

THOMAS BOSTON'S VIEW OF SUBSTANTIVE BIBLICAL LAW

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The Puritan Thomas Boston demonstrates a keen understanding of biblical law. His treatment of the covenant of works is one of the most extensive Reformed literature can supply. He skillfully inter-relates the first covenant, the covenant of works, to biblical law. Additionally, his allegory of the conversation between a Gospel minister, an antinomian, a legalist, and a young Christian remains the quintessential “real life” illustration of the differences between antinomianism, legalism, and biblicism.

THE PROPERTIES OF BIBLICAL LAW

Boston describes biblical law as universal, perfect, indispensable and perpetual. He sees Romans 2:14, 15 as binding “all men, in all places... and at all times”, hence universally.¹ Boston interprets Psalm 19:7 as defining the scope of the law's content as comprehending the whole of man's duty to God and to his neighbor. The perfection of the OT moral law rendered the law as lacking nothing. Therefore Christ did not have to add anything to the OT moral law because of its inherent completeness. Hence, Boston interprets Psalm 19:7 to mean that the NT could add nothing to the OT moral law.² Boston also sees the law as indispensable and perpetual according to Luke 16:17 and Matthew 5:18. According to Luke 16:17, “every jot and tittle of the law” is crucial. According to Matthew 5:18, “one jot or one tittle shall in no wise pass from the law, till all be fulfilled.”³

THE PURPOSE OF BIBLICAL LAW

Boston perceives a distinction between the purpose of God's law given before the fall and the purpose of God's law given after the fall. Originally, Boston holds that the law was revealed to Adam in his original state so that by obedience to it Adam might be justified. The purpose of the law since the fall of Adam, however, is threefold, according to Boston. First, the purpose of the law to fallen man is to let all men know what the holy

1 Thomas Boston, *The Works of Thomas Boston*, II:62.

2 II:62.

3 II:62.

will of God is and what their duty is. Boston cites Micah 6:8 in support.⁴ Second, the purpose of the law to fallen man is to let all see their inability to keep it, and so to humble them in the sense of their sin. In support, Boston cites Psalm 19:11, 12, “By them is thy servant warned. Who can understand his errors? Cleanse thou me from secret faults.”⁵

Third, the purpose of the law to fallen man is to give them a clear sense of their need of Christ. Galatians 3:19 states “Wherefore serveth the law? It was added because of transgressions, till the seed should come, to whom the promise was made.” Boston explains the awakening in the sinner of the sinner's need for Christ in three ways. The law convicts individuals of their sin, exposes the dreadful wrath and curse of God that is due unto them for their sins, and awakens their consciences under a sense of their guilt. The guilt which Boston describes includes apprehension of misery, bondage, and fear. The apprehension of misery, bondage, and fear results in a clearer sight of the need of Christ, and of the perfection of his obedience.⁶

Boston considers the law not only from the perspective of its work in all men in general, but also from the perspective of the unregenerate only. For the unregenerate, the law is a “looking-glass to let them see their state and case.”⁷ Further, the law is a “bridle to hold them with its commands and threatenings, who otherwise would regard nothing.”⁸ Boston even sees the law as a “scourge, vexing and tormenting their consciences, and making them uneasy in a single course, rendering them inexcusable, and laying them under the curse.”⁹ Boston perceives, therefore, the law as an active force impelling the sinner with guilt.

Boston also considers the law from the perspective of its work to those who are in Christ. To those in Christ, the law functions to magnify Christ unto them, “shewing them their obligation to him for fulfilling it in their stead.”¹⁰ Also, the law functions, according to Boston, as a rule of life unto believers, wherein they may express their gratitude by obeying the law of Christ.¹¹

In sum, Boston sees the law leading the unregenerate to Christ as a Savior who redeems them from its curse and condemnation, then leading the regenerate back to the law as a “directory, the rule and standard of their obedience.”¹²

4 II:63.

5 II:63.

6 II:63.

7 II:63.

8 II:63.

9 II:63.

10 II:64.

11 II:64.

12 II:64.

THE PENALTY FOR DISOBEDIENCE TO BIBLICAL LAW

Biblical Law and the Covenant of Works

With Adam, God originally established a covenant of works, according to Boston. This covenant included both a gracious element and a legal element. The gracious element included God's provision of eternal life, a companion, a garden, headship over the earth, plant life, and animal life, and full communion with God. The legal element included a negative component, a positive component, and the moral law of God written upon Adam's heart. The negative component was the prohibition to eat of the tree of life. The positive component was the command to keep the garden, multiply, and subdue the earth. The moral law written upon Adam's heart was later summarily codified in the Ten Commandments.

The Penalty for Breach of the Covenant of Works

Boston sees the breaking of the covenant of works resulting in a two-fold penalty. The penalty includes both legal and real dimensions. The legal dimension of the penalty is legal death. Legal death ensues from an “actual liableness to all miseries for satisfying offended justice.”¹³ Boston expostulates from Galatians 3:10, “cursed is every one that continueth not in all things which are written in the book of the law to do them”:

Thus was man to die the day he should break the covenant; and thus he died that very moment he sinned, because by his sin he broke the holy, just, and good law of God; set himself in opposition to his Creator.¹⁴

Boston illustrates the legal death described in Galatians 3:10:

Thus the clouds gathered over his head, to shower down upon him; and thus was he girded with the cords of death, which neither himself nor any other creature could loose.¹⁵

Boston also sees the penalty for breaking the covenant of works as “real death”. Real death includes spiritual death, natural death, and eternal death. Real death is the result of the sentence of Deuteronomy 29:19, 20. Threatened evils and punishments are contained in the curse of the law.¹⁶ Spiritual death is death of the soul and spirit, as described in Ephesians 2:1. Spiritual death is moral death of the soul, by which is “divested of the image of God, viz. saving knowledge, righteousness, and holiness.”¹⁷ In the state of spiritual death, sin preys upon the soul of man, through the course of his natural life in the world. As Boston eloquently elaborates:

13 XI:207.

14 XI:207-8.

15 XI:208.

16 XI:208.

17 XI:208.

Sin laid the soul as it were in the grave, the house of death; and there being dead while the man liveth, devouring death works and preys in, and upon it, two ways—In the progress of sin and corruption in the soul, as the body in the grave rots more and more, Psalm 14:3. The soul being spiritually dead, the longer it lies in that case, them or loathsome and abominable it becomes. Swarms of reigning lusts breed in it, and are active therein; the remains of the image of God are defaced more and more in it, and the soul still set farther off from God. All actual sins are the workings of this death, the motions of the verminating life of the soul in the grace of sin, Ephesians 2:1, 2. So that they are not only sins in themselves, but punishments of the first sin, which cannot cease to follow on God's departing from the soul; which may persuade us of the absurdity of that principle, that there is no sin in hell.¹⁸

Boston continues with a second way that “sin preys upon the soul of man”:

In the strokes of wrath on the soul. Where the carcass is, there these, like so many eagles, gather together. The sinning soul becomes the centre, wherein all manner of spiritual plagues meet together, as worms do in bodies interred, to feed thereon, Job 20:26. These are manifold; some of them felt, as sorrows terrors, anxieties, losses, and troubles, crossing the man's will, and so vexing fretting, and disquieting him. Those are indeed a death to the soul, having a curs in them, like so many envenomed arrows shot into man; some of them not felt, so as to make the man groan under them, as blindness of mind, hardness of heart, strong delusions, but they are the more dangerous, as wounds that bleed inwardly.¹⁹

But real death not only includes spiritual death, it includes natural death. Boston explains natural death to be death of the body. Natural death results from the separation of the soul from the body. The separation of the soul from the body is of two varieties: stinged and unstinged death. Unstinged death parts the soul and the body but not by the curse of sin. According to I Corinthians 15:55, death has no sting for the believer. Stinged death is death with the sting of the curse, Galatians 3:10.²⁰

Real death also includes eternal death. Eternal death “issues from the eternal separation of both soul and body from God in hell.” Matthew 25:41. Boston develops the concept of the curse upon both soul and body:

This is the full accomplishment of the curse of the covenant of works.; and presupposes the union of the soul and body, in a dreadful resurrection to damnation; the criminal soul and body being brought forth from their separate prisons and joined together again, that death may exercise its full force upon

18 XI:209.

19 XI:210.

20 XI:211-213.

them for ever and ever.²¹

This separation of the united soul and body from God is “an irrecoverable loss of God's friendship, favour and image.” As Boston explains:

No more communication for ever can be between God and the creature brought to this dreadful case. All passage of sanctifying influences is stopped; the curse lies on the creature, which bars all emanations of love and favour from heaven, and leaved it under unalterable barrenness. The holy frame of the soul marred by sin, must remain so, never to be mended.²²

Boston interprets Mark 9:44 to mean that the united soul and body in hell remains in "perpetual bitter despair." Further, in hell, the united soul and body are condemned to continual sinning:

Think and act they must; and how can they but sin, when their corrupt nature remains with them in hell? Submission to just punishment is their duty; but how can they do that in whose hearts is not the least measure of God's grace? Nay, they will gnash their teeth, in rage against God.²³

The reason for eternal death, according to Boston, is that offense against an infinite God can only be paid by infinite suffering. As Boston illustrates and explains:

Because they can not pay out the debt to the full, therefore must they ever lie in the prison. The wrong done by sin to the honour of God is an infinite one, because done against an infinite God; and therefore the satisfaction can never be completed by the finite sufferer. So the yoke of punishment is wreathed about the neck of the sinner for ever and ever, never to be taken off.²⁴

THREE CATEGORIES OF BIBLICAL LAW

Boston sees three kinds of law in the word: the ceremonial, the judicial, and the moral. Boston defines the ceremonial as specially given by Moses. This ceremonial law “bound only the Jews” until the coming of Christ.²⁵ Boston holds that Christ “abrogated” the ceremonial law because they were a “shadow of good things that were then to come: a hedge and partition-wall betwixt them and the Gentiles, which is now taken down.”

The judicial law was the civil law of the Jews. This judicial law, also given by Moses regulated the “civil concerns” of the Jewish nation, “in respect of which the Jewish

21 XI:213.

22 XI:214.

23 XI:214.

24 XI:214-15.

25 II:60.

government was a Theocracy.”²⁶ Boston's view of the application of the judicial law of the Jews to other nations is significant. Boston explicitly states that the judicial law of the Jews, although it made them a “happy people under such a government,” does “not bind other nations farther than it is of moral equity.”²⁷ Further, Boston explains the reason that the judicial law should not bind other nations beyond “moral equity” because it was “peculiarly adapted to the circumstances of that nation.”²⁸

Boston sees the moral law as “the declaration of the will of God to mankind, binding all men to perfect obedience thereto in all the duties of holiness and righteousness.” In contradistinction, Boston sees the ceremonial law as given to the Jews in their particular circumstances “as a church.”²⁹ Boston sees the judicial law as given to the Jews in their particular circumstances “as a state”. The moral law, however, was given to the Jews “in common with all mankind.”³⁰

THE MORAL LAW IN PARTICULAR

The Moral Law before Sinai

Before the written revelation of the decalogue by the finger of God at Sinai, and the subsequent written revelation of the Torah through Moses, “all the race of Adam had a law written in their hearts” according to Boston.³¹ Boston calls this law written in their hearts the “light of reason”. Boston further describes this “light of reason” as the “dictates of natural conscience”. In the dictates of natural conscience were moral principles concerning good and evil which have an “essential equity” in them and the “measures of his duty to God, to himself, and to his fellow-creatures.”³²

Boston defines the original law written in the heart of mankind in the same terms as Paul in Romans 12:2. The original law, according to Boston, was “holy, just, and good”. Boston defines “holy” as “conformity to those attributes and actions of God, which are the pattern of our imitation.” “Just” means, according to Boston, “exactly agreeable to the frame of man's faculties, and most suitable to his condition in the world.” “Good,” according to Boston, means “beneficial to the observer of it, for `in keeping of it there is great reward.”³³

In the state of innocence, Adam possessed the unadulterated image of God, consisting of the moral qualities and perfections of soul. Thus, the Lord imparted to Adam “a spark of his own comeliness, in order to communicate with himself in happiness. This was an

26 II:60.

27 II:61.

28 II:61.

29 II:61.

30 II:61.

31 II:60.

32 II:60.

33 II:60.

universal and entire rectitude in his faculties, disposing them to their proper operations.”

In the fallen state, Adam retained vestiges of the moral law in his sin-laden soul. Common notions of good and evil, including that there is a God, that He is to be worshipped, and that we should give every one his due are the remaining vestiges of the moral law originally written upon the heart.³⁴ The laws that are “common in all countries for the preserving of human societies” issue from the remaining vestiges of the moral law. “What standard else can they have for these laws but common reason?” The purpose of laws common in all countries is societal preservation, the encouragement of virtue, and the discouragement of vice.³⁵ Boston also sees an economic purpose of the laws “common in all countries.” “The design of them is to keep men within the bounds of goodness for mutual commerce.”³⁶ In the fallen state, the progeny of Adam retain inward evidence of the remaining vestiges of the moral law. “Every man”, according to Boston, “finds law within him that checks him if he offends it.” “None are without a legal indictment, and a legal executioner, within them.”³⁷ ³⁸

The Relation of the Original Natural Law and the Covenant of Works

Boston sees the original natural law as created the instant of Adam's creation, then incorporated into the covenant of works later in the Garden of Eden. As Boston explains: “The natural law was in being when there was no covenant of works; for the former was given to man in his creation, without paradise; the latter was made with him after he was brought into paradise” (Gen. 2:7, 8, 15, 16, 17).³⁹ ⁴⁰ The “chief matter” of the covenant of works was the original natural law. Boston explains this “chief matter” of the covenant of works as follows: “It was a rule of life to Adam before the covenant of works, and it may, yea and must be a rule of life to believers, after the covenant of works, and in that covenant a rule of life to Adam and all his natural seed...”⁴¹

Boston distinguishes the natural law and the covenant of works according to several features: First, the original natural law had no promise of eternal life. Second, the original natural law had no threatening of death. Boston speculates that after the creation of Adam in Genesis 1 and the institution of the covenant of works in Genesis 2, God could have “annihilated his creature” because He had not bound himself to give eternal life to his creature.⁴² Further, Boston argues that since the original natural law was built into Adam's created psyche, “why may it not be made the matter of the law of Christ, and therein be a rule of life to them that are his?”

34 II:61.

35 II:61.

36 II:61.

37 II:61.

38 XI:191.

39 XI:191-92.

40 XI:191.

41 XI:192.

42 XI:192.

In an aside, Boston piercingly jabs at the reader, urging the reader to “see their deep concern in this covenant; and consider that your help is not therein, but in laying hold on Christ, the head of the second covenant.”⁴³ ⁴⁴ Boston sees the original natural law implanted in Adam and the covenant of works as “several links in one chain, constitutions of the Supreme Lawgiver, which, in point of obedience, stood and fell together.”

Boston discerns another law, besides the natural law in Adam's constitution and the covenant of works, to which Adam yielded obedience. Boston calls this third legal corpus “the positive symbolical law.” God did not forbid Adam to eat of the tree of knowledge because of any evil in the tree. “It was not forbidden because it was evil; but evil because forbidden.” Although this point may be “minute”, Boston notes that in the “most minute things God appears greatest.”⁴⁵

Boston believes that God established a symbolical law to emphasize a precise point regarding the will of God. The symbolical law was a trial of Adam's obedience exactly suited to pristine state. Obedience to this symbolic law would be the “most glaring evidence of true obedience.”⁴⁶ Not to have another God, not to create images, not to take God's name in vain, and not to keep the Sabbath were not fit probationary commands for Adam in his pristine state. Further, the commands of the second table of the law would not be adequate demonstrations of Adam's obedience because Adam originally had no neighbor until Eve's creation, who was his own flesh.⁴⁷

The minute character of the symbolical law was appropriate to Adam's pristine state for other reasons: First, Adam had an affinity with the nature of God. Second, Adam had an originally pure nature.⁴⁸ Boston further vindicates the symbolical law: “Thus his obedience or disobedience behooved to be most clear, conspicuous, and undeniable; forasmuch as this law respected as external thing obvious to sense, and the discerning of any, who yet could not judge of internal acts of obedience or disobedience. So that God might be ‘clear in judging’, Psalm 51:4, in the eyes of angels good and bad, and of man himself. ⁴⁹ To Boston, the tree was a “visible badge” of obedience. As Boston explains, “It was most proper for asserting God's dominion over man, being a visible badge of man's subjection to God. God had made him lord of the inferior world, set him down in paradise, a place furnished with all things for necessity and delight; so it was becoming the divine wisdom and sovereign dominion, to discharge him from meddling with one tree in the garden, as a testimony of his holding all of him as his great Landlord.”⁵⁰ ⁵¹

43 XI:192.

44 XI:192.

45 XI:193.

46 XI:193.

47 XI:193.

48 XI:193.

49 XI:193.

50 XI:193.

51 II:66.

Boston calls one seeking to enter into eternal life by means of keeping the law a “self-justiciary.” To avert the self-justiciary's focus from a vain hope of law keeping to the severity of the law itself, Christ in Matthew 19:17 answers him, “If thou wilt enter into life keep the commandments.” Boston understands “the commandments” as the ten commandments. Further, Boston sees the ten commandments as the summation of the “whole moral law”.

The origin of the ten commandments, according to Boston, is two-fold: the audible voice of God and the finger of God. Boston paints the occasion of the audible voice of God with majestic strokes:

Never was law given in such a solemn manner, with such dread and awful majesty, Exodus 19; Deuteronomy 4:5; Hebrews 12:18. The people were commanded to wash their clothes before the law was delivered them. By this, as in a type, the Lord required the sanctifying of their ears and hearts to receive it. There were bounds and limits set to the mount, that it might breed in the people dread and reverence to the law, and to God the holy and righteous Lawgiver. There were great thunderings and lightnings. The artillery of heaven was shot off at that solemnity, and therefore it is called `a fiery law.' The angels attended at the delivery of the law. The heavenly militia, to speak so, were all mustered out on this important occasion. In a word, the law was promulgated with marks of supreme majesty; God by all this shewing how a vain thing it is for sinners to expect life by the works of the law; and thereby also shewing the necessity of a Mediator.⁵²

Accordingly, Boston interprets the purpose of the majestic accoutrements of the law's delivery as the humbling of mankind. If mankind perceives his insignificance before the majesty of the divine holiness, mankind should perceive his inability to earn eternal life by means of the law.⁵³ The second aspect of the moral law's origin is the finger of God himself. Moses received “immediately from God himself”, two tables of stone in Exodus 31. Boston sees the purpose of God's using stone as twofold: that God might “hold out the perpetuity of the law” and secondly, that God might show “withal the hardness of men's hearts.”⁵⁴

Because of the response the original stone tables of the law would have received, Moses cast them down. In Boston's view, Moses did not break the original tablets to signify the people's breaking the law. Rather, Boston sees Moses as preserving the integrity of the law by preventing the rebellious people from making sport of the tablets.⁵⁵

The second tables were hewn by Moses and engraved by the finger of God. Boston interprets the significance of the Moses' hewing the tablets and God's engraving the law

52 II:66-67.

53 II:67.

54 II:67.

55 II:67.

as follows: The sinner is “hewn” by the law, that is the law defines the sinner to be what he is. As the sinner is saved, God gives the sinner a new fleshy heart whereupon “the spirit of gospel-grace is the law written upon the heart.”⁵⁶ Boston holds that the first writing in the world was God's engraving the Ten Commandments and that Moses used the alphabet derived directly from God. From the law written upon the stone tablets, all written language began.

The moral law was given, according to Boston, because man's inner law of nature is defective in that the inner law of nature can not lead man to God. Boston sees the inner law of nature as defective for several reasons.⁵⁷ First, the inner law of nature is defective because it cannot expose the first cause of man's misery, Adam's first sin. “Mere natural light can never teach a man to feel the weight and curse of sin committed some thousands of years before he was born, or to mourn for that filthiness, which he contracted in his conception, and for those sproutings of sin in his nature.”⁵⁸

Second, the inner law of nature is defective because natural judgment is “thoroughly distorted and infatuated, so that it is ready to reckon evil good, and good evil, light darkness and darkness light.”⁵⁹ Third, the inner law of nature is defective because it does not “drive men out of themselves for a remedy.” Boston surveys the entirety of the fields of literature and philosophy and concludes that “the sublimest philosophy that ever was did never teach a man to deny himself, but always taught him to build up his house with the old ruins, and to fetch stores and materials out of the wonted quarry. Shame, humiliation, confusion of face, self-abhorrence, condemning ourselves, and flying to the righteousness of another, are virtues known only in the book of God, and which the learned philosophers would have esteemed both irrational and pusillanimous things.”⁶⁰

Fourth, the inner law of nature is defective because by nature “men never knew nor had experience of a better state, and therefore must needs be ignorant of that full image of God in which it was created.” Boston illustrates the fundamental ignorance of the natural man through a series of analogies:

As a man born and brought up in a dungeon is unable to conceive the state of the palace; or a as the child of a nobleman stolen away, an brought up by some beggar, cannot conceive or suspect the honours of his blood; so corrupted nature is utterly unable, that has been born in a womb of ignorance, bred in a hell of uncleanness, and enthralled from the beginning to the prince of darkness, to conceive, or convince a man of, that most holy and pure condition in which he was created.⁶¹

56 II:67.

57 II:67-68.

58 II:67-68.

59 II:68.

60 II:68.

61 II:68.

Additionally, the moral law was given to prevent, according to Boston, the knowledge of the Lord's revelation from perishing.

Perfect Law-Keeping Necessary to Escape the Wrath of God

Boston explains that to escape the wrath and curse of God, one must have kept the law of God perfectly.⁶² Since none can keep the law of God perfectly, the law-breaker must be united to Christ, the law-keeper. As the law was the covenant of works, it was of use to the Israelites.⁶³ According to Boston, the faith of the law to be presented to sinners. “Whosoever then would enter into the covenant of grace, must, in the first place, have a faith of the law; which therefore is necessary to be preached to sinners.”⁶⁴ Through faith in the law, the sinner, a “breaker of the law's commands, liable to divine vengeance” finds their need for grace.⁶⁵ As Boston elaborates:

By the law man believes, that his is a lost and undone sinner, under the curse of the law for his sin, Galatians 3:10. He no more looks on the curse of the law as some strange think, belonging only to some monsters of wickedness, and far from him. But the Spirit of God brings home the dreadful sentence of that broken law, and applies it close to him, as if he had said, thou are the man. And he groans out his belief thereof under the felt weight thereof, like a man under the sentence of death, Romans 7:9.⁶⁶

The Law as the Rule of Life for Believers

Boston masterfully explains the role of the law as the rule of life for believers by means of an allegory. Four parties, each representing some view of the law, engage in conversation. “Evangelista” or Gospel minister converses according to the biblical view of the law. “Neophitus” or the young Christian inquires regarding what is the right role of the law in the life of the believer. “Nomista” or legalist speaks according to a legalistic view of sanctification. This view of sanctification holds that the believer is sanctified by means of law-works in the energy of the flesh. “Antinomista” or antinomian exhibits the view that the law has no part in the believer's sanctification. The interplay of the four characters representing the four perspectives is extremely effective pedagogically. As Bunyan allegorized the progress of the Christian pilgrim, so Boston allegorized the various views of the law in sanctification.⁶⁷

In his allegory, Boston interacts with the views of Luther in his commentary on Galatians and Calvin in his Institutes. Boston quotes Luther: “The conscience hath nothing to do with the law or works.”⁶⁸ Boston also quotes Calvin: “The conscience of the faithful, when the affiance of their justification before God is to be sought, must raise and advance

62 II:395.

63 VII:215.

64 I:360.

65 I:360.

66 I:360.

67 VII:305ff.

68 VII:312.

themselves above the law, and forget the whole righteousness of the law, and lay aside all thinking upon works.”⁶⁹ Through the allegorical character “Evangelista”, Boston explains both Luther and Calvin. According to Boston, neither spoke of the law in the quoted statements except in the case of justification. According to Boston, the believer's keeping the law in sanctification through the power of the Holy Spirit is the believer's keeping the law of Christ.⁷⁰ Through the power of the Holy Spirit, Christ in the believer keeps the law. Therefore, the law of Christ neither justifies nor condemns.⁷¹

The Ten Commandments

Boston compares Genesis 1:27 with Ephesians 4:24 and concludes that the law given to Adam in the garden and Adam himself were both “created righteous and holy”. Boston sees the “natural law” and the “law of the ten commandments” as one in essence. Therefore, according to Galatians 3:10, “all things which are written in the book of the law” include one legal essence, whether viewed from the natural perspective or the perspective of Scripture. Boston sees as “evident” that Adam knew in the garden the content of the corpus of divine law.⁷² To Boston, knowledge of the law is an essential part of righteousness and holiness. Further, Boston equates Adam's knowledge of the law and Adam's original righteousness and holiness with the image of God. Among the heathen, Boston perceives the “remains” of the law originally imparted into Adam's being. Boston interprets “the same law which God gave from Sinai with thunder and lightning, in all the precepts of it was breathed into Adam's soul, when God breathed into him the breath of life and he became a living soul.”⁷³ Boston defines “all created righteousness and holiness” as “conformity to the moral law.” Boston understands the law of God to be an integral component of Adam's creation (cf. Eccl. 7:29).⁷⁴

As soon as Adam had being therefore, he was perfectly conformed to the law of God. As Boston explains, “He was no sooner a man than he was a righteous man, knowing the natural law he was under, and being conformed to it in the powers and faculties of his soul.”⁷⁵ Boston defines natural law not as the Thomist theorists, but rather the law originally built into Adam's psyche at his creation.

Boston sees the words of the Lord Jesus in Matthew 22:37-39 as a sum of the natural law or the law of the Ten Commandments. The first and greatest commandment is “thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all they soul, and with all thy mind.” The second commandment is similar it the first: “Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself.”⁷⁶

69 VII:313.

70 VII:313.

71 XI:191

72 XI:191

73 XI:191

74 XI:191

75 XI:191

76 XI:191

THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN BIBLICAL LAW AND THE GOSPEL

Biblical Law is Partially Inherent—the Gospel is Not

Boston describes the law as a partly inherent in fallen human nature: The law is a doctrine partly known by nature, teaching us that there is a God, and what God is, and what he requires us to do, “binding all reasonable creatures to perfect obedience, both internal and external, promising the favour of God, and everlasting life to all those who yield perfect obedience thereunto, and denouncing the curse of God and everlasting damnation to all those who are not perfectly correspondent thereunto.”⁷⁷ The Gospel, however, is not inherent in fallen human nature. Rather, the Gospel “is a doctrine revealed from heaven by the Son of God.”⁷⁸

The Preaching of the Law is Necessary, but Only the Gospel Saves

The preaching of the law is necessary, according to Boston, because by it the sinner learns of their need for Christ. As Boston illustrates:

He that would engraft, must needs use the pruning-knife. Sinners have many contrivances to keep them from Christ; many things by which they keep their hold of the natural stock; there they have need to be closely pursued, and hunted out of their skulking holes, and refuges of lies.⁷⁹

Boston's treatment of Romans 6:14 would distinguish from the theological category called “dispensationalism.” Boston does not interpret the text according to chronological epochs, where “law” is a past epoch and “grace” is the present epoch. Rather, Boston interprets the “law” in Romans 6:14 to mean the covenant of works. Believers, therefore, are not under the covenant of law to either be justified or condemned thereby.⁸⁰ Because Christ gave perfect obedience to the law as a covenant of works, the believer is under neither the commanding nor the condemning power of the law. Because Christ's perfect obedience satisfied the law's demands, the character of the law can demand nothing of believers, according to Boston. Christ's passive obedience also satisfied the demands of the law because He bore its punishment, “having suffered the very penalty threatened therein.”⁸¹ In Christ therefore, the believer can have no law against them because believers in Christ are agreeable to the very letter and spirit thereof.

BIBLICAL LAW AND THE DISTINCTION OF CHURCH AND STATE

Boston distinguishes between the law of the state and government of Christ's kingdom.⁸² As Boston explains:

77 VIII:459. V
78 III:459.V
79 III:200.I
80 I:64.I
81 I:64.I
82 :486.I

The kings of the earth have no ground to grudge the kingdom of Christ its freedom in their dominions; seeing it is a spiritual kingdom, and quite of another nature than the kingdoms of this world; and interferes not with any of the just rights and prerogatives of earthly crowns. Yet how sad is it that this kingdom should be an eye-sore to the kings of the earth, and that they should employ their power to suppress and bear it down?⁸³

Boston, therefore, espouses the concept of sphere sovereignty. Although one may influence the other, the church and state are to operate in distinct spheres. Boston underscores the duty of magistrates to their subjects. First, they ought to establish good laws among their subjects, and to see them duly executed. Boston cites Zechariah 16:2 and 2 Chronicles 19:5-7. Second, they must govern their subjects with wisdom, justice, and clemency according to 2 Chronicles 1:10. Third, they must punish evil-doers, and encourage them that do well according to Romans 13:3.⁸⁴ Fourth, they must protect their subjects, and provide for their common safety (1 Timothy 2:2), see to their prosperity, and not to oppress them (Proverbs 28:16). Fifth, magistrates, according to Boston, “ought to promote true religion, and advance the interest of Christ’s kingdom among their subjects.” Boston cites Isaiah 49:23 in support: “and kings shall be thy nursing fathers, and their queens thy nursing mothers: they shall bow down to thee with their face toward the earth, and lick up the dust of thy feet; and thou shalt know that I am the Lord: for they shall not be ashamed that wait for me.”⁸⁵ Boston clearly denies the Knoxian position that believers not only have the right but the responsibility to overthrow wicked rulers. In contradistinction, Boston argues:

Lust us be dutiful to subordinate magistrates under him, and honour those whom God has honoured by their office, saying to them, “ye are gods.” Lust us not stumble atheists, Jacobites, and malignants, against our holy religion, by contempt of the magistrate. We read the Bible, where subjection is commanded to subjects oft and again, even to magistrates that were enemies to Christianity. We are the followers of that Jesus who paid his tribute, and taught the people of the Jews, who were more solemnly covenanted with God, and more strictly bound up in the choice of their kings, than any nation under heaven, yet not to deny their tribute to Caesar, the Heathen Roman emperor, who then was their chief magistrate.

Boston then cites Matthew 22:19-21 in support, where Jesus paid his tax with Peter to the Roman government.⁸⁶

CONCLUSION

The works of Thomas Boston reflect a keen understanding of the function of biblical law

83 :486.

84 II:249. I

85 II:250.

86 II:250.I

in systematic theology. Biblical law is a skeleton around which other branches of theology are positioned. In the current scheme of theological schools, Boston would probably not be classified a “theonomist”. Because Boston held that the judicial law of Israel was peculiar to Israel, he apparently did not hold the Mosaic judicial sanctions should be applied to other nations. To Boston, the judicial law of Israel should not bind other nations beyond “moral equity” because the judicial law of Israel was “peculiarly adapted to the circumstances of that nation.”⁸⁷ What “moral equity” means remains a point to ponder. No extant literature clearly defines Boston's meaning in the crucial phase “moral equity”. “Moral equity”, like the similar phrase in the Westminster Confession, “general equity”, remains a theological battleground. Would to God we could ask Boston, “Should an adulterer be publicly stoned? Should they be publicly executed but not necessarily by stoning? Should they receive the death penalty only as a maximum penalty (cf. Num. 35:31)?”

87 I:61.