



Provided by the Church of the Lutheran Confession - Board of Missions

A Systematic Study of Bible Teachings (Dogmatics)

Lesson 18.4.2 – The Doctrine of Law and Gospel

The Different Kinds of Law: Civil

Since the nation of Israel was a theocracy, that is, a nation that had the Lord God Himself as its Ruler and Lawgiver, and since the nation had both believers and unbelievers as its citizens, and the believers still had a sinful flesh, it was necessary for God to enact and enforce civil laws to curb the external sins of the people and to establish a suitable punishment for the various offenses. Many of the laws that are found in the books of Moses are not moral laws that are intended for all people nor ceremonial laws having to do with worship, but civil laws such as any government must have to control its citizens.

Exodus chapters 21-23, for example, lists many such civil laws – laws governing slaves or servants, laws regarding marriage and betrothal, laws regarding murder (intentional and unintentional), laws regarding kidnapping, laws regarding the behavior of animals, laws regarding restitution for theft, etc. These laws were intended only for the Israelites and have no binding force for us, although they may give us good examples of how best to handle similar situations in our country. These civil laws can be summed up in the axiom: **“Life shall be for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot”** (Deuteronomy 19:21). In other words, the punishment shall fit the crime.

Jesus Himself distinguished between moral law and civil law when some Pharisees came to Him with a question concerning divorce. They asked: **“Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for just any reason?”** (Matthew 19:3). In His reply Jesus referred to God’s original creation, as it is recorded in Genesis 1 and 2, and concluded: **“What God has joined together, let not man separate”** (Matthew 19:6). The Pharisees objected, saying that Moses allowed divorce. They were referring to Deuteronomy 24:1-4, where we read: **“When a man takes a wife and marries her, and it happens that she finds no favor in his eyes because he has found some uncleanness in her, and he writes her a certificate of divorce, and sends her out of his house.”** Jesus responded: **“Moses, because of the hardness of your hearts, permitted you to divorce your wives, but from the beginning it was not so”** (Matthew 19:8).

This explains why civil law may not always be in perfect agreement with moral law. Because of the sinfulness of mankind, it is sometimes necessary for a government to allow certain things like divorce to prevent a worse crime such as sexual abuse or even murder. If all human beings were perfect as at the beginning, there would be no cause for divorce at all. God’s will is that every marriage be a lifelong union between one man and one woman, as He established at the beginning.

In this New Testament era we are no longer living under a theocratic form of civil government. The laws God gave to Israel (and to Israel only), do not apply to us today. As Christians we are under the laws of whatever civil government God has placed over us. The apostle Peter wrote: **“Submit yourselves to every ordinance of man for the Lord’s sake, whether to the king as supreme, or to governors, as to those who are sent by him for the punishment of evildoers and for the praise of those who do good. For this is the will of God, that by doing good you may put to silence the ignorance of foolish men”** (1 Peter 2:13-15). It is not for us to determine which laws we will obey and which laws we will disobey because they seem foolish or useless to us. Since God gives governments their authority, and God commands us to submit to them, disobedience to the laws of the land is disobedience to God, unless these governments command us to do what God forbids or forbid us to do what God commands. In such cases we must say with Peter: **“Whether it is right in the sight of God to listen to you more than to God, you judge”** (Acts 4:19). **“We ought to obey God rather than men”** (Acts 5:29).

The apostle Paul was in perfect agreement with Peter, writing to the Romans: “**Let every soul be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and the authorities that exist are appointed by God. ... He is God’s minister to you for good. But if you do evil, be afraid; for he does not bear the sword in vain; for he is God’s minister, an avenger to execute wrath on him who practices evil**” (Romans 13:1-4).

The authority that currently has authority is the authority that we are to obey. If we are living in Nepal, we need to obey the Nepalese authorities. If we are living in Nigeria, we need to obey the Nigerian authorities. When there is civil war in a land, we need to determine which authority has real authority in the place where we live and obey that authority. This may sometimes be difficult to determine. In any case, we must put God’s moral law above all human civil law and obey God rather than any human authority when there is a conflict between what God commands and what the civil government commands.

Questions

1. Why did God have to establish civil laws for the nation of Israel?
2. Name several examples of such civil laws that God made for Israel.
3. Why did Moses allow divorce, according to the words of Jesus?
4. How many governmental laws should we obey?
5. When should we disobey the laws of the land?
6. What does it mean when Paul says the government bears the sword?
7. What is God’s will in time of civil war?
8. Why did Peter and the other apostles disobey the authorities in Acts?