

John Owen's View of Substantive Biblical Law

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Some historians refer to John Owen as “prince of Puritan divines”, since his influence exceeded other Congregationalist luminaries. His scholarship is involved with a tone of certainty, derived in part from the scope of his learning, as well as from his reverence for the Word of God, and his desire to see all Scripture inter-related. Owen's treatment includes an exposition of the text itself, and in addition a system of related texts. His spiritual incisiveness and insight make him a Christian scholar of value and reputation.

OWEN'S DESCRIPTION OF THE LAW OF GOD IN GENERAL

Owen's Definition of the Law of God

Owen's definition of the law of God is simple yet profound. “The law is the beam of the holiness of God himself.” Whatever the law of God communicates to anyone, it does so in the name and authority of God. Biblical law, therefore, is both “of God” and “from God.” Biblical law is “of God” because its content is a direct reflection of who and what God is. Biblical law is the character of God recorded in writing, but also it comes “from God.”¹ The source of biblical law is not the people, and neither is it from any particular religious organization. Rather, the source of biblical law is unique because it issues from God alone.

Owen's View of the Nature of the Law of God

Owen's Catechism, a profound complement to the Westminster Divines' Smaller Catechism, though not equal in length to the Larger Catechism, covers both the nature and the purpose of the law of God.² Owen explicates his views of the nature of God's law by answering a series of related questions.

1 John Owen, ed. William Gould, *The Works of John Owen* (London: Johnstone and Hunter, 1851), VI:389.

2 I:476.

Owen's Catechism on the Nature of the Law of God

In his catechism, Owen's first question on the law of God is "which is the law that God gave man at first to fulfill?" He answers that the law of God did not begin at Mt. Horeb in Exodus 20, but rather with the creation of Adam, adding that the reason this law has binding authority has nothing to do with it being given to the Israelites. Rather, Owen sees the reason the law of God binds all mankind is that it is written on our hearts by the finger of God as part of his creative work. He argues this from the *locus classicus* Romans 2:14, 15.³

Owen's second question follows from the first. There are five passages that he appropriates to show the "uttermost tittle" of the law of God is still required of us: Matthew 5:17, 1 John 3:4, Romans 3:31, James 2:8-10, and Galatians 3. (1) Matthew 5:17 establishes the abiding validity of the law. Owen chooses this passage because it is the thesis of Christ's first sermon (Matthew 5-7). Christ did not come to destroy the law but to "fill it to the full (plhrwsai)."⁴ (2) Owen's choice of I John 3:4 is a skillful use of arguing from the obverse. The text contends that sin is the transgression of the law. Since sin is forbidden in every detail, then the obverse of sin, which is conformity to the law, must also be comprehensive.⁵ (3) In Romans 3:31, Paul clearly states that Apostolic teaching does not void the law; rather, Apostolic teaching establishes it.⁶ (4) James 2:8-10 further elucidates the authority of the law, for to violate the least point of the law is to break it entirely.⁷ (5) Galatians 3 discusses the relationship between God's law and the doctrine of justification by faith. in particular (Galatians 3:21) stating that the doctrine does not contradict the Gospel, and vice versa.⁸

Owen's third question involves the power that is required to keep the law. He argues from the perspective of distinct natures that fallen man cannot keep the law. Law is spiritual, whereas fallen man is carnal.⁹

In his fourth question Owen defends God's propriety as lawmaker. Although fallen man cannot keep the law, he once had the capacity to keep the law when God first gave it. Adam and Eve were created with the law of God written upon their hearts, according to Owen, who draws on Genesis 1:26, Ephesians 4:19, Romans 5:12 to establish that man once had the capacity to keep God's law.¹⁰

3 I:476.

4 I:476.

5 I:476.

6 I:476.

7 I:476.

8 I:476.

9 I:476. In support Owen cites I Kings 8:46; Gen. 6:5; John 15:5; Rom. 7:14; 8:7; I John 1:8.

10 I:476.

Owen's View of the Purpose of the Law of God

Owen's Catechism on the General Purpose of the Law of God

Owen's fifth and sixth catechism questions pertain to the purpose of God's law. By this question, he concludes that the law has two objectives of a general nature (Psalm 19:7-11; I Timothy 1:8, 9; Galatians 3:24). First, we must discover what obedience to God entails. Second, observing the law drives us to Christ.¹¹

In his sixth question, Owen explains how God's law inclines us to Christ. Owen sees the law of God beckoning us to Christ in three ways: (1) by "laying open . . . the utter disability of our nature to do any good (Romans 7:7-9 and Galatians 3:9), (2) by charging the conscience with the "wrath and curse of God, due to sin" (Romans 3:19, 20; 4:15; 5:20); (3) by bringing the soul into bondage to sin, to Satan, death, and hell. This bondage makes us "long and seek for a Savior".¹²

The Whole of the Law of God Expresses the Holiness of God

Just as the law expresses the authority of God, so it speaks to his holiness. Being exposed to the holiness of God results in shame for the sinner, comprised of a sense of the filth of sin. Owen calls this "poena damni",¹³ referring to any conformity to the law of God as "macula" (spot, stain, and filth), because the law expresses God's holiness.¹⁴ Owen sees both the fear and shame produced by the law as "perverse disorder and shameful crookedness", allowing one to compare law's purity with the filth of sin.¹⁵

The Whole of the Law of God Expresses the Authority of God,

Because the law expresses the authority of God, as Owen explains, "guilt inseparably follows every sin."¹⁶ Even though the act of sinning may diminish in time, the guilt of the act remains, a residual, continuing guilt that produces fear. Fear is an expression of guilt, says Owen. He notes that Adam spoke of fear because he was guilty. "I heard thy voice, and I was afraid" (Genesis 3:10). The authority of God, as embedded in the law, produces fear in the sinner, which Owen call "peona sensus".

The Specific Purpose of the Old Testament Law and Sacrifices

Owen sees that Old Covenant sacrifice is designed to remedy the guilt of sinners. "In the doctrine of the law, with the sanction and curse of it, and the institution of sacrifices to

11 I:476.

12 I:476. Owen cites in support Galatians 3:22; Hebrews 2:15.

13 III:428.

14 III:428.

15 III:428.

16 III:428.

make atonement for sin, God declared the nature of guilt and its remedy.”¹⁷ The Old Covenant law and sacrifices provide object lessons regarding the nature of guilt, and how God may remove that guilt.

The Function of the Law Negatively Defined

According to Owen, the law cannot demonstrate forgiveness nor dispense mercy. The sanctions of the law, in their entirety, lie against the sinner, speaking with simplicity and finality, such that there is no mercy. To support this proposition, Owen cites both Deuteronomy 27:26 and Galatians 3:10, “cursed is he that continueth not in all things in the book of the law to do them.” Further, as Paul explains in Galatians 3:10, those who “are under the law are under the curse”, in addition reminding us that the “law is not of faith” (Galatians 3:12).¹⁸ Owen says that the law communicates to one and all “do this and live; fail and die.”¹⁹ Both in general and in particular, the law pronounces sentence with no right of appeal.²⁰

The Function of the Law Positively Defined

The Law is “Connatural” to the Sinner

Owen uses the term “connatural” to describe the proximity of God's law to every sinner (“domestic” and “acquaintance” are synonymous with “connatural”). He contends that the law of God and the sinner are companions,²¹ in Owen's mind inseparable from birth:

It came into the world with him, and hath grown up with him from his infancy. It was implanted in his heart by nature, -- is his own reason; he can never shake it off or part with it. It is his familiar, his friend, that cleaves to him as the flesh to the bone; so that they who have not the law written cannot but show forth the work of the law . . . because the law itself is inbred to them. And all the faculties of the soul are at peace with it, in subjection to it. It is the bond and ligament of their union, harmony, and correspondency among themselves, in all their moral actings. It gives life, order, motion to them all.²²

Because an everlasting union embeds a sinner in God's law, Owen argues that the sinner ought to heed the testimony which the law represents:²³

Now, shall not a man rather believe a domestic, a friend, indeed himself, than a foreigner, as stranger, that comes with uncouth principles, and such a suit is not

17 III:429.

18 VI:389.

19 VI:389.

20 VI:389.

21 VI:389.

22 VI. 390

23 VI. 390

reason at all? I Corinthians 1:18.²⁴

Natural law coexists with sinners, compelling the conscience to condemn sinful acts.²⁵

The Law and Conscience Concur in their Communication to the Sinner

The concurrence of testimony linking law and conscience is constant, says Owen, interpreting Romans 1:32 in this light. Should the law say, “this or that is a sin worthy of death” our conscience replies, “It is even so”, and then continues, “This and that is sin, so worthy of death, is the soul guilty of.” The law replies, “Then die as thou hast deserved,”²⁶ and pronounces the sinner dead.

The Law Receives Concurrence from the Sinner

The law's message to the soul is “against the soul's interest”, asserts Owen. But because the law communicates only justice, righteousness, and equity, the law is persuasive enough to gain the soul's consent.²⁷ Citing Romans 1:32, Owen reminds us that all men know that the voice of the law is the “judgment of God,” confirmation for which is in Romans 7:12-13, “wherefore the law is holy, and the commandment holy, and just, and good. Was then that which was good made death unto me? God forbid. But sin, that it might appear sin, working death in me by that which is good; that sin by the commandment might become exceeding sinful.” It is the authority of the law, the way it accords with conscience, and the reasonableness of the things it proposes, that convinces us of its veracity.²⁸

The Law Speaks with Authority

To disbelieve the law, according to Owen, is to call God a liar. When the law speaks, it speaks not in its own name but in the name of the one who has authored it. Owen sees the commonality shared by law and God's substance as an important connection,²⁹ adding authority to the demands of the law.

The Law Contradicts False Notions of Forgiveness

Owen says categorically that testimony ascribed to the law is such that there is no forgiveness, asserting further that “they that shall flatter themselves with a contrary persuasion will find themselves woefully mistaken at the great day.”³⁰ According to Owen, even the heathen philosophers understand that God is the avenger, and that it is his

24 VI. 390

25 VI. 390

26 VI. 390.

27 VI. 390.

28 VI. 390.

29 VI:391-92.

30 VI:391.

province as ruler and governor of the universe to exact punishment for all sin.³¹ Using as his example a heathen's fear of God's judgment, Owen asserts that such people tremble with fear in the presence of “thunderings, lightnings, tempests, or darkness.” The heathen's secret belief is that God is nigh, and a consuming fire.³² The universal belief that there is a God, and that He is the avenger sin, mitigates any false hopes of remission.³³

Owen's View of the Limitations of the Law of God

Although Owen validates and defines the grandeur and breadth of the law, he does not see the law as a self-sufficient means of recognizing sin. The mirror is accurate, but the sinner does not have eyes to see what is truly reflected. A sinner lacks the wherewithal to recognize the sin, and because of this inability to perceive and utilize spiritual truth, Christ sends his Spirit to convince the world of its sin (John 16:8).³⁴

Owen's Exposition of the Law of God in Particular

God is the Sovereign Lawgiver

In his discussion of James 4:12, “there is one lawgiver, who is able to save and to destroy,” Owen highlights the sovereignty of the sole Lawgiver. God alone has power to prescribe whatever laws he pleases.³⁵ Owen explains that when orders come from one who himself has a superior, then the order has limited credibility, because the superior might choose to countermand it. As Owen says: “there is no room for tergiversation”³⁶ so that when God's orders are disobeyed, we may infer that person is despised, for to disobey his commands is to despise the “whole authority of God”.³⁷ Scriptures remind us that God refers to sinners who break his commands as “despising of him” (Num. 11:20; I Sam. 2:30), “despising of his name” (Mal. 1:6), and the “despising of his commandment” (II Sam. 12:9).³⁸ Owen concludes: “Being, then, under the command of God to be holy, not to endeavor always and in all things so to be is to despise God, to reject his sovereign authority over us, and to live in defiance of him.”³⁹

The Delineations of the Law of the Sovereign Lawgiver

The General Distinctions of the Moral Law, Ceremonial Law, and the Law of Christ

31 VI:392.

32 VI:392.

33 VI:392.

34 II:95.

35 III:610.

36 III:610.

37 III:610.

38 III:610.

39 III:610.

Owen believes that it is necessary to make distinctions regarding the Old Testament law, and that these are twofold—moral and ceremonial, and not three-fold (moral, judicial, and ceremonial), the categories common to Reformed circles of our own times.⁴⁰ Owen grouped the decalogue, the case laws, and the sanctions appended to the case laws into a single category, “the moral law”.

The Laws of Christ are Executed by His Apostles

In Owen's view the Apostles have the authority to execute all of Christ's laws, “with the penalties annexed unto their disobedience,” citing II Corinthians 10:6: “We have in a readiness wherewith to revenge all disobedience.” The punishment for disobedience is excommunication, in the main. He defines excommunication as the “judiciary excision of any person or persons from the society of the faithful and visible body of Christ in the world.”⁴¹

The New Testament Believer's Liberty from the Law

The New Testament Believer's Liberty from the Ceremonial Law

As with other Protestants, Owen agrees that the Old Testament ceremonial ordinances are no longer binding upon believers, who are freed from the law of ordinances. (According to the Jerusalem general assembly, this was the burden that believers of Old Testament times could not carry (Acts 15:10).) Owen sees a link between Colossians 2:14 and Galatians 5:1, in relation to Old Testament ceremonial law. Owen interprets Colossians 2:14, as do most Reformation Protestants, to mean that Christ refuted ceremonial elements of the law, thus “taking them out of the way” by “nailing them to his cross”. Believers must therefore “stand fast in the liberty wherewith Christ hath made us free” (Galatians 5:1). Christ's abrogation of ceremonial ordinances leaves those who follow New Testament teachings at liberty to do so.⁴²

The New Testament Believer's Liberty from the Terror of the Moral Law

Owen sees that not only is a person who believes in the New Testament freed from Old Testament ceremonial law, but also he can enjoy certain liberties regarding moral law. In Owen's opinion, Old Testament moral law is “rigorous”, resulting in “terror”, alluding to God's giving the law to Moses on Mt. Sinai (Exodus 19 and 20). The “dread and terror” of that occasion is absent from the New Testament, where a sense of freedom prevails because people are compelled by dread and terror no longer.⁴³ Owen cites in evidence Hebrews 12:18-22, “we are not come to the mount that might be touched, and that burned with fire, to the whirlwind, darkness, and tempest, to the sound of the trumpet, and the voice of words, which they that heard besought that they might hear it no more; but we

40 V:30.

41 IV:444.

42 II:212.

43 II:212.

are come to mount Sion . . .”

The New Testament Believer's Liberty from the Impossibility of Accomplishing Moral Law

For Owen the New Testament believer also lives in a state of relative liberty from the impositions of moral law. Because of Christ's ministry, such believers find themselves exempted from having to merit salvation by obeying the law. Owen regards this liberty as one of the blessings of the New Testament, as subscribed to by Romans 8:2, 3 and Galatians 3:21-23. The righteousness of Christ relieves believers from their debt to moral law (Romans 8:3). These believers are enabled to meet the demands of law by the Spirit. It is the Spirit that energizes New Testament believers to live out the righteousness of Christ, who lives within them.⁴⁴

The New Testament Believer's Liberty from the Results of Transgression of the Moral Law

Owen contends that there are two outcomes of moral law that afflict every transgressor, and these are either a curse or death.⁴⁵ “The whole wrath annexed” to moral law constitutes a curse. Citing Galatians 3:3, Owen establishes that a believer is delivered from the curse: “Christ hath redeemed us from the curse of the law by being made a curse for us.”⁴⁶ Not only is the believer redeemed from the curse of the law, but also from the sentence of the law, which is death itself. (According to Hebrews 2:15, the New Testament believer is at liberty from death.)⁴⁷

The New Testament Believer's Liberty from Satan, Sin, the World, and the Claims of Satan, Sin, and the World

Additionally, the liberty of the New Testament believer excludes the influence of Satan (Hebrews 2:14 and Colossians 1:13).⁴⁸ Because this liberty is a liberty from sin (Romans 6:14 and 1 Peter 1:18).⁴⁹ Moreover, not only is the New Testament believer set at liberty from the world (Galatians 1:4),⁵⁰ but also is free from "all the attendancies, advantages, and claims" of Satan, sin, and the world (Galatians 4:3-5 and Colossians 2:20).

The New Testament Believer's Liberty from the Law

The Ceremonial Law of the Old Testament Represented the Glory of Christ

44 II:212.

45 II:212.

46 II:212.

47 II:212.

48 II:212.

49 II:212.

50 II:212.

Extolling the virtues of Old Testament ceremonial law, Owen remarks:

What were the tabernacle and temple? What was the holy place with the utensils of it? What was the oracle, the ark, the cherubim, the mercy-seat, placed therein? What was the high priest in all his vestments and administrations? What were the sacrifices and annual sprinkling of blood in the most holy place? What was the whole system of their religious worship? Were they anything but representations of Christ in the glory of his person and his office. They were a shadow, and the body represented by that shadow was Christ.⁵¹

In his treatment of Hebrews 9, Owen says: "all that Moses did in the erection of the tabernacle, and the institution of all its services, was but to give antecedent testimony by way of representation, unto the things of Christ that were afterward to be revealed." This was the substance of the prophets' ministry (I Peter I: 11, 12),⁵² hence Owen calls ceremonial laws "the dark apprehensions of the glory of Christ", and therefore "the life of the church of old."⁵³

Christ Declared the Spiritual Inward Nature of the Law of God

In his discussion of Christ's relation to the law, Owen says the Jews entertained a belief that the law would reclaim its former purity when the Messiah came. For this reason, Owen highlights the importance of the law in Christ's ministry:

Herein did the Lord Christ place the beginning of his prophetic office and ministry, Matthew 5, 6, 7. He opened, unveiled, explained, and vindicated, the preceptive part of the will of God before revealed, to the end that by a compliance therewith we should be holy.

Christ revealed the inward spiritual nature of the law, the truth of its interpretation, "their nature, signification, and extent, vindicating them from all the corrupt and false glosses which passed current in the church, whereby there was an abatement made of their efficacy and an indulgence granted unto the lusts of men."⁵⁴ Making his point, draws on an example that Christ himself acknowledged. At the time of Christ, biblical scholars insisted that "thou shalt not kill" referred only to murder.⁵⁵ It was as the Great Prophet that Christ explained how the commandment forbade injurious thoughts as well, thus reviving the spirituality of the law.

Christ is not a Lawgiver of a New Law

Long before the ministry of J. N. Darby, founder of the Plymouth Brethren and the dispensational hermeneutic, a debate raged even in the Puritan era regarding whether

51 I:348.

52 I:348, 49.

53 I:349.

54 III:632.

55 III:632.

Christ instituted laws or merely endorsed those that existed already. Richard Baxter, for instance, the chief proponent of “neo-nomianism”, held that Christ instituted a new law, which if a sinner obeyed, would result in salvation. In dealing with this very issue, Owen says he will not “inmix” himself “in any needless disputations”, but in his catechism contends that Christ endorsed existing laws existing at the Creation and codified on Mt. Horeb. Owen would not endorse neo-nomianism. Were he privy to the modern debate over dispensationalism, Owen would not endorse Darby's point of view.⁵⁶

For him Old Testament law divides into two: the moral preceptive category and the category of institutional worship, both of which Owen regarded as law;⁵⁷ any part not included in institutional worship he describes as “moral”.

Owen is adamantly against what is now called the dispensational hermeneutic, particularly in relation to the moral preceptive category of Old Testament law:

The Lord Christ gave no new law, nor was the old abrogated by him—which it must be if another were given in the room of it, unto the same ends. For the introduction of a new law in the place of and unto the end of a former, is an actual abrogation of it. Neither did he add any new precepts unto it, nor give any counsels for the performance of duties in matter or manner beyond what it prescribed.⁵⁸

Refuting what came to be associated with Darby, Owen forwards two propositions: in the first place, any abrogation of old law is “contrary to the wisdom and holiness of God in giving the law”, and thus is both unwise and unholy. Owen judges as unwise any effort to inaugurate a law, only to abrogate it at a later date, a process that is contradictory: “why do something if you are going to later undo it?”⁵⁹ In the second place, Owen sees the making and dismantling as an admission that the law is not holy: “if the law had to be abrogated, the law must be unworthy or inferior.” Such a process is “inconsistent with the nature of the law itself”, for to abrogate a law is to admit that its nature is imperfect, and since indeed the law is perfect, then it cannot be dismissed.⁶⁰ Ceremonial law is transformed, rather than dismissed, according to Owen.

In conclusion Owen states: “Wherefore, no additions were made unto the preceptive part of the law by our Savior, nor counsels given by him for the performance of more than it did require.”⁶¹ Moreover, he regards the Gospel as the source “no new law”, rejecting Richard Baxter's neo-nomian argument. Owen believes in the “duties of the moral and eternal law as plainly declared in the doctrine” of the Gospel, but refutes the notion that these are newly inaugurated, since Gospel law is “enforced in the motives”. Christ is not a new lawgiver: “Nor in this sense did the Lord Christ ever declare himself to be a new

56 III:632.

57 I:135.

58 I:135.

59 I:135.

60 I:135.

61 I:135.

lawgiver; yea, he declares the contrary—that he came to confirm the old, Matthew 5:17.”⁶²For Owen, this connection proves that any moral and preceptive part of the Old Testament has abiding validity.

Making his case, Owen asserts that I John 2:7, 8 affirms Christ's "new commandment" of love, by establishing that it is an “old commandment.”⁶³ In contrast, the institutions of worship given to Moses at Mt. Horeb, included various "statutes and judgments" which were “abolished by Christ”.⁶⁴ Owen's interpretation of Hebrews 3:3-6 convinces him that the Old Testament institutions of worship were “appointed”, but only until the “time of reformation.”⁶⁵ Christ, as the "supreme Lord and lawgiver of the Gospel Church," replaces the old with a new law of worship.

Concerning the New Testament, Owen sees obedience to Christ as two-fold: first, obeying Christ is obedience to the moral law and second, obedience to Christ is obedience to the law of evangelical worship, as instituted by him.⁶⁶ Here Owen defines evangelical obedience: “if they intend the duties which the moral law requireth, proceeding from, and performed by, faith in Christ, upon the rounds of the love of God in him, and grace received from him—then they are duties purely evangelical.”⁶⁷ He distinguishes evangelical obedience from obedience that is only mechanical. Although people cannot deprive the “original power” to inspire universal obedience, this is evangelical in nature, procured for Christians by their “confirmation unto the Evangelical Church.”⁶⁸

Owen separates mankind into those who receive the Gospel and those who do not. Since God “hath given unto the Lord Christ all power in his name”, Christ has the authority to compel evangelical obedience of those who have received the Gospel. Those who have not are “left under the original authority of the Law, either as implanted in our natures at their first creation, as are the Gentiles; or as delivered by Moses, and written in tables of stone, as it was with the Jews” (Romans 2:12-15).⁶⁹

Owen has no hesitation in citing Christ as the Gospel lawgiver:

But as unto them that are called unto the faith of the Gospel, the authority of Christ doth immediately affect their minds and consciences. “He feeds” or rules his people “in the strength of the Lord, in the majesty of the name of the Lord his God,” Micah 5:4. All the authority and majesty of God is in him and with him;—so of old, as the great Angel of God's presence, he was in the church in the wilderness with a delegated power, Exodus

62 I:135.

63 I:136.

64 I:135.

65 I:135-36.

66 I:135-36.

67 I:136.

68 I:136.

69 I:137.

23:20-22. So is he still immediately present with the church, requiring obedience in the name and majesty of God.⁷⁰

Obedience to the One to whom God has imparted ultimate authority over the church is the “way whereby God will be glorified.”⁷¹ Owen sees both continuity and discontinuity between law as given to Moses (Galatians 3:19; *cf.* Micah 4:4) and that given to the church through Jesus Christ.⁷²

The Old Testament law has “original power” to command obedience because of its “first institution” at the Creation. From this “original power” the Old Testament law has neither lost its validity nor diminished it in any way.⁷³ Those who follow New Testament law, are obliged, however, to “have respect unto” Old Testament law, even elements of Old Testament law that are “hard and difficult”, but the Old law obliges the believer no longer to obey Old Testament ceremonial law, its statutes and ordinances as in the law of Moses. But overall in Owen's perspective, Old Testament law “continueth still in its original authority and power, which it had from the beginning”, binding believers of New Testament law because the Old is continued in the New.⁷⁴

Christ is the Lawgiver of the Church

The experience of faith, according to Owen, brings the soul into the ambit of Christ's divine authority, an authority so thorough that the soul will come to despise all other things.⁷⁵ Christ's authority as the exclusive “great head and lawgiver of the church” entitles Him to institute all worship; in view of this, anyone who imposes on this usurps the crown and dignity of Christ,⁷⁶ since only Christ deigns power to institute worship in heaven and on earth. Owen argues that if a believer governs his conscience by submitting to the authority of Christ, then he will “find [that] all other authorities . . . come to nothing.”⁷⁷

The Relation of the Law of God to Creation

The Created Law of Operation in All of Creation

According to Owen, all of creation reflects the “law of operation”, as embedded by the Creator. This “law of operation” is the ruling principle that determines every act. Everything under Creation acts according to inherent laws of God, laws which determine

70 I:138.

71 I:138.

72 I:136.

73 I:136.

74 I:137.

75 IX:502.

76 IX:502.

77 IX:502.

its function.⁷⁸

Owen's argument for a creative implanted law he illustrates by example: Fire, because of its nature, must ascend whereas objects containing mass, must descend, and water, being fluid in nature, must flow. If a millstone were to fall, but was caught and hurled upward, that force which converted its direction would be a "matter of wonderful force, power, and efficacy."⁷⁹ That which overrules the creative implanted controlling law must itself be considerable.⁸⁰

From this, Owen draws further analogies, in this case regarding sin: sin is also a matter of remarkable force, power, and efficacy, since it impels created man to act in a manner contrary to the creative implanted controlling law.⁸¹ The urge of species to nurture their young is another example of this law⁸²: "Concreated" with most creatures is a love for their young. Although most creatures have this "instinct and inclination", Owen recalls the foolish ostrich of Job 39:16, 17 which does not conform, but manifests a different implanted law, and mistreats its young.⁸³

Developing his argument that sin counteracts the creative implanted controlling law, Owen turns to Romans 1:31,⁸⁴ where "without natural affection" invokes the heartlessness of parents who murder their own children, even new born. The "barbarous custom among the Romans" whereby they avoid the inconvenience of an unhealthy child, by destroying them, shows that the Romans could "repel the force and nature" of the law within them, in so doing revealing the strength of sin.⁸⁵

In the same vein, Owen decries abortion, calling it the act of a woman who is murdering her own child. Any reasoning that convinces a woman so demonstrates the deceitfulness of sin,⁸⁶ for in this act sin turns the "strong current of nature", darkening all the light of God in the soul.⁸⁷ Owen alludes to the abomination described in Ezekiel 16: 20, 21 and Psalm 106:37, 38, when parents their children to ashes. The idolatrous priests that assisted in this act afforded relief by making "noise and clamor" to drown out the "woeful moans and cries of the poor, dying, tormented infants."⁸⁸ The enormity of the parents' sin corrupts the "whole law of their being and dependence upon God."⁸⁹ To these examples Owen adds the murder of children by their parents, murdering one's spouse, sodomy, incest, the murder of Abel, the treason of Judas, and the villainy of Nero, all of them

78 VI:303, 304.

79 VI:304.

80 VI:304.

81 VI:304.

82 VI:304.

83 VI:304, 305.

84 VI:304, 305.

85 VI:305.

86 VI:305.

87 VI:305.

88 VI:306.

89 VI:306.

rebellion against the prime dictates of the law of nature.⁹⁰

The Created Law and Light of Nature

Owen holds that the “law and light of nature” is embedded in everyone of us. His interpretation of Romans 1:19 and 2:14, 15 says that the consecrated law and light of nature in each human enables them to make a judgment concerning whether their actions be good or evil. Because of this inward law and light of nature, all are under an obligation to obedience.⁹¹

The Law of God Written in the Heart

According to Owen, God does not put into a believer's heart law incapable of obedience, for God says “I will put a new spirit within them”, implying there are no inhibiting conditions. Just as the God of the Old Covenant wrote on the tablets of stone, in the New Covenant he writes on the heart. Owen emphasizes that the principle of obedience is “actually wrought of God in us”,⁹² in reference to its precise nature adding that: “The end of the work of God described is not a power to obey, which may be exerted or not; but it is actual obedience in conversion, and the fruits of it.”⁹³ The writing of God's law on the heart is according to a promise made in Jeremiah 31:28-31:

And if God do not in these promises declare a real efficiency of internal grace, taking away all repugnancy of nature unto conversion, curing its depravation actually and effectually, and communicating infallibly a principle of scriptural obedience, I know not in what words such a work may be expressed.⁹⁴

Prayer is a Duty of the Law of Nature

For Owen the forms of prayer are not an institution of the covenant of works or the covenant of grace; rather, prayer is of the law of nature:

Prayer itself is a duty of the law of nature, and being of such a singular and indispensable use unto all persons, the commands for it are reiterated in the Scripture beyond those concerning any other particular duty whatever; and if it hath respect unto Jesus Christ, with sundry ordinances of the gospel to be performed in this name, it falls under a new divine institution.⁹⁵

Part of the New Covenant, the “new divine institution”, is comprised of the many

90 VI:306.

91 III:278.

92 III:328.

93 III:328.

94 III:328.

95 IV:341.

commands regarding prayer in the New Testament.⁹⁶

The Relation of the Law of God to Sin

Indwelling Sin is a Law

The introduction to Owen's thesis that sin is a law is drawn from the Apostle Paul's confession (Romans 6), "I find a law". Paul described his sinful nature as a "law" because this nature has power; and it has efficacy—"where there is a law there is power."⁹⁷ According to Owen, all laws have two attendant characteristics: on the one hand, a law has dominion or power and on the other, efficacy.⁹⁸

He turns to Romans 7:1 to describe the dominion function of the law of sin: "the law hath dominion over a man whilst he liveth", choosing the Greek version of "hath dominion" (*kurieuew tou anqrwpou*) to demonstrate that by its very nature, a law "plays the part of a superior." Claiming that its nature is to exact obedience,⁹⁹ Owen argues that dominion is a function of a law (Roman 7:12, *basileuein*, "to reign as a king," and 6:12, *kureuein*, "to lord it".)¹⁰⁰ Dominion (the *kurieuew* of Romans 7:1) has a dual nature—moral authority and real efficacy. A law has moral authority over a man and real efficacy also.¹⁰¹

While for an unbeliever, the moral authority of the law of sin in them is complete and unchallenged, the believer, on the other hand, experiences the moral authority of the law of sin as still present but broken, being severely weakened. Though the law of sin residing within believers is weakened, it is not changed.

The real efficacy of a law is its capability of provoking "those that are obnoxious unto it unto the things that it requireth."¹⁰² Thus, in order to provoke the obnoxious to obey, a law has rewards and punishments. All laws maintain an efficacy, says Owen, "from the rewards and punishments that are annexed unto them."¹⁰³

He illustrates the inner conflict of sanctification by reference to Moses,¹⁰⁴ since in him the law of sin and the law of grace conflicted because the rewards of the law of sin were its pleasures. Most people must lose their souls to gain them afresh. In the case of Moses, he submitted to the law of grace, abrogating the law of sin within (Hebrews 11:25, 26): "he

96 IV:341-42.

97 VI:165.

98 VI:165.

99 VI:163.

100 VI:163.

101 VI:163-64.

102 VI:164.

103 VI:164.

104 VI:164.

chose rather to suffer affliction with the people of God, than to enjoy the pleasures of sin for a season; for he looked unto the recompense of reward.” Moses sought the reward of the law of grace, but was caught in the horns of a dilemma: on the one hand, he could sin at the expense of his soul, on the other, the reward of grace would cost him enjoyment of his sins.¹⁰⁵

The law of sin rules the world at large,¹⁰⁶ where those who would not cast it amok, through fear and respect of it, cannot inherit the kingdom of God (Revelation 21:8; the fearful shall have no share in eternal life). The law of sin punishes those who would escape its influence. It shapes the character and conduct by its unrelenting grasp.¹⁰⁷

Of punishments merited by the law of sin, Owen states: “It hath also punishments that it threatens men with who labor to cast off its yoke. Whatever evil, trouble, or danger in the world, attends gospel obedience,—whatever hardship of violence to be offered to the sensual part of our natures in a strict course of mortification,—sin makes use of, as if they were punishments attending the neglect of its commands.”¹⁰⁸ Where loss of prestige, power, or position affects sinners, and the pleasures of sin are lost to them, then it is the law of sin that has brought about this downfall.¹⁰⁹

The law of sin can affect even believers, Owen adds,¹¹⁰ since believers must be prepared to reject inducements to sin, without which: “there is no standing before the power of the law.”¹¹¹ To Owen, the law of sin is not an “outward, written, commanding, directing law, but an inbred, working, impelling, urging law.”¹¹²

Owen distinguishes the nature of an inbred law from an externally proposed law. Before his fall, Adam was implicated in an externally proposed law that came from Eve. Having no inbred tendency against this overture of sin, he could have withstood its temptation. An inbred law affects thoughts and actions,¹¹³ because its “inbred” dimension appearing in the original created state of mankind, according to Owen, in the created state of man, the law of God was inbred and natural. The law of God was “concreated with his faculties, and was their rectitude, both in being and operation, in reference to his end of living unto God and glorifying Him.”¹¹⁴ For Adam, obeying God was easy and pleasant, because before the fall his heart knew the inbred of law of God; his God gave an “especial power in the whole soul to enable it unto all obedience.”¹¹⁵

105 VI:164.

106 VI:164.

107 VI:164.

108 VI:164.

109 VI:165.

110 VI:165.

111 VI:165.

112 VI:165.

113 VI:165.

114 VI:165.

115 VI:165.

Although our constitution has been altered by sin so that the law of God is now “by nature cast out of the soul,” Owen believes something of the original constitution remains. After the fall, people retained some components of the pure original. Since the original law of God is inbred, it is “powerful and effective”—and its remaining vestiges remain powerful and effective in the conscience of the sinner (Romans 2:14, 15).

Owen understands that God writes the law of God upon the hearts of the newly converted, sanctifying them by writing his law upon their hearts, a practice for which Owen rejoices.¹¹⁶ God knows he must implant his law, in this manner, in order to regenerate the sinner:¹¹⁷

I will put my law in their inward parts, and write it in their hearts. The written law will not do it: mercies and deliverances from distress will not effect it; trials and afflictions will not accomplish it. Then will I take another course; I will turn the written law into an internal living principle in their hearts; and that will have such an efficacy as shall assuredly make them my people, and keep them so.¹¹⁸

People must find out that an external outward law is insufficient to lead them obedience.¹¹⁹ Further, because sin is the inward controlling principle in an unbeliever's heart, God implants a more powerful principle. Owen describes indwelling sin as not only as a law but also as an inward habit,¹²⁰ one which prompts certain patterns of thought and behavior. Since indwelling sin repeatedly directs, inclines, and moves one to patterns of behavior, an inward law of grace must.

The inwardness of sin affords its various advantages, since inwardness increases its strength and furthers its causes. In the first place, sin is ever-present in the soul.¹²¹ (Sin always abides in the soul; “it is never absent.”)¹²² It is constant, always inhabiting the soul.¹²³ Thus, there is no respite from sin's claims, at any time; if indeed sin were transient, then we would be more obedient—greatly so.¹²⁴

Owen highlights the constancy of sin by comparing it to the occupation of a walled city. If the city fathers knew when the enemy forces would be absent, they could fortify it during a respite. However, in our case, the home of sin is the soul: “there it dwells, and is no wanderer.” Sin is a like burning coal continually in our houses: “which, if it be not looked unto, will fire them, and it may consume them.”¹²⁵

116 VI:165, 166.

117 VI:166.

118 VI:166.

119 VI:166.

120 VI:166.

121 VI:166.

122 VI:166.

123 VI:166.

124 VI:166.

125 VI:166.

Next Owen develops further his idea that sin is a constant presence in the soul:

Wherever you are, whatever you are about, this law of sin is always in you, in the best that you do, and in the worst. Men little consider what a dangerous companion is always at home with them. When they are in company, when alone, by night or by day, all is one sin is with them . . . Oh, the woeful security of poor souls! How little do the most of men think of this inbred enemy that is never from home! How little, for the most part, doth the watchfulness of any professors answer the danger of their state and condition!

Secondly, sin also increases its strength and furthers its causes because it is “ready to apply itself to every end and purpose that it serves unto.” Owen cites as his example the testimony of the Apostle Paul: “it doth not only dwell in me, but when I would do good, it is present with me.”¹²⁶

In other words, says Owen: “An inmate may dwell in a house, and yet not be always meddling with what the good-man of the house hath to do (that so we may keep to the allusion of indwelling, used by the Apostle): but it is so with this law, it doth so dwell in us, as that it will be present within everything we do.”¹²⁷ According to Owen, when we would do good, the evil within us is more active: “Would you pray, would you hear, would you give alms, would you meditate, would you be in any duty acting faith on God and love towards him, would you work righteousness, would you resist temptations,— this troublesome, perplexing indweller will still more or less put itself upon you and be present with you; so that you cannot perfectly and completely accomplish the thing that is good.” The law of indwelling sin affects us, because our minds are given to “darkness and vanity,” our affections to “sensuality”, and our wills to “a loathing of and aversion from that which is good.”¹²⁸ Sin continually compels us with its “inclinations, motions, or suggestions to evil”, affecting us most when we are inclined to do good.¹²⁹

Thirdly, Owen states that the law of sin applies itself to our work with great facility (Hebrews 12:1): “it needs no doors to be opened unto it” and “it needs no engines to work by,”¹³⁰ affecting every part of our constitution. If we apply ourselves, sin affects us with ignorance, darkness, vanity, folly, and madness. If our hearts are affectionate, sin acts on it by “inclinations to the world and present things, and sensuality, with proneness to all manner of defilements.” Sin affects our entire constitution, even to possessing the “very faculties of the soul whereby we must do what we do.”¹³¹

Owen describes as pitiful the estate of the masses. Sin is so exacting and pervasive that humanity is ignorant of its hold on them. Under its dominion, they are blinded from

126 VI:167.

127 VI:167.

128 VI:167.

129 VI:167.

130 VI:167.

131 VI:167.

seeing its implications by the act of domination:¹³²

They find not that there is darkness and folly in their minds; because they are darkness itself, and darkness will discover nothing. They find not deadness and an indisposition in their hearts and wills to God, because they are dead wholly in trespasses and sins. They are at peace with their lusts, by being in bondage unto them. And this is the state of most men in the world; which makes them woefully despise all their eternal concernments.¹³³

The Knowledge of Sin is by the Law

The Function of the Law in General

Summarizing his understanding of law itself, Owen discusses “Communion with the Son Jesus Christ”; the reason for this law has to do with transgression (Romans 7:12 and Galatians 3:19), which thwarts communion with Christ. The law was given because of human sin (causal), and to revive the good and evil of man at Creation (doctrinal). The law restores to us what original sin damaged. The law serves as a mirror at which one may look and perceive sin “in all its ugliness and deformity.”¹³⁴

Further summarizing the content, manner of delivery, sanctions, and function of the law, Owen asserts that it is characterized by “purity, holiness, compass, and perfection.”¹³⁵ Its deliverance occurred in “dread, terror, thunder, earthquakes, and fire” (Exodus 19:18-20, Deuteronomy 4:11, and Hebrews 12:18-21),¹³⁶ its sanctions including “death, curse, and wrath.”¹³⁷ The function is to make a “wonderful discovery” of sin, because “upon every account [its] pollution, guilt, and exceeding sinfulness” are exposed by the law.¹³⁸

Sin Works Violence to the Law of Nature Implanted in Mankind

Owen believes that sin manifests its power in the unregenerate, such that were an observer to document this power, he need only record the nature of the sins committed.¹³⁹ This record of the sins of the will have a salutary effect on believers, who must look to their own, understanding how easily might these sins grow and fructify.¹⁴⁰ Owen explains: “believers may be taught what is the power and efficacy of that plague of sin which is in and among them by the effects the same plague produceth in and among others, who have not those corrections of its poisen and those preservatives from death which the Lord

132 VI:168.

133 VI:168.

134 II:95.

135 II:95.

136 II:95.

137 II:95.

138 II:94-95.

139 VI:303.

140 VI:303.

Jesus Christ hath furnished them withal.”¹⁴¹ Referring to Psalm 106:37, 38 and Ezekiel 16:20, 21, he maintains:

They took their children and burnt them to ashes in a soft fire; the wicked priests that assisted in the sacrifice affording them this relief, that they made a noise and clamor that the vile wretches might not hear the woeful moans and cries of the poor, dying tormented infants.¹⁴²

Guilt is the Law Voicing Its Objection to Sin

Here is Owen on the voice of conscience, which is a natural law, written upon the heart:

Conscience, if not seared, inexorably condemneth and pronounceth wrath and anger upon the soul that hath the least guilt cleaving to it. Now, it hath this advantage, it lieth close to the soul, and by importunity and loud speaking it will be heard in what it hath to say; it will make the whole soul attend, or it will speak like thunder. And its constant voice is, that where there is guilt there must be judgment.¹⁴³

(His discussion of natural law in the human heart is drawn from Romans 2:14-15.)¹⁴⁴

The Content of Biblical Law Opposes Sin

Biblical law opposes sin in several ways, the first way being that it exposes sin, by discovering it.¹⁴⁵

The measure of the strength of any person or defenced city may be well taken from the opposition that they are able to withstand and not be prevailed against. If we hear of a city that has endured a long siege from a potent enemy, and yet is not taken or conquered, whose walls have endured great batteries and are not demolished, though we have never seen the place, yet we conclude it strong, if not impregnable.¹⁴⁶

Although the law exposes and condemns it, sin is “able to hold out”, and not only to survive, but to “secure its reign and dominion.” Despite the law's strength, sin maintains itself in stubborn resistance to it, in this respect constant, in character volatile, being both great and terrible.¹⁴⁷ The resistance of the law to sin is always fruitless, however, because

141 VI:303.

142 VI:306.

143 VI:387.

144 VI:387.

145 VI:313.

146 VI:313.

147 VI:313.

sin can do no good.¹⁴⁸

The purpose of biblical law is to “discover the enemy; it convinceth the soul that there is a such a traitor harbouring in its bosom,”¹⁴⁹ just as a physician exposes an unknown disease. Since most people have no idea that they are diseased by sin, the law serves as a means of diagnosing its presence.¹⁵⁰ Owen sees biblical law as the soldier who discovers an enemy within the city walls. The law is a seeker, so searching for sin, it is exposed once and for all.¹⁵¹ In Romans 6, Paul testifies that “I had not known sin”, an admission that he was not aware of the dominion and power of sin, a phrase that Owen interprets relatively. He believes that when a Pharisee, Paul was not absolutely ignorant of his sinful nature, but rather he was relatively ignorant of it. Hence, Paul did not know his sin nature “fully, clearly, distinctly”.¹⁵² Examining people's understanding of sin, Owen sees their consciences as inferior expressions of their moral selves. Conscience is barely audible as a reminder of laws written on the heart, for conscience (*cf.* John 1:5) “gives a man such a sight of it as the blind man had in the gospel upon the first touch of his eyes.” The blind man could see “obscurely” and “confusedly”,¹⁵³ as his sight returned:

This, then, the law doth—it draws out this traitor from secret lurking places, the intimate recesses of the soul. A man, when the law comes, is no more ignorant of his enemy. If he will now perish by him, it is openly and knowingly; he cannot but say that the law warned him of him, discovered him unto him, yea, and raised a concourse about his sin in the soul of various affections, as an officer doth that discovers a thief or robber, calling out for assistance to apprehend him.¹⁵⁴

Because of the law, a sinner cannot regard sin a trifling matter,¹⁵⁵ for the sinner is made to see the sins of his own soul, including its vileness, abomination, enmity to God, and God's hatred of it.¹⁵⁶

As a man finds himself somewhat distempered, sending for a physician of skill, when he comes requires his judgment of this distemper; he, considering his condition, tells him, `Alas! I am sorry for you; the case is far otherwise with you than you imagine: your disease is mortal, and it hath proceeded so far, pressing upon your spirits and infecting the whole mass of your blood, that I doubt, unless most effectual remedies be used, you will live but a very few hours.

148 VI:313.

149 VI:313.

150 VI:313.

151 VI:313.

152 VI:313.

153 VI:314.

154 VI:314.

155 VI:314.

156 VI:314.

The sinner's awakening to the nature and extent of his sin happens in stages. First, his conscience (which includes the moral law that God has written upon the heart), may trouble him, and he “finds all not so well as it should be with him, more from the effects of sin and its continual eruptions than the nature of it, which he hopes to wrestle withal.”¹⁵⁷ The world's false religions remain at this stage, since most have only a rude, indistinct, and incomplete conception of sin. On the other hand, biblical religion, which includes biblical law, leads the sinner into a second stage of spiritual and epistemological self-consciousness. In the next place, the law responds to sin¹⁵⁸ by communicating to the soul that sin is a disease that is “deadly and mortal, that it is exceeding sinful, as being the root and cause of all his alienation from God.”¹⁵⁹

Owen explains further the function of law in relation to judging people, since it explains what the sinner should expect. In this respect, the law has an illuminating function, a “discovery property”, that prepares the sinner for judgment. This offers a sinner fair notice of the judgment, and is evidence of God's justice. For Owen the law of God is oracular, since it personally pleads with sinners: “Thou art the ‘man’ in whom this exceeding sinful sin doth dwell, and you must answer for the guilt of it.”¹⁶⁰

Owen says that when the law becomes the oracle that voices divine wrath, an unrepentant sinner will “rouse up” in antagonism to the law: “. . . this, methinks, if anything, should rouse up a man to set himself in opposition to it, yea, utterly to destroy it.”¹⁶¹ On this point the law is unequivocal: “Abide in this state and perish.” According to Owen “God serves warrant on all sinners, first of all in warning, giving notice of God's wrath, and secondly, notice that the sin is inexcusable. The first pertains to the wages of sin in the world of the sinner; the second to God's justice in the world to come.”¹⁶²

Furthering his examination of law, Owen describes it as disquieting the soul, affrighting the soul, and even killing it. Owen means that the law does not allow the sinner to “enjoy the least rest or quietness in harboring its sinful inmate,”¹⁶³ since the law makes the soul “quake and tremble” immediately when one sins, just as if sinners were beasts with fatal arrow stuck in their sides. Wherever the beast goes thereafter, the arrow does its work.¹⁶⁴

Owen says that the law causes the death of the soul, for although a sinner may try to find comfort in self-righteousness and vain hope, these ineffective remedies leave the offender “poor, dead, helpless, and hopeless”. Interpreting Romans 7:9, Owen argues that the law convinces the sinner that his sin merits punishment by alluding to the story of a warrior who was born of the earth. Felled in battle, souls rise again from the earth to fight on, with renewed vigor. So to with sin, that rises again and again until by force it overpowers

157 VI:314.

158 VI:314, 315.

159 VI:314, 315.

160 VI:315.

161 VI:315.

162 VI:315.

163 VI:315.

164 VI:315.

the soul, forcing it to admit that it deserves to be judged.¹⁶⁵ Hence, the law “slays” sin.¹⁶⁶

Although law demolishes sin, it cannot conquer it, since that is not the law's function. Conquest itself has two aspects, implying both a loss of dominion and strength. Owen makes this point with reference to Christ's parable in Matthew—if one wishes to take the goods of a strong man, then one must first constrain him. The assaults of the law cannot conquer sin in this way, however. Owen interprets Romans 6:3 to mean that although the law cannot destroy it to a point where it loses even “one jot of its power and dominion”, because a person who “is under the law is also under sin”.¹⁶⁷

Owen compares the response of sin to the law to Pharaoh's response to Moses when he demanded freedom for the children of Israel (Exodus 5:19, “they found that they were in a very evil case.”) “Finding its rule disturbed, [sin] grows more outrageously oppressive, and doubles the bondage of their souls,” a practice it shares with Pharaoh. Owen cites in evidence Romans 7:9-13: “The whole work of the law doth only provoke and enrage sin, and cause it, as it hath opportunity, to put out its strength with more power, and vigour, and force than formerly.”¹⁶⁸ Owen believes that the law aggravates sin, yes, but agrees that preaching the law, even without grace, does result in the relinquishment of many sins and the amendment of lives. He concedes that the power of God's law is such as to limit sin, though it is not designed to subdue it; this is no dishonor because subduing sin is “not its proper work” (Romans 8:3).¹⁶⁹

Some refrain from sin because the preaching of the law has this result, even if they do so without grace; most are not moved by such preaching, however, of the law. Owen sees the majority of hearers as an adamant receiving the blows of a mere straw. Congregations are full of those who remain “deaf, ignorant, senseless, secure, as if they had never been told of the guilt of sin or terror of the Lord.”¹⁷⁰

The Law Gives No Strength against Sin

Owen contrasts the dominion of grace and the dominion of law,¹⁷¹ for to be under the dominion of the former is to be under sin's dominion since the law cannot subdue sin.¹⁷² “Sin will neither be cast nor kept out of its throne, but by a spiritual power and strength in the soul to oppose, conquer, and dethrone it. Where it is not conquered it will reign; and conquered it will not be without a mighty prevailing power: this the law will not, cannot give.”¹⁷³

165 VI:315.

166 VI:315.

167 VI:316.

168 VI:316.

169 VI:316.

170 VI:317.

171 VII:542-44.

172 VII:544.

173 VII:542.

Citing Romans 6:14 (“not under law, but under grace”) Owen categorizes the law accordingly: law is “the whole revelation of the mind and will of God in the Old Testament.” In this sense, grace is certainly included in “law”. [This meaning is appropriate to an interpretation of Psalm 19:7-9; not only does it contain the law of precepts, but also the promise, and the covenant. It is by means of this promise and covenant that God conveys spiritual strength to the church of the Old Testament.]¹⁷⁴ Owen does not interpret the “law” as represented by Romans 6:14 in this sense, however. Rather, he sees law as meaning the covenant of obedience: “Do this, and live.” Those under the law are therefore under its “power, rule, conditions, and authority as a covenant.”¹⁷⁵

Owen's interpretation of “law” accords with the Cocceius' model of Scripture interpretation. Either one is subject to the law as a covenant of works, or one is subject to grace, as per a covenant of grace. The former maintained Adam before the fall; the law describes the state of those who are fallen.¹⁷⁶ The law was “never ordained of God to convey grace or spiritual strength,” says Owen, defining its limitations. If the law could have given life, then righteousness would have come through it, rather than through Christ (Galatians 3:21). The law is not “God's ordinance for the dethroning of sin, nor the destruction of its dominion,” asserts Owen, because the law does not have “power to bar the entrance of sin, nor to cast it out when it is once enthroned.”¹⁷⁷ In sum, the law has “nothing to do with sinners” except “judge, curse, and condemn.”¹⁷⁸ The laws of Sinai, added to Israel's “original constitution” are designed to encourage in men a belief in the coming Messiah.¹⁷⁹

I Corinthians 15:56 says “the strength of sin is the law”, which Owen interprets: “The commandment comes home to them, sin reviveth, and they die [Romans 7:9, 10]; that is, it gives power to sin to slay the hopes of the sinner, and to distress him the apprehension of guilt and death.”¹⁸⁰ In distinguishing the vast differences between law and grace, Owen notices that law gives no liberty of any kind; in contrast, grace delivers into a “liberty of state and condition” and a liberty of “internal operation.”¹⁸¹ (The former Owen defines as “our deliverance from the law and its curse;” the curse consists of Satan, death, and hell.)¹⁸²

The Relation of the Law of God to the Gospel

The Order and Use of Law and Gospel

174 VII:542.
175 VII:543.
176 VII:542-43.
177 VII:543.
178 VII:543.
179 VII:543.
180 VII:543.
181 VII:543.
182 VII:543.

Owen sees the relation of the law to the Gospel as dependent upon the use of the law:¹⁸³

For that which any man hath first to deal withal, with respect unto his eternal condition, both naturally and by God's institution, is the law. This is first presented unto the sould with it sterms of righteousness and life, and with its curse in case of failure. Without this the gospel cannot be understood, nor the grace of it duly valued.¹⁸⁴

It is indispensable to one's understanding of the Gospel:

For it [the Gospel] is the revelation of God's way for relieving the souls of men from the sentence and curse of the law, Romans I:17.¹⁸⁵

The Law's Instrumentality in Conversion

The “efficient cause” of conversion is the Holy Ghost, the agent of which is word of God. For Owen, the law of God, as contained by his word, is the very agent by which the Holy Spirit effects conversions.¹⁸⁶ For conversion to occur, one must understand the nature, guilt, and curse of sin. It is “from the law of God” that we discover that “afflictions, dangers, sicknesses, fears, and disappointments” may be the Holy Spirit's way to “excite, stir, and put an edge upon the minds and affections of men.” The Holy Spirit is the center of conversion, for God Himself is the force conversion, in order to “reprove men, and set their sins in order before their eyes” (Psalm 50:21). Without the work of the Spirit (John 16:8), Owen holds that sinners may hear the law preached every day of their lives and not be once affected by it.¹⁸⁷

The Relation of the Law of God to Mankind in General

Why Human Laws are Often Little Respected

Owen explains why often human laws are so little respected. Men who transgress weigh the cost against likely punishments. Moreover, he surmises men realize that since lawmakers cannot prosecute penalties in cases of transgression, they need not respect the laws that would inhibit them. Left without effective sanctions, men choose to de-authorize law.¹⁸⁸

God's law cannot be disdained, however, “without the highest folly and villany,” reminding us that rewards and punishments of God are eternal. There is no room for “mutability, indifferency, ignorance, impotency, or any other pretence that they shall not

183 V:75.

184 V:75.

185 V:75.

186 III.351.

187 III.351.

188 III.613.

be executed.”¹⁸⁹ God's attributes are “immutably engaged” by applying sanctions inherent to law.¹⁹⁰ If we comply with God's commands, becoming holy, as a consequence, the “ground of assurance” that we shall be brought into “everlasting felicity”.¹⁹¹

Applying the wages of compliance in pursuit of happiness, Owen rejects any suggestion that the cost of compliance to God's law is a form of bondage. Yet compliance does not mean servile and is not inconsistent with the “free spirit of the children of God,” and to say otherwise is a “vain imagination” to Owen, who believes that “a due respect unto God's promises and threatenings is a principal part of our liberty.”¹⁹²

Laws Designed for the External Establishment of Religion are Generally Ineffective

Owen regards a canon of civil law as an unsuitable basis for religion:¹⁹³ “It is true, that when the doctrine of religion is determined and established by civil laws” conformity to that religion issues “from that external cause alone.”¹⁹⁴ He regards nations that impose some form of nominal Christianity, particularly in the form of liturgies, as endorsing in the popular mind “their peculiar errors.”¹⁹⁵

The Entire Human Race is Under the Condemnation of the Law of God

Owen bears witness to the condemnation of even the least transgression of the law. Under the old covenant, each command requires universal holiness. The very least failure, whether “in substance, circumstance, or degree”, means that we have transgressed the law entire: “whosoever shall keep the whole law, and yet offend in one point, he is guilty of all” (James 2:10). We cannot comply with the covenant of works because of our “lapsed condition.”¹⁹⁶

Not only is compliance impossible because of the covenant's universal requirements, but because “no man influenced only by the commands of the law, or first covenant, absolutely considered, whatever in particular he might be forced or compelled unto, did ever sincerely aim or endeavour after universal holiness.”¹⁹⁷ Not only is compliance impossible because men cannot do so, but because they will not.

Incomplete conformity and even the external appearance of holiness is possible however. The law subdues some, who may be compelled to “habituate themselves unto a strict course of duty.” Even incomplete obedience may sedate the conscience to some degree; just as impure motives may result in partial obedience, and a desire of applause, self-

189 III:613.

190 III:613.

191 III:613.

192 III:613.

193 IV:243.

194 IV:243.

195 IV:243.

196 III:606.

197 III:606.

righteousness, or superstition may result in an appearance of holiness.¹⁹⁸

Owen condemns the folly of holiness of this order, solely in response to the commands of law, warning of the business of self-deception.¹⁹⁹ Neither can salvation be procured merely by adhering to the letter of the law:

And for this reason we are necessitated to deny a possibility of salvation unto all to whom the gospel is not preached, as well as unto those by who it is refused; for they are left unto this law, whose precepts they cannot answer, and whose end they cannot attain.²⁰⁰

Owen draws a distinction between those who keep the law under the covenant of works and those who keep it under the covenant of grace. Under either covenant the faithful are bound by some body of precepts, but those obeying the covenant of works do so that they might be justified in the sight of God. On the other hand, those who obey the covenant of grace do so lest their disobedience reflect dishonour upon the righteousness and holiness of the Gospel.²⁰¹

The Relation of the Law of God and the Regenerate

The Relation of the Law of God to the Life Calling of the Regenerate

Although a professional calling may be lawful, and those in that calling attend to it with industry and diligence, Owen remarks that our spiritual calling is more important, and occupies us more:²⁰²

It may be, it will be asked, whether it be necessary that men should think as much and as often about things spiritual and heavenly as they do about the lawful affairs of their callings? I say, more, and more often, if we are what we profess ourselves to be.

The Relation of the Law of God to the Sanctification of the Regenerate

All acts of a believer must be lawful:

[It is] wrought and preserved in the minds and souls of all believers, by the Spirit of God, a supernatural principle or habit of grace and holiness, whereby they are made meet and enabled to live unto God, and perform that obedience which he requireth and accepteth through Christ in the covenant of grace; essentially or specifically distinct from all natural habits, intellectual and moral, however or by what means soever acquired or improved.²⁰³

198 III:606.

199 III:607

200 III:607

201 III:608.

202 VII:302.

203 VII:302.

God requires obedience to the law because it is the only means whereby we may express our subjection, our dependence on him, our fruitfulness and thankfulness; the only way of our communion and intercourse with him, of using and improving the effects of his love, the benefits of the mediation of Christ, whereby we may glorify him in this world; and the only orderly way where by we may be made meet for the inheritance of the saints in light: which is sufficient, in general, to manifest both its necessity and its use.²⁰⁴

The Law is Given as a Rule of Obedience

Owen's view is that Paul valued the law because the “law was given of God immediately, as the whole and only rule of our obedience unto him.” Paul considered the “nature, use, and end of the law,” concluding that it is an insufficient means of our justification before God (Galatians 3:19, 20).²⁰⁵

How the Believer is to Fulfill the Law

Owen sees all separation from God as a curse that is connected to the law.²⁰⁶ On our behalf Christ underwent such separation from God as the curse of the law requires; this believers are united with God.²⁰⁷ The power that separates God from believers is absorbed by Christ, who bore the full brunt.²⁰⁸ Owen extols the law's holiness: “There is in the whole law and every parcel of it an eternal, indispensable righteousness and truth, arising either from the nature of the things themselves concerning which it is, or the relation of one thing unto another.”²⁰⁹

He sees the eternal verity, and righteousness of the law, both as a totality and the sum of its parts,²¹⁰ explaining that is no respecter of persons:

The law doth not threaten a curse only if we do not believe, but if we do not all things written therein, Deuteronomy 26:26. Whether we believe or not, the law takes no notice; as to the curse that it denounceth, if there hath been any sin, that must be executed. And the law is for the curse, as Isaac for the great spiritual blessing (Genesis 27:27-29).²¹¹

Owen argues that the “one great curse” was “undergone by Christ.”²¹²

Some Things, Although Lawful, May Become Dangerous if They Cause Others to Stumble

204 III:472.

205 V:26.

206 XI:295.

207 XI:295.

208 XI:295.

209 XI:295.

210 XI:295.

211 XI:295.

212 XI:295.

With abiding validity, the law prescribes what is lawful and what is unlawful in the worship of God. Some of what is lawful, however, may be a danger if it causes others to stumble.²¹³ For this reason, love disallows some of what is lawful in order to preserve and edify the sanctity of others.

Lawfulness of Forms of Prayer

Owen believes that “to compose and write forms of prayer for direction and doctrinal helps unto others, as to the matter and method to be used in the right discharge of this duty, is lawful, and may in some cases be useful.” Forms of prayer may serve to divert the mind from the act of prayer itself, but nonetheless the forms instruct believers.²¹⁴

Conclusion

Owen's breadth and depth of understanding is profound, demonstrated by his delineation of arguments, and does, in particular, explain that the law exposes sin, but cannot save believers from its effects. Moreover, for Owen the law of the Old Testament is never abolished, but rather transformed. Although he never explicitly makes the obligation of nations to obey the decalogue, both the case laws that interpret the decalogue (*cf.* Ex. 21-23), and the sanctions enforcing the case laws (*cf.* Ex. 21-23), Owen's paradigm was theonomic (as the Congregationalist Puritan colleagues who settled Massachusetts Bay certainly were). Awkward and problematic, is the application of modern categories to an era when no debate on “theonomy” existed. Nevertheless, Owen's work represents a freshening of the obligations of belief, as such a beacon for those today who would better understand the law and its place in the word of God.

213 XIII:347.

214 IV:347.