

The Law in the Hand of Christ

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I first encountered the idea that believers are under “the law in the hand of Christ” in a reprint of *The Marrow of Modern Divinity*.¹ Originally written by Edward Fisher in 1645,² the *Marrow* is cast in the form of a dialogue among four individuals: Evangelista (a minister of the gospel), Nomista (a legalist), Antinomista (an antinomian), and Neophytus (a young Christian). Evangelista represents the author’s point of view and is presented as charting a middle path between the two extremes of legalism and antinomianism. At one point, Evangelista exhorts the young Christian, Neophytus, to receive the Ten Commandments “only at the hands of Christ; and so shall you be sure to receive them as the law of Christ.”³

Subsequently, I discovered that this concept was not only found in that volume, but had become something of a commonplace among the Marrow Men and the Seceder tradition after them. The *Marrow* became a controversial book when it was discovered by Thomas Boston in 1700 and republished by James Hog in 1718. In 1720, the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland, which was then under a legalistic spell, condemned the book as antinomian and contrary to the Westminster Confession of Faith.⁴ In 1721, Boston, Hog, the Erskine brothers (Ralph and Ebenezer), and others, submitted a “Representation and Petition” defending the book against the condemnation of the Assembly. The book was republished yet again with notes by Thomas Boston in 1726, which is the version that is now commonly reprinted today.

John Brown of Haddington, in his history of the Secession, makes clear his opinion that the Assembly’s condemnation of the *Marrow* was a grave mistake:

The distinction of the moral law into the forms of a covenant, and of a rule of duty in the hand of Christ ... they utterly condemned In their rage against the *Marrow of Modern Divinity*, the assembly condemned a variety of precious gospel truths.⁵

¹ Edward Fisher, *The Marrow of Modern Divinity*, with Notes by Thomas Boston (Edmonton: Still Waters Revival, 1991). All quotes are from this edition.

² The *Marrow* was originally published in London in 1645, enlarged and republished in 1646, and again in 1648 with an exposition of the Ten Commandments. It was published under the name “E. F.” Sinclair Ferguson says “the author’s identity has been disputed, but the consensus view is that he was Edward Fisher, a barber surgeon in London and author of several other minor works in the Puritan period” (*The Whole Christ: Legalism, Antinomianism, and Gospel Assurance—Why the Marrow Controversy Still Matters* [Wheaton: Crossway, 2016], 33). He may have been a barber surgeon, but he was not illiterate (as his later disparagers alleged) and in fact had earned a B.A. degree in 1630 from Brasenose College, Oxford. According to the “Advertisement” at the beginning of the 1789 edition (Falkirk: Patrick Mair), he was noted for his great learning in Greek, Hebrew, and patristics.

³ Fisher, *The Marrow*, 175.

⁴ There were other theological issues at stake in the Marrow Controversy, such as the free offer of the gospel.

⁵ John Brown of Haddington, *An Historical Account of the Rise and Progress of the Secession*, 5th Ed. (Glasgow: William Smith, 1788), 20, 74.

The concept that believers are to receive the law from the hands of Christ is a rich one that includes a number of inter-related theological concepts. These four concepts hang together and provide a covenantal and Christological perspective on the third use of the law.

First, it presupposes that the moral law is eternal and rooted in God's unchanging nature, and yet it comes to us in different covenantal forms. "I conceive, that though ... the law of Christ, in regard of the substance and matter, be all one with the law of works, yet their forms do differ."⁶ The moral law in the form of a covenant of works is both the same and yet different from the moral law as enshrined in the new covenant as the law of Christ. It is the same in that the material content of the law itself has not changed, but it is different when considered in covenantal context. The authors quoted below speak of the law's "legal form" versus its "gospel form."

Second, it assumes the doctrine of republication, that is, that the moral law as given by Moses was in the form of a covenant of works. The Mosaic form of the moral law is that it was imbedded in the context of a typological covenant of works with Israel as a nation in which the nation was to expect blessings for obedience and curses for disobedience.

Third, it teaches that believers are delivered from law as a covenant of works. This is nothing other than what Paul himself taught, when he said that we have died to the law through the body of Christ (Rom 7:4; cp. Gal 2:19). Since we are united to Christ in his death, we have died to the law and are no longer under the binding authority of the law as a covenant of works, to be justified by it or condemned by it. Christ has borne the curse of the law in our place, thereby redeeming those who were under the law (Gal 3:13; 4:4).

Fourth, it finally arrives at the glorious conclusion that the moral law comes to believers from the hand of Christ. This is the logical implication of all that has gone before. The moral law is not erased or abolished, which is an impossibility, since the moral law is nothing other than the ethical requirements, rooted in God's unchanging nature, and binding on all mankind as image-bearers of God. Yet the covenantal context is different. Believers have died to the law as a covenant of works, but they are not free from the moral law, but are bound to it as it is delivered to them from the hand and authority of Christ.

Two questions, reflecting the anxieties of those who are somewhat uncomfortable with this formulation, have been raised about this doctrine. First, does this formulation in any way diminish the commanding authority of God in the law? This question has to be answered with a clear and resounding No. Christ is the divine Son of God, so when the moral law comes from his hand in new covenant form, it does not have less divine authority, nor does it come with less commanding force. Our obligation to the moral law is in fact not lessened but heightened by our union with Christ. As the Westminster Confession of Faith puts it:

The moral law doth forever bind all, as well justified persons as others, to the obedience thereof; and that, not only in regard of the matter contained in it, but also in respect of the authority of God the Creator, who gave it. Neither doth Christ, in the gospel, any way dissolve, but much strengthen this obligation (WCF XIX.5).

⁶ Fisher, *The Marrow*, 172-173.

The second question is, Does this formulation entail any change in the content of the moral law? Again, the answer must be No. The moral law, as to the "the matter contained in it," does not change and cannot change, since God's own holy and righteous nature does not change. Fisher has his Evangelista give voice to this affirmation:

The law of Christ, in regard of the substance and matter, is all one with the law of works, or covenant of works. Which matter is scattered throughout the whole Bible, and summed up in the decalogue, or ten commandments, commonly called the moral law So that evangelical grace directs a man to no other obedience than that whereof the law of the ten commandments is to be the rule.⁷

Ernest Kevan thinks that, although Fisher's formulation was criticized by many as antinomian, the verdict of history acquits him of the charge:

Although the historical fact of *The Marrow* controversy suggests that many at that time thought that the author was an Antinomian, the perspective of later years acquits him of such a charge Provided the pitfalls of Antinomianism on the one side and of Neonomianism on the other be avoided, the conception of the Law "in the hands of Christ" is unexceptionable. It implies no change in the demands of the Law, nor in the obligation of the believer to recognize its binding authority, but signifies a different administration of it, with a different and deeper motive than is found outside of the experience of Christ.⁸

Without further ado, I here provide a collection of all the quotes I could find which employ the Marrow formulation of "the law in the hand(s) of Christ." I have added italics to highlight the places where this locution or its equivalent is used.

Edward Fisher (1645)

Thus, you see, that both these laws [the law of works and the law of Christ] agree in saying, "Do this." But here is the difference; the one saith, "Do this and live;" and the other saith, "Live, and do this;" the one saith, Do this *for* life; the other saith, Do this *from* life The one is to be delivered by God as he is Creator out of Christ, only to such as are out of Christ; the other is to be delivered by God, as he is a Redeemer in Christ, only to such as are in Christ. Wherefore, neighbour Neophytus, seeing that you are now in Christ, beware that you receive not the ten commandments at the hand of God out of Christ, nor yet at the hands of Moses, but *only at the hands of Christ*; and so shall you be sure to receive them as the law of Christ.⁹

⁷ Fisher, *The Marrow*, 172. I would qualify this by noting that the Decalogue contains the moral law, and is mostly moral, but is not strictly identical with the moral law. This distinction allows us to recognize that the sanctions attached to the second, third, and fifth commandments are part of the Mosaic typological covenant of works, and that the fourth commandment must be treated in a special manner. Interestingly, Fisher himself did not think the Lord's Day was the Christian Sabbath (see his treatise, *A Christian Caveat to the Old and New Sabbatarians*).

⁸ Ernest F. Kevan, *The Grace of Law: A Study in Puritan Theology* (Ligonier, PA: Soli Deo Gloria Publications, 1993; originally 1965), 186-187.

⁹ Fisher, *The Marrow*, 174-175.

Samuel Bolton (1645)

It is one of the great disputes these days, whether this moral law is abrogated, or, in the words of the query, whether believers are freed from the moral law. All agree that we are freed from the curses and maledictions, from the indictments and accusations, from the compelling and irritations, and other particulars which we named before. But the question is, to put it in plain terms: Are believers freed from obedience to the moral law, that is, from the moral law as a rule of obedience?

Some there are who positively or peremptorily affirm that we are freed from the law as a rule, and are not, since Christ came, tied to the obedience of it. Others say that it still remains in force as a rule of obedience, though abolished in other respects, as Beza says, 'Christ fulfilled the law for us, but not in order to render it of no value to us.' We are still under the conduct and commands of the law, say these Christians, though not under its curses and penalties.

Again, others say, that we are freed from the law, as given by Moses, and are only tied to the obedience of it, as it is given in Christ: and though, they say, we are subject to those commands and that law which Moses gave, yet not as he gave it, but as Christ renews it, and *as it comes out of His hand* and from His authority: 'A new commandment I give you, that ye love one another' (John 13:34). It is a commandment, for Christ is both a Saviour and a Lord; and it is a new one, not that it did not exist before, but because now renewed, and because we have it immediately from the hands of Christ.

I shall not much quarrel with this. Acknowledge the moral law as a rule of obedience and Christian walking, and there will be no falling out, whether you take it as promulgated by Moses, or *as handed to you and renewed by Christ*.

Indeed, the law, as it is considered as a rule, can no more be abolished or changed than the nature of good and evil can be abolished and changed. The substance of the law is the sum of doctrine concerning piety towards God, charity towards our neighbours, temperance and sobriety towards ourselves. And for the substance of it, it is moral and eternal, and cannot be abrogated. We grant that the circumstances under which the moral law was originally given were temporary and changeable, and we have now nothing to do with the promulgator, Moses, nor with the place where it was given, Mount Sinai, nor with the time when it was given, fifty days after the people came out of Egypt, nor yet as it was written in tables of stone, delivered with thunderings and lightnings. We look not to Sinai, the hill of bondage, but to Sion, the mountain of grace. We take the law as the image of the will of God which we desire to obey, but from which we do not expect life and favour, neither do we fear death and rigour. This, I conceive, is the concurrent opinion of all divines.¹⁰

¹⁰ Samuel Bolton, *The True Bounds of Christian Freedom*, Puritan Paperbacks (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1994; originally, 1645), 56-58. Bolton's work was published in the same year as the first edition of Fisher's *Marrow*, so it is difficult to determine which work has chronological priority. I place Bolton after Fisher because Bolton seems to be reporting Fisher's views when he writes, "Again, others say, that we are freed from the law, as given by Moses, and are only tied to the obedience of it, as it is given in Christ," etc. Bolton was selected to be a commissioner to the Westminster Assembly.

Simon Ford (1655)

Yet I must tell you, I would have the Law preached *as it is in the hands of Christ*, i.e., not as casting men under an irrevocable condemnation for every offence, not as exacting rigorously every punctilio of a duty, upon pain of being rejected by God, not as requiring obedience as a condition of a covenant of works to salvation.¹¹

Thomas Worden (1664)

[Putting the law in the ark shows] that the condemning, accusing, and destroying power of the law, as it was the law of the old covenant, and so a law not satisfied for, was taken away by the satisfaction which was given by Christ; that as the law made the creature before to be subject to its terrors, now Christ has made the law to be subject to its merits, for you see the law is forced to lie under the mercy-seat

It is true indeed, as the moral law, for the matter of it, was the old covenant of works, so it is a covenant or law hid from believers; and in this a believer hath nothing to do with the law, nor the law with a believer. But, when Jesus Christ, on the believer's part, had fulfilled and satisfied the law as it was formerly the old covenant, he takes up the matter of the old covenant, which is the ten commandments, and makes it the law of his kingdom, and so imposes it on his people as a rule to walk by for ever in their several generations; but with differing respects in comparison to what the law was to be subjected unto before, for when the ten commandments, as it was for matter of it the covenant of works, called for obedience from the creature, it was for life, saying, "Do this, and thou shalt live; if not, thou shalt die the death." But as it is become, for the matter of it, the law of a Mediator, and *a law in Christ's hand*, and so a law which comes forth to us from under the mercy-seat, it speaks otherwise than it did before, not for life, but from life; not that you might live, but because you do live; not that you might get heaven, but because heaven is freely given unto you, and bestowed upon you.¹²

Robert Traill (1692)

As the daily study of sanctification is a necessary exercise to all that are in Christ; so the rule of their direction therein is the holy, spotless *law of God in Christ's hand* Let us carefully keep the boundaries between the law and the gospel clear Let us keep the law as far from the business of justification as we would keep condemnation, its contrary But in the practice of holiness, the fulfilled law given by Jesus Christ to believers as a rule is of great and good use to them.¹³

¹¹ Simon Ford, *The Spirit of Bondage and Adoption* (1655). Quoted by Kevan, *The Grace of Law*, 187.

¹² Thomas Worden, *The Types Unveiled, or The Gospel Picked out of the Legal Ceremonies* (abridged and reprinted in London, 1840; originally, 1664), 97-99.

¹³ Robert Traill, *Justification Vindicated*, Puritan Paperbacks (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 2002; originally 1692), 9, 62.

The Marrow Men (1721)

Seeing that which we are concerned with, as contained in our Representation, is only the division of the law into the law of works and the law of Christ: we say, that we are still of opinion, that this distinction of the law is carefully to be maintained; in regard that by the law of works, we, according to the scripture, understand the covenant of works, which believers are wholly and altogether delivered from, although they are certainly under *the law of the ten Commands in the hand of a Mediator*. And if this distinction of the law, thus applied, be overthrown and declared groundless, several sweet gospel-truths must unavoidably fall in the ruins of it. For instance, if there be no difference put between the law as a covenant, and *the law as a rule of life to believers in the hand of Christ* it must needs follow, that the law still retains its covenant-form with respect to believers, and that they, are still under the law in this formality, contrary to scripture (Rom. 6:14 and 7:1-3) and to the Confession of Faith 19.6. It would also follow, that the sins of believers are still to be looked upon as breaches of the covenant of works It will likewise follow, that believers are still to eye God as a vindictive and wrathful Judge, though his justice be fully satisfied in the death and blood of their blessed Surety, apprehended by faith. These, and many other sweet gospel-truths, we think, fall in the ruins of the foresaid distinction condemned as groundless.¹⁴

Thomas Boston (1726)

The receiving of *the ten commandments at the hands of Christ*, is here opposed, (1) To receiving them at the hands of God out of Christ. (2) To receiving them at the hands of Moses, namely, as our Lawgiver. The first is a receiving them immediately from God, without a Mediator; and so receiving them as the law of works ... The former manner of receiving them is not agreeable to the state of real believers, since they never were, nor are given in that manner to believers in Christ ... The latter is not agreeable to the state of New Testament believers, since the true Mediator is come.¹⁵

Ebenezer Erskine (d. 1754)

Some representing brethren in the bounds of the Synod, whereof I was one, did take occasion, in our public appearances, to assert some of those points of truth, in the Westminster Confession, which we conceived to be publicly leased by the act of Assembly 1720, condemning the *Marrow*; as, that believers are delivered from the law as a covenant of works; that there is a difference to be put between the law of works considered as a covenant, and the law considered as the law of Christ, or *a rule of obedience in the hand of Christ*; that when the law as a covenant comes upon the believer, demanding the debt of perfect obedience as a condition of life, his only relief in that case is to plead the perfect obedience and complete righteousness of the ever-blessed Surety; and that the plea is so far from weakening him in the way of duty, that it is one of the principal springs thereof.¹⁶

¹⁴ *Gospel Truth Accurately Stated and Illustrated by the Reverend Messrs. James Hog, Thomas Boston, Ebenezer and Ralph Erskine, and Others; Occasioned by the Republication of the Marrow of Modern Divinity*, collected by John Brown (Canonsburgh: Andrew Munro, 1827), 180-181.

¹⁵ Fisher, *The Marrow*, 175.

¹⁶ *Gospel Truth*, 44.

Ralph Erskine (d. 1752)

But that this moral influence, which dying to the law, or covenant of works, hath upon living to God, or holiness and sanctification, may be further evident: let us consider, how the law to the believer, having now lost its legal or old covenant form, and being put into a gospel-form, and changed from the law of works into a covenant of grace, or *the law in the hand of Christ*; how, I say, every part of it now constrains the believer to obedience and sanctification, in a most loving manner. The gospel-law, or the law of grace, that now he is under, is a chariot paved with love. *The law, in the hand of Christ*, hath now another face, even a smiling face, in all the commands, promises, threatening, and in the whole form thereof.

(1.) *The commands of the law, in the hand of Christ*, have lost their old covenant-form, and are full of love. The command of the law of works is, Do, and Live; but *in the hand of Christ*, it is, Live, and Do: the command of the law of works, is, Do, or else be damned: but *the law in the hand of Christ*, is, I have delivered thee from hell, therefore do: the command of the law of works is, Do in thy own strength; but *the law in the hand of Christ* is, "I am thy strength; My strength shall be perfected in thy weakness," therefore Do. The command is materially the same, but the form is different: the command of the law of works is, Do perfectly, that you may have eternal life; but now, *in the hand of Christ*, the form is, I have given thee eternal life in me, and by my doing; and therefore do as perfectly as you can, through my grace, till you come to a state of perfection. The command, I say, is the same materially And sure I am, that the authority of the commanding God is not lessened, or lost, that the command is now *in the hand of Christ*: Christ is God, co-equal and co-essential with the Father; and as God's authority to judge is not lost, or lessened, in that all judgment is committed to the Son; so his authority to command, is not lost or lessened, in that *the law is in the hand of Christ*: nay, it is not lessened, but it is sweetened, and made amiable, lovely, and desirable to the believer, constraining him to obedience, in that *the law is in the hand of his Head*, his Lord, and his God.¹⁷

John Gill (d. 1771)

The last thing to be considered is, the continuance of the tables in the ark; which remained there until the time that Moses was about to die, even many years after they had been put there; and they remained there many ages after that; and which may signify the abiding of *the law in the hands of Christ*, the anti-type of the ark, even under the gospel-dispensation; the typical ark, and the tables in it, being no more, having their full accomplishment in Christ.

1st, Let it be observed that there is a sense in which the law is abolished, and continues not; the law and gospel are set in a contrast by the apostle, the one is said to be done away, and the other that which remaineth, which is the everlasting gospel, the word of God that abides for ever. When the law is in a sense said to become dead, and believers in Christ dead to that, and delivered from it, this must be understood of it as a covenant of works

¹⁷ *The Sermons and Other Practical Works of the Late Reverend and Learned Mr. Ralph Erskine* (Falkirk: Patrick Mair, 1795), 2.298-299.

And indeed *the law itself, as in the hands of Christ*, is a law of liberty, and which his people serve cheerfully and voluntarily, being made willing in the day of Christ's power upon them; not only to embrace his gospel, and submit to his ordinances, but to serve the law of God with their whole mind and spirit. The commandments of it are not grievous and heavy, being assisted by the Spirit and grace of God to obey them from right principles, and from right views; not to obtain life, but from a principle of life and grace implanted in them; so that this burden, if it may be called one, is light and easy, and borne with delight and pleasure

The believer in Christ has nothing to fear from the terrors of the law and its threatenings, for he is delivered from the curse and condemnation of it by Christ, and though it thunders out terrible volleys of curses on such who are of the works of it, and are under it, and continue not in all things written in it to do them, yet none of these can reach to or fall on the believer in Christ; for Christ has redeemed him from the curse of the law, being made a curse for him: nor is there any condemnation, not one condemnation, were there as many sentences of condemnation pronounced as sins committed, not one of them that can be executed on them that are in Christ, who are secured in his person, and redeemed by his blood ... and therefore, however the law may be a cursing and damning law to others, it remains not so to them.

The law is in the hands of Christ as a rule of walk and conversation, directing believers how to conduct and behave themselves under his influence. The whole scripture, given by inspiration of God, is the standard of faith and practice, and the rule of both: the gospel-part of it is profitable for doctrine, and is the test of that; and the law-part of it respects duty, and points to that; wherefore to the law and to the testimony; if men speak not, and act not according to this word, it is because there is no light in them. Christ is king and lawgiver in his house and kingdom, the church; and besides some positive commands which he has delivered out, there is a repetition of the law in the New Testament; a new edition of it, published under the authority and sanction of Christ; so that we are now under the law to him, and under new obligations to obey it, as held forth by him

True believers, who behold *the law in the hand of Christ*, and as fulfilled by him, delight in it, after the inward man; and though with the flesh they serve the law of sin, to the grief and distress of their souls, yet with the mind the law of God.

Upon the whole, let it be an instruction and direction to you to look to the law only as in Christ; viewed otherwise it is a terrible law, a fiery one, working wrath and threatening with it; throwing out its menaces, curses, damnation, and death; but view it in Christ, and there it is fulfilled, its curse removed, its demands answered, and that itself magnified and made honourable; and appears lovely and amiable, to be delighted in and served with pleasure.¹⁸

John Colquhoun (1819)

This law issues to true Christians from Christ, the glorious Mediator of the New Covenant, and from God their Creator, Proprietor, Benefactor, and covenant God. It proceeds immediately from Jesus Christ, the blessed Mediator between God and men. It is taken in under the covenant of grace, and, *in the hand of Christ*, the Mediator of that covenant, it is given to all who believe in Him, and who are justified by faith, as the only rule of their obedience. The Apostle Paul accordingly calls it 'the law of Christ' (Galatians 6:2)

¹⁸ John Gill, "The Law in the Hand of Christ: A Sermon Preached May 24, 1761 at Broad-Mead in Bristol," in *A Collection of Sermons and Tracts* (London: George Keith, 1773), 1.279-283.

It is the inestimable privilege, as well as the indispensable duty, of all who have believed through grace to be 'dead to the law' as a covenant of works. To be dead to it relatively, or with respect to their state, is their exalted privilege; and to become dead to it really, in the disposition of their minds, is their bound duty As the believer's living unto God, according to *the law as a rule of life in the hand of the Mediator*, is the necessary consequence or fruit of his having become dead to the law as a covenant of works, so his being dead to the law is necessary to his living unto God; so absolutely necessary that were he not dead to the law as a covenant, it would be utterly impossible for him to live unto God in conformity to the law as a rule.¹⁹

Joseph Kerr (d. 1829)

There is still another form of this law which the great Sovereign has exhibited to the church. It is its form as a rule of life, or, *the law in the hand of the Mediator*. It is the privilege of believers in Christ to be under it in this form. They, and they only are delivered from it as a covenant, a broken and condemning law. This deliverance they obtain through Christ's obedience to it as their surety, and the imputation of his righteousness to them, by which it sustains them as righteous, exempts them from its curse, and ceases to command obedience from them to furnish a title to eternal life. To them it assumes the form of *the law in the hand of Christ*, demanding obedience to it as a tribute of just and grateful homage to their Redeemer, who is also their Lawgiver.²⁰

[Readers who discover additional quotes are encouraged to forward them to me for possible inclusion in future updates of this paper.]

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¹⁹ John Colquhoun, *A Treatise on the Law and the Gospel* (Morgan, PA: Soli Deo Gloria, 1999; originally 1819), 26-27, 215, 236-237. Sinclair Ferguson calls John Colquhoun (1748–1827) a "Marrow Man" born out of due time. He favored the *Marrow*, but since the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland had forbidden ministers to recommend it, he would do so in a roundabout way: "Noo, I daurna [dare not] advise ye to read *The Marrow o' Modern Deeveenity*, for ye ken [know] the Assembly condemned it. But they didna [didn't] condemn Tammas Bowston's notes on the *Marrow*" (Ferguson, *The Whole Christ*, 93-94 n37).

²⁰ Joseph Kerr, "God's Law Is to Be Remembered," in *The Pulpit of the Associate Reformed Presbyterian Church, Consisting of Sermons by the Ministers of the Four Synods of that Denomination*, ed. James Prestley (Cincinnati: J. A. & U. P. James, 1851), 278. The Rev. Joseph Kerr (1778–1829) was an Irish immigrant to the United States. He was a pastor in the Associate Reformed Presbyterian Church and for the last few years of his life served as a professor of theology.