

Calvin's Third Use of the Law:

An Assessment of Reformed Explications of the Ten Commandments

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Introduction

German theologian Michael Welker has recently argued that the future of Reformed theology depends on its ability “to experience and to recognize the vitality and clarity of God’s word.”¹ According to Welker, recovery of a robust theology of the word depends on three tasks. First, Reformed theology “must make clear that the church of Christ lives in the presence of the risen Christ, mediated by proclamation and celebration of the sacraments . . . [He is] the ‘one Word of God’.”² Second, Reformed theology must recognize the pluralistic character of the biblical texts, which “precisely in their differences . . . can refer concretely . . . to the reality of Christ’s presence, which every time and culture seeks to grasp in its own way, yet which cannot be exhaustively summed up by any time and culture.”³ Third, Reformed theology must develop a theology of law in which “the Christological determinacy and the biblical breadth of God’s word become liberating powers and acquire ‘solid form’.”⁴

In this paper, I wish to pick up aspects of Welker’s third task: a theology of law that is grounded in the gospel and bring to expression “God’s entire will and God’s revelation.”⁵ Welker notes that Christian theology has too often made law-gospel as abstract opposition—leading, on the one hand, to a general disparagement of the law, and on the other to “naïve and diffuse forms of legalism.”⁶ As a result, theology has been pushed “out of the position of a competent participant in debates about powers shaping our ethos and . . . [has] become hopelessly dependent on moral trends.”⁷ Welker argues that reformed theology, with its notion of a third use of the law, has generally avoided these distortions and can help us today “to understand that the freedom of the gospel cannot be played off against the law.”⁸ Reformed theology is well-positioned to develop a biblical notion of law, with its three pillars of justice, mercy, and

knowledge of God.⁹ Welker argues for a thick reading of biblical law, rather than its reduction to the Ten Commandments. I wish, however, to investigate classic Reformed treatments of the Ten Commandments, precisely because they have been understood to summarize a thick reading of biblical law. I will argue that three aspects of Reformed treatments of the Ten Commandments are of particular value for thinking about a contemporary theology of law: 1) their effort to describe the contours of our lives in the presence of the living Christ, 2) their concern to understand the social, communal dimensions of life in Christ, and 3) their reliance on a dynamic process of moral decision making. In conclusion, I will briefly assess the possibilities for a contemporary theology of law, looking at resistance to unjust authority as a test case. While focusing on discussions of the Ten Commandments in Calvin and key Reformed confessional documents, my analysis will also be informed by a wider reading of classic statements on law and grace.¹⁰

General Observations on Reformed Treatments of the Ten Commandments

Reformed understandings of the Decalogue have been deeply informed by John Calvin's discussion of the Ten Commandments, especially in his Institutes of the Christian Religion and in his Sermons on Deuteronomy. Calvin establishes the basic hermeneutical strategies that have enabled Reformed theologians to view the law not as oppressive requirement, but as joyful opportunity to grow in grace and to participate more fully in the divine life.

The Moral Law

Following medieval precedent, Calvin divides biblical law into three types: ceremonial, judicial, and moral. The ceremonial law consists of Israel's cultic regulations. Though not binding on Christians, they are not without value. They offer types or foreshadowings of God's purposes in Christ.¹¹ The judicial law encompasses the "formulas of equity and justice" whereby the people of Israel were ruled as a nation.¹² Like the ceremonial law, the judicial law is no longer binding; it belongs to a particular historical context of the past. Today, "each

nation is left free to make such law as it foresees to be profitable for itself.”¹³ But the third kind of law, the moral law, is still binding. According to Calvin, it is “an unchangeable rule of right living.”¹⁴ “It is the true and eternal rule of righteousness, prescribed for men of all nations and times, who wish to conform their lives to God’s will.”¹⁵

In line with tradition, Calvin associates the moral law of Scripture with the natural law that God has written on our hearts. Sin, says Calvin, has obscured our ability to know and obey this inner law. But “the Lord has provided us with a written law to give us a clearer witness of what was too obscure in the natural law, shake off our listlessness, and strike more vigorously our mind and memory.”¹⁶ Here, Calvin is arguing a point that is central to his theology. God, recognizing our sinful, lazy nature, does not simply condemn humans, but takes pity on them. Because we are weak, God comes to us and makes the divine self known to us. God does not overwhelm us with God’s glory and power, but offers the divine self to us in a way that is suited to touch us and to move us to obedient response.

Calvin’s description of the role of the Ten Commandments in communicating God’s very self to us is similar to his description of the preaching office and of the sacraments.¹⁷ By the concrete demands of Scripture—just as by the preacher’s flimsy words, and just as by mere earthly material such as water, bread, and wine—God makes the divine self known to humans and draws them into relationship with God. God accommodates the divine self to our human weakness by giving us laws, so that we may come to God. It is no wonder that Calvin can describe the law also as promise. The law never simply demands. It also offers. It sets forth the presence of the God whom Christians now know in Christ.

The Ten Commandments

Calvin follows tradition further, in arguing that the Ten Commandments summarize the moral law of Scripture. The Ten Commandments represent all our duties to God and to others, each set of duties being associated with one of

the two tables of the law. “In the First Table, God instructs us in piety and the proper duties of religion, by which we are to worship his majesty. The Second Table prescribes how in accordance with the fear of his name we ought to conduct ourselves in human society.”¹⁸

Calvin, like the wider tradition, associates the first table with the first part of the great love commandment—to love God with heart, soul, and mind—and the second table with the second part—to love our neighbor as ourselves (Matt. 22:37-39). Calvin argues that the first table is the foundation of the second—only if we learn how to love God rightly will we also be able to love our neighbor rightly. But conversely we have only learned to love God rightly if we also demonstrate love for our neighbor. Worship issues in social justice; social justice rests on orthodoxy (in the sense of “right praise”).¹⁹

Calvin recognized that the Ten Commandments are not by themselves the entirety of the moral law. But they do provide an appropriate framework for compiling and organizing it, and for relating it to the life of Christian love. He broadens each commandment, so that it represents not a solitary act, but a larger category of behavior. The sixth commandment, “do not kill,” is only the most extreme example in the category, “do not injure the neighbor.”²⁰ The seventh, “do not commit adultery,” is the most extreme example in the category, “do not fornicate, do not be promiscuous.” Similarly, “do not steal” condemns all violations of distributive justice; “do not bear false witness,” all lying and deception.

Here, again, Calvin is drawing on his notion of divine accommodation. “Do not kill,” “do not commit adultery,” and the other commandments grab our attention and redirect it, precisely because they seem so extreme. Even if we are not guilty of the specific transgressions that they name, the commandments call us to remember the law in its entirety and to meditate on its relevance to our lives.²¹

God spoke in a gross and uncultured manner in order to accommodate himself to the great and small and the less intelligent. For we know that everyone excuses himself on the grounds of ignorance, and if something

appears too obscure and difficult. . .we can say, “O that was too lofty and profound for me; I didn’t understand it well at all.” Therefore in order that men might no longer have [recourse] to such subterfuges, God willed to speak in a way that [even] little children could understand.²²

Calvin employs two additional strategies to broaden each commandment. First, each commandment applies not only to outer behaviors, but also to inner attitudes and dispositions—a strategy that, as Calvin notes, Christ himself employs in his Sermon on the Mount. Thus, “do not take the name of the Lord your God in vain” is broadened to thinking rightly of God and God’s purposes. “Do not kill” includes not hating or even being angry with your neighbor. Similarly, “do not commit adultery” refers to not lusting in your heart after another person. Calvin insists that the commandments aim at our total transformation. God is Spirit, and God has created humans in God’s image to be spiritual beings—therefore, God claims our inner selves, as well as our outer.

Second, Calvin argues that each of the commandments can be reversed. Each positive injunction implies a negative prohibition, and vice versa. “Honor your father and mother” also becomes: “do not disrespect or disregard your parents.” “Do not kill” implies: “promote your neighbor’s well-being.” “Do not commit adultery” also means: “live faithfully in marriage.”

In broadening the commandments, Calvin demonstrates that we cannot exhaust the requirements of obedience simply by refraining from the heinous crimes that the commandments specifically condemn. Rather, we must examine every aspect of our lives, to bring them into fuller conformity with God’s will. Few of us make graven images. Few of us are guilty of murder. But none of us is free from sometimes giving our loyalties to the things of this world, and none of us is free from sometimes hating and disregarding our neighbors. In Calvin’s thinking, Christ alone has perfectly fulfilled the commandments—and his teachings and deeds do not transcend them but comment on them, revealing their deeper, truer significance. The Sermon

on the Mount is not a new law, but a fuller restatement of the Ten Commandments.

Interrelationships between the Commandments

In broadening the commandments, Calvin also investigates their interrelationship. The central position of the fifth commandment, “honor your father and mother,” is not accidental. Rather, it holds the two tables together. Calvin argues that parents (and other authorities) have been given the office of raising children to know and obey God. Parents represent God. They have a spark of God’s splendor.²³ In honoring parents rightly, we also honor God and are referred to the commandments of the first table.

But the fifth commandment also refers us to the second table. As we learn to honor parents, we learn to live in society. We learn to take regard for the good of others, not only for ourselves. Says Calvin, “in order to live with our neighbors, we each have to correct [our tendency toward] arrogance and presumption, and. . . must learn to be humble and modest. . . [and] to be subject to the least [of our neighbors].”²⁴ The fifth commandment serves as a hinge between the two tables, and reminds us that duties to God spill over into duties to neighbor, and vice versa.

Calvin is also interested in the interrelationships between the commandments of the second table. False witness, as condemned by the ninth commandment, is not merely a matter of using words improperly. It is a form of violence. It deprives the neighbor of his or her social space. It undercuts the neighbor’s public standing. Calvin therefore concludes that “whoever bears false witness against his neighbor kills him: in essence he robs him and is guilty of whatever evil proceeds from his lie.”²⁵ The interrelationship of the commandments serves Calvin’s purposes of broadening them. False witness is a kind of murder and theft.

Calvin also suggests that the commandments of the second table are listed in order of frequency of offense. Murder is less common than adultery. Stealing is more frequent than either. False witness is even more

widespread. Says Calvin, “Those who do not markedly suffer from this disease are rare indeed.”²⁶ Covetousness, condemned by the last commandment, is the most frequent of all. It thoroughly infects all of us and is the inner disposition that underlies offenses against all the other commandments.

The Ten Commandments for Calvin are not a reduction of biblical law to a few basic principles but are a thick reading of biblical law. The commandments are deeply interrelated. They overlap. They inform each other. Offenses in one area lead to offenses in another. Calvin’s interpretation of the Ten Commandments offers a psychological analysis of the dynamics of sin and salvation. The commandments confront us with a picture of our tragic, fallen condition, but also of the new life to which God has called us in Christ.

The Third Use of the Law

In relating the commandments to the Christian life, Calvin speaks of three uses of the law. In its first use, or spiritual use, the moral law accuses us. It shows us our sin and drives us to seek God’s mercy in Christ. In its second use, the moral law pertains to civil government and its responsibility to restrain evil. While civil government today need not utilize the same civil laws as the people of Israel, it should rest on the same moral foundations. In its “third use,” the moral law “finds its place among believers in whose heart the Spirit of God already lives and reigns.”²⁷ It teaches and exhorts believers to live a life worthy of the calling to which they have been called. It arouses them to obedience and draws them back from transgression. As Calvin notes,

However eagerly [the saints] may in accordance with the Spirit strive toward God’s righteousness, the listless flesh always so burdens them that they do not proceed with due readiness. The law is to the flesh like a whip to an idle and balky ass, to arouse it to work. Even for a spiritual man not yet free of the weight of the flesh the law remains a constant sting that will not let him stand still. . . . But the accompanying promise of grace. . . sweetens what is bitter.²⁸

Luther and Calvin give different emphases to these three uses of the law. Luther, like Augustine, can sometimes suggest that obedience to God's will flows freely and spontaneously from the justified sinner. Through Christ, our ability to live by the law written on our hearts has been restored. We need no external guide.²⁹ But Calvin, having once noted that our flesh is sinful and lazy, insists that we cannot do without an external pattern of righteousness. We need to be reminded of God's will, and we need to be spurred into action.

Luther, like Calvin, acknowledges that believers need to be disciplined in faith. The "outer" man" needs to be brought into conformity with the "inner man," which has been justified by Christ. But Luther emphasizes the role of vocation, not the moral law, in training one to serve others and to be more fully conformed to Christ.³⁰ He never speaks explicitly of a third use of the law. For Luther, the "principal use" of the law is its spiritual, accusing use,³¹ whereas for Calvin it is the third use.³²

Luther does give more emphasis to something like the third use of the law in his catechisms, which begin with discussion of the Ten Commandments as a rule for righteous living. Yet, concludes Luther, the commandments "are set on so high a plane that all human ability is far too feeble and weak to keep them."³³ It appears that the accusing function of the law predominates, even for believers.³⁴ By the law, we are driven to the Creed (the second part of Luther's catechisms), with its proclamation of God's mercy in Christ.

Calvin too can acknowledge that no one keeps the law perfectly. We always fall short and rely on God's forgiveness. But Calvin also insists that humans really can grow in righteousness. The law does not simply accuse us. It guides and directs believers in their efforts to live more faithfully before God. Calvin's insight is perhaps captured best by the structure of the Heidelberg Catechism, which places its discussion of the Ten Commandments not at the beginning but at the end—after the Creed, with

its assurance of our justification in Christ—and under the heading of “Thankfulness.”³⁵

Implications

Calvin sees biblical law as a means by which God comes to us, teaches us, and conforms us to life in God. Similar understandings are also apparent in classic Reformed confessions, such as the Geneva Catechism (which Calvin himself authored), the Scots Confession, the Heidelberg Catechism, and the Westminster documents. The Ten Commandments help to specify—in Welker’s terminology, to make “solid”—the life of Christian love. Each of the commandments represents a moral trajectory, a range of internal and external behaviors that point us toward the very character of the God that we know in Christ. The commandments are not an oppressive requirement. Rather, they help to structure and direct the energies of love that have been set free in us by Christ’s salvific work.³⁶ They represent what we today might call “disciplines” or “practices” of faith.³⁷ They are demanding, but also liberating. They constitute an external pattern of righteousness, yet one that we seek to internalize, so that external demands might become internal dispositions. The commandments inform us of God’s will for our lives, but also aim at our moral formation and transformation.

A Reformed Theology of Law

Reformed treatments of the Ten Commandments suggest three key theological dimensions to the law in its third use. First, the commandments are not simply prescriptive. They are also descriptive. They tell us who Christ is and therefore who we are in Christ. Second, the commandments never aim simply at individuals’ personal transformation. In claiming to describe who we really are, as created in the image of God, they also hold forth a social vision. They represent life in the kingdom of God. Third, the

commandments, while summarizing the moral law, never exhaust it. They do not simply provide a checklist of “dos” and “don’ts.” Rather, they describe general trajectories, along which we must make particular moral determinations in particular circumstances.

Contours of Life in Christ

One angle on the formative power of the Ten Commandments relates to their Christological center. Each of the commandments finds its fulfillment in Christ. Those who are joined to Christ, who have died and risen with him in baptism and discipleship, share in his life. The commandments do not simply represent an imperative. They also represent an indicative. Not only do they tell us what to do. They also tell us who we already are in Christ.³⁸ To live by the commandments is to give expression to one’s true self as belonging now to Christ.

The Christological dimension of the commandments is not always apparent. In his *Institutes*, Calvin separates his treatment of the Ten Commandments (Book 2) from his discussion of the Christian life (Book 3). Yet, a closer reading indicates these concerns are closely interrelated. Calvin begins his discussion of the Christian life by noting that “the law of God contains in itself. . .that newness by which [Christ’s] image can be restored in us.”³⁹ Though Calvin then acknowledges the value of developing a second pattern, that of Christ’s own life, he never suggests that these two patterns—law and Christ—contradict each other. Rather, they are complementary. The commandments help describe Christ’s way of self-denial and of taking up the cross—and therefore what it means for us to belong solely to God.

Other Reformed sources more explicitly link law and the believer’s life in Christ. The Geneva Catechism states that the moral law of Scripture, as exhibited in the Ten Commandments, is the “rule” for the Christian life.⁴⁰ The Westminster Larger Catechism argues that the moral law reminds the regenerate how much they are bound to Christ. Because Christ has fulfilled

the law in their stead, thinking of the law moves them to thankfulness. They then give expression to their gratitude by taking care to conform themselves more fully to the law.⁴¹ Both Geneva and Westminster emphasize that obedience to the commandments is nothing less than a form of worship—a way of glorifying and honoring the God who has claimed us in Christ.

To live by the commandments, then, is to enter more fully into the life of God, as it has been mediated to us by Christ.⁴² The commandments are not a futile exercise in external religiosity. They cannot be opposed to a truer, more genuine piety of the heart. The commandments set forth Christ to us—not only by telling us more concretely and specifically of his way of life, but also by communicating his living presence to us. To live by the law is like feeding on the eucharist (or, as Reformed theology would emphasize, also like hearing the preached word). Obedience, like receiving the bread and wine, strengthens faith. Law and eucharist can become forms of works-righteousness, but need not be. Each is God's invitation to trust in Christ and to participate in his life. Through obedience, as through word and sacrament, humans become more fully the spiritual beings in the image of God that God created them to be.⁴³

To obey the seventh commandment by practicing faithfulness and purity in marriage is to come to know more fully the character of God. “Since he ought to possess us completely in his own right, [God] requires [of us] integrity of soul, spirit, and body.”⁴⁴ God wants us to be temples of God's Holy Spirit. Other commandments make a similar point. To obey the eighth commandment by caring for the poor and being content with one's own lot is to be blessed by God.⁴⁵ To obey the ninth commandment by learning to tell the truth is to participate in God, who is the truth.⁴⁶

As Calvin says, God has provided us laws “in conformity with his nature.”⁴⁷ To live the moral life is to live more fully into the image of Christ, who is perfectly conformed to God. Obedience to the way of Christ evokes the presence of the living Christ. A robust theology of the word sees law not in

opposition to grace but as grace itself seeking “solid form” in the life of believers.

A Social Vision

A second angle on the formative power of the Ten Commandments relates to their social, communal dimensions. Reformed sources rarely focus on personal sanctification. The Ten Commandments are more than a guidebook to negotiating issues of personal morality. The personal is always closely linked to the social. To live by the commandments is to live in the hope of the kingdom and God’s reordering of social relationships.

Though especially pronounced in the second table, the social dimension of the commandments is apparent in the first, as well. Reformed interpretations of the third commandment note that misusing God’s name not only offends God, but also has negative social consequences. One form of offense is perjury. Another, notes the Westminster Larger Catechism, is using God’s name to support “sinful lusts and practices” that abuse any of God’s creatures.⁴⁸ Similarly, Reformed treatments of the Sabbath commandment have acknowledged not only its spiritual, but also its social implications. We release others from our normal, everyday demands on them, so that we can join with them in praising and adoring God. Sabbath-keeping is not just about personal piety. It bears the seeds of God’s kingdom. It calls us to practice equality and mutuality—to treat each other truly as brothers and sisters, whose faith transcends worldly differences.

In treating the second table, Reformed sources lift up not only the interpersonal realm but larger social structures. Calvin insists that offenses against these commandments are more than trivial, personal matters. They threaten to undo human society. To fail to honor parents and social authorities is not only to offend against them personally. It is to make social life impossible. We fail to submit to the common good that they represent. Similarly, to murder is not only to rob the life of an individual. It is to violate the bond that holds society together. In speaking of the ninth

commandment, Calvin argues that God gave us speech, so that we might “nurture tender love and fraternity with each other,” rather than tear each other down. Reformed theology argues that God has created humans for society. To keep the commandments is to promote social justice and well-being.

In explicating the commandments, Reformed sources focus on two spheres of social life. First, the commandments are foundational to civil society. Calvin and Reformed confessions believe that civil government has the responsibility not only to hinder evil, but actively to promote the reformation of its citizens. Civil government is not the same as the kingdom. It has no spiritual authority. Yet, as “it is God’s will that we go as pilgrims upon the earth while we aspire to the true fatherland, . . .the pilgrimage requires. . .helps”—including civil government. Civil government must find appropriate ways of giving social embodiment to the ends of the commandments. While strategies will differ from one kind of society to another, civil government has a responsibility to promote both justice and piety.

Second, the commandments are foundational to ecclesial society. While Reformed treatments of the Ten Commandments inevitably draw consequences for civil government, they devote the majority of their attention to life in the church. Calvin may speak of civil government as one of the “external means or aids by which God invites us into the society of Christ and holds us therein” (the title of Book 4 of the Institutes), but civil government is only one chapter (and the last) out of twenty, the others of which treat life in the church. Similarly, Reformed confessions typically have a short chapter on civil magistracy towards their end, or do not treat it at all, whereas they give sustained attention to the church.

Each of the commandments can be interpreted as having a special, spiritual significance for life in the church. In honoring the church’s spiritual leaders, we are fulfilling the fifth commandment. “Do not kill” in its positive

form requires us to help and support each other, and therefore calls us all the more to preserve the bond of unity in the church. Similarly, the ninth commandment, which requires us not to “flatter one another or promote our vices through lies,” has obvious implications for church discipline.

The commandments may tell us about life in Christ, but life in Christ is never simply a matter of personal piety. To grow into the image of Christ is to learn a greater capacity to live in human society. The reformation of the self is inseparable from the reformation of the church and civil society. A robust theology of the word sees law not in terms of individualistic, moral legalisms, but in terms of just social orders.

Moral Decision Making

A third angle on the formative power of the Ten Commandments relates to the process of moral decision making that must accompany their application to our lives. The Ten Commandments are more than a checklist of moral injunctions and prohibitions. They are broad trajectories, whose implications in a particular situation require us to exercise moral discernment.

That the commandments suggest moral trajectories is already apparent in the typical hermeneutical moves that characterize Reformed discussions. Each of the commandments is broadened to include a wide range of behaviors—inner and outer, positive and negative. They lay a total claim of the self. But complete reformation of the self is impossible under the conditions of human sin. At best, each of the commandments points us in a direction, but cannot tell us precisely what to do from one situation to the next.

To keep the Sabbath is not exhausted by a strict Sabbatarianism. In its deepest sense, Sabbath-keeping is living every moment of one’s life as though one belonged to God. While a disciplined use of the holy day may assist in this process, Sabbatarian regulations can be at most a means, not an end. Calvin argues “that it was not [God’s] principal aim for there to be one day a week in which people ceased to work in order to catch their

breath.” Rather, Sabbath-keeping requires us to exert ourselves. “We shall have to labor hard. . .[to renounce] all our thoughts and desires in such a way that only God governs us.”

On first reading, later Reformed confessions appear not to retain Calvin’s insight. The Heidelberg Catechism mentions allowing “the Lord to work in me through his Spirit,” but places more emphasis on diligent attendance at church. By the time of the Westminster Larger Catechism, Sabbatarian regulation is in the first spot: “The Sabbath, or Lord’s Day, is to be sanctified by an holy resting all that day. . .even from such worldly employments and recreations as are on other days lawful.”

Yet, even these specific injunctions are best understood as concrete examples of broader moral trajectories. For Heidelberg, the fourth commandment in its fullest sense is about maintenance of the gospel and Christian education. Attendance at church points one in the right direction, but does not exhaust the commandment. Westminster too makes clear that the meaning of the Sabbath commandment ultimately lies not in fulfilling a list of Sabbatarian duties, but in knowing ourselves to be created and redeemed by God. Sabbath-keeping is a provision for our weak, forgetful natures. It trains humans to remember God. It points them in the direction of “all the rest of the Commandments.”

Because the commandments represent broad moral trajectories, Reformed confessions show a tendency to elaborate and expand on each. The Westminster Larger Catechism typically states the positive requirements of each commandment first, and only then the sins that each commandment forbids. Under each of these two headings, an extended list is developed, indicating the applicability of the commandment to every area of life. The Seventh commandment requires such things as “chastity in body, mind, affections, words, and behavior, and the preservation of it in ourselves and others; watchfulness over the eyes and all the senses; temperance, keeping of chaste company, modesty in apparel.” The eighth calls us to “truth,

faithfulness, and justice in contracts and commerce. . .rendering to everyone his due. . .giving and lending freely. . .an endeavor by all just and lawful means to procure, preserve, and further the wealth and outward estate of others.” The Ten Commandments provide the parameters within which moral decision making is to occur.

Reformed treatments of the Ten Commandments do not rest content with a situational ethic that would rely alone on the spontaneous movement of love. But neither do they reduce ethics to a moral checklist. One learns the way of faithfulness as one moves along the trajectories that the commandments describe. A robust theology of the word is neither legalistic nor without law. Rather, the law helps us ask the right questions of ourselves, as we seek to be faithful to God within the particulars of our own situations.

Implications

Each of the Ten Commandments is an instrument of the law in its third use, to teach and exhort believers. The commandments invite us to know the living Christ. They draw us into life in his kingdom. They demand that we examine every area of our lives, personal and social, so that we may conform more fully to God’s will.

Here, again, the notion of “disciplines” is suggestive. The commandments initiate believers into a training program. The Christian life is a matter of practice, whereby we grow—slowly and not without relapses—into deeper communion with God and with each other. With daily effort, we learn more to recognize God’s presence in Christ, and to honor God’s image in each other. Classic Reformed treatments of the Ten Commandments suggest how a theology of law can avoid legalistic moralisms, yet can specify concrete practices that guide a distinctively Christian way of life.

A brief examination of the issue of resistance to unjust authority may summarize Reformed insights into the Decalogue and further suggest their value for Christians today. The key commandment for Reformed reflection on obedience and disobedience to authority has been the fifth: “honor your father and mother.” It has been carefully related to the other commandments of the Decalogue, and has been interpreted not in a narrow political sense, but as a summons to fuller, more faithful life in Christ.

Broadening the Commandment

Reformed sources broaden the fifth commandment, utilizing the typical strategies that we have identified. First, the reach of the commandment is extended. “Father and mother” names a category, not two individuals. God has appointed a variety of persons to be like parents, in teaching us right living. We are to honor all superiors, civil and ecclesial. Second, the commandment is focused not only on outer behaviors, but also on inner dispositions. Honoring superiors is more than a matter of external obedience. Rather, one should obey cheerfully and willingly, and should actively seek superiors’ good. The Scots Confession can go so far as to say that we should “love” and “support” superiors. Third, the positive injunction, “honor,” is understood to imply a corresponding negative prohibition: “do not resist obedience, do not deny respect, to lawful authority.”

The fifth commandment has been understood to train us in wider duties of piety and justice. We obey authorities not so much for their sake, but for the sake of God and the neighbor. First, our experience of human authority helps us to understand God’s authority. Obedience to civil and ecclesial authorities reminds us all the more of the obedience that we owe God. Second, obedience to authorities teaches us to think in terms of what is good for others—for society as a whole, for the church. The fifth

commandment directs us to both tables of the Decalogue. We honor “father and mother,” God and the neighbor, as we attend to the law in its entirety.

The fifth commandment also interrelates in specific ways with the other nine commandments, as when it spills over into interpretation of the third commandment. The Heidelberg Catechism makes clear that swearing a lawful oath, when required by civil authorities, does not take God’s name in vain. Similarly, the fifth commandment spills over into interpretation of the eighth. “Do not steal” implies to Calvin that we should not deny superiors the honor that is due them. Duties to authorities inform other moral duties.

Just Authority

By broadening the reach of the fifth commandment, Reformed sources also understand themselves to be establishing criteria by which Christians might judge whether a particular authority is lawful or not. Like parents, civil and ecclesial authorities represent God in God’s power and preeminence. They are God’s “lieutenants” and God’s “ministers.” But this spark of glory also represents the magnitude of their responsibilities. Superiors should insist not on their own privilege but should demonstrate God’s pity for God’s people. According to the Westminster Larger Catechism, superiors are “to love, pray for, and bless their inferiors. . .protecting and providing for them all things necessary for soul and body.” As the catechism further notes, superiors are styled “father” and “mother” not simply to indicate that we should obey them, but also to teach superiors “in all duties towards their inferiors, like natural parents, to express love and tenderness.”

Reformed sources have insisted that civil and ecclesial authorities are equally responsible within their proper spheres of action to promote all the ends of the commandments. Calvin warns authorities that they must honor and serve God in all they do. Correspondingly, if authorities ask us to act contrary to the will of God, we must resist them. The Scots Confession tells us to obey superiors’ orders only “if they are not contrary to the commands of God”—and places this comment within its very listing of the Ten

Commandments, as though the commandments establish the criteria for right rule.

Specific commandments further frame the meaning of obedience to the fifth commandment. The Scots Confession explicates the sixth commandment in terms of saving the lives of the innocent, repressing tyranny, and defending the oppressed—as though “do not kill,” properly understood, would require Protestants to take action against violent, oppressive civil and ecclesial authorities (Queen Mary and the Catholic Church) in Scotland. Similarly, the fourth commandment spills over into the fifth. The Westminster Larger Catechism notes the special responsibility of superiors to keep the Sabbath and to ensure that “it be observed by all those that are under their charge.”

A commandment that on the surface appears to relate to the honor that children owe parents becomes an occasion for reflecting on the purposes of government, and for demonstrating the tension between obedience to God and obedience to authorities. Reformed interpretation of the fifth commandment has not been aimed primarily at reminding Christians of their shortcomings, and, correspondingly, of their need for Christ—the first use of the law. While its relevance to the second use of the law is clear—the commandment tells us what civil government is all about—it has not been treated simply as sage political advice. Rather, the fifth commandment, like the rest of the Decalogue, has been understood primarily in terms of its usefulness to believers—the third use of the law. A thick reading of the commandment should guide us in learning the right kind of obedience to civil and ecclesial authorities—and, hence, the right kind of disobedience, as well.

Disciplines of Obedience and Disobedience

The Reformed tradition suggests that we will come to learn the right kind of obedience to human authorities only if we ground it in the three key dimensions of the third use of the law: 1) the contours of life in Christ, 2) the

social dimension of life in Christ, and 3) the need for moral decision making. Christian obedience has a definite shape and is in service of larger moral ends.

First, the obedience to which God calls us should help us grow in our capacity to look beyond ourselves to God and God's purposes. It should give us a fuller sense of God's presence—both as the One who stands above all human authority, and as the One whose image we honor in every person. Obedience that aims primarily at pleasing human authority is already a misguided obedience. Rather, obedience to human authority should train us in a deeper capacity for divine service. If obedience to human authority helps turn us away from selfish desire, if it helps us attend to the needs of others whom we might otherwise ignore, then it is helping us grow into the image of Christ.

Calvin and the Reformed tradition have never tired of proclaiming that “in life and in death, we belong to God.” They have also noted that we often learn this truth about ourselves only as life circumstances disappoint our self-appointed programs for self-realization. Human authority too can seem to get in our way. When human authority is oppressive and unjust, it must be resisted. But not every law, not every command, that seems oppressive or unjust is truly so. Sometimes obedience to human authority, however much it may initially frustrate our sense of what is good and right, can eventually expand our awareness of what is good and right. Each of us has had teachers who knew us better than we knew ourselves, and who asked us to try tasks that we at first resisted, yet that later helped us discover new skills and abilities. Human authority at its best can embody a social wisdom greater than our own self-understanding.

“Obedience” is not a popular word in contemporary American culture. But a Reformed understanding of obedience suggests its sacramental dimensions. We need to learn the way of service, of attending to the needs of others, so that we can more fully know the very character of God, who in

Christ has sought us out. Human authority can teach us the value of submitting to a wisdom greater than our own.

Second, the obedience to which God calls us should help us grow in our capacity for social relationship. Paying taxes may never be popular. But a just government can address social needs that far surpass our individual, primate efforts at charity. Similarly, life in Christian community impels us to consider points of view that we might otherwise dismiss. “Life together” is possible only if it is ordered—i.e., if there is exercise of authority and discipline. From a Reformed perspective, obedience to human authority is never simply a matter of personal morality. It is a summons to participate more fully in social life.

Broadening the reach of the fifth commandment ultimately suggests its applicability to every human relationship. Whenever we interact with another person, we simultaneously experience elements of superiority, inferiority, and equality. Others have skills and abilities that we do not, just as we have skills and abilities that they do not. In some respects, we are equals. In others, we are not. Superiority is a relative matter. The fifth commandment ultimately calls us to humanize all power relationships—to live in dependence on each other, regardless of our office or station in life. It is striking that Reformed confessions sometimes speak of our duty to bear with superiors “infirmities. . . covering them in love”—the same kind of language that the Apostle Paul uses for life in the community of faith (see Galatians 6:2). Superiors never stand over and against us only as superiors. They are also fellow travelers, fellow bearers of the image of God.

Third, the obedience to which God calls us should help us grow in our capacity to engage in moral decision making. Obedience to human authority is never a matter of blind obedience. While we must beware of our innate tendencies to find excuses not to obey others—and of asserting ourselves self-righteously, instead—we must also beware of excusing ourselves from hard thinking about what is right or wrong. Reformed interpretation of the

fifth commandment has always noted its tension with the first. Not every command of an authority is just; not every failing of an authority should be borne patiently.

The fifth commandment can do nothing more than suggest a moral trajectory. It cannot relieve us of the responsibility to make moral decisions. This trajectory demands that we take seriously our need to learn obedience to human authority. Yet, it also demands that we take seriously our responsibility to judge when obedience may no longer be justified and disobedience may be required. Obedience never stands in abstraction. It must be related to other moral duties, as defined by the remainder of the Decalogue.

If power relationships are to be humanized, the ninth commandment is of special significance. The ninth commandment asks us not only to refrain from false witness, but also to be active agents of the truth. We must be prepared to speak the truth, as best we know it, to those who wield authority. But if obedience cannot be approached in abstraction, neither can truth-telling. Calvin and Reformed confessions note that we must tell the truth in a way that is suitably accommodated to the capacities of the other—just as God has accommodated the divine self to us. Once again, we are required to exercise more discernment. The commandments provide definite parameters, but not legalistic solutions, for the Christian life.

Implications

We live in an era in which some Christians call for posting the Ten Commandments in courtrooms or schools. The commandments become a political gesture—a way of declaring that people should revere and respect human authority in general, and civil government in particular. Behind these general appeals lies a more specific moral, political agenda that is frequently allied with the Religious Right.

Other Christians are suspicious of calls to obedience. They argue that what is needed is to develop persons who are responsible, free moral

agents. The Ten Commandments may be one resource for Christians and others, but must be understood in their own historical context.

From a Reformed perspective, it is morally irresponsible to conclude that all human authority has been ordained by God and should therefore be obeyed, no questions asked (see Rom. 13:1). But neither is it morally responsible to dismiss the idea of “obedience,” as though it had no place in the moral life. Obedience to human authority can teach one to become a more responsible moral agent—if one learns the right kind of obedience.

One must examine one’s own motivations, as well as the ends to which human authorities are directing their efforts. Will one’s obedience lead one into deeper participation in the way of Christ? Will it contribute to the flourishing of human society? Will it invite one into responsible decision making? Or will one’s obedience simply serve ends of appeasing human authority? Will it simply make one feel morally self-righteous? Disobedience must be tested in a similar fashion.

Obedience never stands as an absolute. It is better understood as a lifelong discipline or practice that includes disciplines of resistance, such as truth-telling that exposes misuse of civil or ecclesial power. The question of obedience to authority demonstrates what is at stake in obeying the commandments in general.

Conclusion

The Reformed notion of the third use of the law may continue to provide insight to Christians today. Some observers of church or culture too easily

appropriate the language of law or grace to label warring camps. “Law” becomes associated with a “conservative, fundamentalist” concern for traditional standards and beliefs. “Grace” becomes associated with a “liberal, progressive” call for hospitality, toleration, and inclusiveness. Law and grace again become an abstract opposition, rather than a dynamic theological relationship.

A theology of the third use of the law insists that law and grace are not opposites. A life that is grasped by God’s grace in Christ seeks the order, structure, and form—i.e., the laws—that makes life together possible. Classic Reformed treatments of the Ten Commandments explicate the ways in which biblical law gives definition and direction to the Christian life. The commandments summarize the wide extent of our moral duties, and the complex ways in which these duties interrelate. The commandments suggest moral trajectories and lifelong disciplines that deepen our capacity to participate in the divine life, to live justly with others, and to think morally.

A more complete exposition of the Decalogue for today, however, would have to consider several key questions. Of special concern is clarifying the relationship of biblical law to insights from the sciences about those orders and structures that contribute to the flourishing of life. Does a thick reading of the Decalogue yield moral insight that is unavailable from other sources? Does it offer Christians a deeper wisdom than they can otherwise find?

Perhaps even more pressing is clarifying the meaning of grace and participation in the divine life. Asking people to submit to life under the law will make no sense unless they first experience the liberating power of the gospel. A theology of law will seem vapid or overly legalistic unless they know what the church means when it says that God has come to humans in Christ. In the end, developing a robust theology of law cannot be separated from the other two tasks that Welker identifies: explicating the meaning of the real presence of Christ, and attending to the pluralistic shape of the biblical texts, as they witness to Christ’s presence.

¹ Michael Welker, “Travail and Mission: Theology Reformed According to God’s Word at the Beginning of the Third Millennium,” in Toward the Future of Reformed Theology, ed. David Willis and Michael Welker (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 141.

² Welker, 141.

³ Welker, 142.

⁴ Welker, 143.

⁵ Welker, 146.

⁶ Welker, 144.

⁷ Welker, 146.

⁸ Welker, 146.

⁹ Welker, 145.

¹⁰ Key, representative works include Augustine, The Spirit and the Letter; Martin Luther, The Freedom of a Christian and Commentary on Galatians; Dietrich Bonhoeffer, The Cost of Discipleship; Karl Barth, Church Dogmatics ii/2 (Chapter VIII, “The Command of God”); and Juergen Moltmann, The Way of Jesus Christ and The Spirit of Life.

¹¹ John Calvin, Institutes of the Christian Religion, ed. John T. McNeill (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), 2.7.1.

¹² Calvin, Institutes, 4.20.15.

¹³ Calvin, Institutes, 4.20.15.

¹⁴ Calvin, Institutes, 4.20.14.

¹⁵ Calvin, Institutes, 4.20.15.

¹⁶ Calvin, Institutes, 2.8.1.

¹⁷ See Book 4 of the Institutes.

¹⁸ Calvin, Institutes, 2.8.11.

¹⁹ Perhaps for this reason, Barth makes the Sabbath commandment the key to his theological ethics. See Church Dogmatics iii/4,47-72 (“The Holy Day”).

²⁰ Throughout the paper, I will be using the Reformed numbering for the Ten Commandments.

²¹ The organization of biblical law into ten commandments may also have functioned as a mnemonic device.

²² John Calvin, Sermons on the Ten Commandments, ed. Benjamin W. Farley (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1980), 153.

²³ Calvin, Institutes, 2.8.35.

²⁴ Calvin, Sermons, 140.

²⁵ Calvin, Sermons, 205.

²⁶ Calvin, Institutes, 2.8.48.

²⁷ Calvin, Institutes, 2.7.12.

²⁸ Calvin, Institutes, 2.7.12. The term “third use of the law” derives from Philip Melancthon in his Loci Communes.

²⁹ Note this emphasis in The Book of Concord as well: “Fruits of the Spirit. . .are those works which the Spirit of God, who dwells in the believers, works through the regenerate, and which the regenerate perform in so far as they are reborn and do them as spontaneously as if they knew of no command, threat, or reward.” See The Book of Concord, ed. Theodore G. Tappert (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1959), 480-481.

³⁰ See Martin Luther, “A Commentary on St. Paul’s Epistle to the Galatians, 1531,” in Martin Luther: Selections from His Writings, ed. John Dillenberger (Garden City, NY: Anchor Books, 1961), 159-160.

³¹ Luther, Galatians, 140.

³² Calvin, Institutes, 2.7.12.

³³ Martin Luther, “The Large Catechism” in The Book of Concord, 411.

³⁴ While some of the Lutheran Symbols explicitly acknowledge a third use of the law, they tend like Luther to emphasize the role of the law in reproving the “outer man”: “When because of the flesh [believers] are lazy, negligent, and recalcitrant, the Holy Spirit reproves them through the law”; “for the Old Adam, like an unmanageable and recalcitrant donkey, is still a part of them and must be coerced into the obedience of

Christ, not only with instruction, admonition, urging, and threatening of the law, but frequently also with the club of punishments and miseries.” The Book of Concord, 566, 568.

³⁵ Also, note Calvin’s placement of the Ten Commandments in his Strassburg liturgy. The commandments are sung as a joyous response to the words of absolution. They come after the corporate prayer of confession of sin, rather than before it (i.e., for purposes of self-examination).

³⁶ As Ronald H. Stone has argued, “love needs expression in principles.” He too turns to the Ten Commandments for “guidelines in living in right relationships and making justice in an unjust world.” See Ronald H. Stone, The Ultimate Imperative: An Interpretation of Christian Ethics (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press), 51, 95.

³⁷ See Craig Dykstra, Growing in the life of Christian Faith (Louisville: Geneva Press, 1999); and Dorothy Bass, ed., Practicing Our Faith (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1997).

³⁸ Bonhoeffer pursues a similar line of thinking in his explication of the Sermon on the Mount in The Cost of Discipleship. Jesus’ radical injunctions are descriptions of who we really are now in Christ.

³⁹ Calvin, Institutes, 3.6.1.

⁴⁰ qq. 128-131.

⁴¹ q. 97.

⁴² The 19th century Anglican theologian F.D. Maurice makes a similar point: “If [the commandments] are kept, if they are watched over and thought about and cherished. . .they will give us an acquaintance with Him which we can obtain in no other way.” See F.D. Maurice, Reconstructing Christian Ethics: Selected Writings, ed. Ellen K. Wondra (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1995), 74.

⁴³ Correspondingly, to disobey the commandments is to descend to the level of mere animal existence. We become monsters, or beasts. See Calvin, Sermons, 166.

⁴⁴ Calvin, Institutes, 2.8.44.

⁴⁵ Calvin, Sermons, 197.

⁴⁶ Calvin, Institutes, 2.8.47.

⁴⁷ Calvin, Sermons, 157.

⁴⁸ q. 113. Using God’s name to cast charms on others is also forbidden!