PREACHING THE GOSPEL FROM THE LAW[1]

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The first five books of the Bible contain numerous laws written for Old Testament Israel on the way to the Promised Land. I daresay that ministers don't often choose sermon texts from the legal material of the Pentateuch. After all, it's not easy to preach on such passages in a way that's meaningful for Christians living in the twenty-first century. Yet there is a wealth of gospel to be found in them, and they form a significant portion of the Word of God. In this article I'll first address the need for preaching on the laws. Then I'll briefly outline some hermeneutical principles for interpreting legal material. Finally, I'd like to offer some practical suggestions and strategies for preachers.[1]

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From their very origin, the laws of the Old Testament had a public rather than an esoteric character. They were not intended for a privileged few but for the entire covenant people. God proclaimed the Ten Words from the blazing top of Sinai in a voice of thunder for all Israel to hear. Moses received instructions, precepts and ordinances from the mouth of God, who told him to repeat them in the hearing of the people ("Say to the Israelites..."). And Moses did so ("Hear, O Israel..." [Deut 6:3,4]). Most of the book of Deuteronomy is public proclamation of the Word.

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Furthermore, parents were told to impress God's commandments on their children at home and on the road, that is, in all the practical situations of daily life (Deut 6:7). Priests had a teaching ministry in addition to their tabernacle duties. Almost immediately after the first priests were ordained, the Lord said to Aaron, "This is a lasting ordinance for the generations to come. ... you must teach the Israelites all the decrees the Lord has given them through Moses" (Lev 10:10-11, cf. Deut 18:1-8, 33:10, Mal 2:4-9). Elders also had the duty of teaching the law to the people (Deut 31:9-12, 32:7).[2]

Prophets also played an important role. They not only pointed God's people forward to their glorious future in Christ but also back to their covenant obligations under the law (e.g. Isa 42:20-25, Jer 7:21-24, Hos 8:12, Amos 2:4). Deuteronomy 17 adds a very specific requirement for the king (vv. 18-20):

> When he takes the throne of his kingdom, he is to write for himself on a scroll a copy of this law, taken from that of the priests, who are Levites. It is to be with him, and he is to read it all the days of his life so that he may learn to revere the LORD his God and follow carefully all the words of this law and these decrees and not consid-

er himself better than his brothers and turn from the law to the right or to the left. Then he and his descendants will reign a long time over his kingdom in Israel.

The law also had to be read in public. In Deuteronomy 31 Moses instructed the priests and the elders that every seven years, during the Feast of Tabernacles, they were to read to all Israel the law which Moses had just written down for them. Moses twice said that the purpose of such reading was that the people might learn to fear the Lord their God (vv. 12, 13). In other words it served to strengthen the bond between Israel and their God. Psalm 119 is a grand poetic exposition on the benefits of meditating on God's law. The reading of the law to King Josiah had a powerful effect on him: he tore his robes and wept before the Lord. It had the same effect on the returned exiles when Ezra read it to them at the Feast of Tabernacles. On that occasion, Nehemiah told them not to grieve: "the joy of the Lord is your strength" (Neh 8:10). In other words, the very fact that the law was being read again should assure the people of the reality of their covenant relationship with God.

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One could say, then, that the reading and teaching of the law in the Old Testament had a purpose analogous to that which we confess in the Canons of Dort, namely that God "maintains, continues, and perfects [his work of grace in his people] by the hearing and reading of his Word, by meditation on it, [and] by its exhortations, threats and promises" (V, 14). In short, it is in keeping with the very nature of the law that it be proclaimed to God's people for their instruction, comfort, and admonition.

Obsolete Shadows?

One might ask whether that remains true in the NT age, particularly of laws which have been fulfilled in Christ and which are no longer observed in the new covenant. Does it still make sense to deliver sermons on such texts? After all, to mention just a few passages, in Mark 7:19 Jesus effectively declared all foods clean; in Luke 23:45 the curtain of the temple was torn in two; in Acts 15 the apostles and elders of Jerusalem wrote to the Gentile believers requiring far less of them than the law of Moses had of the Jews; in Galatians 3:25 Paul concluded that we are no longer under the supervision of the law; and in Colossians 2:16-17 he wrote, "Do not let anyone judge you by what you eat or drink, or with regard to a religious festival, a new Moon celebration or a Sabbath day. These are a shadow of the things that were to come; the reality, however, is found in Christ." So should we not leave the shadows behind and stick to the reality?

Here I'd like to make three comments. The first is that the legal passages of the Pentateuch are still the Word of God and as such they have not lost their power to strengthen the faith of the listeners. They are part of the "all Scripture" of 2 Timothy 3:16-17, that is "useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting, and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work." Here Article 25 of the Belgic Confession makes a well-formulated distinction between the *use* of the ceremonies and symbols of the law, which ought to be abolished among Christians, and their *truth and substance*, which remain for us in Christ, and the article adds that we still use the testimonies taken from the law "to confirm us in the doctrine of the gospel and to order our life in all honesty." In the passages I cited earlier, the Lord Jesus and the apostles do not deny the truth and substance or the enduring testimony of the law but they abolish their use.

My second comment is that Old Testament ceremonial laws still contain a gospel message. In fact the very passages which I cited earlier — Acts 15, Galatians 3, Colossians 2, and others besides — highlight the essential continuity between the laws of Moses and the coming of Christ. To ignore the gospel of the Old Testament ceremonies puts the preacher at risk of oversimplifying and misunderstanding what Christ came to do, oversimplifying because we ignore what he came to fulfill, and misunderstanding because the ceremonial ter-

minology of the Old Testament permeates the writings of the New; one cannot understand the language of the latter without studying the former.

That brings me to a third comment: when we consider the statements which Paul and the other apostles made about the law, we need to remember that they were writing for believers in a particular context, a context quite different from ours. Ministers today do not preach to first-generation Jewish Christians for whom the legal material of the Pentateuch had always governed their daily lives, and for whom it was difficult to leave the ceremonies behind. Nor do they preach to first-generation Gentile Christians under pressure from their Jewish counterparts to embrace the ceremonies of the law. Quite to the contrary, preachers today address people with very limited exposure to the Jewish community. They preach to congregations for whom the ceremonies of the law are not a living reality or a cultural paradigm, and who quite frankly struggle to see the point of reading the legal material of the Pentateuch because there is such a disconnect between the world of those laws and their own world. The challenge for preachers of the gospel is to fill that disconnect in — with the person and work of Christ.

Some Hermeneutical Principles

In the next part of this article, I'd like to outline some hermeneutical principles for interpreting legal passages. I will focus on six principles that serve the proclamation of the gospel.

1. To begin with, although I have been using the terms "law" and "legal material," the Hebrew noun *Torah* does not primarily mean "law," but "instruction." It is related to the verb *yarah*, which means 'teach, instruct." For example, in Exodus 24:12, the Lord said to Moses, "Come up to me on the mountain and stay here, and I will give you the tablets of stone, with the law [*hattorah*] and commands I have written to instruct them [*lehorotham*]."[3] The laws of Moses were not intended as a legal code of rules and penalties, but as instruction for how Israel was to live in covenant with God. The Lord is not so much the high and mighty Lawgiver as the patient Teacher of His people, which makes one think of the wilderness journey in terms of a classroom rather than a courtroom.[4] In that respect the relationship between the Lord and his people in the wilderness is similar to the relationship between Christ and his disciples. Now, words like "law" and "legal" are so entrenched in Biblical translation and theology that we can't get away from them, but being aware of the meaning of *Torah* will help preachers to keep in mind the continuity between the Old Testament and the New, and to explain this continuity to their congregations.

2. In order to do justice to the legal passages, one needs to pay attention to the unique character of the Pentateuch as a whole. It has the form of a history book that starts with the creation of the world and ends with the death of Moses. But within the historical account, no less than two thirds of the contents are made up of various groups of instructions and precepts which fill up the second half of Exodus, almost all of Leviticus, much of Numbers and almost all of Deuteronomy. So you can't really call the Pentateuch a historical account, but neither is it a law book. History and law are intertwined. Furthermore, the legal material is not always organized by topic: some parts are clustered into one group of chapters, for example the instructions for building the tabernacle and the sacrificial instructions, but others are not, such as the regulations for feast days, which are scattered here and there.

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How does one make sense of this? I'd like to make three suggestions. Firstly, the consistent aspect of the organization of the Torah is the historical aspect: the events flow in chronological order. Secondly, the instructions or laws are recorded in the order in which Moses received them from God. Moses was not a lawyer or judge who organized his legal and moral reflections by topic, but he was a prophet who received instructions from the Lord and delivered them to the people at a

particular time and place. Hence it is often important to pay attention to the immediate historical context in which they were given. Thirdly, the instructions Moses received were often God's response to a specific event. As the people traveled through the wilderness, an issue or a problem cropped up, so God told them what to do: he instructed his people, but his instruction often went further than the specific situation. He gave lasting ordinances for what his people were to do in future once they settled in the Promised Land.

Let me summarize the second hermeneutical principle as follows: when preaching on a legal passage one must do justice to its specific redemptive-historical context and its literary function.

The character of the Pentateuch is therefore best described as a history of revelation in the sense that it records God's revelations to Moses in the order in which they were given. The author of the Torah has not tried to reorganize it or to streamline it but has preserved its episodic, situational character. Even though it was written down for the benefit of future generations who are no longer in the same situation in the wilderness but have settled in the Promised Land, and who need to work with the laws on a day to day basis, the Torah has not been rewritten into a more handy format. Why not? Because an important feature in observing the Law is *remembering*. Remember what God *did*: that's history. Remember what God *said*: that's law. So the unique character of the Torah as a mix of history and instruction is well suited (one could almost say "designed") to help the people remember the words and the works of the Lord — remembering God's works for the purpose of trusting in him, and remembering his words for the purpose of obeying him.

Thus the Torah as written serves the purpose of strengthening the relationship between the people of Israel and their God, helping them to trust and obey. God desires fellowship with his covenant people, and therefore he gives the law, not only to set the terms of the relationship, but also to strengthen the bond.[5] And that's precisely what gospel preaching should do (Heidelberg Catechism, Lord's Day 25). Let me summarize the second hermeneutical principle as follows: when preaching on a legal passage one must do justice to its specific redemptive-historical context and its literary function. What historical context did it function within? And how was it designed to strengthen faith in God?

3. Related to the second principle is a third one: because the legal portions of the Pentateuch are set within historical narrative, it is important for the exegete to be aware of what I would call the "critical junctures" or turning points between which a text occurs. For Exodus I would suggest that the critical junctures are the six theophanies, namely, the burning bush, the pillar of cloud and fire leading the people out of Egypt, Mt Sinai shaking and smoking while God spoke the ten words of the covenant, the 70 elders going up and seeing the God of Israel with a pavement of sapphire under his feet, Moses being permitted to see God's back, and finally, the cloud descending upon the newly finished tent of meeting. Each of these theophanies is interspersed with legal and/or historical material, and the *content* of that legal and historical material has to do with the theophany which occurs before it, and that material then sets the stage for the following theophany.

The same principle can be applied to Leviticus and Numbers. Most of Leviticus is made up of priestly instruction, but one critical juncture is the death of Nadab and Abihu by fire from the Lord in chapter 10. This event makes sense when seen against the preceding context as a threat to the newly instituted priestly administration of chapters 1-9 (and in that respect, by the way, it's contextually analogous to the deaths of Ananias and Sapphira in Acts 5). Leviticus 10 in turn becomes the impulse for the holiness regulations which follow, even as far as the Day of Atonement in chapter 16, where the deaths of Nadab and Abihu are mentioned again. For Numbers the critical junctures are the arrangement of the tribal camps in chapter 2, the departure from Sinai in chapter 10, the judgment upon the older generation in chapter 14, and the arrival of the younger generation at the plains of Moab in chapter 22. Those passages are historical benchmarks that help one to interpret both the legal material

and the historical narrative of the intervening chapters. In short, being aware of *when* God gave a law will help us to understand *why* he gave that law, and that will in turn help us to explore the gospel of those laws in a more sensitive manner.

4. The historical narrative within which the legal material is set reminds us that the law was given *en route* to the Promised Land. That setting provides a link between the Israelites and the people of God to whom we preach today: our church members are likewise *en route* to the Promised Land, and just like the people of Israel they need a gospel which shows them how to live in fellowship with the God who has redeemed them from bondage, to open their eyes for the redemption which they already enjoy, and to encourage them to persevere on the journey and look forward to perfect rest (Heb 4:1-2). So besides drawing lines from the *content* of the law to our redemption in Christ, one can also draw lines from the *audience* of the law to our audiences today. How did the content of the law equip and encourage Israel to persevere and to long for the coming rest? That's the gospel! So we need to ask: what gospel did Israel hear in these laws, and how do we who are in Christ hear that same gospel more richly and fully than they did?

5. I agree with Dr. Nelson Kloosterman that the common threefold distinction between moral, civil, and ceremonial laws is flawed, not least because it prompts a preoccupation with the question whether a law remains binding in the new covenant, while failing to account for the fact that even so-called moral laws have ceremonial aspects, and so-called civil and ceremonial laws have abiding instructional worth and an inherent gospel message.[6] It would be a shame if this threefold distinction were to prejudice a minister to preach only on legal passages which he regarded as binding and to bypass texts which he regarded as abolished, because the two-fold result of such a prejudice might very well be to *miss* the gospel in the moral laws and to *ignore* the gospel in the civil and ceremonial laws.[7] Let me add that one does not need the distinction between moral, civil, and ceremonial to safeguard the abiding authority of the Ten Commandments. The special status of the Decalogue is sufficiently attested by other and better considerations, such as its divine recitation from the top of Sinai in a voice of thunder, its inscription on tablets of stone in the very handwriting of God, its place in the ark of the covenant, quotations from the Decalogue in various parts of Scripture,[8] its use as a literary structure for several books of the Bible, and so on.

6. Lastly, how does one preach on the OT laws in a way that is meaningful for the congregation? Here I suggest a two-pronged approach, which I'll call "zooming out" and "zooming in." Zooming out means using a hermeneutic which the Lord Jesus Christ presupposes in Matthew 22 and 23. In Matthew 23:23 and 25 he said, "Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You give a tenth of your spices—mint, dill, and cummin. But you have neglected the more important matters of the law—justice, mercy and faithfulness. ... You clean the outside of the cup and dish, but inside they are full of greed and self-indulgence. Blind Pharisee! First clean the inside of the cup and dish, and then the outside also will be clean." Applying this quotation to the interpretation of a particular law, whether it be about tithing or clean versus unclean, or feast day observance, or any other, I'm suggesting that ministers need to explore the matter of the heart which underlies their text: how do the provisions of a particular law illustrate the weightier matters of justice, mercy, faithfulness, purity, love — bearing in mind what the Lord Jesus said in Matthew 22, that all of the law hangs on the great commandment to love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, and mind, and the accompanying command to love the neighbour as yourself. Next, we need to ask how Christ embodies, exemplifies, and explains the weightier matter which that law illustrates. And then: how should it be lived out in the church and witnessed to the world?

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Now, the drawback of "zooming out" in this way is that it can make the application too

general and perhaps too spiritual, and not specific and practical enough. And therefore one also needs to "zoom in." You see, the Old Testament laws are practical by nature. They were intended to overcome very real difficulties in a hands-on fashion; they put God's people to work, expressing love, mercy, holiness, and justice in deeds. To bring out the enduring relevance of such laws for the lives of our members we need to zoom in to their specific redemptive intent: what kinds of problems, shortcomings, breakdowns were they designed to overcome, and where can similar problems be found in our lives today, and what works of thankfulness, what fruits of faith should we as redeemed people of Christ be producing?

In conclusion, ministers of the Word should not hesitate to preach on the legal material of the Pentateuch.

In terms of their relevance for our society, we might ask: what strategies do our social, judicial and political institutions apply to address human brokenness, and how can the church be a shining light, not by bringing *back* Old Testament law, but by bringing *out* the gospel in that law for a society that has institutions but has lost sight of the only One with real redemptive power to change lives and to restore what is broken.[9]

Some Practical Suggestions and Strategies

Finally, I'd like to offer some practical suggestions for potential sermon series. First of all, if one wanted to give the congregation a bird's eye view of the book of Exodus, one could do so with a series of 12 sermons, one on each of the six theophanies, and one on a legal or narrative passage between each theophany, to show the progression of the book culminating in the dwelling of God with his people in the finished tabernacle. One could also focus on a section of Exodus, starting with one theophany, such as that of Exodus 19, and showing how the subsequent legal material proceeds from it and prepares for the next theophany, that of Exodus 24.

Leviticus is more difficult: one possibility would be a series of sermons on the sacrifices in chapters 1-7.[10] One challenge would be to maintain sufficient variety to keep the series going. (And by the way, let me challenge you with a hypothesis: although the sacrificial laws are crucial for understanding Christ's sacrifice for us, in terms of *gospel significance* the sacrificial laws are not more important than the other Old Testament ceremonies and institutions. If it is true that the active obedience of Christ is just as important as his passive obedience, then preachers ought to give as much attention to the ceremonies under which he lived, as those under which he died.[11]) I've also mentioned Leviticus 10 as a critical juncture, so one could also build a series of sermons around that passage.

For the book of Numbers, I've suggested several critical junctures that could form bookends for a series of sermons. Another possibility is to preach on the intercessory prayers: between Numbers 11 and 21 there are five plagues and five intercessory prayers. In the midst of carrying out his righteous judgment God still listens to prayers for mercy on a disobedient generation: that provides plenty of scope for gospel preaching! Especially noteworthy are the two exceptions in Numbers 11 and 20, where it is Moses who loses patience and God who rebukes him and shows mercy. One might also preach a series of sermons on the cluster of feast days in Numbers 28 and 29.

What about Deuteronomy? An interesting literary structure for Deuteronomy has been proposed by Stephen Kaufman and further developed by John Walton.[12] Briefly, they argue that after Moses has recited the Decalogue in chapter 5, he then gives a commandment-by-commandment exposition of the Decalogue in chapters 6 through 26. If Kaufman and Walton are right (there is, of course, much more to their proposals), one could, for instance, combine a sermon series on Lord's Days 34-44 of the Heidelberg Catechism with a series on the book of Deuteronomy.

In conclusion, ministers of the Word should not hesitate to preach on the legal material of the Pentateuch. On the contrary, they will find the glorious gospel of Jesus Christ in those passages too, and their congregations will be enriched to hear how the laws still hold enduring wisdom and deep comfort for their lives today.

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Notes

1 The material that follows was first presented at a Preaching Seminar held at the Canadian Reformed Theological Seminary in January 2012. For a video recording, go to http://www.canadianreformedseminary.ca/general/preaching_seminar.html.

2 C. van Dam, "The Preacher as Priest," *Clarion* 57.23 (Nov 7, 2008): 591.

3 Other examples where the two occur together are Deut 17:11, 33:10, Isa 2:3 // Mic 4:2, 2 Chron 15:3. Especially noteworthy is Isa 2:3: "Many peoples will come and say, 'Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob. He will teach us (*yorenu*) his ways, so that we may walk in his paths.' The law (*torah*) will go out from Zion, the word of the LORD from Jerusalem."

4 According to Ken Mathews, one should not think of codified law referenced by a court, but of case law that reflects societal attitudes ("Preaching in the Pentateuch," in Michael Duduit [ed.] *Handbook of Contemporary Preaching* [Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1992], 271). That distinction, however, fails to do justice to both its divine origin and its instructional character.

5 See, e.g., Ex 24:7, Deut 6:2, 5, 17:19, 31:11-13, 2 Kgs 23:2-3, Neh 9:3, Ps 119 *passim*, Lk 10:26-27.

6 Nelson D. Kloosterman, "The Old Testament, Ethics, and Preaching: Letting Confessional Light Dispel a Hermeneutical Shadow," in *Living Waters from Ancient Springs: Essays in Honour of Cornelis Van Dam* (ed. Jason Van Vliet; Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2011) 185-197. This is a weakness of Graeme Goldsworthy's chapter on "Preaching from Old Testament Law" in his *Preaching the Whole Bible as Christian Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), esp. pp. 154-55. The treatment of Andreas Köstenberger and Richard Patterson is much more nuanced: "Therefore, rather than reading Old Testament laws in order to decide to which category they belong or which of these laws are absolute and universally binding standards or which are ethically and historically limited to Israel, the careful interpreter should see them as part of the broad narrative in which they are found (Exod. 12:1; Deut. 34:12)" (*Invitation to Biblical Interpretation* [Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2011], 164). Mathews puts it well: "..the law was a whole, not susceptible to the dissection of moral versus ceremonial. These distinctions made by preachers would be foreign to the Israelite and objectionable to Paul as a Jew (Gal. 5:3)" ("Preaching in the Pentateuch," 276).

7 I acknowledge the usefulness of the moral/civil/ceremonial distinction as labels of convenience, and Mathews rightly points out that one should be sensitive to NT passages that give explicit direction on the abrogation of a law, e.g. 1 Cor 10.31 ("Preaching in the Pentateuch," 277). According to Köstenberger and Patterson, "the applicability of the law for Christians is channeled through the light of the new covenant established by Christ," which, while true, is hardly a practical criterion for identifying which laws remain binding and which do not.

8 For a list of references, see Köstenberger and Patterson, *Invitation to Biblical Interpretation*, 167.

9 For some specific examples of how to do this, see my recent articles, "Stolen Goods, Broken Trust: the Law and Gospel of Restitution," *Reformed Perspective* 31.1 (Nov 2011): 20-24; "Out of the House of Bondage: The Old Testament Slavery Laws and our Redemption in Christ," *Clarion* 61.3 (Feb 3, 2012): 58-62.

10 Dr. Cornelis van Dam has published some essential material for preaching on these passages: "The Origin and Character of Sacrifice in Scripture," "The Incense Offering in its Biblical Context," and "The Burnt Offering in its Biblical Context," all in *Mid-America Journal of Theology* 7 (1991): 3-16, 179-184, 195-206.

11 "The gospel event is not a repudiation of the law; it is its most perfect expression. The life of Jesus, what some theologians refer to as the active obedience of Christ, is as much a part of his justifying work as his death (the so-called passive obedience)" (Goldsworthy, *Preaching the Whole Bible as Christian Scripture*, 159).

12 Stephen Kaufman, "The Structure of the Deuteronomic Law," *MAARAV* 1.2 (1978-79): 105-158; John Walton, "Deuteronomy: An Exposition of the Spirit of the Law," *Grace Theological Journal* 8.2 (1987) 213-25. For the view that it reflects the structure of an ancient suzerainty treaty, see Meredith G. Kline, *Treaty of the Great King: The Covenant Structure of Deuteronomy* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1963).