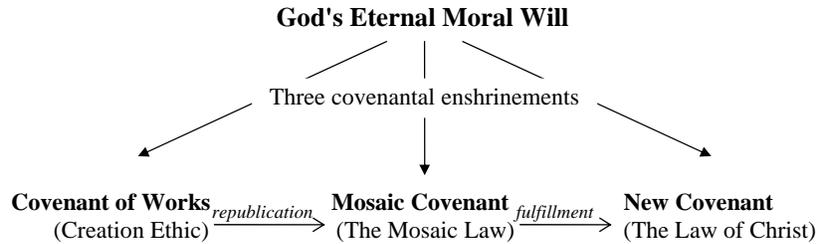


THREE COVENANTAL ENSHRINEMENTS OF THE MORAL WILL OF GOD



EXPLANATION:

God's eternal moral will. The will of God that is rooted in God's unchanging nature and in man's created nature as God's image. Traditionally this has been labeled "the moral law." The drawback of the traditional label is that it is then equated with the Decalogue. This can be seen, for example, in the first two paragraphs of chapter 19 of the Westminster Confession. Paragraph one says that the moral law was given to Adam in the garden. Paragraph two then asserts, "This law" (referring back to the law given to Adam) "after his fall, continued to be a perfect rule of righteousness, and, as such, was delivered by God upon Mount Sinai, in ten commandments." This formulation effectively places the Decalogue in the garden, thus transforming the Decalogue into a creation ordinance, an expression of the timeless moral will of God binding all men in all ages. The authors of the Westminster Confession apparently ignored Paul's teaching that the Mosaic Law is binding only on Jews (Rom. 2:12) and given chronologically after the fall (Rom. 5:13). Furthermore, having stated that the Decalogue is "a perfect rule of righteousness," the Westminster divines contradict themselves and teach that the Sabbath day has changed to the first day of the week after the resurrection of Christ. These considerations demand that we make a distinction between the Law (Decalogue) and God's eternal moral will, rather than conflating them in one concept, "moral law." The "moral" part of "moral law" contains a valid insight – there is such a thing as God's moral will. The "law" part of "moral law" contains a valid insight – the Mosaic Law was a summary of God's moral will given to Israel in a form appropriate to Israel's covenant and Israel's theocratic status in the land. But when these two insights are combined into one "moral law," the simple Christian reading Rom. 2:12 and 5:13 will conclude either (1) that the moral law is not binding on Gentiles and did not exist prior to Sinai, or (2) that he simply can't understand his Bible so he'll just stick to reading the Confession.

Covenant of Works, Mosaic Covenant, New Covenant. God's eternal moral will is never given in a non-covenantal form. Man never has access to it in the abstract as a timeless set of ethical principles. Instead, these three covenants in the Bible are historical covenants, made with specific parties, bound to observe a revealed set of stipulations. These covenants are covenantal enshrinements of God's eternal moral will. The covenantal form of the moral will of God found in the Covenant of Works may be termed "Creation Ethic." The creation ethic given to Adam was not given in the form of a list of commands (aside from the prohibition of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil), but in the form of the imitation of God principle, grounded in his created nature as God's image. The covenantal form of the moral will of God enshrined in the Mosaic Covenant is called "The Mosaic Law," with special reference to the Decalogue. Not everything in the Decalogue is moral, but in it the moral will of God is "summarily comprehended," yet in a form that is appropriate to Israel's theocratic status on probation in the land of Canaan. The covenantal form of the moral will of God enshrined in the New Covenant is called "the Law of Christ" (Gal. 6:2; 1 Cor. 9:21). The Law of Christ is revealed in the New Testament, primarily summarized in the love command emphasized by Jesus and the apostles.

Republication. The arrow from the Creation Ethic to the Mosaic Law is labeled "republication," because the Mosaic Law is a typological republication of the Adamic Covenant of Works. Adam's probation in the garden is re-enacted on a grand scale in Israel's probation in the land of Canaan. The Sabbath, originally revealed to Adam before the fall (Gen. 2:2-3), reappears in the Mosaic economy. The Sabbath principle is the sign of the principle of works-based probation (man must work, and only then may he enter into God's rest). This explains why in the new covenant the day must change to the first position of the week, which is based on the beyond-probation principle (Christ has entered God's rest for us as our covenant head, therefore we work). The republication of the Creation Ethic is typological only. It is not a genuine re-enactment of a covenant of works, as if God were offering eternal life to Israel on the basis of Law-keeping. The typological covenant of works with Israel pertains only to the temporal blessings and temporal curses which operated in connection with the land.

Fulfillment. The Law of Christ is organically related to the Mosaic Law and to the Creation Ethic given to Adam. The differences are in several areas. (1) Due to the nature of progressive revelation, the moral will of God has reached its definitive, eschatological exposition in Jesus Christ. The Mosaic form of the moral will of God demanded a largely external obedience. In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus brings out the internal dimension of the moral will of God more fully than the Mosaic Law. The Mosaic Law did require heart obedience, but that was not its primary emphasis. (2) Another difference is that the concrete manifestation of the moral will of God given in the person of Christ far exceeds the revelation of the old economy. The Mosaic Law required Israelites to love their neighbor. But the Law of Christ requires us to love our enemies, and love itself is now definitively known and seen in the cross, where God manifested the depth of his love toward sinners. (3) Finally, the Law of Christ differs from the Mosaic Law (and the Creation Ethic) in that the Law of Christ does not function as a covenant of works. We are not under law but under grace (Rom. 6:14). In the new dynamic of grace, obedience is not the condition of blessing, but (guaranteed) blessing is the basis of obedience. Christ has not only fulfilled the Mosaic Law by means of the fuller revelation that he brings (points 1 and 2), but by means of his keeping of the Law in our place, thus calling us to an obedience in union with him that is the result rather than the basis of God's favor.

Hermeneutics. How do you use the chart in practice? If you are reading the Bible and you come across a commandment, you have to ask yourself, which covenant is this command functioning in? If you are not a party to that covenant, the stipulation does not bind you directly (e.g., if you are a Christian, you are not bound to any of the stipulations of the Mosaic Covenant). However, a particular commandment in a covenant that you are not a party to may be grounded in God's eternal moral will, and thus you should expect to find that commandment republished in the covenant you are a party to.

Example: The fifth commandment obviously functioned within the Mosaic Covenant. The fact that the keepers of this commandment were promised long life in the land of Canaan demonstrates this. Yet it is inherently right, in the nature of things, for children to obey their parents. Thus when you come to the New Testament, expect to find that principle taught there in new covenant form (e.g., Eph. 6:1-4). However, the nature of that obedience, as well as the promise of long life, will have to be transformed to fit the new covenant, where some obedient children do not prosper in this life, and where the land is fulfilled in the new heavens and new earth. The fifth commandment *per se* is obviously not directly binding on the new covenant people of God. (If you're not sure, just ask yourself: Do Christian children in Tel Aviv live longer than non-Christian children? Are obedient children who happen to live in Kansas missing out?) Nevertheless, the fifth commandment enshrined a lasting principle of the moral will of God, appropriate to Israel's particular covenant circumstances prior to the coming of Christ. Therefore, we are not surprised when we come to the New Testament and we read that Christian children ought to obey their parents in the Lord. But neither are we surprised when we discover that the particular covenantal garb of the fifth commandment has been altered in light of the new covenantal circumstances of the people of God after the coming of Christ.