

## **WESTMINSTER CONFESSION OF FAITH XIX**

*(Reading: Matthew 5:17-48: Exodus 20:1-17)*

### **What Puts It Into Practice**

We have come, in our considering the Westminster Confession of Faith, to its third part. For in the chapters 1 till 8 we saw WHAT IT'S ALL ABOUT. There we heard regarding the foundations of Christian truth.

And then, in the chapters 9 till 18, we looked at HOW IT'S COMING ABOUT. That was about how salvation was applied to us.

Now, in the third part, we come to WHERE IT'S SHOWING OUT. This is what we confess Scripture teaches regarding the Christian life.

So the next fifteen chapters are about putting it into practice. This is why we could have no better place for the Divine Laws than right at the beginning of this section, because here we have the basis for the whole of our Christian living.

Now when we think of Divine Laws we instantly go to the Ten Commandments, don't we? That's the Law we all know. That's the clear basis for so much of what passes for law in our society today. And it's certainly what is preached in a faithful biblical church.

But that would too narrow a focus, for while the Ten Commandments are called the summary of the law it does not cover what Scripture means by the Law of God. In fact, to understand what the Bible teaches about this, you need to go right back to creation itself.

You see, Adam and Eve had the law written in their hearts. Being made in God's image they were fully moral creatures. That's why Romans 1 verse 20 can speak about men being without excuse for their wickedness. And Romans 2 verse 15 goes on to say that pagans show "that the requirements of the law are written on their hearts, their consciences also bearing witness, and their thoughts now accusing, now even defending them." This is why, in the first place, we consider THE HEART OF THE LAW.

### **The Heart of the Law**

Chapter 4 Article 2 has stated that man has a special place in creation as the creature who was designed to respond to his Creator in free obedience. This special relation between God and man, through which God's purpose with His creation is to be brought to fulfilment, is described in Chapter 7 in terms of the covenant.

The Confession now focuses on what it means for man to stand in this special covenant relation with God. So man is subject to the law of God. By being God's creatures we are under obligation to God. This is THE HEART OF THE LAW.

This means it didn't change when man fell into sin. Are the laws of physical health wiped out by someone getting sick? They are still part of our fundamental constitution.

This is what Article 2 brings out. Because why else would the Ten Commandments need to republish God's Law but for the fall of man?

And notice the context for this republishing. It's set under the covenant of grace. The Mosaic dispensation was a particular administration of the covenant of grace. So its requirements were to be fulfilled in the context of grateful response to the God of salvation – the God who had redeemed them from bondage in Egypt.

Thus THE HEART OF THE LAW is moral. That's why it's this law which is written on our hearts. And so while Moses declared it in a certain way to God's people of that time, it is true right throughout human history.

This is what Article 5 brings us to, for we don't truly find ourselves until we find God by subjection to His Law. True freedom is being free to serve Him.

That's why Jesus said in Matthew 5 verse 17 that He hadn't come to abolish the Law but to fulfil it, for He didn't change the basis of our obligations. Instead, He adds the reasons which come out of His redeeming love. And so it is that we have in John 13 verse 34 Jesus' words, "A new commandment I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another."

It's because of this that we differ with the Antinomians. They believe that believers are released from the obligation of the moral law.

Now they do justice to our deliverance from this law in its covenant form - because Christ has fulfilled exactly where Adam failed. But that doesn't change being under it as a rule of life. In fact, by believing we know, with the apostle Paul in 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians 9 verse 21, that we're not free from God's law but are under Christ's law

We come back to Matthew 5 verse 17 with Christ fulfilling and not destroying the Law. For the Gospel doesn't weaken the obligation of the law but confirms and strengthens its authority. As Romans 3 verse 31 states emphatically, "Do we, then, nullify the law by this faith? Not at all! Rather, we uphold the law."

So when someone were to point to a text such as Romans 6 verse 14, which says that we are not under law but under grace, we should not be thrown by that. It does not mean believers are free from having to keep the Ten Commandments. That verse actually is in a passage dealing with being delivered from the practice of sin. This is the great comfort that sin cannot take over your life.

And that's because a believer isn't under law but under grace. If he were still under law he would be dominated by sin. There would be no way he would have any progress in the Christian life. But because of God's grace sin cannot have that kind of control.

So when many Christians say today that they can break the Sabbath day and do whatever they like on that day, because they're under grace, they're terribly wrong. We cannot disregard the Sabbath day, nor God's law against divorce, nor anything that is contrary to his law - we of all people have to show God's grace.

This is what Article 6 leads us into. It describes three distinct uses the moral law has today.

The first of these is as a standard for society. We read Article 6 say that it is of great use to others as well as believers. It informs them of the will of God and their duty. This we see in the justice system of nations founded upon biblical principles. It's what sets them out from the other nations of the world. Or, should I say, it's what used to set them out in this world?

The second use of the law is to bring people to a conviction of their sin and so realise they need Christ and His salvation. This is the "further conviction of" which Article 6 describes.

Paul was speaking of this in Romans 3 verse 20 when he said that "through the law we become conscious of sin." And in Galatians 3 verse 24 he writes that "the law was put in charge to lead us to Christ that we might be justified by faith."

The third use of the law we have already touched upon. This concerns the law as the rule of life for believers. "It is likewise of use to the regenerate" says Article 6 and it goes on to show restraining and re-training.

But all the while we cannot ever take this as a credit. Scripture clearly warns against those who take pride in how they obey the law. Rather, it is all of grace, through and through! This is THE HEART OF THE LAW.

### **The Face of the Law**

But we come, in Article 3, to a different aspect. So, in the second place, we note, THE FACE OF THE LAW.

Here the matter of ceremonial laws is brought up. It's a matter Hebrews chapter 9 deals exclusively and extensively with. There it is shown how the way the Israelites worshipped under the old covenant has been done away with in Christ. For what was there before God's Son came was there to point to what the Messiah would do. And so in His doing and dying the Lord Jesus does away with all that.

This is what He had said to the Samaritan woman at the well. In the discussion they had about worship He says in John 4 verses 21 till 23, "Believe me, woman, a time is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. You Samaritans worship what you do not know; we worship what we do know, for salvation is from the Jews. Yet a time is coming and has now come when the true worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and in truth, for they are the kind of worshippers the Father seeks."

This is why genuine reformed-presbyterian churches have principal objections to bringing back any symbolic worship into Christian worship, aside from the sacraments the New Testament clearly indicates – whether candles, incense, bowing to the east, sacred buildings, sanctuaries, liturgical gowns and so on. That fails to see the vastly superior blessing we have in simple and spiritual worship today.

One minister was hosting another minister in his reformed denomination. The visitor spoke of the terrific participation some of the children were able to have in the advent season - the period leading up to Christmas. With great enthusiasm he described how each Sunday a different child would come down from the congregation, with a flame, to light the next candle. He felt it was such a meaningful thing for them and so symbolic for that time of the year!

He observed, though, that his colleague wasn't quite sharing the same enthralment. He paused. And in that pause the hosting minister said, "But wasn't that why there was the Reformation?" He was caught. He knew exactly what his colleague meant, and also the vital importance of what he meant. But he wasn't about to change. And now perhaps it's no surprise he worships with quite a different denomination.

You see, those ceremonial laws were THE FACE OF THE LAW then. That was where God's people were pre-figuring the way that Law would be fulfilled. Today THE FACE OF THE LAW is found on the faces of all God's people. Where once there needed to be a physical temple, with its certain ceremonies, there is now where God's people are together from the heart and according to His Word.

### **The Hand of the Law**

But then there is still another type of law. And so, thirdly, let's see THE HAND OF THE LAW.

This is what Article 4 deals with, because there are quite a number of laws in the books of Moses that were civil laws. They were laws given to Israel as a theocratic nation. Like the ceremonial laws they came before Christ and were fulfilled in Christ.

And so it's the New Testament church which is the continuation of Israel - a continuation because the heart stays the same.

Thus there are times when we can see the Old Testament pointing out the difference between those temporary and moral laws. David in Psalm 51 verses 16 and 17 says, "You do not delight in sacrifice, or I would bring it; you do not take pleasure in burnt offerings. The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise."

Jeremiah chapter 31 verse 33 further foretold this and Hebrews 10 verses 15 and 16 confirmed.

It is here we come up against another opposing view we find in churches today. An example of this came through in the current debate regarding homosexual marriage. There are some church ministers who support such legislation. They argue against how the Bible clearly condemns homosexual relationships. And they do that by setting laws against laws within the Bible.

One minister is quoted as saying she can't accept the Bible on this because there are Biblical rules Christians aren't following today. She raised a dietary regulation as an example, the one found in Exodus 23:19.

Aside from the fact her Church's own Confession of Faith clearly answers this question, she doesn't know the Bible very well. You would have to fear what is taught there!

If she knew her Bible in a believing way, she would know why there are different types of laws and why some no longer apply. But then a little knowledge is a dangerous thing, isn't it? Exactly because it is so little! The little that they would choose to justify their continuing disobedience against God's Law!

It's no surprise that such people are leading the campaign to destroy the Christian fabric of our nation. They who call themselves ministers of the word are not true preachers of that word, for if they were they would clearly show how the regard we have for human life and for human relationships comes right throughout the Bible. There can be no love which excuses whatever deviancy anyone wants to do! That's not love - that's lust!

### **The Love of the Law**

But true love, ah, that can only be THE LOVE OF THE LAW. And so we come to our fourth part. This is where Article 7 rounds off what we confess of the Law of God.

Article 7 does this by taking up the three uses of the law in Article 6. Although there can be no credit in obeying the law what grace of the gospel is there when you thankfully do it! We confess here about "sweetly complying with it" and "freely and thankfully" doing it.

The law only conflicts with the gospel when you think that it's by obeying the law you can become what God requires you to be. But Christians, who know they have become that by God's grace alone, still have to be what they become. You have to live it out in your life.

And what better thing could you do? On any day there's nothing better that we could be doing!

That's why you love the law. It's a lamp to your feet and a light for your path, as David says in Psalm 119 verse 105.

Once there was a certain preacher in the west of England who was known for his opposition to the moral law as a rule of life to believers. He was preaching on a week-day evening at a village,

in a cottage full of poor people. Declaiming in his usual way against the law, and seemingly at a loss for enough expressions to degrade it, he said, "The law is dead; it is fallen; it is done with!" He was using his handkerchief and so he spread it out and, holding a corner in each hand, he said, "The law, my friends, has fallen down before the believer like this handkerchief!" Then letting it go from his hands he let it drop to the floor.

But unfortunately it fell upon the candles used for lighting. It extinguished them, leaving the preacher and all his hearers in darkness!

How appropriate! It was a graphic representation of the spiritual darkness which such preaching produces.

You see, the law is no master whom you fear. It's the friend on whom you depend!