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Bound by Law?

It's a recurring theme: must Christians obey God's Law?

by James McBride

Stranded on a deserted island a group of British pre-teens struggle to organize their 'society'. Without guidance their efforts end in anarchy, superstition and murder. [Wm Golding: *Lord of the Flies*]

Anyone who vies to lead a nation—or a club!—understands the need for order, for a set of rules, laws, to curb our human nature in its extremes. The church is not exempt! Yet too often we hear the cry that law—indeed God's Law—is obsolete.

Just Human

Nations are hide-bound with home-made legislation—often petty rules dreamed up by civil servants with nothing else to do. Bureaucracy gone mad. Yet the fundamental principles of good order are trodden underfoot, principles that deal with our nature and its proclivity to lawlessness.

At our best we show humanity, kindness, compassion, love even. There are countless examples day in day out, and some even dare to die to save their fellow-man.

Yet every year multiple thousands of the unborn are killed in the womb while murderers walk as good as free. Corruption in high places is overlooked and the innocent prosecuted. The plight of the vulnerable is ignored. The building-block of a sound society, the family, is despised while sterile same-sex relationships are given the status of normality.

Lawless we are at heart. Weaken the constraints on negative behavior and out seeps the badness. Given the opportunity we avoid taxes, pilfer the office stationery, have clandestine relationships. Under personal pressure we betray others, as during conflicts. And CCTV moderates our behavior!

Law Valued

Extended experience of human nature unearths behavioral characteristics which most people will deem unacceptable—so we enact a law against it. Law is framed to regulate human behavior. Without restraints we revert to

that deserted island. Clearly, we are far from perfect!

Life is precious so murder and assault is universally outlawed. We cherish our personal property, so theft, burglary *etc* are legislated against. Commit a serious sexual offence and jail beckons. Lie in court and you may be locked up.

All of us, surely, whatever our faith or absence of religious faith, will be happy to embrace the freedom that well-framed law brings.

Origins

Christian believers generally endorse the view that mankind is a special creation of God. He made us. He built into us our physical, psychological, mental and spiritual operating system. 'God's Law' (Heb *torah*) is the manual by which that system works in us effectively. It is summed up for us in the 'Ten Commandments' formalized for the Constitution of the new nation of Israel around 1500BC, but has been active since we first walked the earth. Indeed it conforms to every sound principle of human behavior discovered by psychology.

However delayed, the negative consequence of going contrary to this in-built law is inevitable, for both individuals and the populace at large. If widely ignored, society implodes. As predicted by Jesus for the end-time: '*...Such will be the spread of evil [Gk anomia—lawlessness] that many people's love will grow cold*' (Matthew 24:12).

Law and order

There is a lesson to be learned from Israel's experience—and *their* experience of *torah* was of a perfect law from the hand of the Creator (Deuteronomy 4:8). But even the best and most equitable of laws must be accepted and obeyed by the people. Israel happily accepted God's legal program: '*...all the people answered together, and said, All that the LORD has spoken we will do*' (Exodus 19:8).

Given human nature, however, a system of penalties for disobedience was an essential accompaniment to maintain

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law and order, and a system of penalties was prescribed.

The ancient Law as applied to the Constitution of Israel was for the governance of a nation. It was *not* the path to spiritual salvation—though in Israel’s case the nation was uniquely bound by Covenant with the Creator. His part was to care for them, and they were to follow His guidance.

The Law, the *torah*, is like a protective hedge (*cf* Job 1:10, Isaiah 5:5) that guards individuals and nations (insofar as it is applied) from the lawlessness that wreaks destruction and destroys lives.

Aside from God’s dealings with Israel, since man’s beginning lawless acts received penalties by the hand of God—either directly (Cain, the Flood, Canaan *etc*) or by natural consequences.

All such lawlessness is ‘sin’ (I John 3:4). Thus we find that centuries *before* Moses, sin—the transgression of that law—was well understood. The Canaanite King Abimelech, for example, was ruler of ‘...*a righteous nation*’, (Genesis 20:4). Abraham ‘... *listened to My voice and heeded My charge, My commands, My statutes, and My laws*’ (*ch* 26:5). Joseph (a son of Jacob; *ch* 39:7-8) resisted the adulterous intentions of an Egyptian official’s wife.

God’s Law, then, is eternal. It is man’s operating system, going contrary to which carries automatic negative consequences for every human. It was not dreamed up out of the blue by Moses or just for Israel. As *you* are human you are subject to it—whatever your faith may be. You are indeed ‘bound by Law’.

Writes the apostle Paul: ‘...*The Gentiles do not have the Law of Moses; they sin and are lost apart from the Law. The Jews have the Law; they sin and are judged by the Law*’ (Romans 2:12).

The ultimate consequence is - *death*. Not just end-of-life death but also eternal death. Records King Solomon: ‘...*For the living know that they shall die; but the dead do not know anything; nor do they have any more a reward, for their memory is forgotten*’ (Ecclesiastes 9:5).

Until, that is, they are brought back to life to face judgment. Said Jesus: ‘...*an hour is coming in which all those in the tombs will hear His voice. And they will come out, the ones having done good into a resurrection of life; and the ones having practiced evil into a resurrection of judgment*’ (John 5:28-29).

The Gospel

What of those reconciled to God through Jesus, Christians? Through him we are no longer subject to that eternal death, our transgressions of law being through him forgiven.

Yet we are still subject to any physical or material or mental consequences of transgressing it. Man, writes Paul, has been delegated the responsibility to administer justice: ‘...*Let every person be subject to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except by God, and those that exist are put in place by God. So then, the one who resists authority resists the ordinance which is from God, and those who resist will receive condemnation on themselves*’ (Romans 13:1-2). That includes serving the penalty, Christian or not!

So it is a misunderstanding to claim that ‘the law is done away, nailed to the cross’. As wrote the Psalmist ‘...*they have made void your law*’ (119:126). The consequence of transgressing this eternal Law is still there, a Damoclean sword ready to take vengeance for wrong-doing. Paul again: ‘...*the law is holy, and the commandment is holy and righteous and good*’ (Romans 7:12). By studying—and personally applying God’s Law he could steer clear of its penalties. Or King David: ‘...*O how love I your law! it is my meditation all the day. You through your commandments have made me wiser than my enemies*’ (Psalm 119:97-98).

Character

Israel experienced the Law as a tutor (Galatians 3:24-25). Its numerous detailed observances—there are an estimated 613 ‘laws’—were onerous and time-consuming (Acts 15:10-11). But their aim was to inculcate the habit of ‘holiness’ in each Israelite and to map out for *our* learning those principles that tend to Christ-like behavior. Many an Israelite in the time of Jesus exhibited this godly character, Simeon and Anna, for example. And, of course, Mary and Joseph.

Everyone, including those ‘in Christ’, will experience the temporal consequence of transgressing the Law. The *eternal* consequence of sin, however, is annulled for true believers: ‘...*if we say that we have not sinned we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just, so that he will forgive us our sins and will cleanse us from all unrighteousness. If we say that we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us*’ (I John 1:8-10).

God’s in-built Law is a blessing—for all of mankind.

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