
John Wesley and the Law

by William M. Arnett

The law has great significance for John Wesley, a significance which can be fully appreciated only when it is seen in relation to the gospel. “Let the law always prepare for the gospel,” writes Wesley to one of his fellow-preachers (Joseph Cownley), thus emphasizing one of the main functions of the law.¹ In the same letter he warns that preaching on so vital a theme as the love of God could be counter-productive unless the law is emphasized. With keen perception and real candor he pin-pointed a danger he observed in his own preaching and in that of Cownley’s:

I see a danger you are in, which perhaps you do not see yourself. Is it not most pleasing to me as well as you to be always preaching of the love of God? And is there not a time when we are peculiarly led thereto, and find a peculiar blessing therein? Without doubt so it is. But yet it would be utterly wrong and unscriptural to preach of nothing else. Let the law always prepare for the gospel. I scarce ever spoke more earnestly here of the love of God in Christ than last night; but it was after I had been tearing the unawakened in pieces. Go thou and do likewise. It is true the love of God in Christ alone feeds His children; but even they are to be guided as well as fed — yea, and often physicked too; and the bulk of our hearers must be purged before they are fed; else we only feed the disease. Beware of all honey. It is the best extreme; but it is an extreme.²

This advice comes out of Wesley’s practical experience as an evangelist. Even well-intentioned preaching on the love of God could veer toward a dangerous sentimentalism and result in the feeding of the disease of sin rather than effecting its cure. Hence the

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admonition: “Beware of all honey”!

Wesley’s emphasis on various functions of the law are a benefit to both the sinner and the Christian. “Few themes in Wesley’s theology are as thoroughly thought out as his doctrine of the law” writes John Deschner.³ Following is an investigation of Wesley’s doctrine and related factors of the law: its origin and meaning; the Mosaic dispensation; its characteristics and functions; its relation to Christ and the gospel; and finally a practical application of its preaching values.

Four of Wesley’s sermons⁴ will be of special importance in this investigation: first, Discourse V, based on Matthew 5:17-20, his 13 expositions on the Sermon on the Mount; second, “The Original, Nature, Property, and Use of the Law,” in which Romans 7:12 is used as a text; and two discourses on “The Law Established Through Faith,” using Romans 3:31 as a basis for each discourse. While these four sermons are primary sources, there are also significant comments and insights in Wesley’s scattered writings, particularly in his *Explanatory Notes Upon the New Testament, Letters*, and *Explanatory Notes Upon the Old Testament*.

The Origin and Meaning of the Law

The law, which is for John Wesley the moral law,⁵ pre-dates the time of Moses. Its origin is to be traced beyond the foundation of the world, even to the very being of God Himself.⁶ He describes the law of God as “a copy of the eternal mind, a transcript of the divine nature.”⁷ He defines it as “the original ideas of truth and good, which were lodged in the uncreated mind from eternity.”⁸ It was first given to angels and then to man in paradise and is “coeval with his nature.”⁹ It was engraved on man’s heart by the finger of God, and was thus divinely written on “the inmost spirit both of men and angels.”¹⁰ From another point of view, the law “is supreme, unchangeable reason; it is unalterable rectitude; it is the everlasting fitness of all things that are or ever were created.”¹¹

Related to the origin of the law is the age-old question of whether a thing is right because God wills it or whether God wills it because it is right. Wesley says this question arises because men make a distinction between the will of God and God Himself. He regards the question as more curious than useful, and “to say that the will of God, or that God Himself, is the cause of the law, is one and the same thing.”¹²

Although man soon rebelled against God, and by breaking the Divine law, virtually effaced it out of his heart, God did not despise the work of His own hands, and through the sacrifice of His Son, in some measure, re-inscribed the law on the heart of His dark, sinful creature.¹³ The prevenient grace of God became operative immediately after the fall.

The Mosaic Dispensation of the Law

On account of man's continued rebellion and transgressions, the Mosaic dispensation was introduced. There are two fundamental aspects to this dispensation: the moral law, contained in the Ten Commandments, and enforced by the prophets, and the ceremonial or ritual law, which was only designed for a temporary restraint upon a disobedient and stiffnecked people. The moral law stands on an entirely different foundation from the ceremonial, for the former was from the beginning of the world "written not on tables of stone," but "on the hearts of all the children of men, when they came out of the hands of the Creator."¹⁴ Every part of the moral law "must remain in force upon all mankind, and in all ages; as not depending either on time or place, or any other circumstances liable to change, but on the nature of God, and the nature of man, and their unchangeable relation to each other."¹⁵ In his comment on Exodus 20:1, relating to "the law of the ten commandments," Wesley says "this law God had given to man before, it was written in his heart by nature."¹⁶

The Characteristics of the Law

As expressed in Romans 7:12, Wesley stresses the fact that the law is holy, just, and good. First and foremost, it is holy, the immediate offspring and express resemblance of God who is essential holiness.¹⁷ "As sin is, in its very nature, enmity to God, so His law is enmity to sin."¹⁸ Secondly, the law is just, the "immutable rule of right and wrong," depending upon the nature and fitness of things, which is tantamount to saying it is dependent on God or the will of God.¹⁹ The third characteristic of the law is goodness, resembling the source from which it flows, namely the goodness of God. The law is good in its fruits or effects as well as in its nature.²⁰ The ceremonial law is good since it points to Christ.²¹

In view of these Divine qualities, it is obvious why Wesley took vigorous exception to Luther's dualistic view of the law as set forth in his commentary on the Epistle to the Galatians. Luther coupled the

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law with sin, death, hell, and the devil, and taught that Christ delivers us from them all alike. Wesley said “it can no more be proved by Scripture that Christ delivers us from the law of God than that He delivers us from holiness or from heaven.”²² He understood this to be the source of the “grand error” of the Moravians whose emphasis was on “no works; no law; no commandments.”²³ Christ has indeed redeemed us from the curse of the law, but not from the command of it, for we are still under the law to Christ.²⁴ The law “springs from, and partakes of, the holy nature of God; it is every way just and right in itself; it is designed for the good of man.”²⁵

Jesus Christ and the Law

There is an intimate relationship between Jesus Christ and the law in the thought of Wesley. He states explicitly, and also infers, that Christ is “the great Author” of the law.²⁶ He repeatedly refers to Christ as the “Lawgiver,” often in superlative terms, as in his comments on Matthew 7:29; 5:22; Mark 2:28; and Hebrews 10:29.²⁷ In fact, says Wesley, “It was therefore the Son of God who delivered the law to Moses, under the character of Jehovah.”²⁸ In his Discourse on Matthew 5:13-16, Wesley declares that Jesus Christ came not to destroy but to establish, proclaim, and fulfill the moral law. As fulfiller of the law, Jesus was not simply referring to His own perfect obedience but, according to Wesley, was saying this:

I am come to establish it in its fulness, in spite of all the glosses of men: I am come to place in a full and clear view whatsoever was dark or obscure therein: I am come to declare the true and full import of every part of it; to show the length and breadth, the entire extent, of every commandment contained therein, and the height and depth, the inconceivable purity and spirituality of it in all its branches.²⁹

Wesley calls this the strongest and most rigorous type of law preaching.³⁰ A Christian cannot live without the law any more than he can live without Christ. “Indeed each is continually sending me to the other — the law to Christ, and Christ to the law.”³¹

The Law and the Gospel

This brings one quite naturally to a consideration of the funda-

mental harmony between the law and the gospel. There is no “contrariety” between them, neither does one supersede the other. So perfect is the harmony and agreement that it is akin to two sides of the same coin.

The very same words, considered in different respects, are parts both of the law and of the gospel: if they are considered as commandments, they are parts of the law; if as promises, of the gospel. Thus, “Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart,” when considered as a commandment, is a branch of the law; when regarded as a promise, is an essential part of the gospel — the gospel being no other than the commands of the law, proposed by way of promise.³²

Obviously, there is an intimate relationship between the two. “On the one hand, the law continually makes way for, and points us to the gospel; on the other, the gospel continually leads us to a more exact fulfilling of the law.”³³ Thus every command in Holy Scripture may be considered a covered promise. “If . . . God command thee so, then thou shalt be able to . . .” Exodus 18:23a. God’s biddings are God’s enablings. Redemptively and experientially, it is illustrated beautifully by the necessity of the new birth (John 3:7) and the Divine provision that follows (John 3:14), as well as by the command to pursue holiness or sanctification (Hebrews 12:14) and the redemptive provision (Hebrews 13:12) for the realization of holiness in heart and life.

The Functions of the Law

The first use of the law is to convince the world of sin, that is, “to slay the sinner.”³⁴ The precepts and the sanction of the moral law as they stand in themselves are “a killing ordinance, and bind us down under the sentence of death.”³⁵ Therefore, it was generally Wesley’s method to present his hearers with the demands of the moral law before he proclaimed the good news of the Gospel. “It is the ordinary method of the Spirit of God to convict sinners by the law,”³⁶ he writes.

The second use of the law is to bring the convicted sinner to Christ that he might live. The only right method is “first, to wound by the law and then to heal by the gospel.”³⁷ “The law first breaks us, and kills us with the sight and guilt of sin before Christ cures us, and binds

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us up.”³⁸ Yes, the law is a strict schoolmaster to bring us to Christ.

The third use of the law is to keep us alive by binding us very close to the Saviour. “ It is the grand means whereby the blessed Spirit prepares the believer for larger communications of the life of God.”³⁹ Hereby the way is prepared for a three-fold function of the law to instill sanctification or holiness in the Christian. The law is still of unspeakable use, says Wesley:

. . . first, in convincing us of the sin that yet remains both in our hearts and lives, and thereby keeping us close to Christ, that His blood may cleanse us every moment; secondly in deriving strength from our Head into His living members, whereby He empowers them to do what His law commands; and, thirdly, in confirming our hope of whatever it commands and we have not yet attained, — of receiving grace upon grace, till we are in actual possession of the fullness of His promises.⁴⁰

What a gracious ministry this is! It is the springboard for one of Wesley’s most eloquent and moving exhortations:

. . . for the time to come, never think or speak lightly of, much less dress up as a scarecrow, this blessed instrument of the grace of God (i.e., the law). Yea, love and value it for the sake of Him from whom it came, and of Him to whom it leads. Let it be thy glory and thy joy, next to the cross of Christ. Declare its praise, and make it honourable before all men . . . Keep close to the law, if thou wilt keep close to Christ; hold it fast; let it not go. Let this continually lead thee to the atoning blood, continually confirm thy hope, till all the “righteousness of the law is fulfilled in thee,” and thou art “filled with all the fullness of God.”⁴¹

The Law and the Gospel: Means to an End

In his first discourse, “The Law Established through Faith,” based on Romans 3:31, Wesley warns there are at least three ways of making void the law through faith: first, by not preaching the law at all; secondly, by teaching that faith supersedes the necessity of holiness; and third, by living as if faith was designed to excuse us from holiness.⁴²

On the positive side, the law is established in the heart and life of man, by faith, in three ways:⁴³ first, “by endeavouring to preach it [the doctrine of faith] in its whole extent, to explain and enforce every part of it, in the same manner as our great Teacher did while upon the earth;” secondly, by preaching faith in Christ as not to supersede, but to produce holiness — all manner of holiness — of the heart and of the life; and third and most importantly, by embracing faith in our own hearts and lives. The works of the law can never justify, but they are the immediate fruit of that gospel faith which justifies. Neither the law, the gospel, nor faith, then, are ends in themselves. Love is the end. Love is the end of all the commandments of God. “Faith, then, was originally designed by God to re-establish the law of love.”⁴⁴ This sets the law and the gospel in their proper perspectives, and strikes a death blow to antinomianism on the one hand and stifling legalism on the other.

Preaching Values of the Law

Wesley’s sense of balance and proportion is evident in his very practical advice about preaching the law and the gospel. In one of his most important letters (to Ebenezer Blackwell?), he shares the results of his experience as an evangelist, and as John Telford points out, “describes the kind of preaching he had found most effectual in leading to conviction of sin and true repentance”:⁴⁵

I think the right method of preaching is this. At our first beginning to preach at any place, after a general declaration of the love of God to sinners and His willingness that they should be saved, to preach the law in the strongest, the closest, the most searching manner possible; only inter-mixing the gospel here and there, and showing it, as it were afar off. After more and more of the gospel, in order to *begat faith*, to raise into spiritual life those whom the law hath slain.⁴⁶

So Wesley would not advise preaching the law without the gospel, any more than the gospel without the law.

“I mean by ‘preaching the gospel’ preaching the love of God to sinners, preaching the life, death, resurrection, and intercession of Christ, with all the blessings which in

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consequence thereof are freely given to true believers. By 'preaching the law' I mean explaining and enforcing the commands of Christ briefly comprised in the Sermon on the Mount."⁴⁷

In brief, Wesley's strategy was to preach the law to men until they knew themselves to be sinners, then to preach Christ to them as sinners. "One in a thousand may have been awakened by the gospel; but this is no general rule: the ordinary method of God is, to convict sinners by the law, and that only."⁴⁸

So once again Wesley would say, "Let the law always prepare for the gospel." It is very apparent that his preaching advice was a wise application of his theology. In our time one does well to ponder carefully and to heed judiciously the advice Wesley gave to the people called "Methodist": "Love the strictest preaching best, that which most searches the heart and shows you wherein you are unlike Christ, and that which presses you most to love him with all your heart and serve him with all your strength."⁴⁹ ■

Footnotes

¹*The Letters of the Rev. John Wesley, A.M.*, ed. John Telford (London: The Epworth Press, 1931), III, p. 34. Hereafter referred to as *Letters*. This letter was written April 12, 1750.

²*Ibid.*

³*Wesley's Christology* (Dallas: Southern Methodist University Press, 1960), p. 93.

⁴These sermons are numbered differently in various publications. In *Wesley's Standard Sermons*, two volumes, edited and annotated by Edward H. Sugden, they are numbered (as listed in the paper) XX in volume 1, and XXIX, XXX, and XXXI in volume 2. This valuable edition is no longer in print. In the N. Burwash edition, one volume, originally entitled *Wesley's Doctrinal Standards*, the sermons are numbered (as listed in the paper) XXV, XXXIV, XXXV, and XXXVI, which is the same numbering as in Wesley's *Works* (ed. Thomas Jackson). The Burwash edition is the only edition of Wesley's sermons currently in print, entitled *Wesley's 52 Standard Sermons* (Schmul Publishers, Salem, Ohio). Documentation here will note the Sugden edition, two volumes, as S1 and S2, followed by the page number, and the Burwash edition, one volume, as Burwash, followed by the page number.

⁵S2,45; Burwash, p. 337.

⁶S2,42,45; Burwash, pp. 336,337.

⁷S2,47; Burwash, p. 337.

⁸S2,46; Burwash, p. 337.

⁹S2,43; Burwash, p. 336.

¹⁰S2,43; Burwash, p. 336.

¹¹S2,46; Burwash, p. 337.

¹²S2,50; Burwash, p. 339.

¹³S2,43; Burwash, p. 336.

¹⁴S1,400; Burwash, p. 248.

¹⁵*Ibid.*

¹⁶*Explanatory Notes Upon the Old Testament* (Salem, Ohio: Schmul Publishers, 1975) I, p. 263. Hereafter referred to as *O.T. Notes*.

¹⁷S2,47; Burwash, p. 338.

¹⁸S2,48; Burwash, p. 338.

¹⁹S2,50; Burwash, p. 339.

²⁰S2,51; Burwash, p. 340.

²¹John Wesley, *Explanatory Notes Upon the New Testament* (London: The Epworth Press, 1950), p. 772. Note on I Timothy 1:8. Hereafter referred to as *N.T. Notes*.

²²*The Journal of the Rev. John Wesley, A.M.*, ed. Nehemiah Curnock (London: Charles H. Kelley, 1909), II, p. 467.

²³*Ibid.*

²⁴John Wesley, *O.T. Notes* I, p. 321. Note on Exodus 34:1.

²⁵John Wesley, *N.T. Notes*, p. 544. Note on Romans 7:12.

²⁶S1,401; S2,56; Burwash, pp. 248,342.

²⁷John Wesley, *N.T. Notes*, pp. 44, 31, 148, 840.

²⁸*N.T. Notes*, p. 420.

²⁹S1,401; Burwash, p. 248.

³⁰S1,405; Burwash, p. 250.

³¹S2,55; Burwash, p. 342.

³²S1,403; Burwash, p. 249.

³³*Ibid.*

³⁴S2,52; Burwash, p. 341.

³⁵John Wesley, *N.T. Notes*, p. 650. Note on II Corinthians 3:6.

³⁶S2,52; Burwash, p. 340.

³⁷John Wesley, *A Christian Library* (London: Printed by T. Cordeaux, for T. Blanshard, 1819) V, p. 17. From the Rev. Robert Bolton, "Instructions for Rightly Comforting Afflicted Consciences." Bolton was some time Fellow of Brazen Nose College, in Oxford, and Rector of Broughton, in Northamptonshire.

³⁸*Ibid.*, p. 23. From Bolton's treatise; the quotation is from a writer by the name of Throgmorton.

³⁹S2,53; Burwash, p. 341.

⁴⁰S2,54; Burwash, p. 341.

⁴¹S2,56; Burwash, pp. 342, 343.

⁴²S2,61ff.; Burwash, pp. 347ff.

⁴³S2,73ff.; Burwash, pp. 354ff.

⁴⁴S2,80; Burwash, 358.

⁴⁵John Wesley, *Letters* III, p. 78.

⁴⁶*Ibid.*, pp. 79,80.

⁴⁷*Ibid.*, p. 79.

⁴⁸S2,61; Burwash, p. 348.

⁴⁹John Wesley, "A Blow at the Root, or Christ Stabb'd in the House of His Friends," *Works* (ed. Jackson) X, p. 369. Also, John Wesley, ed. Albert C. Outler, p. 382.

The following sources have helpful discussions and analyses on this theme: Harald

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Lindstrom, *Wesley and Sanctification*, pp 75-82; John Deschner, *Wesley's Christology*, pp. 93-115; two articles in the *Wesleyan Theological Journal*, Volume 12, Spring, 1977: Charles R. Wilson, "The Revelance of John Wesley's Distinctive Correlation of Love and Law," pp. 54ff.; Charles N. Dillman, "Wesley's Approach to the Law in Discourse XXV on the Sermon on the Mount," pp. 60ff.