anything new; He is merely expounding ("restoring") the original meaning of Moses' law.

For still others, Jesus' treatment of the law in Matthew 5:21-48 is a new application of the law of Moses in keeping with the over-arching law of love. What the law of love demands is preserved; the remainder of Moses is abolished.

Some examination is necessary.

2. Survey / Analysis

If Jesus is quoting the rabbinic traditions in order to then expound the true meaning of the law of Moses, there is little evidence for it in the passage itself. It would seem on first reading that He is making specific reference to Moses -- indeed, He is quoting him. But in either case, it is necessary to discern precisely what Jesus does with the law in each antithesis. Does He merely expound Moses and explain meanings latent in the law all along? Or is there some kind of advance? Or is there an abrogation? Just what does Jesus do with Moses?

1. In the first antithesis (vv.21-22) Jesus proceeds from the prohibition of murder to a prohibition of hatred. On close evaluation, it is difficult to agree with those who see this as a mere exposition of the sixth command. But since the assumption in the saying is that the prohibition of murder remains, it is also difficult to work from here to a strict discontinuity viewpoint. It is likewise difficult to see this as a mere *deepening* of the murder prohibition: it is more an *advance*, an extension of it, for no fair exposition of the sixth commandment could arrive at an equally weighty prohibition of hatred. Some sort of advance is involved: possibly extension, but more likely addition.
2. The second antithesis (vv.27-28) proceeds from the prohibition of adultery to a prohibition of lust. The situation here is virtually parallel to the previous case. Again, there is an advance of some sort.
3. The third antithesis (vv.31-32) is a bit different. In view is Deuteronomy 24, Moses' permission for and instruction concerning divorce. But Jesus neither deepens nor extends this teaching; nor does he give "a proper interpretation" of it. Since the *intent* of Moses' instruction was to restrict (at least hasty) divorce, this may be viewed as another advance: Jesus restricts it even further. But still, Moses' instruction involved a permission to divorce -- and this permission Jesus plainly rescinds. What Moses clearly allowed, Jesus expressly forbids. Here there is a tightening of the law at least, but apparently an abrogation.
4. In the fourth antithesis (vv.33-34) Jesus proceeds from the prohibition of perjury (Lev.19:12) to a prohibition of oaths. Whatever hyperbole may be involved here, Jesus expressly forbids what the older law allowed. Is this not abrogation? And if the abrogation is only a formal one, it remains that His command is no mere exposition of the older law. Moses' commands which regulated oaths were intended to ensure honesty, and this is what Jesus accomplishes. But in doing so He renders the older law obsolete.
5. In the fifth antithesis (vv.38-39) Jesus proceeds from the *lex talionis* to non-resistance. Following the lead of Martin Luther, interpreters generally see behind this an abuse of the *lex* for personal revenge, when in fact it was intended for legal/judicial proceedings. But this destroys the parallel: Jesus is not simply directing our revenge to the proper channels -- He is calling for a "willingness to suffer personal loss as a characteristic Christian virtue."¹ There is hyperbole involved (again) in the examples which follow (vv.39-42), but precise definitions are not necessary here. What is important is the observation that while Jesus may not formally repeal the *lex*, He very severely restricts its use.
6. In the final antithesis (vv.43-44) Jesus proceeds from loving one's neighbor (Lev.19:18) to loving one's enemy. However one understands the "hate" clause here, it remains that "loving one's enemy" is a principle not immediately evident in any exposition of Moses (particularly in light of Deu.23:3-6, etc.). This is plainly more than a careful articulation of the love command of Leviticus 19:18. It is an advance. Jesus extends the law's requirement.

3. Conclusion

The common explanation that Jesus is merely correcting mistaken views of the law's original meaning does not fit the evidence. This is surely involved in some of the cases, but in none of them is this explanation sufficient by itself. Rather, it seems that Jesus, 1) claims an authority that is superior to that of Moses -- this

in keeping with the Matthean "eschatological transcendence" pattern noted previously, as well as the "Christological *ego*" in the antitheses themselves ("But I say"). And, 2) He not only claims this authority but exercises it by taking the law of Moses in whatever direction He sees fit. In some cases, He leaves the particular command in tact (#1 & 2). In some cases He extends the teaching of the command as originally given or advances it in some other way (#1, 2, 3?, 6). But in some cases He seems to rescind the original legislation (#3, 4) or at least restrict it (#5). There seem to be elements both of continuity and discontinuity. And there appears to be no simple explanation for this other than that *Jesus has claimed and exercised a prerogative that is uniquely His*. Indeed, He is greater than Moses, and greater than the law itself.

III. The Messianic Mission — Matthew 5:17

Matthew presents Jesus as the new Moses, yet greater and with superior authority. And when Jesus actually treats the law He is not hesitant to appear so. What bearing this has on Matthew 5:17 (Jesus' Sermon text) remains now to be shown.

A. Exegesis

1. A Denial: "Not To Destroy"

When Jesus says "I came" He speaks in reference to His Messianic mission. This fits well in Matthew's Christology and follows naturally the infancy narrative, the voice from Heaven at His baptism, etc. The phrase "the law and the prophets" refers to (OT) Scripture as a whole. The verbs "destroy" and "fulfill" (*katalusai*, *plerosai*) are both telic, or purpose, infinitives. Jesus is addressing and clarifying the goal of His mission in relation to the Scriptures.

The definitions of "destroy" offered in the standard lexicons are almost endless, and for this reference (5:17) "abrogate," "abolish" or "annul" are generally offered by lexicographers and commentators alike. "Destroy" stands in contrast to "fulfill," and while the contrast may not be absolute (cf. 10:34) the strong sense of purpose is evident. Moreover, the parallel in verse 18 speaks of parts of the law "passing away" (*parelthe*) and likewise reflects the idea of accomplishment of intended goals: the law will not "fall to the ground." *Kataluo* ("destroy") is used five times in Matthew (5:17 (twice); 24:2; 26:61; 27:40) and always by Jesus (or when His words are being quoted). The other references (outside of chapter 5) refer to "destroying" the temple, and that usage illustrates well the meaning here (as KJV). He has not come to "tear down" or "disassemble" the law in the sense of destroying that for which it was intended. He has not come to make it fail its intended design. He will not render it invalid. Liddell and Scott offer several definitions that may fit: cancel, dissolve, dismiss, make useless, cast down. Perhaps "overthrow" fits best. Simply put, Jesus denies that He has come with cross-purposes to the law. He will not invalidate the Scriptures which God has given; He will allow them to stand, and their purpose will continue to be served.

Aside: An Implication

There is an assumption in Jesus' words which has significant implications concerning His Person and authority. "I did not come to destroy the law" would be unnecessary verbiage coming from anyone else, but from Jesus the denial assumes the possibility. His words are freighted with implications of the authority He has as Messiah.

This fits very well within the larger Matthean Christological themes highlighted earlier. And it is directly related to Jesus' claim in Matthew 12:8: "The Son of Man is Lord even of the Sabbath day." This is one more opportunity for Matthew to emphasize that Jesus is "greater than Moses," and it falls at a crucial point. As it relates to the law, *in precisely what way* is Jesus greater than Moses? And how will that authority be evident?

It has already been shown that in vv.21-48 He will take the law of Moses in whatever direction He sees fit. But in those various directions, what is the cohesive factor? How can His treatment of the law be explained and identified?

The answer to these questions lies in the next infinitive, *plerosai* ("fulfill"), the key word to the entire discussion.

An Affirmation: "But To Fulfill"

pleroo ("fulfill") in Matthean Usage

With all the press Matthew gives to this word the question of definition becomes greatly simplified. Of particular significance are the "fulfillment quotations"² in which the "filling up" is that of God's purposes in redemptive history. In these Matthew follows up a narrative of some event associated with Jesus' life, cites a specific passage from the Old Testament, and declares it to be "fulfilled." Each of these "formulas" makes clear announcement that God's purposes have reached their culmination in Jesus. The sense of "fulfillment" is a broad, redemptive-historical one. Often it is the "prediction / verification" sense which is prominent (eg., 21:4-5). But often the connection is more subtle (2:15, 17-18). "[T]he kind of typology varies considerably. Yet the perception remains constant that the OT was preparing the way for Christ, anticipating him, pointing to him, leading up to him."³ With His arrival God's purposes expressed in the Scriptures are reached.

Matthew's understanding of "fulfillment" is, from the standpoint of many interpreters, very elaborate. At times it seems almost embarrassingly fanciful. Who would have expected that God's calling up of Israel out from Egypt was a pre-figurement of the return of Jesus from Egypt (Hos.11:1; Mat.2:15)? But this is Matthew's outlook: he very casually looks across the history of Israel and sees it all as typologically prospective of Jesus in some way. His conviction is that in Jesus "all the rich diversity of God's relations with his people in word and deed converges; that is what 'fulfillment' means for Matthew."⁴

So to say that Jesus is the new Moses, David's greater son, etc., or to say that He holds supreme authority, is entirely right -- but it is not enough. He is still more. He is the outworking, the full measure, the goal, and the accomplishment of the Divine purpose. In short, He is the "fulfillment" of redemptive history. This is precisely the outlook which pervades Matthew's Gospel, and he goes to great lengths to show it. It is entirely arguable that Matthew's whole theological motivation in writing his Gospel may be summed up in this one word -- fulfilled (*pleroo*, 17 times in Matthew; *teleo*, 3 times). This is his trademark, his primary thrust emphasized over and over again even without the use of the term. For Matthew, Jesus is the fulfillment of all the expectations regarding David's and Abraham's Son, and He is the one who "fills full" all the promises made throughout Israel's history. Speak of Bethlehem, Galilee, the Messiah, the King of Israel/the Jews, the suffering Servant of Jehovah, the Son of Man, or any of a host of other terms pregnant with expectation, and Jesus is the Fulfiler, the answer and goal of them all.

Within this context it would be surprising if chapter 5 of Matthew's Gospel would be any different. Indeed, it is not. Jesus' Sermon text, the basic proposition which He proceeds to expound, is precisely that: He came "to fulfill." It seems, then, from the general Matthean use of "fulfill" (*pleroo*), that Jesus' claim is intended to be understood in an eschatological sense. Curiously, the only parallel to this statement found elsewhere in the Gospels is Luke 16:16-17 which clearly points in this same direction.

"The law and the prophets were until John; since that time the kingdom of God is preached, and every man presses into it. And it is easier for heaven and earth to pass, than one tittle of the law to fall."

Again it is Jesus Himself who specifies that the law had a prophetic/prospective function; it anticipated Him who brought about its expectations. In doing so, the law did not "fall" (*pipto*). The parallel holds even in detail. Christ brought to final realization the "full" eschatological realization of the law.

B. Contextual Considerations

Contextual indicators in Matthew 5 run along these same lines. First, as pointed out previously, "fulfill" stands in contrast (*alla*) to "destroy," which has the sense of invalidating or destroying that for which something was intended. The law will not fall to the ground. So in this context "fulfill" should carry the

corresponding eschatological significance of "bringing about its intended and ultimate purpose" -- which is precisely its meaning throughout Matthew.

Verse 18 provides three more indicators which point in the same direction. First, the implication of "pass away" (*parelthe*) is that of that of failure to achieve an intended goal, "falling to the ground" unfulfilled. There is again an eschatological sense. And the same is implied also in *genetai*, translated "fulfilled" in the KJV and "accomplished" in the NASB and NIV. The idea is simply, "happen" or "come about." Jesus is speaking in terms of the law's "prophetic"/ eschatological purposes being achieved (cf. Luke 16:16). This, taken in consideration of the two "until" (*heos*) clauses, shouts of eschatological fulfillment.

Verse 20 points in the direction of eschatological fulfillment also. More attention will be given to some details later, but it could be noted here that the "righteousness" of which Christ speaks and which He demands is presented as the real experience of those in His kingdom (cf. verses 6 and 10). Yet this "righteousness," presumably, is the very righteousness expected in the prophets, particularly Isaiah. Here also, then, there is indication of "fulfillment" in an eschatological sense.

Jesus' Point of Reference

Finally, it should be observed that given the way Jesus expounds this proposition in verses 21-48 as well as the specific mention of the "commanding" aspects of the law in verse 19, it seems clear that it is His *teaching* that is in view. This accords also with the Matthean emphasis on what Jesus "says."⁵ The parenetic function of the law and prophets anticipated a "fulfilling" which Jesus claims here to give it in the principles He expounds. The older Reformed view that the "fulfillment" in view is Jesus' active obedience to the Mosaic stipulations has largely -- and rightly -- fallen out of vogue. Strickland continues one Dispensational interpretation when he reduces the significance of "fulfill" to that of merely fulfilling prophecy (in the prediction / verification sense),⁶ but this fails to take into account both the immediate context (which is Christ's teaching/law) and the broader significance of *pleroo* ("fulfill") surveyed above. The passage itself (through to the end of the Sermon) focuses not on Jesus' actions nor on the mere occurrence of what was predicted, but on Jesus' ethical teaching. Neither does Jesus' teaching merely clarify the original code. *It is more climactic; there is eschatological transcendence. Jesus' teaching brings about that for which Moses' law was ultimately intended. It expresses fully and ideally the "righteousness" anticipated at Sinai and in the prophets. The old law was not "full" in itself; it had a forward look. It anticipated a "fulfilling" which in Christ's teaching finally came to perfect realization.*

Although he comes to different final conclusions than those offered here, Brevard Childs states the point well:

The depth of the disagreement [between Jesus and the Pharisees] is underestimated when scholars suggest that Jesus was only opposing the Pharisaic tradition of the law, but leaving the Mosaic law itself intact. Nor is the controversy adequately described by claiming that Jesus sought only to dispense with the OT ceremonial law while retaining the ethical imperatives. *Rather, the issue turned on Jesus' claim to be the new interpreter of the will as revealed in the law.*⁷

Conclusion

In the end, therefore, the focus shifts a bit. "[I]t is not the question of Jesus' relation to the Law that is in doubt but rather its relation to him!"⁸ How is Moses' law affected, now that its Fulfiler/ Fulfillment has come? Answer: Jesus brought about that which Moses' law anticipated; apart from his interpretation of it, it has precisely no enduring applicability. Only in Him does it find its full significance and continuing validity. In Christ the law has now reached its goal.

This understanding has several advantages, among which are the following.

- 1) It does not require a different sense for "fulfill" than what is found consistently in Matthew.
- 2) It preserves the contrast with "destroy."
- 3) It fits very well in the larger Christological context of Matthew.
- 4) It provides specific explanation for Matthew's "greater than Moses" motif.
- 5) It gives close attention to Matthew's emphasis on redemptive history. Jesus inaugurates a new era which affects even the law of Moses -- and, in fact, was anticipated by it.
- 6) It provides the simplest explanation for Jesus' handling of Moses' law in 5:21-48.
- 7) It allows for the "advance" that is both inherent in the word "fulfill" itself and evident in the exposition of 5:21-48.
- 8) It explains the frequent emphasis on Jesus' teaching throughout Matthew's Gospel (eg., 7:24, 26).
- 9) It preserves the continuity with Moses that is implied in the phrase "not to destroy but to fulfill"; it is no mere "replacement" theology. Yet it also allows for the dramatic "shift" that is sometimes evident in 5:21-48, often in Paul, and which is required by the "newness" of this age."

C. Objection

Generally, the more common understanding has been that Jesus' "fulfillment" of the law was His clarifying its true meaning in some way. But any notion of a mere reissuing of Moses' law both ignores the redemptive historical connotations of "fulfill" in Matthew and makes 5:17 a misfit within Matthew's "greater than Moses" Christology, leaving the whole motif unexplained. And it further reduces "fulfillment" to mere continuance.

Now if it be argued (as it is by Reformed interpreters generally) that the ceremonial laws are not "abrogated" but rather "taken up" in the greater work of Christ which they anticipated, then it must be asked by a different explanation for the remainder of Moses' law is necessary. This is precisely the position argued here: that the entire law had a sense of anticipation about it, an anticipation that was exhausted and realized in Jesus Christ.

With parallels between the ages of redemptive history, the question is not so much that of continuity / discontinuity but of type / antitype. The type gives way to the antitype which transcends it in some manner. So with the law. Not the ceremonial only but every jot and tittle, Jesus says, is "fulfilled" in Him -- swallowed up into its full and final realization.

The whole law, then, was taken up into Christ, and He gave to it its truest significance. What that significance is, is for Him to explain (by His teaching personally and via the inspired writers of the NT; cf. John 16:12-13); the significance is not established by a pre-determining hermeneutic. Likewise, He determines also what details endure and in what sense. God's law comes to the church from the hands of Christ, the Lord of the law. Continuity with Moses there is, but Moses is no longer the center of attention nor the final court of appeal: that prerogative belongs to One greater than Moses. It is *Jesus'* teaching which forms the ultimate standard of righteousness and Who pronounces with supreme authority what is the will of God. He clarifies that righteousness which Moses' law only foreshadowed (cf. Col.2:17).

IV. The Law of Christ Enforced — Matthew 5:18-20

A. Exegesis

For Matthew, then, what Jesus has to say has an eschatological significance to it. Moses has stepped aside and given way to this One Whose teaching forms the ultimate standard of righteousness and Who pronounces with supreme authority what is the will of God. He clarifies that righteousness which Moses' law only foreshadowed (cf. Col.2:17).

In verse 18 Jesus affirms that His claim extends to every detail of the law -- every "jot and tittle." In verse 19 Jesus carries the thought a step further (*oun*): if the law's fulfillment must continue, one implication is that it

must be obeyed and faithfully taught (*poiese kai didaxe*) -- and that in its every detail. Every "least commandment" must be carefully observed.

The interpretation of the verse turns on the phrase "the least of these commandments." To what, precisely, does this refer?

Several options are available. First, it could be taken very literally to mean that throughout this age the church should continue to observe every detail of the Mosaic law. But given the teaching that is capsulized in the book of Hebrews, few Christians would want to go this far. Second, it could be taken to mean that the moral law in general and/or the decalogue in particular should continue to be observed throughout this age. This is the standard Reformed position. But it would be difficult to understand "these *least* commandments" as a reference to this "weightier" aspect of the law! Further, it introduces a literary division of the law which is extraneous to the passage: it is every last "jot and tittle" that is in view _ not just the 10 words. And what Jesus takes up for example/application (vv.21-48) fits no such nicely defined category. What Jesus has to say is in reference to every last single (*hen / mia*) detail (*iota e keraia*) of the law.

Next, Robert Banks suggests that "*these* least commandments" is a proleptic reference not to Moses' law but to Jesus' "*Nova Lex*" which has displaced Moses' law and which follows in vv.21-48.⁹ This view has some things to say in its favor, such as the weight given to Jesus' teaching as the climactic fulfillment of Moses and the emphatic "But I say unto you" repeated throughout the following passage. But it seems exegetically strained. It requires the reader to know beforehand what lies ahead in vv.21-48. Further, "law" inverses 17-18 (even in Bank's view) refers to the law of Moses; it would be a surprising shift indeed for "the least of these commandments," stated in the very same breath, to be something different.

However, Banks is not far off the mark. Jesus has just emphasized that *He* is the Fulfiller of the law. He also emphasizes that *every detail (iota and keraia)* of Moses must continue to be observed -- a phrase that is powerfully extensive. The question, then, should be, *in what sense* can every detail of Moses be followed? Answer: as it is "fulfilled" in Jesus.

It was shown earlier that there is no hermeneutical "tool" with which the interpreter can sort out the "new" interpretations which Jesus gives to Moses in verses 21-48. It must suffice to say simply that this is how the Lord of the law hands it down. There is no other cohesive factor involved in the various directions the law is taken. It is Moses' law, to be sure. But it is Moses' law *as it is given to the church from the hands of Christ*. This is indeed why He emphasizes at the end that "these words of mine" form the basis of judgment (7:24-27). This is why "lawlessness" (*anomia*; KJV, "iniquity") is defined by disobedience to *His* words (7:23-24). He did not claim to "rubber stamp" Moses, nor did His exposition (vv.21-48) resemble a mere exposition of Moses. It resembled, rather, One "greater than Moses" assigning to the older law its new and eschatological significance. This is what he claims in verse 17; this is what he does in verses 21-48. This is what He requires in verse 19. Moses' law is not simply displaced; it is fulfilled. But in the process, Moses takes "back seat" to his Antitype.

Virtually all Christian interpreters agree that the ceremonial aspects of Moses' law are "set aside" in that they find a new significance (fulfillment) in the work of Christ. Having come to this "fulfillment," they are taken up into the new and final realization which they anticipated. This is precisely what is argued here in reference to "every detail" of the law, not one aspect only. Interpreters often speak (in so many words) of the fulfillment of the ceremonial law, the cancellation/ abrogation of the civil law, and the continuance of the moral law. But all this is completely unnecessary if the *whole* of the law may be viewed as being taken up into Christ and given His new and authoritative interpretation. With this, then, "every detail" of the law (of Moses!) may be observed by the new covenant believer in precisely the same way; namely, in the way it comes to him from the hands of Christ. With some details of the law the "fulfillment" will entail extension or even addition (vv.21-22, 27-28). With some details the fulfillment will involve restriction (vv.38-39) or even abrogation (vv.31-32, 33-34). Or some details may be seen now to have served merely as illustrations of something greater (eg., the sacrifices, the Sabbath). But no matter: the lead is taken by the Lord of the law,

and He gives the law its eschatological significance. He determines what details remain and in what form, and it is in this form only that the law remains valid in this Messianic age. For the new covenant believer, every last detail of Moses is "done and taught" *in keeping with its fulfillment*.

In hermeneutical debate it is often asked whether it is right to assume that all of Moses' law remains unless it is specifically abolished, or if it is right to assume that it is all abolished unless it is specifically stated to remain. In one sense the question is irrelevant, for it is the entire old covenant that is abolished (2Co.3) and not just certain categories of its law. But in another sense the question is wrong, for Christ's claim here is that all of Moses is to be *continually* taught and observed -- only, in the form that He gives it. It is all of the law that remains, but it is to be obeyed *as interpreted by Jesus*.

B. Antinomianism?

Is this "antinomianism"? For many, the rejection of Moses as the final authority has been considered precisely that. Yet as Calvin rightly pointed out, "That man does not break ceremonies, who omits what is shadowy, but retains their effect."¹⁰ This is simply what is proposed here, only consistently to every detail of the law, not ceremonial aspects only.

"These commandments" do not reflect a sub-standard, more easily attainable righteousness. Much to the contrary, the law as it is now fulfilled in Christ epitomizes the very highest righteousness, one that surpasses even that of "the scribes and the pharisees" (v.20). These men who in their day represented the very essence of holiness, had at their very best a righteousness which was inferior to that made known by Christ's authoritative interpretation of the law. Indeed, this is the very righteousness of God (v.48).

Reformed writers often are forced by their hermeneutic to affirm what would otherwise seem unthinkable. It is not uncommon to read them say that Jesus "did not give a condensed and definitive code of morality" and "no new standard," but that He merely gave "clear exposition of old statutes."

But all this misses Jesus' point entirely. Nowhere here is there any implication that Jesus came to merely "clarify" or more fully explain Moses' law. He did nothing of the kind. He came to "fulfill" the law, to give to it its final "filling up." His teaching is a necessary advance "filling full" that which awaited Him for precisely this purpose. In Jesus is found, indeed, a full and complete "definitive code of morality." Without Him the old law has no relevance whatever, and the "filling" which he gave it reflects and demands a degree of righteousness which Moses' law only anticipated.

So the standard has not been lowered; it has been elevated. The love for neighbor demanded under Moses fades in comparison to the love for enemy demanded by the Lord Jesus! Those old laws forbidding murder are essential, but the law of Christ adds to it the prohibition of hatred. The old law forbade adultery; the fulfilled law adds lust to the prohibition and requires that violators of either be "cast into *gehenna*" (v.30). Did the old law regulate oaths? The fulfilled law forbids them and requires honesty outright and absolutely. Did the old law provide for revenge through legal means? The fulfilled law enjoins patience under God's providential care.

And so on it goes: the righteousness of the old law is brought to its climactic fulfillment in Jesus. Accordingly, the church is not at all obliged to follow the old law in its older form. She is required to follow the law only as it comes to her through the grid of Jesus Christ, the law's Lord and Fulfiller. Nor does it belong to any hermeneutical system to dictate beforehand what part of Moses remains and what does not -- which parts are "moral" and which are not. It is Christ's, and His alone, to make such determinations.

V. Summary and Conclusion

Matthew labors to present Christ as greater than Moses. He labors also to show the redemptive-historical eschatological transcendence which he brought about; this is an ages of advance. He labors further to emphasize the supreme authority which Christ presents. It would be most surprising if in the midst of all this

Jesus merely reissued the law of Moses. The generally "flat" transition required by the Reformed hermeneutic does not fit into Matthew's scheme of things. What Matthew presents -- what Jesus presents -- is not a re-ratified old covenant law, but a fulfilled law for a new era and a new covenant people.

Throughout, the emphasis is taken off Moses and placed on to Christ. It is the law *interpreted by Him which remains binding*.

End-notes

1. Greg L. Bahnsen, *Theonomy in Christian Ethics* (Nutley, NJ: The Craig Press, 1979), 118.
 2. 1:22; 2:15, 17, 23; 4:14; 8:17; 12:17; 13:35; 21:4; 27:9. Also 26:54 and 56, which are virtually identical.
 3. D. A. Carson, *Matthew in The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, vol. 8, ed. Frank E. Gaebelin (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1984), 28.
 4. R. T. France, *The Gospel According to Matthew* in TNTC (1985; reprint, Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1990), 41.
 5. Cf. the oft-repeated "Jesus said"; the 55 "I say" sayings, significantly more than any other Gospel writer; "my words"; the discourses; etc.
 6. Wayne G. Strickland, "The Inauguration of the Law of Christ With the Gospel" in *The Law, The Gospel, and The Modern Christian* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1991) 258.
 7. Brevard S. Childs, *The New Testament as Canon: An Introduction* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985, 71-72; emphasis added.
 8. Robert Banks, "Matthew's Understanding of the Law: Authenticity and Interpretation in Matthew 5:17-20," *JBL* 93 (1974): 242.
 9. *Jesus and the Law in the Synoptic Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975) 233. "Matthew's Understanding of the Law," 239.
 10. John Calvin; cited in Bahnsen, *Theonomy in Christian Ethics*, 49.
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