

Excursus: Living into Christ's Fulfillment

More than two centuries ago the great American theologian Jonathan Edwards observed: "*There is perhaps no part of divinity attended with so much intricacy, and wherein orthodox divines do so much differ as stating the precise agreement and difference between the two dispensations of Moses and Christ.*" Transposed into more contemporary theological vernacular, Edwards was referring to the challenges of determining the nature and extent of the continuity and discontinuity that exist between the Israelite preparatory era under the Law of Moses and the present era of christological fulfillment under the New Covenant.

As shown in the previous treatment, the fundamental relationship between these two "dispensations" (to use Edwards' term) is that of *promise* and *fulfillment*: The Mosaic Covenant was preparatory and therefore prophetic and promissory, and has now found its fulfillment in the New Covenant in Christ. Both the Old Testament and New Testament scriptures everywhere affirm this relationship, but there are significant differences among Christians regarding the specifics and implications of it.

- In general terms, Reformed Theology emphasizes the principle of *continuity* in the promise/fulfillment dynamic. Working from the premise that the Old and New Covenants are merely different administrations ("dispensations") of the same covenant – the so-called *covenant of grace*, Reformed Theology assigns essential continuity between the Mosaic era and the present one under Christ. This sameness applies, among other things, to the way the covenant community is defined (by external covenant sign) and how it orders its covenant life with God (the centrality of the "moral law").

As a particular expression of Reformed Theology, Theonomy carries the notion of continuity even further. It, too, upholds the continuing obligation of the "moral law" (defined by the Westminster Confession of Faith as "summarily comprehended in the ten commandments"), but it regards that obligation as including the sanctions attached to it. That is to say, violation of God's moral laws (not simply the Decalogue) is to be met with the punishment assigned to that law. Moreover, this applies to civil society and not simply the body of Christ. The *State* as well as the *Church* is obligated to uphold and enforce God's law. The justification for this position is the Reformed premise that the body of moral law represents God's will for mankind, and so "*forever binds all, as well justified persons as others, to the obedience thereof*" (Westminster Confession).

Reformed Theology's historical emphasis on continuity between Moses and Christ has inclined it to nuance fulfillment in terms of *establishment*. That is, Jesus "fulfilled" the Law (at least the moral law) in the sense that He recovered it from its adulteration at the hands of Israel's rabbis and then reconfirmed and reestablished it for His Church of the new covenant era. In that regard, Jesus gave back to His people the "true Moses."

- On the other hand, the more contemporary (and more widely embraced) theological system of Dispensationalism emphasizes *discontinuity* within the promise/fulfillment dynamic. Whereas Reformed Theology tends to minimize and flatten the distinctions between the Old and New Covenants, Dispensationalism tends to exaggerate them.

Dividing salvation history into distinct “dispensations,” this system regards the Old Covenant as distinctly Israelite and associates it with the pre-Christ “dispensation of law.” So the New Covenant pertains to the “dispensation of grace” secured by Jesus’ atonement. Reformed Theology tends to view fulfillment of the Mosaic Law (at least its “moral” component) in terms of *confirmation*; Dispensationalism treats it more in terms of *replacement*. The New Covenant has replaced the Old Covenant even as the Mosaic “law dispensation” has been replaced by the “grace dispensation” of the Church age.

These (and other) considerations aren’t the stuff of abstract theology, but are crucially important for addressing the matter of Christian ethics and obligation; they – and the perspectives and premises underlying them – will greatly impact how a particular issue of Christian ethics is answered. Jonathan Edwards made the preceding observation in the context of considering the question of access to the Lord’s Table, but the matter of christological fulfillment is fundamental to every question of Christian ethics and practice. The issue can be framed in this way:

- Most broadly, does the Christian rightly derive his ethics and practice from the Old Testament (particularly the Mosaic Law), the New Testament, or both?
- And if both, in what way and according to what relationship? Does the Old Testament or New Testament have primacy, or are both to be treated with equal weight? And what does equal treatment really mean? Is the content and teaching of the two testaments to be merged together to form a whole like pieces of stone in a mosaic? So, for instance, in treating the topic of divorce and remarriage, should the Christian simply conjoin Old and New Testament passages to form a composite “biblical” doctrine respecting this issue?

Related to these concerns, those who emphasize continuity between the Old and New Covenants (and testaments) tend to hold as a maxim the notion that only those Old Testament directives and obligations explicitly *rescinded* in the New Testament are not binding on Christians. Conversely, those who emphasize discontinuity tend to argue that Christians are bound only to those Old Testament obligations that are explicitly *reaffirmed* in the New Testament. Continuance is the foundational assumption in the case of the former; discontinuance in the latter.

But if it’s true – and it is – that the question of Christian ethics hinges on the nature, extent and outcome of Christ’s fulfillment of the Law (as indeed the entire preparatory history), then it’s vitally important to understand that fulfillment. And toward that end, the treatment of 21:17-26 emphasized two considerations in the relationship between the Old and New Covenants.

1. The first pertains to the **historical role** of the Old Covenant, which was to formalize, define and prescribe the relationship between Yahweh and Israel. Israel was the national extension of the patriarchs and therefore the covenant nation to whom God had bound Himself when He made His covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. He delivered the people of Israel from their bondage in Egypt, but in order to take them to Himself in covenant union as He had promised Abraham (cf. Genesis 15:1-21; Exodus 3:1-10). And so, when Yahweh brought Israel out of Egypt He led them to Mount Sinai where He made His covenant with them (Exodus 3:10-12, 19:1ff). *The Sinai Covenant established and ordered the Abrahamic covenant relationship between Abraham’s seed and his God.*

Moreover, the relationship between Yahweh and Israel was that of *Father* and *son*. Israel was Yahweh's "first-born son" (Exodus 4:22), which means that the Sinai Covenant – which formalized, defined and prescribed Israel's relationship with God – pertained to the nation's identity and obligation as the "son of God." The Law of Moses wasn't a set of legal obligations demanded of a nation of individuals; it was the charter that bound divine Father to elect covenant son. *The Law showed Israel what it meant for it to be Yahweh's son and fulfill its identity and calling with respect to its Abrahamic mission of mediating the Father's blessing to all the families of the earth.*

Israel would fulfill its covenant calling and lead the nations to know the true and living God, not by active "outreach," but by the testimony of faithful sonship: The world would learn of this God by observing the son who manifests His likeness. Thus Israel's "law-breaking" was relational unfaithfulness; it was the violation of its sonship and thereby its failure to testify of its divine Father to the watching world. *Israel's law-breaking consisted precisely in its failure to be Israel, and the implication is that fulfillment of the Law would consist in a human "son" being Israel in truth and without flaw or failure.*

2. The second dynamic pertains to the **preparatory role** of the Law of Moses – that is, its function as a *pedagogue* in the unfolding salvation history. Again, the Law's fulfillment amounted to Israel fulfilling its identity and calling as "son of God," but Israel failed miserably and hopelessly. The obvious implication is that there would be no fulfillment at all, or else it would be realized through another "Israel" – another Abrahamic "seed" who would mediate the knowledge of Yahweh to the world through a life of faithful sonship. *Thus Israel's failure to be Israel is the historical basis for the Law's pedagogical role:*

- First, by precisely defining and prescribing Israel's identity and calling, the Law of Moses shone the spotlight on and certified Israel's abject failure.
- In this way the Law established the need for a new "Israel," which, in turn, attached to it a conspicuous forward-looking orientation. Israel hadn't even left Sinai before the Law – *which understood its own fulfillment as Yahweh's fulfillment of His promise to Abraham* – cast its eyes and hopes toward the future.

Thus the Law of Moses *served* and *advanced* the Abrahamic promise by revealing – through the mechanism of Israel's failure – God's design that the promise should be fulfilled in connection with a future singular "seed of Abraham" – a true "Israel" and true "son of Yahweh." The Law was a pedagogue, preparing Israel for the day of maturity in two ways: First, it held the covenant nation under the conviction of its own failure and need; second, it pointed the sons of Israel (and the Gentile world observing Israel) toward the Coming One who would fulfill the "righteousness" of the Law – *and thereby Yahweh's promise to Abraham of creation-wide blessing and restoration* – by being Israel indeed: the son of God in all truth and faithfulness.

The Law's historical and preparatory roles – centered in the Abrahamic promise – highlight the fact that it *terminates* in Jesus Christ. They show how He is "the end of the Law unto righteousness" – not by abrogation or confirmation, but by fulfillment.

The preceding two considerations are fundamental to discerning the nature of the relationship between the Old and New Covenants. On the one hand, they show that the notion of *replacement* doesn't do justice to it; fulfillment doesn't *replace* promise. Such a conception entirely misses the historical role and christological purpose of the Law (ref. again Galatians 3:15-29; cf. Romans 3:21-22). But neither did Jesus *establish* the Law, as if the Sinai Covenant was ultimate in itself and only needed the Messiah to come along and remove the appendages and distortions that centuries of rabbinic interaction had attached to it.

Jesus Christ *fulfilled* the Law of Moses, but not in the widely held sense of a meticulous and flawless conformity to a host of legal demands. This conception, too, results from the failure to understand the Law in its historical and salvation-historical roles as God's covenant with the Abrahamic household. No, Jesus fulfilled the Law by being the person the Law defined and prescribed: the son of Abraham and son of God, *with all that those concepts entail and imply*.

Resolving the dilemma of a truly biblical Christian ethic, then, depends upon discerning the dynamics of continuity and discontinuity that exist between the Old and New Covenants. But that, in turn, depends upon discerning how it is that Jesus fulfilled the Law. And once that is understood, it becomes immediately evident that the issue of continuity/discontinuity isn't, as so many conclude, a matter of proportionality or relative importance.

- There is *continuity* between the Old and New Covenants – not in the sense that they are administrations of the same essential covenant, but in that they are conjoined in Christ. The Law of Moses portrayed Him by prescribing what it meant for Israel to be Israel, and it promised Him precisely because Israel failed in its calling.

And as the True Israel which the Law set forth, Jesus has now constituted upon and in Himself the eschatological “Israel of God” – the kingdom of priests related to God as His covenant people through the New Covenant in Jesus' blood (1 Peter 2:4-10). In that way *He* has become the “covenant of the peoples,” bringing and binding to His Father sons and daughters from every tribe, tongue and nation (cf. Isaiah 11:1-13, 42:1-9, 49:1-13).

- But precisely because fulfillment is a matter of transformation, there is also an all-encompassing *discontinuity* between the Old and New Covenants. Jesus didn't come to reaffirm the Law of Moses, but to inaugurate the eschatological kingdom and the everlasting covenant by which it is administered and governed. The Israelite kingdom was founded upon and governed by the Mosaic Covenant with its focal point in the mediating priesthood, and so it is with the everlasting kingdom of God. It has Jesus Christ as its mediating High Priest, and where there is a change of priesthood there is a change of covenant (“law”) (Hebrews 7:11-12).

The basis for answering the continuity/discontinuity question is a biblical grasp of christological promise and fulfillment – not merely with respect to the Law of Moses, but the entire salvation-history with all of its components and features. When one discerns, *in light of the revelation of the preceding salvation history*, who Christ is and what His person and work have accomplished and set in place, the subject of Christian ethics is no longer nebulous and daunting: Whatever the particular practical issue or concern, the key to answering it is the little phrase: *in Christ*.

- 1) Again, Jesus Christ has fulfilled the Law in the sense that He is *Himself* – in His person and work – the fulfillment of the Law: He is the One the Law spoke of, looked for and found its hope in. *Both as pedagogue and prophet, the Law was radically christocentric.* This is why Paul condemned as disobedient to the Law those who fail to embrace Christ fully and in truth. Whatever their commitment and zeal for the Law, such persons are guilty of refusing to listen to it (Galatians 4:21-31).

And precisely because the Law is radically and entirely christocentric, *the Christian has no direct relationship to it.* He is related to it only in and through Christ. This is as true of the “moral law” as it is the Law’s civil and ceremonial parts, for the Scripture everywhere insists that Jesus fulfilled the Law of Moses in its entirety. (This doesn’t mean that the Decalogue has no relevance to the Christian; it means that the Christian is related to it – as every component of the Mosaic Law – as it has been transformed in Jesus Christ.)

- 2) The Law of Moses looked to, prepared for, and has found its fulfillment in Christ. And Christians are those who, by definition and in reality, are “in Christ” (cf. Romans 8:9-10; 2 Corinthians 5:17; Colossians 1:25-27). This means that their relationship to the Law is Christ’s: *They have fulfilled the Law by being in the One who Himself fulfilled it.*

They have fulfilled the Law’s “righteousness,” not by doing its commandments as such, but by sharing in the life and likeness of the One whom the Law set forth and in whom it has found its appointed realization (Romans 8:1-11). Christians are thus “law-keepers” in the *ontological*, “new-creational” sense: Through personal, spiritual union with Christ, the True Israel, they are the “Israel of God,” and thus fulfillers of the Law that defined and prescribed Israel (Galatians 6:11-16 with 3:26-29).

- 3) The Law’s christocentricity together with the fact that Christians share in Jesus’ life affirms that they have fulfilled the Law’s “righteous requirement” simply by being found in Him. But these truths also show that, because they live out His life in them, Christians live in a manner which accords with the Law. But they do so, not as a matter of purposed conduct, but as the authentic existence of those who, through Christ’s indwelling Spirit, have become “christified” people – “sons of God” that the Law portrayed and prescribed.

And so the Christian’s ethic has nothing to do with the Law of Moses as such. The “law” with which the Christian has to do – and which determines and informs his ethics – is the *law of Christ*. This “law” doesn’t consist of rules, but of the truth that inheres in Christ and proceeds forth from Him to enliven, inform, perfect and oversee His creation, not least of which are those human creatures who share in His life and likeness (1 Corinthians 9:19-23; Galatians 5:13-6:2).

The “law of Christ” is summed up in the singular principle of *sonship*: first, a life of love and devotion to the *Father* as brethren of the Son through the power of the Spirit; second, love for the Father’s *children* who are brothers in Christ through the shared Spirit; third, love toward the *world* which the Father created, reconciled in His Son, and will one day fully restore (cf. Romans 13:8-10 with 8:18ff; cf. also Colossians 1:19-20 with 2 Corinthians 5:11-21). Though a distant glance will give the impression that Christians are marked by moral rectitude, closer contact should reveal the fragrance of Christ – the savor of faith working through love (Galatians 5:6).