God’s Covenant with man

Chapter 8 – “Precepts and Problems”

We begin this week a study of the two chapters of Covenants that discuss the covenantal aspects of the Law delivered to Israel through Moses. In these sections, we’ll be trying to address elements of the following questions:

− What were the characteristics of the covenant as given through Moses?
− How does the Law fit within a gracious covenant?
− What role does the Law play throughout redemptive history?

In his Institutes of the Christian Religion, John Calvin outlines three uses of the Law. These are (the Latin included for Matt’s benefit) usus elenchticus, usus politicus et usus in renatis, and are briefly defined as:

− usus elenchticus To bring people to a knowledge of their sinfulness and sinful behavior
− usus politicus Used by God for his providential ordering of society through law and civil government.
− usus in renatis To act as the standard for behavior.

We’ll discuss these issues too, this week and next.
Let’s consider Calvin’s 1st and 3rd uses of the Law today...

1) How does the Law show us our condition? A pair of questions to frame the discussion:

   a) Is it possible to know what is sinful apart from the Law? What does Paul say when addressing this subject in Romans 7?

   b) How does the Law itself provide us with a view of what is good, by contrast? What does it show us in this regard? Psalm 119, though long, provides insight here.
2) Calvin’s third use is, for him, the principal one. How ought we look to the Law as a pattern for our lives?¹

Let us now take a step back and look at the big picture.

3) Two passages which place the Law firmly within the greater bounds of God’s covenant are Exodus 2:24-25 (where the story of the Exodus and the giving of the Law begin) and Exodus 20:2 (where God reveals Himself again as the God of His people, as He delivers the Law to them).²

a) How does Law fit into a Covenant of Grace? Perhaps this could be asked more directly: how do the three uses of the Law that Calvin talks about reflect the grace of God?

¹ This is an ENORMOUS subject… but let’s take a look at I John 2, and the letters of II and III John, just to start the discussion. We’ll talk about this question much more next week.

b) What is the distinction between keeping the Law and being justified by grace?

c) Is the Law something special only applying to the time between Moses and Christ, or is it something which spans the temporal breadth of the Covenant of Grace? (Many in today’s church see it the former way)
4) As the Covenant people of God, what is the meaning of the Law for us? Why do we still need it? Is it useful for those whom Christ has redeemed by His blood? Robertson touches on these questions in the last section of Chapter 8.
   a) In what way does the Law not function? (see Gal. 3:1-14) Did it ever function that way?

   b) How are those that follow the Law blessed? See, e.g., Deut. 30:6, Ezekiel 36:26-7, Psalm 1, Psalm 94, Matt. 7:24-27, Eph. 6:1-3, James 1:22, etc.

   c) In what way does God use the Law in chastening His people? Whom does the author of Hebrews (in Chapter 12) say that the Lord chastises? Is chastisement, then, a sign of covenantal dissolution?
Quotes, long and short...

From I. John Hesselink, Calvin’s Concept of the Law, p 88-89:

“The Abrahamic covenant, similar to the Mosaic covenant, was not “free” in the sense that Abraham was now free to act as he pleased. God also lays claim upon Abraham and requires from him the same obedience of faith which was required in the covenant given at Mt. Sinai. No formal law as such is involved, but the same basic principle is in operation. Calvin considers the command to Abraham, “Walk before me and be perfect” (Gen. 17:1) as essentially the same command which was given to the Israelites at Mt. Sinai.”

“…this raises the question as to why the Mosaic covenant was necessary at all. The answer was partially given above (c.f. quotation from the Inst. II.7.1), namely, to renew and intensify the desire of the chosen people for the promised deliverer. A fuller answer is given, however, when Calvin adds, ‘Moses was not made a lawgiver to wipe out the blessing promised to the race of Abraham. Rather, we see him repeatedly reminding the Jews of that freely given covenant made with their fathers of which they were the heirs. It was as if he were sent to renew it.’ More importantly, ‘though God made his covenant with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, yet he only formed for himself a church (ecclesiam) when the law was promulgated.”

from Anthony Burgess, Vindicae Legis:

“We hold the Law as a rule still to walk by, though not a covenant of works to be justified by”

from Samuel Bolton, The True Bounds of Christian Freedom:

“The Law is void for the damnatory, not its directionary power, we are not under the curse, but yet the commands.

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3 “the law was added about four hundred years after the death of Abraham...This was not done to lead the chosen people away from Christ, but rather to hold their minds in readiness until his coming; even to kindle a desire for him, and to strengthen their expectation, in order that they might not grow faint by too long delay.” Calvin, Institutes, II.7.1.
4 ibid.
5 Calvin, Commentary on Jeremiah 7:22.
6 This I would recommend very heartily as a work to read if you’ve got questions about Law and Grace and how the two meet. It is simply excellent, and very pastoral.