

# STEPHEN CHARNOCK'S VIEW OF SUBSTANTIVE BIBLICAL LAW

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Stephen Charnock (1628-1680), chaplain to Henry Cromwell, the governor of Ireland, and joint pastor with Thomas Watson at Crosby Hall published only one sermon in his lifetime. The extent of his publications while living does not belie the quality of his ministry. His preaching, without notes, markedly distinguished him for both erudition and clarity. Further, his theological expertise resulted in the award of a fellowship at New College, Oxford, where he associated with the Puritans Thomas Goodwin and John Howe.<sup>1</sup> His works were published posthumously in the 1680s, with his complete works reprinted in nine volumes in 1815. In 1869, Nichol published his works in five volumes.

Charnock's overall theology of the law of God is contained in the 19th chapter of the Westminster Confession of Faith of 1648, and the parameters articulated in questions 91-150 of the Larger Catechism. No better theses subsuming Charnock's thought on the law of God may be found than seven these of the Westminster Confession on the law of God.<sup>2</sup> As contained in the Nichol's *Complete Works of Stephen Charnock*, the numerous references to the law of God may be examined according to three foci—the relation of the law of God to God's divine nature, the relation of the law of God to Christ the Mediator, and relation of the law of God to mankind.

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1 Stephen Charnock, *Christ Crucified* (Lynchburg: James Family Publications, n. d.), forward by Ed Hindson.

2 *The Confession of Faith. The Larger and Shorter Catechisms, with the Scripture Proofs at Large: Together with the Sum of Saving Knowledge.* (Glasgow: Free Presbyterian Publications, 1985), pp. 79-84, 91-150.

## The Relation Of The Law Of God To God's Nature

### THE RELATION OF THE LAW OF GOD TO GOD'S INCOMMUNICABLE ATTRIBUTES

#### The Relation of the Law of God to God's Sovereignty

Charnock articulates in one brief section of his works the relation of the law of God to the sovereignty of God. God's law reveals God's unhindered, unrestricted authority. For some of God's laws there is no other reason than this, that God wills to have it so.<sup>3</sup> These laws (Charnock includes Genesis 2:17, “not eating of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil” in this category) are based solely on divine prerogatives:

No other reason of this seems to us, but a resolve to try man's obedience in a way of absolute sovereignty, and to manifest his right over all creatures, to reserve what he pleased to himself, and permit the use of what he pleased to man, and to signify to man that he was to depend on him, who was his Lord, and not on his own will.<sup>4</sup>

The law of God, therefore, issues from a Sovereign, who has the inherent right to demand what he will from his creatures. Man has no claims upon God; only God possesses full claims upon man (cf. Rom. 9:19-21).

#### The Relation of the Law of God to God's Majesty

Although all of God's laws reflect his attributes, Charnock particularly notes the unique character of the decalogue as a reflection of his majesty. This portion of the law was written with his own finger in the “tables of stone” (Ex. 31:18). No other portion of Scripture receives this designation. Moses was to frame the law in the tables of stone, but the writing of the law was reserved by God himself for God himself. In support of this fact, Charnock quotes Exodus 32:16, “And the tables were the work of God, and the writing was the writing of God engraven upon the tables.” Furthermore, God endeavored to have his sovereignty “eminently appear” through the attendance by his “heavenly militia” (Dt. 32:2). This law is called a “fiery law, coming from his right hand.” Thus, Charnock concludes that it was “published with all the marks of supreme majesty.”<sup>5</sup> One aspect of the law, therefore, is its reflection of the unique majesty of God.

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3 Stephen Charnock, *The Existence and Attributes of God* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1979), I:69. All subsequent citations conform to the following forms: (1) Volume numbers "I" and "II" cite either of the two volumes of Stephen Charnock, *The Existence and Attributes of God* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1979); (2) Citations including volume numbers "III," "IV," and "V," originate from Stephen Charnock, *The Complete Works of Stephen Charnock*, B. D. (Edinburgh: James Nichol, 1865).

4 II:389.

5 II:390.

### **The Relation of the Law of God and God's Spirituality**

Charnock distinguishes the law of God with the law of man because of its ability to manage the conscience. This ability of the divine law to manage human conscience is a manifestation of God's spiritual character. The conscience is part of man's spirit; the law touches man's spirit. Charnock elaborates:

God hath given man but an authority over the half of man, and the worst half too, that which is of an earthly original; but reserved the authority over the better and more heavenly half to himself. The dominion of earthly princes extends only to the bodies of men; they have no authority over the soul, their punishment and rewards cannot reach it; and therefore their laws, by their single authority, cannot bind it, but as they are coincident with the law of God.<sup>6</sup>

Since only God may judge the conscience (Luke 12:3, 4), it is his province only. Only he can impose laws upon it. Charnock explicates the nature of conscience, as part of man's spirit, as it interrelates with the law of God:

It is out of the reach of human penal authority... Conscience is a book in some sort as sacred as the Scripture; no addition can be lawfully made to it, no subtraction from it. Men cannot diminish the duty of conscience, or raze out the law God hath stamped upon it. They cannot put a supersedes to the writ of conscience, or stop its mouth with a noli prosequi. They can make no addition by their authority to bind it; it is a flower in the crown of Divine sovereignty only.<sup>7</sup>

### **The Relation of the Law of God to God's Immutability**

Charnock illustrates that a change of God's law does not imply a change in God himself. Further, a change in God's law does not imply the existence of more than one God. Charnock explains the reason for changes in God's laws through two analogs: First, young children should be dealt with differently than when mature (cf. Gal. 4:3). Second, a physician's skill is not questionable if he prescribes an appropriate remedy for the malady of one, and a different one for the malady of another.<sup>8</sup>

Charnock argues that it is the province of God to dispense with his own laws, whether they be over nature or men. God exercises his right to govern the laws of nature by arresting the law of physics to produce miracles—"to make the sun stand still, or move backward, to bind up the womb of the earth, and bar the influences of the clouds, bridle the rage of the fire, and the fury of lions; make the liquid waters stand like a wall, or pull up the dam, which he hath set to the sea, and command it to overflow the neighboring

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6 II:391.

7 II:391.

8 II:346.

countries.”<sup>9</sup>Over men, God has a right to dispense with his own laws. So Charnock comments upon the transformation of the ceremonial law into something higher. By terminating the Temple and the legal priesthood, God brought the ceremonial aspect of true religion into a higher plane. Conspicuously absent, however, is Charnock's comment on the case laws and their penalties, which Charnock does not mention as being transformed. His development of the continuity of the law may imply a belief in the abiding validity of case laws and their penalties, though not the ceremonial laws. His sense of the abiding validity of the judicial laws would be within the parameter of the Westminster Confession's phraseology—“general equity”.<sup>10</sup>

## **THE RELATION OF THE LAW OF GOD TO GOD'S COMMUNICABLE ATTRIBUTES**

### **The Relation of the Law of God to God's Wisdom**

God's laws reflect both a divine and human telos. “An universal wisdom and righteousness glitters in the Divine law.” The law reflects the superiority of God—“who teaches like God?”<sup>11</sup>(Job 36:22). Not only do they reflect God's indubitable authority because of his own glory, but they disclose his wisdom “respecting man's benefit.” God's law perfects man's nature by conferring a wisdom upon him—the law “enlightens the eyes” (Ps. 19:7, 8). The law imparts a two-fold knowledge, both of God and self.

Charnock declaims the propriety of God's law by underscoring the result of its absence. Absence of God's law turns man to beast.<sup>12</sup> The laws of men are “often unjust, oppressive, cruel, sometimes against the law of nature.”<sup>13</sup>On the contrary, the Israelite nation, through the benefit of biblical law, would have all citizens be “statesmen” as to judicial matters, “ecclesiastics” as to ceremonial matters, and “honest men” in economic matters. Further, Charnock praises biblical law because it was designed not for one particular nation, but to accommodate all mankind, “in the variety of climates and countries wherein they live.” The results of all mankind's obedience to God's law would be stupendous, according to Charnock:

And if [the law were]<sup>14</sup>well observed, [it] would alter the face of the world, and make it look with another hue. The world would be altered from a brutish to a human world; it would change lions and wolves, men of lion-like and wolfish disposition, into reason and sweetness. And because the whole law is summed up in love, it obligeth us to endeavor the preservation of one another's beings, the favoring of one another's interests, and increasing the goods, as much as justice will permit, and keeping up one another's credits,

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9 II:391-92.

10 II:392.

11 II:528.

12 II:527.

13 II:528.

14 The contents of brackets were added by the author of this paper for clarity.

because love, which is the soul of the law, is not shown by a cessation from action, but signifies an ardor, upon all occasion, in doing good. I say, were this well observed, the world would be another thing that it is: it would become a religious fraternity; the voice of enmity, and the noise of groans and cursing, would not be heard in our streets; peace would be in all borders; plenty of charity in the midst of cities and countries; joy and singing would sound in all habitations.<sup>15</sup>

Universal obedience to the God's law would, therefore, transmit the blessedness of God's wisdom to the whole earth.

#### **The Relation of the Law of God and God's Mercy**

Further, God can not impose injurious laws—to do so would dishonor himself. God's nature compels his law to be not false but true, because God is truth, not injurious but beneficial, because God is good, and not vain but profitable because God is wise. Through three illustrations, Charnock pleads with his hearers to submit to God's laws. (1) Noah submitted and thus saved the human race. (2) The children of Israel submitted and invaded the land and thus saved the Messianic seed. And (3) the Savior submitted to the law of God, and saved the elect.<sup>16</sup> The law of God in these instances transmits God's mercy to men, if they obey it.

#### **The Relation of the Law of God and God's Holiness**

Charnock develops the theme of the relation of the law of God and God's holiness according to three foci—(1) a theodicy for the institution of a law God knew would be disobeyed, (2) an exposure of the sin of charging the law with rigidity, and (3) a discussion of the significance of the law's penalties. A common objection to God's institution of the law is “Why would he institute a law he knew men would not obey?” “Is this a blemish to his holiness?” To these inquiries, Charnock's theodicy includes the following points: (1) “The Scripture frees God fully from any blame in this, and lays it wholly upon Satan, as the tempter, and upon man, as the determiner of his own will” (Gen. 3:6). Charnock lifts the focus of blame for man's disobedience to Edenic law from God and rests it upon the guilty parties—Satan and man. (2) Charnock argues that man was created with original uprightness according to Ecclesiastes 7:29; therefore the divine character can not be faulted if the creature, of the creature's own power and accord, corrupted himself. Charnock dresses this argument with the following illustration. Silver, gold, and other metals were created by God in an original “form and figure.” These metals are capable of receiving other forms by the efforts of men. Similarly, man in his original state took another form through Satan's temptation. Charnock adds similar analogs—an excellent instrument framed by a skilled craftsman may be easily marred by a cruel hand. Further, the workman who built the house “strong” and with “good posture” should not be impugned if the house be ruined through wastefulness or carelessness.

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15 II:527.

16 II:604.

In no uncertain terms, Charnock equates charging the law of God with rigidity to be “contemning the holiness of God.” When men complain that the law “shackles” them, and “prohibits their desired pleasures,” they “cast dirt upon the holiness of God.” The reason for the Israelites' hatred of the prophets, according to Charnock, was their hatred of the law.<sup>17</sup> Further, the rebellious Israelites attempted to sway the prophets from their calling, calling them to “get” “out of the way”, and “turn aside out of the path, and cause the Holy One of Israel to cease from before them”<sup>18</sup>(Is. 30:10, 11). Proceeding into a stinging soliloquy, Charnock exposes the backsliding mind-set of the Israelites:

Let him [God] be gone from us, since he will not countenance our vices, and indulge our crimes; we would rather hear there is a God, than thou would tell us of a holy one. We are contrary to the law, when we wish it were not so exact; and therefore, contrary to the holiness of God, which set the stamp of exactness and righteousness upon it. We think him injurious to our liberty, when by his precept he thwarts our pleasure; we wish it of another frame, more milked, more suitable to our minds; it is the same, as if we should openly blame God for consulting with his own righteousness, and not with our humors, before he settled his law; that he should not have drawn from the depths of his righteous nature, but squared it to accommodate our corruption.<sup>19</sup>

God's holiness, according to Charnock, is manifested in the penalties inflicted for the violation of His law. The penalties inflicted by God's law imply the inter-relationship of divine holiness and justice. The root of God's holiness is God's justice; and the triumph of God's holiness is God's justice. According to Charnock, both of these attributes are circumscribed in one term, “righteousness.” Citing Psalm 103:6 (“The Lord executeth righteousness and judgment for all that are oppressed.”) and Daniel 9:7 (“Righteousness (that is justice) belongeth to thee”). Charnock explains that holiness and justice, subsumed by the category of divine righteousness, are responsible for “all the tempests and storms in the world.” One penalty for sin which Charnock underscores is the dreadful overthrowing of the Jewish state. Divine righteousness hardened the hearts of the unbelieving Jews and “cashiered a nation, once dear to him, from the honor of his protection.” Despite this act of reprobation, God's holiness is applauded by the seraphim (Is. 6:3, cf. 9-11).<sup>20</sup>This penalty for disobedience to God's law was prophesied by Deuteronomy 28:15ff.

#### **The Relation of the Law of God and God's Goodness**

The law of God, according to Charnock, manifests the goodness of God. The same divine goodness that motivated creation motivated God to govern by his law. If God had left

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17 II:178.

18 II:178-79.

19 II:179. The contents of the brackets were added for clarity.

20 II:132.

man without a law to govern him, God would cease to be good, according to Charnock.<sup>21</sup> God's goodness in government appears in his "fitting the law to the nature of man"<sup>22</sup> In man's original condition, man was "upright" (Eccl. 7:29), and therefore able to keep the Edenic law. The Edenic law was "rather below than above his strength." The law was suited to his nature and his nature to the law. They were like "exact straight lines, touching one another in every part when joined together." Intellectually, volitionally, and emotionally, man's original nature was suited to the law: "it was not above his understanding to know it, nor his will to embrace it nor his passions to be regulated by it." God required of man no more than already written upon the heart of man in his original state (cf. Rom. 2:15). The nature of the moral law written upon the heart of man was not grievous (I John 5:3)—not coming only by the authority of a sovereign to exact but the goodness of a father to demand.

Further, the response to the moral law in man in his original state would be pleasure—"a delightful satisfaction." Obedience to the moral law written upon the heart of man would have produced "extraordinary contentment." Like the original nature of man, the renewed regenerate nature of fallen man finds in the law of God a "suitableness which kindles delight" (Ps. 1:2). To both the original and renewed natures of mankind, the law is neither a shock nor a burden.<sup>23</sup> Rather, the divine goodness which shines in it prompts praise to the Lawgiver (cf. Ps. 119:164).<sup>24</sup>

But not only was the law of God fitting to the nature of man, it was also fitting for the happiness of man. The divine goodness cannot, by its very nature, enjoin upon man anything that was unreasonable, oppressive, or uncomfortable. "Bitterness cannot come from that which is altogether sweet." Because the Lawgiver is both infinitely wise and good, his commandments are both rational and beneficial. Charnock illustrates the divine Lawgiver as an excellent prince, who will make laws not only for his own honor, but his people's good. Scripture underscores that God's law was "for our good" (Dt. 10: 12, 13). God never pleaded with the Israelites to obey his law on account of his divine authority; rather God pleaded with them to obey because it was in their best interest (Dt. 4:40; 12:28). "Great peace" have they which observe Gods' law. Whenever the Israelites fell from the way of his law, he grieved for men's impairing their own felicity, rather than violate his authority—"O, that thou hast hearkened to my commandments, then had thy peace been as a river!" (Is. 48:18).<sup>25</sup> The end of the law was eternal life, according to Christ in his dialogue with the rich young ruler. Had Adam obeyed the moral law written upon his heart, he would have attained eternal life. Charnock thus holds to the original Edenic law as a conditional covenant of works. In the same vein, Stephen refers to the law given to Moses as the "living oracles" (Acts 7:38).<sup>26</sup> Charnock explicates the intent of the God in the law:

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21 II:252.

22 II:252.

23 II:252.

24 II:253.

25 II:253.

26 II:253-54.

The chief design of God in his law is the happiness of the subject; an obedience is intended by him as a means for the attaining of happiness, as well as preserving his own sovereignty: this is the reason why he wished that Israel had walked in his way, “that their time might have endured forever” (Ps. 81:13, 15, 16). And by the same reason, this was his intendment in his law given to man, and his covenant made with man at the creation, that he might be fed with the finest part of his bounty, and be satisfied with honey out of the eternal Rock of Ages.<sup>27</sup>

God not only grants mankind a benevolent law, but because of his goodness encourages obedience by promises and threatenings. Rather than simply command obedience predicated upon his lordship, God motivates his hearers to obedience by promises of bounty and rewards.<sup>28</sup> Charnock calls these “arguments of sweetness”. By these gentle overtures, God would attract his people to their duties.<sup>29</sup> By two passions, Charnock observes, the nature of man is managed in this world—hope and fear. The divine Lawgiver utilizes both to induce obedience to his law. By hope the Lawgiver manages mankind by holding before men the promise of blessing for obedience; by fear the Lawgiver manages mankind by holding before men the threat of punishment. Through elevation of hope and excitement of fear God prompts man to his greatest happiness.<sup>30</sup>

But not only by threatenings and punishments, but also by gracious impartation of benefits God prompts obedience to his law. The benefits God graciously bestowed upon the Israelites in bringing them up from bondage (Is. 2:2) and miraculously delivering them from Egypt (Jer. 11:7, 8) implied “strong obligations” to an “ingenuous observance” of the law.<sup>31</sup> “God can enjoin the observance of nothing but what is good.”<sup>32</sup> Charnock interprets I John 5:3 (“his commands are not grievous”) as not “grievous in their nature” nor “grievous to one possessed with a true reason.”<sup>33</sup>

## **The Relation Of The Law Of God To Christ The Mediator**

Christ honored the law of God in both its precept and penalty. Charnock describes the law as honorable and righteous in both its precept and penalty. In the Garden, the express design of the precept of the law given was obedience. Although obedience was the design, God added a penalty to enforce the authority of the precept. After the fall, God-given laws still have both precept, designed for man's obedience, and penalty, designed for man's correction (Gen. 2:17).<sup>34</sup> Both precept and penalty honor God's attributes. The holiness of God is honored in the obedience of the precept; the justice of God is honored

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27 II:253-54.

28 II:254.

29 II:255.

30 II:255.

31 II:339.

32 II:339.

33 II:339.

34 II:565.

by the execution of the penalty.

This law was vindicated through the active and passive obedience of Christ. Christ actively vindicated the precepts of the law by his conformity to it in his life; he passively vindicated the penalty of the law through his death. Christ “exactly performed” the precepts, and upon him the curse was “punctually executed”. Through his voluntary observing the precepts, and voluntary undergoing the penalty, Christ, the Wisdom of God (cf. Prov. 9) vindicated the holiness of God expressed in the preceptive aspect of the law and the justice of God expressed in the penal aspect of the law. Truly, the Mediator “fulfilled the righteousness of the law” (Mt. 3:15; Rom. 8:3).<sup>35</sup>

## **The Relation Of The Law Of God To The Three Fold State Of Man - Original, Fallen, And Regenerate**

### **The Relation of the Law of God to the Original State of Man**

God's rule of law extends to the whole universe, including mankind. God's universal sovereignty allows him to enact laws for the whole universe, including the heavens, angels, mankind, and beasts. Even the “heavens have their ordinances” (Job 38:33).<sup>36</sup> Angels which fell into sin must have violated some law because where there is no law, there is no transgression. Charnock postulates that this law was the moral law that agreed with their spiritual natures: “a love to God, a worship of him, and a love to one another in their societies and persons.”<sup>37</sup> Men are under the law of God because:

Every son of Adam, at his coming into the world, brings with him a law in his nature, and when reason clears itself up from the clouds of sense, he can make some difference between good and evil; discern something fit and just. Every man finds a law within him that checks him if he offends it; none are without a legal indictment and a legal executioner within them.<sup>38</sup>

Even the beasts are ruled by an unwritten law of divine providence. This governing of unintelligent life is in a “manner inferior to the rule of man.”<sup>39</sup> Clearly, God's rule of law extends to the whole universe.

Charnock later argues that men should imitate God's holiness because it is within man's created nature to do so. Man's nature, which is in the image of God, includes a natural appetite to resemble God. In man's original state, this righteous nature included desire to resemble God in his purity, rather than his knowledge (Gen. 3:5). Had there been no original motive for man to resemble God in his holiness, the devil's temptation to confuse man to resemble God in knowledge rather than holiness would have been “as an arrow

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35 II:566.

36 II:389.

37 II:388-89.

38 II:388.

39 II:389.

shot against a brazen wall.” In the fall, man “mistook the term”, incorrectly thinking that he could resemble God in knowledge rather than purity.<sup>40</sup>

### **The Relation of the Law of God to the Fallen State of Man**

In Charnock's view, the fallen nature of man and spiritual nature of the law are in constant enmity. Because the law is spiritual and man is carnal (Rom. 7:14), the law and the carnal nature of man are in permanent enmity. For peace between the two, one must change. The law can have no friendship for man; nor may man have friendship with law in this state. Mutual friendship is impossible because their natures are so contrary. What the law commands is disgusting to the flesh, what the flesh desires is displeasing to the law.<sup>41</sup>

To Charnock, the existence of the human moral awareness, is everywhere evident. Charnock argues that “there is a notion of good and evil in the consciences of men” which “evidences” itself in “laws that are common to all countries”. These laws serve three purposes: (1) the preservation of their societies, (2) discouragement of vice, and (3) encouragement of virtue.

Upon the supposition laws common to all nations must originate from a common source, Charnock extrapolates that such a common standard is founded upon “common reason”. Since Paul presupposes that a civil magistrate is a minister of God for good, hence a commonly accepted good, such a perception must issue from “common reason” (Rom. 13:1). Further, since all nations “do by nature things contained in the law” (Rom. 2:14), there must be a natural “common reason”.<sup>42</sup> Through the following arguments, Charnock argues for the existence of “common reason”. (1) There are natural principles within man which distinguish for him good from evil. “How would this be if there were not some rule in him to distinguish good and evil?” Thus, Charnock argues by supposition of the contrary. If there were no common reason, there is simply no other way men would know good from evil. Since men know good from evil, common reason exists. (2) If there were no “common reason”, Charnock deduces “there would be no sin”, citing 1 John 3:4, because “where there is no law there is no transgression”. Since God holds men responsible for sin, and God is not unjust, there must be some law telling man of his sin, since by some law is the knowledge of sin (cf. Rom. 3:20-21). (3) If there were no innate reason, why do men condemn evil in themselves and others when their inner natures are depraved? Thus, there is some human component, operating within man's psyche, that distinguishes good from evil.<sup>43</sup>(4) The extent of such differentiation is universal. Everyone discerns good from evil. Since not some but all do such, this must be a natural human component causing the actions, because universal effects require universal causes.<sup>44</sup> Charnock further develops his doctrine of “common reason” by identifying its source. Since every law has a lawgiver, common reason must have a lawgiver. This

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40 II:200.

41 *The Complete Works of Charnock*, III:34.

42 I:69.

43 I:69.

44 I:70.

lawgiver can not be man himself, because man's corrupt nature would snuff out his moral sensibilities if it were possible. Thus, the lawgiver must be God.<sup>45</sup>

Charnock compares the light of the moral law written upon the heart with the light of the written law of Scripture. The former is likened to star light, which may be sufficient to reveal the “greatness of the filth of sin”. The written law of God, however, is bright enough to examine in the heart “those little sprouts and branches of sin”.<sup>46</sup> Thus, both common reason and the written law of God expose sin in fallen man.

Charnock further comments on the response of fallen men to God's law. Arguing from Romans 2:14 (“the Gentiles do, by nature, the things contained in the law”), Charnock states there is a great affinity between the law of God and the reason of man. From the law emerges a natural beauty which “darts” upon the reasons and consciences of men. Men's consciences then “dictate” to them that God's law is worthy to be observed. Further, even if men do not practice the law, they yet apprehend its correctness. Even if one should through the “fury of his lusts” break the laws of wedlock, the same one would approve the very law he broke lest he endure the same “injury and disgrace”.

In another vein, God's law commends itself to the consciences of men by its scope. The law is “goodness at the root, not only in action, but affection; not only in motion of the members, but the disposition of the soul”.<sup>47</sup> In articulating the response of men to God's law, Charnock explains the exclusive claims of the divine law. “It is treason in any against the crown of God, to mint laws with a stamp contrary to that of heaven, whereby they renounce their due subjection, and vie with God for dominion, snatch the supremacy from him, and account themselves more lords than the Sovereign Monarch of the world.” Charnock paints such monarchs in graphically dark terms and with a touch of sarcasm:

When men will not let God be the judge of good and evil, but put in their own vote, controlling his to establish their own; such are not content to be as gods, subordinate to the supreme God, to sit at his feet; nor co-ordinate with him, to sit equal upon his throne; but paramount to him, to over-top and shadow his crown;—a boldness that leaves the serpent, in the first temptation, under the character of a more commendable modesty.<sup>48</sup>

When men make additions to the laws of God, they condemn the sovereignty of God. “The authority of a sovereign Lawgiver is invaded and maligned when an inferior presumes to make order equivalent to his edicts.”<sup>49</sup> When men will obey human rulers over God, whether they be servants, employees, or citizens, they set man upon the throne of God, and God at “the footstool of man; to set man above, and God beneath; to make

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45 I:70.

46 IV:177.

47 IV:529.

48 II:431.

49 II:432-434.

him the tail, and not the head, as God speaks in another case of Israel” (Dt. 28:13).<sup>50</sup>

Man should not tamper with God's laws, but revere them. Because God the Lawgiver is infinitely wise, disputes against his “precepts and methods” are intolerable. Even if the wisdom of God's precepts and methods are not perceived by men, men should nonetheless entertain them with respect and reverence.<sup>51</sup> Charnock analogizes the reverence one should display toward the law of God with the respect one should display toward the law of the prince. Man should not tamper with God's laws.

We must not think to mend our Creator's laws, and presume to judge and condemn his righteous statutes. If the flesh rise up in opposition, we must cross its motions, and silence its murmurings.<sup>52</sup>

Another theme Charnock briefly develops is the rôle of the law in conversion. The law has no inherent ability to save; rather the law leads men to Christ by exposing their need of him. “The law will instruct, not heal. It acquaints us with our duty, not our remedy; it vitiates sin, not allays it; it exasperates our venom, but doth not tame it; though it shews man his miserable condition, yet a man by it doth not gain one drop of repentance. It tells us what we should do, but correct not the enmity of our nature whereby we may do it.”<sup>53</sup>

#### **The Relation of the Law of God to the Regenerate State of Man**

Charnock's treatment of the relation of the law of God and the new nature includes a differentiation of the natural law of nature and the new regenerate mind, the regenerate nature's responses to the law, and elements of the law to which the regenerate nature is accountable. Charnock distinguishes the law of nature and the law of God in the regenerate mind. The two are in agreement, but the former is natural, originating in the covenant of works. The latter originates in the Spirit of God.<sup>54</sup> The new nature is created by God, *ktisqenta*, implying it is a re-creation of the original nature that was lost by Adam through the fall.<sup>55</sup> The totality of the law God writes upon the new nature, not in tables of stone, but in the fleshy tables of the heart (2 Cor. 3:3).<sup>56</sup> The law written upon the heart applies to inward man according to Psalm 119:9, “thy word have I hid in my heart, that I might not sin against thee” and Jeremiah 31:32, “thy word will I write upon the heart”.<sup>57</sup> The new nature includes an inner ability to know and obey the law,<sup>58</sup> an inward conformity to the law,<sup>59</sup> a mighty affection for the law,<sup>60</sup> and a strong propensity to

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50 II:434.

51 II:603-604.

52 II:604.

53 IV:202.

54 IV:119.

55 IV:119.

56 IV:120.

57 IV:120.

58 IV:120, 123.

59 IV:121.

60 IV: 122.

obedience.<sup>61</sup> The believer's present relation to the law is that he is subject thereof, both to its "preceptive and minatory part", that is, its precepts and penalties.<sup>62</sup>

Charnock not only discusses the character of the regenerate nature in relation to the law but the overall purpose of the regenerate nature, which is conformity to the holiness of the law. Believers must, according to Charnock, labor after a conformity with the holiness of God (cf. I Peter 1:15, 16). The nature of God presented in the Scripture is not only for a pattern to imitate, but also a motive to persuade believers to holiness (I John 3:3; Matt. 5:48; Lev. 11:44; I Pet. 1:15, 16). Charnock underscores that the pattern given us is not the holiness of angels or archangels, but the archtypical holiness of God.

Charnock develops the following point of clarification regarding the goal to resemble God's holiness. The command to imitate divine holiness is not "an order to cease to be creatures, and commence gods," but rather to possess the same kind of holiness, not essence of holiness. To command mankind to possess the essence of holiness would be an impossibility in itself. Charnock illustrates the difference of the two spheres of holiness: "a short line may be as straight as the other, though it parallel it not in the immense length of it".

In the same vein, Charnock recommends that believers not look ultimately to other believers for the pattern of holiness to emulate, but rather to God himself. "To endeavor to be like a good man is to make one image like another; to set our clocks by other clocks, without regarding the sun: but true holiness consists in a likeness to the most exact sampler." The Stoics looked to human examples of virtue, such as Socrates; Christians must look to the divine example of holiness, as manifested in Jesus.<sup>63</sup>

Regarding obedience to the law, Charnock argues the motive of obedience must be the imitation of divine holiness, not any other motive, such as health, security, or prosperity. We must first perceive then conform to the purity of God's nature. The purity of God's nature, though invisible to the human eye, is visible to us through his law; hence, it is law both "holy" (Rom. 7:12) and "pure" (Ps. 19:8). By two metaphors, Charnock describes the law of God - a window and a transcript. Both metaphors imply that God's holiness may be known through his law. Further, God's holiness may be imitated through conformity to his law. "Our lives," enjoins Charnock, are to be a "comment upon his law."<sup>64</sup>

In his analysis of human conformity to the law, Charnock makes an insightful and profound distinction:

If it [conformity to the law] be agreeable to God's will, and convenient for some design of our own, and we do anything only with a respect to this

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61 IV: 122.

62 IV:566.

63 II:199.

64 II:200.

design, we make not God's holiness discovered in the law our rule, but our own conveniency: it is not a conformity to God, but a conformity of our actions to self.<sup>65</sup>

If for instance, one abstains from intemperance, not because the law commands it, but rather for health, one does not follow God's holiness as his rule but his own security, convenience, or something else which we make a god to ourselves. Therefore, all that the believer does must be an expression of the divine holiness as articulated in the law of God. True obedience is not a mere “resisting in negatives, but aspiring to positives”.<sup>66</sup> All that believers do must be according to the positive goal of resembling God's purity.

## **Conclusion**

The precision, depth, and comprehensiveness of Charnock's understanding of the law of God challenges the truncated, confused, and even self-contradictory understanding of the law held by much of modern evangelicalism. While much of modern evangelicalism holds “not under grace but under law”, they claim the need for more “biblical principles” from the Old Testament. While many claim that the Old Testament law is “not for us,” they still purport that all Scripture is profitable for doctrine, reproof, correction, and instruction in righteousness (II Tim. 3:16). Charnock was unencumbered by confused presuppositions. Rather, to Charnock “we do not make void the law, rather we establish it” (Rom. 3:31). Although the ceremonial law was brought to a higher state under Christ, the moral law and the general equity of the judicial law remain in force. To Charnock therefore, the law of God should be a viable force in the believer's individual life, the life of the church in general, and society at large. Charnock's coherent approach to the law of God would, if imitated, refresh the Church with light. Would that more today would delight in the law of God day and night (Ps. 1:1-3) as Charnock did!

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65 II:200.

66 II:200.