

# WHICH OLD TESTAMENT LAWS ARE IN FORCE TODAY?

***Here is how you can know which laws in the Old Testament were changed, or are no longer necessary, and which we are commanded to observe today!***

by Herman L. Hoeh

**N**EW MEMBERS in God's Church often ask, "When I read the Old Testament, how can I know the difference between the ceremonial laws no longer binding on the Church, and those laws which we are to observe today?"

This question is absolutely BASIC.

Christian growth depends in no small measure on understanding the answer to this question.

## **Ten Commandments Binding at Creation**

The patriarch Abraham kept the Commandments. "... Abraham *obeyed my voice,*" said God, "*and kept my charge, my commandments, my STATUTES, and my LAWS*" (Gen. 26:5).

God's *basic spiritual* Law which regulates human life existed from creation. It is "holy, just and good," said Paul in Romans 7:12-14. This Law is summed up in the Ten Commandments God gave to Moses on Mt. Sinai. The Ten Commandments were not new — only the written, codified form in which God spoke and wrote them was new. (Write for the reprint, "Were the Ten Commandments in Force Before Moses?" if you haven't read it.)

The entire Bible was written to illustrate the lives of individuals who repented of sin and kept the spiritual laws God set in motion from creation.

David was inspired to write: "All his commandments are sure. They stand fast for ever and ever, and are done in truth and uprightness" (Ps. 111:7-8).

Jesus said, "Think not that I am come to destroy the law, or the prophets: I am not come to destroy, but to fulfill" (Matt. 5:17).

God's Church believes David. It also believes Jesus. It does what He commands. He is, after all, the Head of the Church of God!

## **Other Laws Based on Ten Commandments**

Abraham kept the Ten Commandments. He also kept God's STATUTES and LAWS. What were these statutes and laws?

Statutes are expressions of a law-maker, usually commanding or forbidding that certain things be done. In addition to the broad principles of the Ten Commandments, God gave to the patriarchs STATUTES for the general well-being of the people — together with JUDGMENTS for the protection of everyone's legal rights. *Judgments* are binding *decisions* of judges based on God's previously revealed Law. These decisions are used to settle similar future disputes and to render a sentence or verdict.

In general the Ten Commandments apply to individual conduct, the statutes to national or church affairs, and the judgments to decisions rendered according to the principles of the Ten Commandments and the statutes.

The world had strayed so far from the truth by the days of Moses, that God had to reveal His laws and statutes anew to the Israelites. Ancient Israel had lost much of the knowledge of

God's ways while in Egyptian bondage. Notice, however, that God was revealing laws which were *already* in force.

In Exodus 16:28 God challenged Israel: "How long refuse ye to keep my commandments and my laws?"

Israel could not refuse what did not exist!

In Exodus 18:16 we read that Moses explained to his father-in-law what he did when the people had a dispute: "I do make them know the statutes of God, and his laws."

Both these instances occurred *before* the nation reached Sinai — before the Old Covenant was made.

As these statutes and laws existed before the Old Covenant, they were not thereby abolished in A.D. 31 when the Old Covenant marriage agreement ceased at the death of Christ. The Old Covenant could not destroy what it did not bring into force. The Old Covenant, remember, was a MARRIAGE AGREEMENT in which Israel promised to obey the Eternal (Christ) who was the Husband, and He, in turn, promised to provide for the nation. To obey the Husband meant to keep God's laws which were already in force! (Our fine reprint "The NEW Covenant — Does It Abolish God's Law?" explains that the Old Covenant was a marriage agreement.)

## **Magnifying the Law**

The statutes and lesser laws of God magnify the Ten Commandments. The First Commandment says, for example, "Thou shalt have no other gods before

me.” The statutes regarding annual festivals magnify this principle — explain how, in a positive way, to ensure that one worships the one true God: “Three times [in the year] thou shalt keep a feast UNTO ME . . .” (Ex. 23:14). Those who obey keep in special contact with the Creator God.

Many additional laws — such as Exodus 22:16, 19, for example — specify in greater detail how the Seventh Commandment, “Thou shalt not commit adultery [or moral uncleanness],” is to be applied.

Notice also that God made provision for additional *judgments* to be established over the centuries (see Numbers 27:6-11 for example). The judgments are binding *decisions* based on God’s previously revealed law.

But when did the carnal ceremonies and sacrifices of the Levitical priesthood begin? When did they cease to have force and effect? And how can we distinguish them from the statutes and laws that existed *prior* to the Old Covenant?

### **When Did Sacrificial Laws Begin?**

When God brought Israel to the foot of Mt. Sinai, He gave the Ten Commandments to them. He allowed Moses to declare to Israel the statutes and judgments which the people didn’t want to hear (Exodus, chapters 20-24). These statutes and judgments MAGNIFY the Ten Commandments.

Now notice carefully. There is only one sacrifice mentioned thus far in the book of the law — the *Passover* sacrifice (Ex. 23:18). God called it “MY sacrifice.” The Passover was instituted in Egypt, weeks before Sinai. It had to be included in the Old Covenant, but it was not instituted by the Old Covenant.

Next, turn to Jeremiah 7:22-23. Listen to what the Eternal inspired Jeremiah to write: “For in the day that I brought them out of the land of Egypt, I DID NOT SPEAK . . . OR COMMAND *them concerning burnt offerings and sacrifices*. But this COMMAND I GAVE THEM: ‘OBEY my voice . . . and walk in ALL THE WAY THAT I COMMAND YOU, that it may be well with you’” (*Revised Standard Version*).

God did not command these sacrifices to be offered originally. This explains why none of those temporary sacrifices were perpetuated by different symbols in the New Testament Church. Only the Passover is continued — with the different New Testament SYMBOLS of unleavened bread and wine. Why is the Passover continued today? — because it began *before* the Old Covenant was made! (See its institution in Exodus 12 before the Israelites left Egypt.)

The very fact that Jesus substituted unleavened bread and wine for the Passover lamb only, and not for the temporary Levitical offerings, is proof that the ceremonial Old Testament offerings are not binding today! — but that the Passover, in its New Testament form, *is* binding!

Paul explains that the temporary rituals and sacrifices were afterward “*added* because of transgressions” (Gal. 3:19) — because God’s spiritual Law was being broken — to last *until* Christ should come. They foreshadowed the sacrifice of Christ and were a “reminder of sin” to teach the people the need of the Messiah — the true Passover Lamb — who would pay the penalty of human transgression (Heb. 10:3-10).

Notice that these temporary rituals did *not* define sin. They were reminders of sin. *God’s spiritual laws define* sin. The laws which define sin — which explain what sin is — these laws we are to keep today.

### **Sacrifices FOREVER?**

The principle of voluntary offering of sacrifices existed before Moses. Christ volunteered to offer Himself from the *beginning* to pay for the sins of mankind. Cain and Abel made offerings to God (Gen. 4:3-4). But in the period from Moses to Christ the practice of giving offerings was reduced to a ritualistic plane and regulated in great detail. Why? Because the children of Israel were a physical, carnal people without the promise of the Holy Spirit. They could not offer themselves in spiritual obedience to God (Deut. 29:4), so they performed ritualistic washings and offered animals and other physical types instead — as a type of the true

spiritual worship to come (John 4:24).

They *needed to be reminded* of Jesus’ then future sacrifice, so God gave them physical types in the “law of Moses,” “until the seed should come” (Gal. 3:19).

Today, however, we offer *spiritual* offerings and sacrifices: we are being “built into . . . a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ” (I Peter 2:5, 9 RSV). We are to present our bodies a living sacrifice, holy, well-pleasing to God, our spiritual service (Rom. 12:1).

It is a *spiritual principle* to offer one’s self in living obedience — to sacrifice the self — to God. God Almighty is worthy to receive such service.

“But,” some have asked, “weren’t the Levitical sacrifices ordained *forever*?” Let us look at what the Bible really says. We may find some surprises.

Yes, the Bible does say that the sacrificial rites and other ritualistic functions belong to the Levitical priesthood forever. But *nowhere* are the people commanded to offer bloody sacrifices forever. Let us understand the real significance of the Hebrew word *olam* translated “forever.” It means *continuous, so long as the factors involved exist*.

Take for example the three statements found in Exodus 21:6, Leviticus 25:46 and Deuteronomy 15:17. All three speak of men being the slaves of a master *forever* — which obviously can only mean continuous until the death of one of the parties.

Now what factors may limit the duration of the offering of sacrifices? One, the *need* of a physical, human priesthood. Two, the *need* for sacrifices. And three, the existence of a temple or tabernacle.

In other words, as long as sacrifices are offered, the functions of the physical priesthood will never be transferred from the family of Levi. It is theirs forever. “For if he [Christ] were on earth, he should not be a priest, seeing that there are priests that offer gifts according to the law” (Heb. 8:4). The physical priesthood is Aaron’s, of the tribe of Levi. The spiritual priesthood is Jesus’, who is of the order of Melchizedek, not Aaron.

What is the purpose of a priesthood? To offer sacrifices and to act on

behalf of men in relation to God (Heb. 5:1 and 8:3). But how long do physical offerings as reminders of sin need to be made? Paul tells us: “Now where remission of these [sins] is, *there is no more offering for sin*” (Heb. 10:18).

To offer sacrifices today as reminders of sins already paid for by Jesus, who gave His life in full payment for all sins, is needless after A.D. 31 when Jesus died to pay for the sins of the world. God signalled this fact to the Jews in A.D. 70 by allowing the destruction of the temple.

Moreover, since the Holy Spirit was made available to mankind beginning Pentecost Sunday; June 17, A.D. 31, physical offerings and various washings which are types of the Holy Spirit are no longer needed and hence no longer binding. The factors involved ceased to exist.

*The ritual laws were subject to change because they were only types of the promised seed, Christ (who was to take upon Himself the sins of the world) and of the Holy Spirit which would regenerate men spiritually. When the circumstances were altered in A.D. 31, at the crucifixion, and on Pentecost, the obligation to practice the ritualistic laws ceased. These rituals had no further use when the Lamb of God died for our sins and when the Holy Spirit became available for men in general. But note that they did not cease because they were part of the Old Covenant. They were added after the Old Covenant or marriage agreement was ratified (Exodus 24). The rituals ceased to be needed because the true sacrifice for sin had been offered.*

But what about God’s spiritual laws?

### **God ALONE Changes Laws**

Perhaps some have failed to realize that God ALONE has the right to add to or alter His laws, and that HE WILL NOT ALTER HIS SPIRITUAL LAWS. The spiritual laws describe the very character of God. They enable us to know what God is like. Since the character of God remains *unchanging* — “I change not,” says the Eternal (Mal. 3:6) and “Jesus Christ, the same yesterday, and today, and for ever” (Heb. 13:8) — God’s spiritual laws cannot change.

### **Ritual Laws Distinguished from Others**

In Hebrews 9:9-10 we read of the material gifts and sacrifices which included “ONLY meats and drinks and diverse washings and carnal ordinances, imposed until the time of reformation.”

Notice that these temporary laws did not pertain to murder or theft or sabbath breaking, but were ONLY those ordinances regulating meat and drink offerings and different washings or ablutions of the unclean. (These external washings were a type of the Holy Spirit cleaning us up from within.)

Any other laws not included in Hebrews 9:10 were *not* part of the rituals added because of sin!

Remember this point!

It will help you to know which rites in the Old Testament were added to the statutes and judgments already in existence.

### **What Is the Law of Moses?**

Some people are easily confused by the trick argument of some that the Ten Commandments are the law of Moses. They read in Luke 2:22-24 that the ordinances of the “law of Moses” are also called part of the “law of the Lord.”

Why is the “law of Moses” also called the “law of the Lord”? Because all law comes from God! Moses was not the lawmaker! He merely told the people the laws that God set in motion (John 1:17).

However, the Bible NEVER calls the law of Moses the Ten Commandments. The law of Moses comprises statutes and judgments which God gave him to communicate to the people. The difference between the law of Moses and the Ten Commandments is that God spoke the Ten Commandments, but *Moses* delivered the statutes and judgments.

Now, let us recall that when Moses first delivered the statutes and judgments, *the law of Moses had no sacrifices connected with it*. Jeremiah said so! (Jer. 7:22.) The law of Moses was originally the civil law, based on the principles of the Ten Commandments. These civil statutes and judgments are also right and good (Ps. 119:7, 8).

Some of these civil laws were included in the Old Covenant (Ex. 21-24) and others were promulgated at later times (Deut. 12:1, and following chapters for example).

*After* the ratification of the Old Covenant (Ex. 24), the Levitical priesthood was established and the laws regulating offerings were added to the law of Moses (Ex. 28:1). (Prior to this time offerings were voluntary and young men were priests — Exodus 24:5.)

Therefore the law of Moses *has more than one part!*

Notice God’s definition of the original part of that law in Malachi 4:4 (RSV): “Remember the law of my servant Moses, the statutes and ordinances that I commanded him at Horeb for all Israel.”

*This* law we are not to forget. We are to keep it!

But added later to this law were other statutes regulating material rituals, such as sacrifices, lighting of candles, burning incense and various washings for the unclean.

This almost unnoticed fact that the law of *Moses* was composed of *two* distinct parts — the civil and the ritualistic — is what causes so much difficulty in understanding.

### **Part of Law of Moses Still in Force!**

Jesus said the two great commandments were love to God and love to neighbor. Do you know from where He quoted these laws?

Out of the book of the law! — the laws that *Moses* spoke to the people. Read it in Leviticus 19:18 (RSV): “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” And Deuteronomy 6:5: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might.”

In II John 5 and 6, God commands Christians to obey these two basic laws which He communicated to the people by Moses! In II Kings 23:25, Josiah is praised because he did so. He “turned to the Lord with all his heart, and with all his soul, and with all his might, ACCORDING TO ALL THE LAW OF MOSES”!

Notice how plain it is. The civil law of Moses expounds the Ten Commandments by revealing how the ten basic

principles are to be applied. We are to *keep* this part of the law, not in the old strictness of the letter, but according to its full spirit and intent.

### **Ceremonial Part NO LONGER in Force**

Then why do we read in Acts 15 that Gentile converts do not have to observe the “law of Moses,” except for four points? The answer is made plain in Acts 21:21.

The laws of Moses, here called in question, involved “customs.” Read it for yourself. The Jews were mistakenly accusing Paul, saying that he taught Jews living abroad “not to circumcise their children or observe the CUSTOMS”! (Acts 21:21.)

The controversy in the early Church did not involve the spiritual intent of the *civil* law of Moses. It involved the *ceremonial additions* to the original *civil* law of Moses — *customs* — ADDED ceremonies or rituals.

### **Why Four Points Specified in Acts 15**

This fact is further proven by noticing the four points, included in the law of Moses, which are binding on all Christians everywhere. We are not to eat blood, animals which have been strangled, meats offered to idols (when another’s conscience could be defiled), or to commit fornication (Acts 15:20).

These four points were originally part of the civil law of Moses. But these points were also *included later* within the added ceremonies because Gentiles ate their sacrifices with the blood, often strangled their animals, presented them to idols and commonly committed fornication in their religious ceremonies. *To prevent these pagan customs being practiced by Israel*, God included the four civil points of the law along with the rituals (Lev. 17:7, 10; Num. 25:1-3).

Because some would have thought, therefore, that they were abolished along with the temporary rituals when those ceremonies were declared no longer binding (in Acts 15), these four points had to be specifically declared still in effect. Since these four points were part of the civil law before the

addition of the rituals, they remained binding *after* the abolition of the physical sacrifices and washings!

How plain! Only the *ceremonial customs* of the law of Moses have passed away.

The *civil* law of Moses *which defined sin* was not called in question in Acts 15 — it was not involved. (Paul, of course, explains elsewhere that the civil law, once administered in the letter, is now to be observed in the spirit and full intent of its meaning — II Cor. 3.)

The many civil laws regulating tithing, clean and unclean meats, the annual sabbaths, and many others are still for the New Testament Church because they help explain what sin is. They were *not* part of the *ceremonial* law of Moses mentioned in Hebrews 9:10 and in Acts 15.

One other point must be clarified. Certain Jews accused Paul of teaching against physical circumcision, which was instituted long before the law of Moses and therefore was not really a part of it.

Circumcision, in its spiritual intent, is not done away — like the Ten Commandments it is still in force. But, like the Passover, the *manner* of circumcision has been *changed*. Circumcision is now *of the heart*, not of the male foreskin (Rom. 2:28-29; Col. 2:11; Deut. 10:16; 30:6).

### **A Different Administration**

Now let us consider the use of the death penalty in Old Testament times.

A question sometimes asked is this: Why do we not enforce the death penalty for sabbath breakers or for any other violation of the Ten Commandments?

The answer to this question is found in Matthew 5, where Jesus gave instructions, not for a civil government as in the Old Testament, but for a spiritual CHURCH.

In Matthew 5:38-42, Christ revealed that a true Christian should be willing to suffer wrong done to him, if necessary (see also I Peter 2:19-20; Rom. 13:1-7). Jesus said, “Ye have heard it said an eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth: But I say unto you, that ye resist not evil: but whosoever shall smite thee on thy right cheek, turn to him

the other cheek also.”

He commenced by saying He came to fulfill the law, not to destroy it. He then proceeded to MAGNIFY the APPLICATION of the civil laws as they were given to ancient Israel — not abolishing them, but *magnifying* them and making them more honorable (Isa. 42:21).

He raised them from narrow, national laws — given to a carnal nation to be administered according to the strict letter — to a spiritual plane regulating the whole of human society. Six times Jesus said: “You have heard it said in olden times. . . . But I say to you. . . .” And He then proceeded to expound the *spiritual principles underlying the civil laws of Moses*.

### **An Eye for an Eye?**

The intent and underlying principle of the law of God is love of God and neighbor (Matt. 22:36-40). For a spirit-begotten New Testament Church, Christ showed *how* to love our fellowmen better.

But the instructions given to Moses about “an eye for an eye” were not intended as some people take them. They were laws set up to regulate a human society, with all its faults, in a fair and just manner. And these *principles* are still in effect today.

Many have read the command in Exodus 21:24-25 with shocked amazement at the assumed “cruelty” of the God of the Old Testament. They suppose anyone causing a person accidentally to lose sight of an eye would immediately be seized, held down, and have *his* eye gouged out in just retribution!

But is this a right understanding of the verse?

The context in which we find this command of “eye for eye, tooth for tooth” is explaining the principle of *just recompense* for any wrong done. The very next verse shows that if a person causes his slave to lose his eye or tooth, the slave must be freed as a PAYMENT for the injury — workmen’s compensation. Verses 18 and 19 of the same chapter discuss the matter of one person injuring another. What is the punishment? “. . . he shall *pay* for the loss of his time, and shall cause him to

be thoroughly healed.” It was a matter of *payment* or recompense — not revenge by inflicting the same injury.

Then verse 22 shows that a person should be punished if he causes a pregnant woman to have a miscarriage. What is the punishment in this case? Again it is “. . . and he shall *pay* as the judges determine.” The whole context of the “eye for eye, tooth for tooth” command is concerned with the matter of *just recompense* or *payment* for the injury caused — an “eye-value” for an eye, a “tooth-value” for a tooth.

The principle of a “life for a life” definitely applied in *extreme* cases, where no other penalty would be just and adequate (Ex. 21:12-17, 23).

### Why the “Letter of the Law”?

Why did Moses give the spiritual principles only in the letter to ancient Israel?

Ancient Israel was a national church — a physical nation organized into the congregation of Israel. The people did not have the promise of the Holy Spirit; they were a nation of *this* world. Moses said they did not even have the power or strength of will to keep what little he commanded them (Deut. 5:29).

And neither do most human beings today! People don’t want to obey the commandments. “The carnal mind is enmity against God: for it is not subject to the law of God . . .” (Rom.

8:7). For that reason Israel needed punishments for lawbreakers to keep peace and security and ensure obedience in the land. So God ordained that human judges exercise certain of His divine prerogatives and execute punishments on their fellowmen.

*Jesus* — who was the LORD who spoke to Moses — *gave the civil law to Moses in the strict letter at Mount Sinai for a physical church*. Fifteen centuries later that same Jesus emphasized the SPIRITUAL intent of the law. He also made it possible for the members of His *spiritual* Church — the New Testament Church of God — to keep all His binding laws by sending God’s Holy Spirit! □

Reprinted from *The GOOD NEWS* (August, 1972), pages 1-3, 16-17.